



“Each Step Brings a New Anxiety” - The Work Trajectories of Trans Women in Portugal: Implications for Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

Trans women face persistent barriers to accessing and remaining in the labor market, shaped by institutional transphobia, social stigma, and systemic neglect. This study aims to explore how the work experiences of trans women are intertwined with processes of psychological distress, coping and identity affirmation. This qualitative study was carried out based on semi-structured interviews with ten trans women living in Portugal. The emerging content was analyzed using the Thematic Analysis technique, with a theoretical framework grounded in the theories of Minority Stress and Intersectionality. We identified seven key themes from the analysis of the narratives presented. These themes were organized into four trajectories reflecting continuity, rupture, resistance, and resilience identified in the participants' work experiences. The four trajectories were: (1) Exclusion and Disqualification, which includes rejection in hiring processes and daily hostility in formal employment; (2) Survival Strategies and Informal Paths, which reveals sex work and informal work as responses to systemic barriers, and as a way to finance gender transition; (3) Suffering and Subjectivity, which describes the psychological cost of visibility, surveillance, and persistent loneliness; and (4) Support Networks and Opportunities, which reveals the transformative potential of care, whether through family, therapy, peer networks, or inclusive workplaces. Across all trajectories, work emerges as both a site of violence and a platform for survival, gender affirmation, and, eventually, belonging. Despite systemic barriers and emotional distress, participants demonstrated resilience through informal work paths and support networks, highlighting the urgent need for inclusive and affirming workplace policies.

Keywords: Employment Discrimination, Labor Market, Social Exclusion, Trans Women, Transphobia

