

# Experiences at Work and Discrimination against Trans Individuals in Colombia

*Experiencias en el trabajo y discriminación de las personas trans en Colombia*

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## Key words

Content Analysis

- Discrimination
- Work Experiences
- Skills
- Trans Population

## Palabras clave

Análisis de contenido

- Discriminación
- Experiencias en el trabajo
- Habilidades
- Población trans

## Abstract

The transgender population in Colombia faces significant challenges related to socio-labor exclusion. This study analyzes the work experiences of transgender individuals in Valle del Cauca, identifying forms of discrimination within the labor market and factors that impact their professional and educational trajectories. A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted, revealing that most experiences are complex, with discrimination manifesting through violence, stigmatization, and exclusion. The primary causes include early departure from home and limited investment in human capital, in addition to a lack of interest from businesses in hiring them. This work provides valuable insights into labor discrimination against the transgender population and serves as a foundation for future research within the Colombian context.

## Resumen

La población trans en Colombia enfrenta graves desafíos de exclusión sociolaboral. Este estudio analiza las experiencias laborales de personas trans en el Valle del Cauca, identificando formas de discriminación en el ámbito laboral y factores que afectan sus trayectorias profesionales y educativas. Se realizaron dieciocho entrevistas en profundidad, revelando que la mayoría de las experiencias son complejas, con discriminación, manifestándose a través de violencia, estigmatización y exclusión. Las causas principales incluyen la salida temprana del hogar y la escasa inversión en capital humano, además del desinterés empresarial por su contratación. Este trabajo aporta una comprensión valiosa sobre la discriminación laboral hacia la población trans, sirviendo como base para investigaciones futuras en el contexto colombiano.

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Trans, non-binary and queer identities challenge traditional norms by not aligning with the sex assigned at birth, crossing socially imposed boundaries regarding the meaning of gender (Bradford and Syed, 2019; Candido and Medeiros, 2021). Rather than a fixed state, these identities reflect a continuous process of transition toward a desired identity, as defined by David (2015), who emphasizes that this movement, rather than the final destination, constitutes the essence of the trans experience. This approach has been supported by studies highlighting that transition is a lifelong process. Garosi and Pons (2016) conceptualized the term trans as an umbrella that includes a diversity of identities, promoting an understanding that protects the multiplicity of subjective and bodily gender experiences, avoiding pathologizations and challenging the limitations of the sex-gender binary.

The lack of proximity to (and understanding of) these communities fuels deep-rooted stigmas and prejudices, especially among cisgender people who, in many cases, have no direct contact with trans or queer people. According to data from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC.ORG, 2023), only 35 % of all US voters reported knowing or working with a transgender individual in 2016. This social distance, aggravated by biased representations and exclusionary narratives, not only perpetuates stereotypes, but it also hinders the integration of these individuals in social and work environments (Smith, 2014). Despite the growing visibility of public figures from the trans community, studies show that

this population faces alarming levels of discrimination, especially in the workplace, where gender identity is often more evident than sexual orientation, making it difficult to conceal. This exposes these individuals to greater risks of stigmatization (Bryson, 2017; Drydakis, 2019).

In Colombia, official statistics underestimate the extent of sexual and gender diversity, reporting that only 1.2 % of the population identifies as LGBT, as compared to international estimates suggesting some 7 % of the population, of which between 0.1 % and 0.6 % identify themselves as trans or queer (DANE, 2022; Williams Institute, 2022). These figures reflect a significant underrepresentation, which may be influenced by factors such as fear of stigma, lack of legal recognition and the inherent fluidity of these identities. In terms of education and employment, the data are equally concerning. A report from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2020) suggested that 85 % of all trans people in Latin America do not complete secondary school due to family abandonment and bullying, and only 8 % manage to obtain a university degree. Furthermore, 88 % report that they have never sent out a resume to look for a job, while 74 % work in sectors such as hairdressing or sex work, not by choice, but given that this is their only alternative to systemic exclusion. This situation is aggravated by the legal, social and political hostility that they encounter, which perpetuates a cycle of poverty (Sansone, 2019) and vulnerability (Reed, 2020).

The intersection of variables such as gender, race and socioeconomic position amplifies the discrimination faced by trans people. These inequalities are less visible in quantitative statistics, which tend to homogenize non-normative identities, making their analysis difficult. Instead, qualitative studies have proven more suitable for exploring the complexity of these ex-

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periences (Anteby, 2014; Tomasev *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, recent studies suggest that discriminatory attitudes towards trans individuals have deep roots in cultural and structural factors (Kilander, 2022). Variables such as regular attendance at conservative religions, sexist ideas and rigid conceptions about gender binarism have been found to be important predictors of discriminatory behavior (Ueno, 2021; Mallory, Flores and Sears, 2021).

Although more subtle and comparable to structural racism, employment discrimination continues to seriously affect the mental health, well-being and social inclusion of trans people, hindering their personal and professional development (Toro-Alfonso, 2012). Their exclusion from the labor market and the educational system not only hinders their individual growth, but also negatively impacts human capital and the collective well-being of societies. In Colombia, the study of the socioeconomic conditions and labor participation of this population is crucial to understanding the dynamics of exclusion and its consequences on development and social well-being.

