

PROVING GENDER: MEDICAL GATEKEEPING, EPISTEMIC POWER, AND THE INSTITUTIONAL PRODUCTION OF TRANSGENDER LEGITIMACY IN DELHI

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ABSTRACT

Transgender healthcare is frequently framed as a question of access, rights, and service delivery. This paper shifts the analytical focus by examining how gender is institutionally produced within medical settings rather than merely recognized. Drawing on a pilot qualitative study conducted in Delhi, the research analyzes in-depth interviews with 30 transgender individuals seeking gender-affirming healthcare and 2 medical professionals involved in providing such care. Anchored in Foucauldian analyses of medical power, Butlerian theories of gender performativity, and the framework of epistemic injustice, the paper demonstrates that medical institutions function as epistemic authorities that determine the legitimacy of gender claims. Psychiatric evaluations, binary diagnostic norms, and professional ethical reasoning operate as mechanisms of medical gatekeeping through which gender identities are evaluated, stabilized, and certified.

Trans respondents describe fear of refusal, pressure to conform to binary expectations, and strategic modification of personal narratives to appear psychologically stable and institutionally legible. In contrast, medical professionals emphasize readiness, risk management, and ethical responsibility, revealing a discursive asymmetry between lived identity and institutional reasoning. The findings suggest that recognition within transgender healthcare is not an automatic outcome of self-identification but a conditional process shaped by disciplinary power, constrained performance, and hierarchical knowledge relations. By conceptualizing legitimacy as an institutional outcome rather than an inherent attribute, the paper contributes to sociological debates on medicalization, gender, and epistemic authority in contemporary governance.

KEYWORDS: Transgender Healthcare; Medical Gatekeeping; Epistemic Injustice; Gender Performativity; Institutional Legitimacy

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