



India  
**HIV/AIDS**  
Alliance



# BEYOND 'BEING'

Stories of the Wajood programme

AMPLIFYCHANGE

Wajood, meaning identity in Hindi, is a programme focusing on enhancing access to sexual health, mitigating violence and providing linkages to social welfare and entitlement schemes for the transgenders and hijra community.

Funded by Amplify Change, Wajood strengthens the capacity of community-based organisations to provide effective, inclusive and sustainable HIV prevention programming for transgenders and hijras.

India HIV/AIDS Alliance is implementing this project with 6000 TGHs in six sites of India, namely Telangana, Andhra Pradesh (Eluru), Karnataka (Bijapura and Chikbalapur), Gujarat (Vadodara) and Delhi NCR.

We present some success stories of the programme.

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## Pooja's Journey of Acceptance and Transformation

**"You never change things by fighting the existing reality.**

**To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."**

***-Buckminster Fuller.***

Pooja hailed from the grounds of Aligarh and as a Hijra (socio- ethnic identity within transgender community) she would participate in dances and celebratory processions in her neighbourhood on special occasions. One day a pregnant woman saw Pooja, and due to superstitious fears that the unborn child would be born a hijra, Pooja was threatened and subjected to violence by the family of the pregnant woman.



This was not the first time; Pooja had experienced similar threats in the past. The marginalisation she faced wasn't restricted to just the societal forces, it also seeped through the boundaries of her family. Her family had forced Pooja to cut her hair and did not allow her to wear salwar-kameez; they called her an embarrassment to the family. This discrimination by her loved ones made Pooja depressed and she became a loner, avoiding engaging with anyone around her.

After the episode with the pregnant woman, a panchayat meeting was called for a better assessment of the situation. They decided to ostracise Pooja from the village, since she was seen as an obstructive force. Pooja left her home town and came to Delhi, still in a depressed state.

This feeling of depression and extreme worthlessness is common among the transgender and hijra (TGH) community. It usually stems from the dejection and discrimination they face from the society members, often forcing them to resort to suicide or self-harm, due to severe depression. In such a context Wajood (meaning existence in Indian language) implemented by India HIV/AIDS Alliance ([www.allianceindia.org](http://www.allianceindia.org)) and partners with funding from Amplify Change tries to provide psychosocial support to the targets of such marginalisation.

In Delhi, members of the Basera Trust (implementing partner under Wajood project in Noida) - which is a community based organisation working on sexual minority health and human rights issues - tried advising and informing Pooja on the importance of both mental and physical health. Furthermore, she was encouraged to get HIV test done as a precautionary step. Her refusal to the same paved the way for the Basera Advocacy officers to provide psychosocial support to Pooja. This was a vital aspect of the threefold duty of Wajood, namely enhancing access to sexual health, mitigating violence and providing linkages to social welfare and entitlement schemes for TGH communities. Thus, by advocating Pooja on the importance of sexual health through constant dialogue and counselling they were able to ensure that she got the tests done.

Another aspect of the psychosocial support under Wajood is counselling families of the TGH individuals, who ostracise their children for transitioning into a transgender. This is initiated not only on a one-on-one basis but also through group counselling. Thus, the officers under Wajood with the help of lawyers, local governing body and doctors engage with the family members of the affected individual. The programme's effectiveness comes through because of this structural framework. Further, if the need be, there are assured referrals to other clinics and professionals. By interacting with the TGH's family in the form of a well-directed dialogue, change in the familial mind set is brought about in a successful manner. The Wajood programme in a such a manner has provided services and help to the TGH community in six sites across India in the states of Delhi (NCR), Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana and Karnataka.

This was also done in Pooja's case. The officers counselled Pooja's family. Now, Pooja's parents visit her in Delhi and she goes back to her hometown at Aligarh periodically – without facing any prejudice and discrimination.

## Rajesh's Search for his Wajood

### Gathering family support for Transgender clients to strengthen health delivery under Wajood Project funded by Amplify change

Rajesh is a resident of Noida and identifies himself as a cross dresser. When his family members, particularly his father and brother got to know of this they subjected him to great violence and beat him up. This anger got even more severe once the father and brother got drunk. Under the influence of alcohol they would verbally and physically abuse him. Furthermore, to ensure that Rajesh doesn't completely transition into a transwoman his father spent 15,000 rupees by employing a *tantric baba*, popularly known as 'Godmen' in India.

Rajesh was overwhelmed with the discrimination and marginalisation that he was being subjected to, forcing him to reach a stage wherein suicide seemed the only alternative. This was fortunately, prevented when Rizwan, project coordinator from the Basera Trust (community based organisation working on sexual minority health and human rights issues) was able to provide him with adequate psychosocial counselling support. Crisis mitigation is one of the focus areas of the Wajood Project funded by Amplify Change reaching 6,000 transgender population in four states. Often one observes that family and friends are the first to inflict violence to the community members. Wajood in such a context tries to create an enabling environment by providing the members with a safe space Drop in Centre (DIC), to share their GBV stories, and seek counselling from the community counsellors and increase health seeking behaviour through access to community clinics for HIV testing. Project DIC also helps the Transgender and Hijra (TGH) community through referrals and linkages to lawyers, local governing heads and other stakeholders.

However, in order to properly implement this model, steps need to be taken to carefully sensitise the family members of the TGH community in order to prevent any counter effects. In Rajesh's case, the Basera Trust was able to sensitise Rajesh's mother; the counselling was successful and she accepted to support him. The Basera Trust is currently in the process of counselling his father and brother. Family support is essential for TGH community to overcome any peripheral risk around substance use, loneliness and mental health issues.

