

Course Name: GENDER INCLUSIVE URBAN SPACES: ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

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Module 3.2 - Cities and the Marginalization of Sexual Minorities

Hello, my name is Kalki Subramaniam. I am an artist, transgender rights activist, actor and writer from the state of Tamil Nadu, India I also run a small NGO, an organization, a community-based organization for transgender community of India called Sahodri Foundation. I belong to a very small semi-urban town, which is almost a rural town called Pollachi, near to the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border, but very much inside Tamil Nadu. It is below the Western Ghats mountains. It is a very beautiful place.

I grew up in that beautiful surroundings and right from the age of 13, I have outed myself as a transgender woman openly and since the day I came out to my parents as a trans woman, and also in the school that I studied, I did come out openly as a trans person. I was not afraid of being discriminated, but yes, I was. I was bullied, I was discriminated not only by the fellow students but also by the teachers. But I would say life has opened so many possibilities for me. One of the things that gave me the confidence of who I have made myself into are the books, the knowledge that I read which gave me the courage, the confidence and the jest to face the struggles and to understand the struggles of transgender persons like me. When I came out as a trans person at the age of 13 to my parents, they were shattered. Coming from a very traditional Hindu family it was difficult for them to accept but then their love overcame their fear, their kindness overcame their shame. So that was something I was lucky enough to have all their love and their support. India is not represented by its cities.

It is actually represented by its villages and small towns and I come from a small town. But because of the discrimination for people like me in the villages and in small towns, in 2008, I moved to Chennai and I lived there for almost five years. Living in a city empowered me, taught me how to voice, how to fight, how to stand up for myself, and

people like me- city actually gave me voice. It also taught me how to connect with people, how to connect with officers, how to connect with policy makers, the ministries, the officials, the NGOs, the fellow humans who are like me. So cities, the urban spaces, actually provides a venue for change for especially for the minorities like me, like a transgender minorities especially. And I would say cities have a voice, especially the LGBTQI community have taken the opportunity, particularly from the trans community, a lot of transgender people move from the villages of India and the small towns of India to cities like Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, Trivandrum, Kochi, Bangalore and Ahmedabad and all these places. I would say that these are spaces where there is tolerance to a certain level.

I would not say they are 100 percent tolerant, but I would say there is some sort of tolerance for transgender people in urban spaces. These massive spaces give you the opportunity to choose where you can live, but then you end up in slums. That is what happens with the transgender community mostly. Most of the transgender persons in the city that I knew from 2008 to 2012 lived in slums because, fortunately or unfortunately, the transgender community was more accepted there. In slums, everyone struggles; everyone worries about tomorrow. Everyone has a story. Everyone has a story to tell, a story of struggle. And our transgender community shared that struggle with them.

So, in the slums that I knew—where my friends lived and where I have stayed with them—I know that my friends had a very beautiful relationship with other people living there. With a lot of other people living there. In fact, I saw my friends help others and receive help, support, and love from others too because the struggle in the slums is not about gender. It is about equality, balancing, livelihood—mostly about bread and butter, or rice and dal, for that matter. It is about everyday food. It is about a respectable place in society.

So, in that way, I would say that in urban spaces, transgender people were particularly accepted in slums. I lived in a space from 2008 to 2012 when I lived in Chennai. I lived in two kinds of places. I lived in a place called Jafferkhanpet, Saidapet—West Saidapet—which was not a very urban area. It was mostly lower-middle-class people, Indians going for work—working as office clerks, office-goers, small vendors, street vendors, fish sellers, and all.

These people lived in the area that I lived. There was acceptance for transgender people but then the rent that we paid was tremendous. It was almost double. So there was some

kind of an acceptance, but it was not- but there was also exploitation for people like me. Three years I lived in such a space, I never had any problem with the neighbors, nobody discriminated me. And my house owner, he was just a wonderful person. He was a differently-abled human being but he was the one who accepted me because i had previously searched for 25 houses but none of them gave me a space and he gave me. I did a lot of work in Chennai and within two years I got a recognition to go to- an invitation to come to the US. Several awards, several invitations from the university and and then offered to act in a film. So once I acted in a film, the film director offered me one of her properties to stay and that was a beach bungalow near the Kottivakkam beach in Chennai. I stayed as a one person, I stayed in that massive space because i wanted a change. But then I felt- this loneliness put me into depression. So again my neighbors were the fishermen. I was friendly with them, they were the ones who accepted me. The rich people, upper class, they did not really accept me or people like me. But it was mostly the working class, the fishermen, the everyday struggling people for their livelihood, those people were the ones who understood my struggle better, who understood the struggle of our community better because beyond gender, the struggle was the same. The discrimination was the same, the inequality and the imbalance was the same. So they embraced me, they embraced people like me. Until today, some of my best friends are all coming from there- the city of Chennai. So in a way living in a city empowered me. However there are prejudices. When my house was sold, the house that I lived belonged to my film director, and when she sold the house I had to vacate the place, and then come back into the same place I lived two years ago, Saidapet. But when I came back nobody wanted to offer me a house because it was once again the same kind of struggle that I had to go through when I came first to Chennai. I went to each and every house, like 25 houses, vacant houses I went.