## LABOR MARKET, DISCRIMINATION AND SKILL BUILDING

For people with non-normative identities, the world of work represents a constant challenge, riddled with structural inequalities and systematic discrimination. Gallie (2018) examined how atypical jobs have evolved in terms of quality and security, while Standing (2011) delved into the increasing levels of precarious work and the resulting socioeconomic divisions. Pager and Shepherd (2008) explored discrimination in selection processes, highlighting how gender and ethnic-racial components affect job opportunities. Alcántara and Moreno (2022) analyzed the intersectionality between gender, race

and class in the workplace, pointing out that black trans women hold the most vulnerable place in this hierarchy of discrimination. Although these investigations have advanced the understanding of labor dynamics, challenges persist, especially for trans and queer populations.

Not only does work provide economic resources, but it is also a fundamental axis for well-being and personal identity. According to Clark (2015), quality employment generates satisfaction and also reinforces the sense of personal worth and provides a framework for social belonging. At the same time, Moore (2017) highlighted that work satisfaction is linked to eudaimonic happiness, which lies in the achievement of significant accomplishments, explaining why some people continue to work after reaching the retirement age.

The labor market in Colombia reflects deep inequalities. According to a World Bank study, it ranks second highest in terms of inequality in Latin America. This inequality is manifested by a highly segmented labor market. In the Cauca Valley, the problem has reached an alarming level, with an increase in the concentration of wealth. The Gini index rose from 0.47 in 2019 to 0.52 in 2020, accompanied by high rates of youth unemployment and informality, ranking among the most affected regions in the country (DANE, 2022).

The statistics provided by DANE (2022) estimate that at least 24.3 % of the LGBT population of working age is not working. No data is provided for the trans population. These figures are often underestimated, since in conservative societies people may view their lives as being threatened due to the recognition that they have non-normative sexual identities. Another reason for the underestimation is that national statistics are collected in urban areas having access to public services (Drydakís, 2019).

According to the ILO, work quality depends on factors such as income, social security, formal contracts and welfare policies. A study by Posso (2010) highlights that higher education and company size are key determinants of improved working conditions. However, regional inequalities persist, and the big cities continue to be where the best paying jobs are concentrated.

Work experiences of trans and queer people are profoundly marked by stigma, educational exclusion and structural discrimination. According to Subhasandhya and Gyanaranjan (2023), the lack of policies to promote inclusive school environments directly affects positive perceptions of education, limiting access to skills and employment opportunities. Furthermore, informal networks for access to well-paid jobs in contexts such as Colombia may increase the exclusion of marginalized groups, as noted by Viáfara and Uribe (2009).

Stigma towards trans people, combined with early family abandonment and institutional discrimination, perpetuates the exclusion of these populations from formal employment. This translates into significantly low rates of labor participation and a high concentration in informal sectors, such as sex work and beauty. These sectors are marked by precariousness and vulnerability. Although few studies have been conducted on the work trajectories of trans individuals in Colombia, the studies that have been carried out, often undergraduate theses, have revealed stories of discrimination and factors that could facilitate more equitable access to the labor market.

This study examines the work experiences of trans people in the Cauca Valley (Colombia), in an attempt to identify forms of discrimination and understand the factors affecting their educational and professional careers.

## INSTRUMENTS AND METHODS

A content analysis approach was adopted to examine factors, aspects and dimensions of reality that had not been previously identified in existing theories, and to corroborate those that have already been documented. According to Páramo (2015), content analysis allows us to bridge the gap between empirical research without a theoretical basis and theories without empirical evidence, using the data collected as a starting point to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. During this process, the investigative team analyzed texts and communications in order to identify recurrent patterns, topics or biases, highlighting the usefulness of this methodology to explore sensitive topics and hard to access populations (AtlasTI, 2024).

The study used content analysis as a central approach to examine the work experiences of trans and queer people. This method was selected due to its ability to explore dimensions of reality that have not yet been identified or to confirm aspects that have been previously documented in the literature. According to Páramo (2015), content analysis allows for a closing of the gap between abstract theories and specific empirical evidence, using the collected data as a starting point to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomena at hand.

For the organization and systematization of the information, as well as to minimize interpretive biases, a double-blind methodology was used during the coding and analysis process. This implies that two researchers worked independently on the data categorization and analysis. They subsequently compared their results to ensure consensus. This analysis was performed using the MAXQDA tool, which

permits the handling of large volumes of qualitative information in an organized and structured manner. In addition, a mixed analysis was carried out, integrating two complementary perspectives, namely, a deductive approach, based on global theories and findings that offered an initial conceptual framework, as well as an inductive approach, based on the analysis of the particularities of the context and the identification of new variables, categories or dimensions related to the work reality of trans and queer people.

