

# STRUGGLING THROUGH ECONOMIC HARDSHIP: MY UNTOLD STORY



Akali Chaudhary

I am Akali Chaudhary, an intersex woman who has surpassed the milestone of 53 years on this journey of life. I live in the small town of Sombare, nestled within Itahari in the Sunsari district (eastern Nepal). I came into this world in the midst of an economically challenged family, which meant that my upbringing was colored by innumerable hurdles. As time passed, my family's financial situation grew increasingly dire, making it an uphill task to even put basic meals on the table for me. There were instances when we had to rely on the kindness of neighbors, scraping by with whatever leftover food they could spare. Going to bed with an empty stomach is etched deeply in my memory from those nights gone by. Even though I faced struggles, children in their early stages of life might not fully grasp the extent of those challenges. Under the watchful eyes of my parents, I managed to find happiness.

When I was born I had female and male organs. Because I had more female organs, my parents raised me as a daughter. They did not want to see me wearing male attire. No one apart from my family was aware of my intersex identity. By the time I was seven years old, my body underwent significant changes that I couldn't ignore. These physiological changes were accompanied by changes in my behavior, which began to raise concerns within my family. For example, I wore female clothing around my father and brothers because they had strong aversion to third gender, and my mother said to wear female dress in front of them. But I was fond of wearing male attire. My mother possessed

some understanding of this matter. When I was seven, she brought up the topic with me, but due to my tender age, I didn't understand what my mother was saying so, it didn't have an impact on my mind.

At age 14, I finally gained a fuller understanding of being intersex. I openly engaged in conversations with my mother. She told me to discover my own journey of knowing myself. But other family members who were aware that I was born intersex began treating me differently as I transitioned into adulthood. They subjected me to hurtful slurs like *hijda* and *chakka* (terms used pejoratively to demean third gender). My brothers began physically abusing me because they believed that my identity was tarnishing our family's social standing. If I tried to defend myself, I was physically punished. But I kept on speaking up for my rights. The situation escalated to the point where my brothers and father plotted to expel me from our home. Thankfully, I found refuge under the protective care of my mother. She allowed me to wear male attire when my father wasn't at home. She even protected me when people came to her with marriage proposals for me. But I couldn't escape the weight of scorn by other family members.

When my mother passed away I was left adrift in the family, devoid of her protection. The ground beneath me eroded away. My mother's absence meant that there was no longer a haven of safety within our home. The once-familiar spaces, now felt hostile and perilous because my two brothers subjected



me to even more extreme physical and mental harassment. My father's behavior towards me was also not good. I was isolated. I found myself alone.

Fear of violence from society outside my home held me back from running away from home. But the oppression within my family became unbearable and compelled me to escape. One night, I left Itahari to find refuge in Kathmandu. I was 14 years old.

Despite being intersex, I'd chosen to identify myself as a transgender man. In Kathmandu, I lived with a friend. I had to seek employment in the garment industry. The job provided me with food and a place to stay. However, I found myself ensnared in a cycle of labor exploitation because I didn't receive a wage that truly reflected the worth of my labor, even after giving my skin, bones, and tireless efforts. For 11 years I was earning 500 rupees a month (less than four US dollars at current exchange rate).

Kathmandu had initially seemed like a refuge but my body felt battered and aged. My situation, both physically and emotionally, was in shambles. I couldn't return to the house of my family in Itahari because my family had mistreated me. Itahari offered no solace.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was evicted from my room. The landlord showed me no compassion, leaving me with no choice but to endure over two weeks of homelessness, surviving solely on bread and

enduring a life of destitution. Throughout the pandemic, I found myself without any family support. Compounding my difficulties, my official identification card carries a female designation, which poses significant problems for me because I prefer to present myself as a man. Unfortunately, Nepal's existing laws and regulations have left me in a bind. I've been unable to secure government documents that accurately reflect my true identity due to this legal gap.

Despite the grand slogans and reassuring speeches by politicians and government leaders, my experience has shown me that our generation of elders might end up as nothing more than ashes, having endured a life plagued by discrimination and humiliation. Even though political shifts have promised rights across various levels and sectors, political leaders have yet to acknowledge the existence of single individuals like me, who are part of the gender and sexual minorities, and find ourselves excluded from access to government services. The looming concern of falling ill or the frailty of my aging body haunts me as I wonder how I will manage as a single elderly person. Safety and security have been elusive.

I earnestly request that the government empower us financially, establish collective residences or ashrams for gender and sexual minorities with precarious livelihoods, and help address the challenges that deny gender diverse individuals social security and dignity.