None of them offered space for transgender people. On the one side, there was this tolerance but that does not mean there is acceptance 100 percent. People were afraid to give houses for me either they charged me enormous rent and advance payment or they refused to give me a space because I was one- for one thing I was a transgender woman, the second thing I was a single woman, the third thing is I am a lonely woman. I'm a woman who is living alone, who has been identified as a trans. Whether I am educated or not does not make a difference. They did not make a difference at all.

The openness about my gender identity was the sole reason for being discriminated and pushed away from that city. And then once again, I moved away from Chennai and I

called up the village in Pondicherry, Auroville, the City of Dawn, the Golden City they say. In Auroville, I called up my friends there and then they found within two hours of my call, they found a place for me in the village. So once again, back to the village life I lived. In the seven years I lived in the village, for two years in Auroville, Kottakarai it was, and then I lived in the city of Pondicherry, I did not face discrimination except a few times. I faced sexual harassment because of my gender identity. I have sometimes faced extreme sexual harassment too. These are incidences that happen every day to every woman and it happens double to transgender women. But our struggles continue whether if we are living in urban spaces or rural spaces. Trans people need to struggle every day not just in Tamil Nadu, not just in India. It is a struggle around the world. It is a struggle for inclusivity, it is a struggle for equality, it is a struggle for survival, acceptance, safety, security, and kindness and this is what we deserve whether we live in urban spaces or rural spaces. This is what we deserve. I know so many of my friends from Kerala when they came out as trans women in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, they could not live in that city- in that state, nowhere could they live openly wearing a saree. So most of them came to Chennai and then most of them also went to Bangalore and lived there. And when I asked them why did you leave your place and they said if I had continued to wear a saree, and lived as a woman in my state, I would have been killed, raped. From such a state, Kerala has transformed into a trans tolerant state in the past six to seven years. The governments of Kerala and Tamil Nadu had introduced transgender welfare policies. Particularly in 2008, even before the Supreme Court of India legally recognizing transgender persons in 2014, the Tamil Nadu state government introduced the Transgender Welfare Board in 2008- one of the pioneering departments, one of the pioneering acts by the government of Tamil Nadu in 2008. Followed by that many states opened Transgender Welfare Board and even the Supreme Court of India took the case of Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board and framed the verdict that legally recognized transgender persons in 2014. Since then there have been so many policies and developments across India in many states which I think, we transgender people are in a very, very good transcending phases. But we do face discrimination almost every day in our lives. Our families continue to discriminate us, whether you are born in a city or in a village. Our families continue to disown us. Whether there is a transgender policy or welfare board, our families still continue to disown us.

Whether the Supreme Court of India legally recognizes us or the government of India introduces the Transgender Protection Act, families continue to discriminate against us. The change happens slowly. More and more transgender people from the cities as well as

from rural areas have to be educated and empowered, and that empowerment comes through policies that are truly helpful and supportive in the development and empowerment of the transgender community. Many of the policies introduced by the government have been found to be and have resulted in futile attempts to empower the community.

They have not been useful. Policies should be reviewed, and policies should be introduced with consultation from the community. Often the ministries and the officers, even though they want to support and help us, do not take the opinions of our community. In that aspect as well, even though they want to give us support, and empower us, they do not acknowledge, they refuse, or they deny giving us a voice, strength to our voices, and our thoughts. Only if that happens can change occur. Inclusivity is not just providing us with free houses. Inclusivity is not giving us ration cards or identity cards. Inclusivity is not giving us jobs.

Just in any corporate or just providing us a job and then pinkwashing that, 'We have provided jobs for transgender people,' and publicizing it in a big way in the media. That is not inclusivity. Inclusivity should be permanent. Inclusivity should be transformational. Inclusivity should strengthen the community.