To collect information, the “Work life accounts instrument” was designed and applied through in-depth interviews conducted between May and August of 2022. These interviews consisted of seven open questions, formulated in a conversational format to facilitate the participant’s free expression and permit further information when necessary. This article focuses on the results derived from the analysis of the following two questions:

- What has your work history been like? When did you start working and what has it been like since then?
- Discrimination is common in our sexist contexts. How have you dealt with this in the workplace? What strategies have you used?

Sampling

Participant selection was based on self-determination methodology, allowing each individual to define how they wanted to be called and how they identified themselves in terms of gender and sexual identity. Snowball sampling was used, with support from a non-governmental organization in Cali and contacts in the trans and queer population. Finding participants and their willingness to collaborate in the study proved challenging, so a financial incentive was offered, a recommended practice in research with vulnerable populations.

Initially, the sample consisted of 37 LGBT individuals. However, during the analysis period, significant differences were identified between the experiences of the LGB individuals and the trans participants. Therefore, the analysis was divided into two groups: LGB people and trans and queer individuals. This study addresses the results of the trans and queer group, consisting of eighteen participants who self-identified as follows: two trans men, two queer people and fourteen trans women (see Table 1). The narratives collected reflect their shared experiences regarding their work trajectories, discrimination and coping strategies.

TABLE 1. Sample and characterization of the trans and queer people interviewed

Name	Dur.	O/Ident.*	Educational level	Age in years	Profession/s
1. A.Y.	1,2'	Trans Woman	8th grade	43	Social projects/Glassworks/Hairdresser
2. D.Y.	49'	Trans Man	11th grade	41	City Hall link/P. Root sales/Baker
3. K.Y.	1,2'	Trans Woman	Hairdresser vocational studies	43	Hairdressing instructor/Hairdresser
4. Jh.C.	1,1'	Trans Man	Professional	32	Physical education-trainer/Diversity manager-University
5. Mí.Y.	1,0'	Trans Woman	Cooking vocational studies	27	Chef/Town Hall

**TABLE 1.** *Sample and characterization of the trans and queer people interviewed* (Continuation)

Name	Dur.	O/Ident.*	Educational level	Age in years	Profession/s
6. Val.V.	42´	Trans Woman	Voc. studies incomplete	40	Pharmacy promotor/Seller
7. D.Y.	1,3´	Trans Woman	11th grade	60	Hairdressing instructor/Hairdresser
8. E.S.C.	1,1´	Trans Woman	Primary school	37	Street vendor
9. U.G.C.	1,1´	Trans Woman (Afro)	11th grade	52	Sports monitor/Hairdresser/Athlete
10. DV.B.	46´	Queer	Masters	35	Multi-national marketing
11. N.S.C	42	Trans Woman	11th grade without completion	28	Sex worker/Sales
12. Y.Pa.	41	Trans Woman	Vocational studies	25	Sex worker/Leisure and Pre-school worker
13. A.Y.C.	1,0´	Trans Woman (Afro)	8th grade	45	Sports monitor/Office work/Sex worker
14. M.A.C.	36´	Trans Woman	Dance professional studies	52	Dance teacher/Sex worker
15. G.A.J.	57´	Trans Woman	11th grade	36	Sex worker/Trans Human Rights worker/Hairdresser
16. Gi.C.	1,2´	Trans Woman	8th grade	53	Hairdresser/Trans Human Rights worker
17. M.C.	1,1´	Trans Woman	11th grade	58	Sex worker/Sales/Crafts
18. K.S.	48´	Queer	11th grade	32	Sales

\*Sexual orientation/gender identity.

Source: Author's own creation, 2023. Interview duration is presented in hours and minutes.

**RESULTS**

Only two individuals in the study described themselves as queer. One was the individual having the highest educational level and socioeconomic status, holding a senior management position. The other claimed to consider themselves *different* and was currently in the process of learning about gender identity. This suggests that self-identification may be mediated by socioeconomic and educational factors that enable greater access to contemporary discourse on sexual and gender diversity.

The rest of the interviewees identified themselves as trans women, trans men and transgender. This is a language that reflects

their specific experiences and the process of identity construction. All of the individuals recognized that their identity has been an ongoing learning process, marked by a process of re-recognition of their own self and their position in the world.

Four main categories of analysis emerged from the qualitative analysis of the accounts told by the eighteen interviewees in response to the question about their work life history, and from the data processing with the MAXQDA program: a) Education and skills building, b) Experiences at work, c) Discrimination, d) Challenges and learning. These results allow for the identification of specific patterns, tensions and challenges faced by trans and queer people in the workplace.

Experiences in the work setting

The participants’ experiences of discrimination are extremely diverse. They refer to distinct settings such as education, health, family and, consequently, work (Valles, Cea D’Ancona and Domínguez, 2017). Their accounts refer to work in areas such as sex work and hairdressing to management positions in multinationals, with the latter being the least common case. These experiences are marked by opportunities as well as barriers, including anecdotes of discrimination that range from subtle comments about their identity to explicit acts of stigmatization and physical violence.

In the analysis, it was determined that only one person (queer) began working after reaching the age of majority. This case corresponds to an individual having a high educational and socioeconomic level, resulting in the development of a successful career in multinational organizations. This data contrasts with the other participants, who began working between the ages of twelve and sixteen, which reflects structural conditions of inequality that push trans people to enter the labor market early, generally in precarious jobs.

