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## **Beyond Formal Inclusion: The Role of Social Support in Sustaining Transgender Livelihoods**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Formal inclusion policies have expanded legal recognition for transgender individuals in many contexts; however, lived economic sustainability often depends on informal social structures rather than institutional support. This study examines the role of perceived social support in sustaining the livelihood of a self-made transgender professional in India. Using a single-case mixed-method design, quantitative data were collected using a standardized Social Support Scale, complemented by in-depth narrative interviews. Findings indicate that while formal institutional and familial support remained limited, informal support from clients, peers, and community networks played a crucial role in emotional well-being, occupational continuity, and economic stability. Social support functioned as a protective and enabling resource, facilitating trust, belonging, and resilience in everyday work life. The study argues that sustainable livelihoods for marginalized populations are often maintained through relational and informal support systems rather than formal inclusion alone. Implications for social sustainability, policy development, and community-based support interventions are discussed.

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### **1 Introduction**

Inclusion has become a central objective in contemporary social policy and development discourse, particularly for historically marginalized populations such as transgender individuals. Legal recognition,



affirmative policies, and rights-based frameworks are often presented as milestones of progress. However, formal inclusion does not automatically translate into sustainable livelihoods or everyday well-being. For many transgender individuals, especially in developing contexts, survival and stability continue to depend on informal social networks rather than institutional mechanisms.

In India, transgender persons experience persistent barriers in education, employment, housing, and healthcare, despite recent legal advancements. As a result, many engage in self-made or informal professions, where economic continuity is shaped by social acceptance and relational safety rather than organizational inclusion. In such contexts, social support emerges as a critical determinant of livelihood sustainability.

This study explores how perceived social support sustains the work life and economic stability of a self-made transgender professional. By centering social support rather than stress or resilience, the paper offers a complementary perspective on transgender livelihoods and contributes to broader discussions on social sustainability beyond formal inclusion frameworks.

## **2 Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Social Support and Well-Being**

Social support refers to the availability and perception of emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance from social networks. Extensive research has demonstrated that social support enhances psychological well-being, buffers stress, and promotes adaptive functioning. Emotional support fosters belonging and validation, while instrumental support facilitates practical problem-solving and stability.

### **2.2 Transgender Livelihoods and Informal Economies**

Globally, transgender individuals are disproportionately represented in informal labor markets due to systemic discrimination in formal employment. Informal work offers autonomy but also exposes individuals to economic insecurity and social vulnerability. Research suggests that success within informal economies is closely tied to social relationships, trust, and community embeddedness.

### **2.3 Formal Inclusion Versus Lived Inclusion**

Formal inclusion emphasizes legal recognition and policy-level access, whereas lived inclusion refers to everyday experiences of acceptance, safety, and dignity. Several scholars argue that policy recognition



alone is insufficient without supportive social environments. For transgender individuals, lived inclusion is often negotiated through interpersonal relationships rather than institutions.

## **2.4 Social Support as a Sustainability Resource**

From a sustainability perspective, social support contributes to continuity, stability, and long-term well-being. Informal support networks enable marginalized individuals to withstand economic shocks, navigate discrimination, and maintain livelihood engagement. This study situates social support as a foundational resource for sustainable livelihoods.

## **3 Theoretical Framework**

The study is guided by Social Support Theory and informed by Ecological Systems Theory. Social Support Theory emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in promoting well-being and functional adaptation. Ecological perspectives highlight how individuals interact with multiple systems—family, community, market, and society.

Within this framework, social support is conceptualized as a mediating resource that sustains livelihood engagement in contexts where formal inclusion is weak or absent. Rather than focusing on deficits, the framework foregrounds relational assets and community-based support structures.

## **4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

A mixed-method single-case study design was adopted to capture both measurable perceptions of social support and rich qualitative experiences.

### **4.2 Participant**

The participant is a self-made transgender woman engaged in a service-based profession in South India. She operates independently and does not receive formal organizational or institutional support.

### **4.3 Instruments**

**Social Support Scale:** Used to assess perceived emotional, informational, and instrumental support.

**Semi-Structured Interview:** Explored sources of support, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and the role of relationships in sustaining work life.



#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to assess levels and sources of perceived social support. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to support and livelihood sustainability.

#### **5 Quantitative Findings**

Results from the Social Support Scale indicated moderate overall perceived social support, with significant variation across support sources. Support from clients and peers emerged as relatively strong, particularly in emotional and affirmational domains. In contrast, family-based and institutional support was reported as minimal or inconsistent.

The findings suggest that social support was predominantly work-centered and relational, rather than familial or structural. Emotional encouragement, respectful treatment, and acceptance within the work environment contributed positively to the participant's sense of stability and motivation. Instrumental support, such as referrals and repeat patronage, also played a role in sustaining income continuity.

These patterns highlight the centrality of informal social networks in maintaining livelihood engagement when formal inclusion mechanisms are absent or ineffective.

#### **6 Qualitative Findings**

##### **6.1 Support Through Client Relationships**

Clients emerged as a primary source of emotional and instrumental support. Respectful interactions, repeat visits, and verbal encouragement reinforced the participant's sense of belonging and professional worth.

##### **6.2 Peer and Community Support**

Peer networks provided shared understanding, advice, and emotional validation. Informal community connections offered safety and collective strength, particularly during periods of discrimination or economic uncertainty.



### **6.3 Absence of Institutional Support**

The participant reported limited access to formal support systems such as government schemes, workplace protections, or organizational advocacy. This absence reinforced reliance on interpersonal relationships.

### **6.4 Support as Motivation and Stability**

Social support functioned as a motivational force, sustaining hope and commitment to work even during challenging periods. Feeling accepted reduced emotional exhaustion and strengthened occupational persistence.

## **7 Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that social support operates as a foundational mechanism sustaining transgender livelihoods beyond formal inclusion frameworks. While policies and legal recognition remain important, they do not substitute for everyday relational acceptance and support.

Informal social support enabled emotional well-being, reduced isolation, and provided practical resources essential for livelihood continuity. These findings align with sustainability perspectives that emphasize relational and community-based assets over purely institutional solutions.

Importantly, the study challenges the assumption that inclusion must be institutionally driven. Instead, it highlights how lived inclusion is often cultivated through everyday interactions within informal economies.

## **8 Implications**

### **8.1 Implications for Social Sustainability**

Sustainable livelihoods for marginalized populations require strengthening informal support systems alongside formal policies. Social sustainability depends on relational trust, acceptance, and community engagement.

### **8.2 Policy Implications**

Policymakers should complement legal inclusion with community-based support initiatives, peer networks, and livelihood mentoring programs tailored to transgender professionals.



### **8.3 Practice Implications**

Practitioners working in development, social work, and entrepreneurship should recognize and leverage existing informal support networks rather than relying solely on institutional interventions.

## **9 Contribution to Knowledge**

This study contributes by:

Centering social support rather than stress or resilience

Highlighting informal networks as sustainability resources

Expanding understanding of lived inclusion

Offering an Indian-context perspective on transgender livelihoods

## **10 Limitations and Future Directions**

As a single-case study, findings are not statistically generalizable. Future research should include multi-case or comparative designs and examine diverse occupational contexts. Longitudinal studies could further explore how social support evolves over time.

## **11 Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that sustainable transgender livelihoods are often sustained not through formal inclusion alone but through informal social support systems embedded in everyday work life. Emotional affirmation, relational trust, and community acceptance emerge as critical resources enabling continuity, dignity, and well-being. Recognizing and strengthening these support structures is essential for building socially sustainable and inclusive economies.



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