Inclusivity should be equal. Inclusivity is sitting next to a transgender person on a bus or a train, smiling at them, and acknowledging that they are as much as me—whoever is sitting next to them. It is not about being pitiful; it is not about being compassionate. It is about acknowledging our civil rights. It is about acknowledging human rights. It is about acknowledging us as humans. That is what inclusivity is. Whether you live in an urban space or a rural space, that is what true inclusivity is. I would say, especially for the transgender community, cities have truly empowered us. Cities have helped us approach media houses and cities have helped us connect with journalists, writers, artists, educationalists, colleges, academics, universities, and talk to them about—sensitize them about—our lives and our issues. Cities have given us opportunities to connect with policymakers and ministries, police officers, the judiciary, and the media to make a change—not only to make a change but also to sustain that change. But it is also the rural culture, the tradition, and sometimes even the religion in India particularly that has given us acceptance. For example, the Koovagam festival conducted every year in the village of Koovagam near Villupuram city in India, is a religious event from the Mahabharata where thousands of transgender people from all over India come to the temple and worship Lord Aravan, a deity. There is a beautiful story behind the deity as well. Aravan

was a prince and the son of Arjuna, the bravest, most beautiful, handsome prince—one of the Pandavas. In the Mahabharata, to win, the Pandavas had to perform a human sacrifice. The person who had to be sacrificed needed to have all 64 qualities of a man. Only three people had these qualities. They were Arjuna, Krishna, and Aravan. So Krishna cannot be sacrificed. He is the sole reason for the war. And Arjuna is the greatest warrior, and he has to be there in the war to win. And it was Aravan. who was approached by Arjuna and Krishna.

And Aravan agreed to be beheaded, to be sacrificed. But he had one wish. He wanted to be married before he was sacrificed. So, the Pandavas announced it to the kingdom, to the entire city where they lived, that they were looking for a bride for their son. But no father wanted to give their daughter to a man who was going to die the next day.

They did not want their daughters to be widows. And so nobody was willing to give their bride. And so Aravan could not get married. And then Krishna became a woman. Krishna became Mohini.

He became a she and then she, Mohini, married Aravan and they spent their blessed night. And then the next day Aravan was sacrificed. He died happily. And then the widow, Mohini, had to rule the traditions of widowhood. That is exactly what happens in Koovagam village.

Religion and epics have also played a role in the stories of acceptance, gender swapping, gender transition and all that. That also could be one of the reasons why a transgender community has been accepted in India. The trans identities and the stories of gender, gender changes are everywhere in the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and the temples and sculptures and scriptures. So these are also some of the reasons why gender identity and gender change and acceptance of transgender people has not been very difficult for transgender people in India. Yes, we face discrimination both in urban and rural spaces but we also face a lot of acceptance too. There is a change happening in India right now, truly an astonishing change I would say. I am very hopeful that the next 10 years the transgender persons, particularly from the entire LGBT community transgender persons, are going to be highly empowered in our state, and that has been a struggle for people like me, we activists have been struggling for this kind of a change for 15 years.

We have brought a tremendous transformation. Today, if I am speaking in this lecture, it is also because my voice has been empowered and I have been able to do this lecture. This has given me my voice. I have claimed it on behalf of the transgender community. I

would like to read one of my poems that I wrote in my Tamil book, 'Kuri Aruththen', but I am not going to read the Tamil version but I am going to read the English translations of my poem. It is called,

So this poetry, the translated version, appears in my book titled, 'We Are Not the Others.' This poetry is about our pride—transgender women's pride in being women, in challenging male chauvinism, in challenging male dominance, in challenging patriarchy. As a trans woman and activist, I feel that I have the voice and must reflect the voice of our community, especially the voiceless transgender and LGBTQI persons. I believe that equality is for all—whether you are a trans man, a transgender woman, a queer person, or non-binary, the struggles we all go through are the same. We need family acceptance.

We need equal spaces. We need, particularly in India, housing. We need employment. We need respect. And we need safety, security, and protection.

Like any other person in this country—anyone who enjoys civil rights—we transgender people deserve it too. And we will claim it. We don't just want to exist. We want to survive. We want to live.

It is not about existence. It is about equality. It is about pride. It is about dignity. It is about respect.

And that we truly deserve. And that will continue as long as we are discriminated against. We will continue our fight for equality. Our fight to claim our rights for empowerment. Our claim for empowerment.

And our freedom to live as happy human beings. Thank you.