Only two participants (a trans man and the previously mentioned queer individual) managed to access higher education and obtain a professional degree. Of

the eighteen people interviewed, four (the two trans men and the two queer people) have worked in private companies, although they faced multiple difficulties, especially those from low-income backgrounds, such as one of the participants who self-identified as queer.

The experiences of the two trans men reflect a more favorable integration into organizations, as previously mentioned by Schilt (2006). However, this integration was not free of verbal aggression. Commentaries such as “You don’t look like a trans man” were perceived as uncomfortable, and were not considered to be compliments. As one of the interviewees mentioned: “How do I say it? You are not paying me a compliment” (Personal statement, Trans man, 4. JhC). These comments reveal how cisnormative perceptions continue to exist, even in settings that appear to be inclusive.

All of the interviewees stated that they chose to be open about their identity at some point in their career, although two trans women indicated that they adapted their gender expression according to the demands of the job and their economic needs. This reveals the ongoing negotiation between gender identity and normative expectations in work environments. The categories determined in the experiences of the interviewees are presented below, based on organization type (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Category: Types of experiences identified in the interviewees’ accounts

Organization/employment types	Description	Appointment
Private organizations/ companies	Hide their identity	“I had both. Because when you work in a certain way, in a business style, I had to be a bit more masculine” (Trans woman, 17. MMC).
	Collaboration networks	“I brought my resume, and there was a man that I recognized, and he helped me with the selection process. It was for a Human Resources assistant position...” (Trans woman, 11. NSC).

**TABLE 2.** *Category: Types of experiences identified in the interviewees' accounts* (Continuation)

Organization/employment types	Description	Appointment
Public/governmental	Never be called	"Yes, and I started handing out resumes, wonderfully, the interviews and everything, but it was practically a waste of resumes and of time, because they told me: 'You have an excellent resume, don't call us, we'll call you'" (Trans woman, 11. NSC).
	Multi-nationals	"At the companies where I have worked, especially at Amazon, now, that is where I have received the most support, because we have a company that is very large and therefore, it is super-committed to areas related to diversity and inclusion" (Queer, 10. DVB).
	City hall	"[...] We met the councilmen, they opened the door to us trans girls of my time. They were very, very kind to us, when we suddenly had an idea, that is, we want this, we want to launch this project, they were there with us [...] they supported us, so that is another door that opens" (Trans woman, 1. AY).
	Public org.	"This is going to sound odd. At the administrations, they have opened the door to hiring trans people only because they need to show that they meet their trans diversity quotas at these city halls and in the governments" (Trans woman, 15. GAC).
Tertiary sector/education	NGO	"That meeting with the NGO and a private entity, where we met with many successful people who have been educated, who have good jobs... I told myself that if I had continued studying, I don't know where I would be now" (Trans woman, 3. KGY)
	Universities	"At the universities, well, you know that it is more open, however, there are still people..." (Trans woman, 9. UGC).
Self-employed		"They don't give us the opportunity... so sometimes one gets stuck, then they say: 'Ah! I'm not going to work for anyone, and I will look for my own work'" (Trans woman, 7. DMY).
	Hairdressing	"They were serious and learned a lot from me. Many of these people already have their own independent hair salons. I also helped them a lot in their set-ups" (Trans woman, 7. DMY).
	Sex work	"Well, since I was 15 I chose to leave home. And as of this age, since I had no work options, I began working as a sex worker" (Trans worker, 14. MAC).

Source: Author's own creation, 2023.



The trans and queer people's work experiences in private organizations ranged from the need to hide their identity to finding genuine support in multinational companies such as Amazon, where diversity and inclusion policies were key. One queer person highlighted that working at Amazon allowed them to develop professionally in a respectful and supportive environment. However, these positive experiences were exceptional, since most of the trans women faced systematic rejections during the recruitment processes.

In public institutions, experiences ranged from advances in inclusion to perceptions of instrumentalization. Some people acknowledged progress, such as the hiring of trans people in community projects or local administrations, although others noted that these initiatives appeared to be superficial efforts to meet diversity quotas, without a real commitment to their integration in significant roles.

However, the accounts also reveal a duality of identity in formal and informal work. One of the trans women interviewed explained how, during her youth, while working in commercial companies, she adapted her behavior according to social expectations. The interviewee described it as follows:

Yes, behavior was much more hidden, right? [...] You went more in line with what society expected, but when I work independently, well, my way of being logically explodes. It's like: –come on man, buy my ice cream–, I'm not going to say: –come on love, buy me some insurance– (Trans woman, 17. MMC).

This testimony highlights the dissonance between personal identity and the demands of the formal work environment. In contrast, freelancing allowed this woman to express herself more freely, exposing the limitations imposed by traditional corporate norms.

Another participant reported not having faced discrimination in the business environment thanks to her “warm and friendly personality”. However, she recalled having been a victim of discrimination during her schooling, at an all boys' school. This led her to drop out of school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. These experiences are in line with studies linking educational exclusion with a lower capacity for future work insertion (Shelton *et al.*, 2018).