A significant detail to note in this narrative is the fact that Rajesh's brother himself is a client of a hijra sex worker. This paves way for an analysis which highlights the existing contradiction within the Indian society. While the brother doesn't allow his sibling to cross dress, he himself engages sexually with other transwomen sex workers. The biggest challenge for the team members of Wajood are the people who are in situation where Rajesh is – on one hand the family takes a moral view; on the other hand the behaviour of people who object is often closeted. But the team is hopeful and optimistic.

## When There Is Will There Is Way

### The Story of Neetu, a Transwoman Programme Manager in Andhra Pradesh

Neetu is a transgender and is currently the advocacy officer under Wajood programme in the Andhra Pradesh region. She however, went through several struggles and upheavals in her life to finally work for the people of her community. By motivating and supporting them she helped her fellow transgender and hijra (TGH) peers to carve a path for themselves, different from traditional vocations most of them are involved in sex work and toli badhai (a custom where transgenders visit homes on childbirth or wedding occasions and dance to earn money).

Neetu has a post graduate degree in Masters of Business Administration. She got her higher education as a man, and underwent her Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) soon after. On completion of her MBA, due to her SRS and newly found identity as a transgender – she found it difficult to find job opportunities which were equivalent to her achievements and credentials. Even though Neetu was more than qualified for the job, her sexual identity prohibited her from gaining further recognition in the field. This forced her to resort to sex work and get encapsulated further into the sphere of the hijra community. However, Neetu's mother urged her to put her knowledge and education to better use. She encouraged Neetu to apply for different jobs and Neetu tried garnering as much information as she could about different opportunities available to her. Soon she got a job opportunity with the Wajood Programme, at India HIV/AIDS Alliance.

There was no vacancy in Telengana, so Neetu shifted to Andhra Pradesh despite her inhibitions and scepticism of leaving the comforts of her hometown. Within the tenure of 3 years in which Neetu has been working with India HIV/AIDS Alliance, she has achieved remarkable feats for her community. Legal certificate of being transgender have been provided to more than 50 new members of the community. Furthermore, out of the 500 individuals who registered for the pension scheme, 60 were TGs. Thus, slowly yet steadily Neetu has been able to bring about change in her community; she has been provided a platform through Wajood to make this process of change smoother and more efficient.

India HIV/AIDS Alliance helps build an inclusive and accepting organisational framework by providing job opportunities to transgenders and hijras. These leaders act as the spokespersons and advocacy officers at grassroots levels allowing a sense of solidarity in this constantly growing sphere of learning and development.

## Investment in communities to greater health access

### The story of Ashwini, former hijra sex worker from Karnataka

Belonging to the Kolar District of Karnataka, Ashwini had faced several troubles and difficulties because of her sexuality since childhood. She was often discriminated and was forced to leave her education when she was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade because of constant teasing and harassment she faced by her teachers and peers. In this quest to find her identity she found refuge within the Hijra community in Bangalore and left her family.

After being involved in sex work and begging for 10 years in Mumbai and Bangalore, Ashwini found her true calling by getting associated with the Pehchaan (meaning acknowledgement, recognition or identity in Hindi) programme, which was the largest HIV intervention programme for men who have sex with men, transgender and hijra community supported by the Global Fund implemented by India HIV/AIDS Alliance and partners from 2011-2016. She was selected as a community mobiliser in the project. Furthermore, by winning the support of her Guru (senior hijra providing patronage, social security, and clothing, food to disciples or chelas) - in working for an NGO rather than perpetually being involved in the badhai toli – Ashwini found a new born confidence.

She was able to leave the world of sex work and begging and work for her community members. Along with the Sangama Trust later in Wajood in the Kolar district, Ashwini successfully organised several protests and rallies on issues of sexual health and violence against TGH communities. Ashwini was a strong influencer in revising the budget for the Transgender Policy dictating their jobs and employment opportunities. Moreover, she is the first transgender woman to work for the Weekly Newspaper, 'Hi Kolar' as a District Reporter. She addresses issues being faced by TGs and how to deal with them effectively.

Now that she is a community mobilising officer and working for Wajood, her family has accepted her and she lives with her mother. Ashwini opined that because of sex work and begging she could not receive any respect or prestige within society. Her position in the collective was looked down upon due to her TG status. However, after getting a job with India HIV/AIDS Alliance in the Wajood programme not only has she received high regard from her peers but is also happy and confident. She believes that because of the institution she has been able to garner several opportunities, which wouldn't have been available before. Now she not only counsels and further helps new entrants into the community but also is able to deal with crises effectively.

Ashwini, while sharing her story talked about Sundari who at the age of 14 wanted to transition and get into sex work. However, Ashwini convinced Sundari to continue with her education. Sundari has now completed BSc. Agriculture from Mysore and is looking for jobs after having completed her SRS.

Ashwini is extremely proud of Sundari and believes that programmes and organisations like Wajood and India HIV/AIDS Alliance respectively, allow one to grow and develop in a holistic manner.



## About India HIV/AIDS Alliance

India HIV/AIDS Alliance is a non-governmental organisation working in partnership with civil society and communities to support sustained responses to HIV in India. Complementing the Indian national programme, Alliance India works through capacity building, technical support and advocacy to strengthen the delivery of effective, innovative, community-based interventions to key populations affected by the epidemic. The organisation's programmes focuses on those most vulnerable to HIV, with a particular emphasis on marginalised populations including men who have sex with men (MSM), transgenders, hijras, sex workers, injection drug users (IDUs), youth, women and people living with HIV (PLHIV).

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