Some trans women have opted for awareness-raising strategies to counteract social rejection in the workplace. One of the participants stated the following:

Well look, they are giving me the opportunity. [...] We aren't weirdos [...] we simply were born in the wrong body (Trans woman, 11. NSC).

Despite their efforts, this woman recognized that, after losing her job, her attempts to re-enter the formal labor market were unsuccessful, leading her to perform sex work. This experience has been shared by many trans women, who, aware of the rejection that they face due to their gender identity, decide not to send CVs to formal companies. Jobs in private companies, although they allow them to support themselves, usually force them to give up their gender identity.

All of these biases, because depending on where you studied, where you lived, with whom you lived, all of this begins to provide information, since the companies want to fill a very specific mold. It is very complicated (Trans woman, 10. DVB).

This testimony highlights the rigidity of the organizational structures as an obstacle to the inclusion of trans people. Corporate standards, such as requiring a specific dress code, are symbolic and real life barriers to the expression of gender identity.

Comments related to having done “everything” are common among the in-

interviewees, given their economic vulnerability and lack of profession. Hustling is a common condition in the lives of trans people (Shelton *et al.*, 2018). One interviewee described the following:

I have done everything. I have worked as a construction assistant. I have worked as a doorman. I have also worked a lot in restaurants as a kitchen assistant. I have worked in event companies, as a waiter, attending social events. Also in social work, as an activist. Yes, I have done a lot of security work, as a guard, doorman, messenger (Trans woman, 13. AYC).

These activities also include sales, counter work, hairdressing, beauty, cooking and the arts, which may be due to the networks that have developed in these areas. When it comes to having an established profession, trans women share the perception that one must first build a career and then transition. This has been shown to be true only if one achieves high status and professional recognition, but not otherwise (Davis and Yeung, 2022; Yoder and Mattheis, 2016).

## Education and skill building

Education plays a crucial role in the lives of trans people, both as a means of accessing the labor market and as a tool to raise awareness about sexual and gender diversity. According to Leppel (2019), both dimensions are essential to reduce discrimination and promote inclusion. However, the educational landscape for trans people remains challenging. For example, a study of school climate in Bogotá (Colombia) and its surrounding areas found that 35 026 students reported witnessing attitudes of rejection towards homosexual people, while 47 225 observed acts of discrimination (Colombia diverse, 2016). This hostility in the classrooms contributes to low average school completion rates in the trans population (Bello, 2018).

The interviewees' accounts demonstrate how discrimination and rejection in educational settings impact their scholastic trajectories. One trans woman described the following:

Many people told me: "go to an accelerated class, there are only ten or eleven people there". But no, I knew that it would be six months that I would have to put up with people looking at me like I was a weirdo (Trans woman, 15. GAC).

Discrimination in the school environment is very intense, at an age when individuals tend to be more sensitive to the comments of their peers. Despite these challenges, the interviewees recognize the importance of education to access better job opportunities:

Well, the issue of education... since you know that even to be a cleaner they ask for a high school diploma and many of us don't even have that (Trans woman, 13. AYC).

They also expressed interest in educational programs that include scholarships and specific training for their inclusion:

I would have loved to have had that... education, training and scholarships, because I see it as having more inclusion, more acceptance, more of everything. I would love it (Trans woman, 12. YP).

Despite the challenges, the emerging leadership in the trans community represents a hope for change. Many of the interviewees highlighted how some trans women are taking on roles as spokespersons and leaders in political and social processes. In this case, despite the interest of mayors and government agencies, trans women have low qualifications levels. One trans woman highlighted the following:

I don't know why they don't study. If it's due to money, the Ministry of Social Welfare (Yumbo) helps them find scholarships to finish high school and higher education (Trans woman, 3. KGY).

However, there is also evidence of the need for greater personal motivation and continuity in educational processes:

They told us: “the one who finished high school should pursue her career, become a lawyer, a doctor, a psychologist, whatever she wants, so that they can continue to advance, not just stay there, so that we can continue to go forward in life”. But look, most of us are over forty, so it was our failing to make an effort to continue our studies (Trans woman 3, KGY).

Lack of access to information and communication technologies (ICT) represents a major obstacle to the trans population. One participant shared the following:

The biggest obstacle that I have encountered, and it is not even discrimination or people, the biggest, the worst, and I feel stuck, is technology (Trans woman, 3. KGY).

Another interviewee told of how, thanks to community initiatives, they were able to learn basic computer skills:

I didn't have access to a computer because, well, I hadn't studied much, so my classmates and I started taking classes to help me lose my fear of computers (Trans woman, 13. AYC).

In addition to these technical skills, trans women identified the need to develop soft skills, such as communication, leadership and public speaking, which are essential in today's work environment. This is revealed in their accounts discussing the need to develop soft skills such as public management, communication and

public speaking or leadership. A lack of these skills often causes difficulties given their vulnerable condition.

Yes, because right now, unfortunately, those who don't study are nobodies and if you study, if you educate yourself, you will speak well, you will behave well, you will have a good circle of friends (Trans woman, 3. KGY).

### Discrimination in the workplace

Discrimination in the workplace continues to be a major barrier for trans and queer people, limiting their access, integration and adaptation to workplaces and social life in general. The experiences narrated by the interviewees reflect the multiple forms of exclusion and hostility they face. These experiences not only affect their employment opportunities, but also their sense of belonging and self-esteem. One trans woman illustrates this reality by pointing out:

I'll tell you one thing, if I'm gay, let's say, how many gay people are there working? Many. They work in banks, they work in nightclubs, in companies, but they are serious, they have their studies, they fit in with this field, while we trans people don't fit in this field (Trans woman, 7. DMY).

This testimony reveals how, even within sexual diversity, trans people face higher levels of marginalization. Below is a summary of the forms of discrimination that were reported in the accounts given by the interviewees (see Table 3).

**TABLE 3.** *Category: Manifestations of discrimination against trans and queer people*

Manifestation of discrimination	Affirmations
Discrimination in job interviews	“From my personal experience, since I have only had one job interview in my life, it was at a company here in Yumbo. It was the first and the last, because I said: ‘I don't have to come here to let anyone drool over me or let anyone step all over me just because of who I am’” (Trans woman, 1. AY).

**TABLE 3.** *Category: Manifestations of discrimination against trans and queer people* (Continuation)

Manifestation of discrimination	Affirmations
Discrimination in the selection process	"I had contact with the group and they called everyone, because my resume was presented several times. They called everyone but they didn't call me. Yes, I felt this exclusion" (Trans woman, 2. DY).
Discrimination in the request for documents	"In my case, it is a bit complicated because up until now, I have not changed my name. Legally my name is [...] and if he sends a resume, they are going to judge him, the interview is going to be somewhat uncomfortable when I arrive. So no, I don't want to be subject to this. One deals with a lot of rejection, and I don't handle it very well. I prefer not to be subject to it" (Trans man, 2. DY).
Teasing and behavioral evaluation	"In the disco where I worked, well, I had already begun my transition, but I was in the initial stages, so some people thought that I was a gay man or was effeminate. And once, one of the security guards made fun of me with one of his colleagues, because of the way I peed" (Trans man, 4. JhC).
Exclusion or refusal to have contact	"Well, when you enter a company, there are always certain colleagues who seem to exclude you from certain things, or the colleague who says: 'oh, this broad is in love with me', without even knowing them" (18. KS).
Using/instrumentalizing them	"At university, well you know it is more open, although at university they have stuck me with psychologists and with a priest on the side... so it is to generate controversy" (Trans woman, 9. UGC).
Looking at them oddly	"When I worked in the market, they looked at one as if, as if we were in the circus, and as they would look at something in a cage" (Trans woman, 15. GAC).
Expecting or demanding a standardized image	"That was in a company that packed diapers, which sent me to cut my hair" (Trans woman, 15. GAC).
Not explaining or "playing dirty" so that they make mistakes	"Like now at the pharmacy where I am. I had to complain to the boss. Well, my boss, they weren't giving me the prescriptions so that I could deliver the medicine. So I had to tell on them, and well, in these little towns people are hateful" (Trans woman, 6. VDV).
Use of disrespectful language in public	"People can shout things at me on the street, because one does not stop walking on the street" (Trans woman, sex worker, 7. DMY).
Asking about romantic partner in interviews to reveal one's sexual orientation	"Because when I went to look for a job, when I said: 'Ah, but I have an open situation'... Because of that change, the situation has been very, very negative (Couple)" (Trans woman, 17. MMC).
Sexual comments	"Going back to the work part, what I was telling you: sexism, sexual comments and all this was always present" (Queer, 10. DVB).

**TABLE 3.** *Category: Manifestations of discrimination against trans and queer people* (Continuation)

Manifestation of discrimination	Affirmations
Fear for personal safety	“No, I don’t speak openly. Yes, yes because sometimes it is a question of safety” (Queer, 10. DVB).
Talking about them or making comments	“People who were standing in line were asking questions like: ‘What is that? A woman? Is that a trans? A woman or a trans’. Many clients approached me and asked: ‘Come on babe, are you a trans girl?’ I told them: ‘Yes, my love, I am a trans girl’. And they said to me: ‘It’s good that they give them the opportunity’. Others made faces” (Trans woman, 11. NSC).
Firing them	“But well, due to my sexual condition I was disconnected from work” (Trans woman, 14. MAC).
Indirect poor treatment: looks, gestures	“I lasted as a technician, let’s see, like two, three years, as I was saying. But the treatment was... they treat you, they make you feel like an ass. I mean, like because you’re trans you’re the worst and, well, you should be grateful that they have you there” (Trans woman, 15. GAC).
Double discrimination for race, economic condition	“More than anything, I suffered from double discrimination for being black and being trans. They said: ‘You are black and a sissy’” (Trans woman, 9. UGC).

Source: Author’s own creation, 2023.

The various forms of discrimination identified in this study reflect global trends that have been widely documented in the literature (Davis and Yeung, 2022; Drydakís, 2019; Bradford and Syed, 2019). For example, Schilt (2006) showed that trans men can experience certain privileges by being accepted as “another one” within the masculine groups in the workplace, which highlights a marked preference for the masculine. This phenomenon reveals that moral and social categories at work are intertwined with aesthetic and functional criteria. However, discrimination against trans people tends to intensify when other conditions of vulnerability converge, such as belonging to an ethnic or racial minority, living in rural areas or lacking sufficient financial resources. In the case of trans men or queer people, the pressure to conform to aes-

thetic and behavioral standards is evident. One interviewee shared the following:

I go to an interview, and they tell me: “no, you are a woman, you need to be more feminine”, because, well, in my area it is sales and I have been rejected many times because of my physical appearance (Queer, 18. KS).

Although in the interviews we were careful not to ask about issues that might cross an ethical line, inevitably stories arose about being unable to open bank accounts, not being paid at banks, problems obtaining some type of certificate or document, being harassed by the police on the streets, or lacking sufficient economic resources.

Discrimination during selection processes is one of the most frequent experiences told in the accounts of the trans people (Bryant-Lees and Kite, 2021), along with bullying and non-physical ag-

gression (Camacho, Morales and Güiza, 2014; Porath and Pearson, 2015). In Latin America, this discrimination is aggravated by high levels of insecurity for the LGBT community. Brazil, Mexico and Colombia stand out as the countries having the most homicides reported against transgender people (SRD, 2021), highlighting the seriousness of the regional context.

In contrast, data from the US has revealed that, over recent years, same sex couples have earned higher incomes than heterosexual couples, which has partially transformed the narrative of disadvantage in public spaces. However, this progress is not reflected in trans, non-binary people or those facing inequality intersections, such as those who belong to a racialized ethnicity, come from poor families or live in peripheral areas (Cockshott, 2020). According to this author, these data are linked to an interest of the middle and upper classes in consolidating same-sex marriage, a phenomenon that is not replicated in contexts of less developed economies (FELGTBI, 2023).

### Workplace challenges

For many of the participants, a lack of skills is a problem for insertion in the job market (see Table 4). This was one of the most frequent difficulties mentioned in the accounts. However, other problems also appeared that were not documented in the literature and had not been considered by the researchers. This includes issues such as being more vulnerable to robbery and attacks at work because they are alone or have criminal records, which are more typical of insecure environments like the Colombian one.

An analysis of the interviewees' accounts reveals multiple challenges faced by trans and queer people in the workplace. The main barriers include a lack of

institutional support, informal and precarious employment, vulnerability to violence, discrimination related to gender transitioning, criminal records, and financial literacy. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified these difficulties, especially in informal and unregulated sectors.

One of the most notable issues was the lack of support from companies and their human resources departments. The accounts revealed work environments that are dominated by structural *machismo*, where gender diversity was neither discussed nor promoted. This made it difficult for trans people to feel protected or included, limiting their ability to address issues of discrimination or even to make their gender identity visible in these spaces.

On the other hand, labor informality constituted a critical challenge. Many of the trans people interviewed reported unstable working conditions, characterized by a lack of formal contracts, irregular payments, and no access to social security. These dynamics make their economic situation precarious, limiting their ability to build a stable career. A lack of financial literacy emerged as an additional factor, highlighting the need to develop money management skills to avoid internal conflicts or financial losses in informal work settings.

Vulnerability to violence was another recurring challenge, especially for those who work on the streets, in informal trade, or in sex work. Testimonies reflect that these individuals face not only physical assault and robbery, but also constant fear for their safety due to their visibility as trans people.

Furthermore, gender transition processes were identified as a significant obstacle. Some people noted how their perception of their job opportunities was limited by the fear of rejection associ-

**TABLE 4.** *Challenges at work of the interviewed people*

Challenges and difficulties at work	Affirmations
Lack of support from company authorities	"When I worked in this sales region and it was a bit, you know... I wouldn't have felt like talking about it, because it was a much more macho environment, where you don't feel like you have the protection of having Human Resources nearby and that all these issues weren't discussed in the corporate offices, where events are held, and the subject is discussed, and everything is super open" (Queer, 10. DVB).
Informality and the lack of social security	"[...] it was super informal. That was it, and they paid me daily. Then I asked to be paid weekly, and they gave me my weekly allowance. I had to sign a petty cash receipt, but they didn't give me a contract" (Trans woman, 15. GAC).
Financial literacy and money management	"And she would tell us: 'Brush my hair but allow me to pay for the brushing later'. And then the neighbor would appear saying: 'Look, I already paid her for the brushing, I met her at a party, and I paid her there'. So, we, the others, 'What?' This bitch took the money, then the others got angry, and that was the end of the partnership" (Trans woman, 3. KGY).
Self-perception and the creation of their self-image	"I also went through a few months of rehabilitation, so I said: if I go back to the street to do sex work, it will be a risk factor for relapsing, because you know that sex work involves drugs, alcohol, staying up late, the client... I said no, because I'm not going to continue with the same things after I've been rehabilitated. I said, right? I have to cut it out, quit sex work, quit the nightlife, quit partying" (Trans woman, 13. AYC).
Pandemic	"That's when we entered the pandemic. And the hair salon was closed for a long time. So, I decided to gather all those things to take them home, and I asked a friend for help because I felt like I was depressed" (Trans woman, 6. VDV).
Street work, sex work and street vending, violence and robbery are a daily challenge	"Men in a pickup truck with revolvers said to me: 'Listen, you filthy faggot, you who defend human rights, this girl stole my chain or my wallet on the street, right? She stole my money. I need it back, or else I'll kill her' (Trans woman, 9. UGC).
Occupational illness and old age	"Because I didn't think I would reach an age like that, because I think that when you are very young, you think about other things than that you are going to reach an age like this. It's hard to know that I could have done it, and suddenly I didn't have someone pushing me. I never thought about that. I thought about living life and enjoying it; working, and well, I never thought about paying for that service that one needs these days, but you have to handle whatever comes" (Trans woman, 7. DMY).
Transitioning	"I studied for about twelve months in a studio where I know I will never be able to work. At that time, I thought about it like that, and at that time, it appeared that way. I will never be able to work because I will not spend my whole life seeing myself physically as a child, since I had not transitioned yet" (Trans woman, 3. KGY).
Having a criminal record	"To get hired, I have a legal problem that I'm currently resolving, right?. I haven't been given the job because I have issues with the attorney general's office" (Trans woman, 9. UGC).

Source: Author's own creation, 2023.

ated with their identity before and during the transition. This factor reflects how social stereotypes affect not only the employability of trans people, but also their self-esteem and ability to project themselves into the future.

Another relevant topic was the impact of criminal records, especially in contexts such as Colombia, where companies tend to verify these records as part of the selection process, since it is an exclusion criterion and is verified in their databases (Suárez, 2020).

Finally, challenges associated with aging and occupational disease were identified. Many of the transgender people interviewed expressed that, in their youth, they did not consider aspects such as planning for old age or affiliation with social security systems, which now translates into economic limitations and access to basic services in later life.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that, in general, transgender people experience significant marginalization in both public and private organizations. However, some exceptions were identified in specific sectors, such as hairdressing, where environments are perceived to be relatively more inclusive. This exclusion manifests itself in various dimensions, from lack of access to job opportunities to unequal treatment in the workplace.

Trans men and queer people with professional careers reported more positive experiences, although not without discrimination. The attacks, both active and passive, range from annoying and derogatory comments about their sexuality to deliberate workplace exclusion. This hostility forces many trans people to seek coping strategies, such as creating sup-

port networks (my friends) and moving in safe circles, especially in high-risk work contexts like sex work. However, in many cases, these networks are not sufficient to break the cycle of subsistence, which prevents real integration into the formal labor market.

Education also emerges as a critical factor in labor market exclusion. Of the eighteen people interviewed, sixteen did not attend university, and only six received technical studies. This may be attributed to the systematic discrimination experienced in the school environment, which frequently leads to dropping out. These educational barriers limit their employment opportunities and perpetuate a cycle of exclusion. Despite this, the skills valued by interviewees are not limited to the technical field but also include subjective competencies such as building a solid self-image and a sense of personal worth, which are essential for resisting violence and exclusion.

Employment discrimination against trans people comes in multiple forms, with verbal and social aggression being the most frequent. According to Resnick and Galupo (2019), these include mockery, exclusion, sarcasm, and derogatory comments, which act as a filter in selection processes, interviews, and document requests. This hinders access to formal employment, relegating these individuals to the informal economy. Additionally, practices such as instrumentalizing them for specific tasks, biased performance evaluations, sexual comments, and threats of violence reinforce a hostile and deeply unequal work environment. The above is an overview that reveals how gender norms intersect with labor dynamics to perpetuate the exclusion of bodies and identities that challenge cisgender and heterosexual normativity.



The challenges and lessons faced by trans people begin in childhood, when school is viewed as a place of violence and exclusion. Interviews tell stories of family abandonment, physical and psychological abuse, and school discrimination, limiting their access to formal education. This early exclusion translates into low job qualifications and a lack of the skills necessary to compete in an increasingly technological labor market, including technology management and personal finances. The lack of employment support networks and the precariousness of available jobs (such as sex work or informal sales) accentuate their vulnerability.

Trans and queer people face a labor market that is characterized by precariousness and a lack of access to decent jobs. Many of these individuals work in the informal economy, without employment contracts or social security. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these problems, disproportionately affecting those working in informal sectors.

Furthermore, the timing of the gender transition significantly influences employment opportunities. Individuals who transition after reaching a professional status tend to be more likely to keep their jobs as compared to those who transition prior to becoming established in their field. Although some sectors, such as hairdressing, self-employment, the arts, and culinary arts, offer employment alternatives, they often lack economic stability and social protection.

Finally, the employment experiences of trans and queer people discussed in this study are marked by inequality and a lack of opportunities. Public policies and specific efforts are needed to combat workplace discrimination, but above all, to promote inclusion and guarantee access to decent and stable employment for all people, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

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