


# On the crossroads: Gender and career-transitioning experiences of a young transgender employee

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**Background:** Research in gender and sexuality studies focuses on the experiences of LGBTQI communities and how they are discriminated against in societies. Research on career transitioning has focused on how employees navigate their world of work, with fewer studies focusing on career transitioning with transgender employees in the workplace.

**Objectives:** This article aims to provide a unique perspective by delving into the career transition journey of a young transgender male-to-female employee. By exploring her experiences in the workplace, I hope to shed light on the challenges and triumphs of her journey.

**Method:** This article presents a qualitative, phenomenological case study exploring the lived experiences of Angel (pseudonym), a young transgender employee at an educational space, as she navigates gender identity and career transition crossroads. The study employed a face-to-face semi-structured interview as a data collection method.

**Results:** This article shows how Angel struggled to find and become herself in the workplace while navigating her gender and career transition. It demonstrates her lived experiences, the multiple faces of gender and career transitioning, and her journey of being at the workplace.

**Conclusion:** The findings reveal significant challenges faced by transgender employees, including discrimination, microaggressions, and systemic barriers. Training about transgender people and workplace inclusivity should be a strategic priority for organisations.

**Contribution:** This case study contributes to our understanding of the complex intersections between gender transition and career development, highlighting unique challenges faced by transgender employees through discrimination, identity navigation, and systemic barriers. These insights can inform inclusive workplace policies and practices.

**Keywords:** transgender; transitioning; career transition; heteronormativity; employment; gender stereotypes; career aspirations; workplace.

## Introduction

Transitioning is not a single event but a complicated process involving various aspects of life, including one's spiritual, personal, gender and career transitions. Because of the complex nature of the transition, it is generally challenging for all humans. However, this journey becomes more complicated when individuals find themselves at the crossroads of multiple transitions, which, in this article, are the gender, identity and career-transitioning crossroads.

Career development is an essential aspect of employment, as it provides opportunities for growth and advancement. However, transgender employees are faced with the realities of having to navigate a complex and often hostile environment while managing the personal and emotional challenges of transitioning (Goldberg et al., 2021). In addition, transgender youth face significant challenges during their career transitioning process, such as discrimination, bullying, harassment, a lack of understanding and marginalisation in the workplace, with employers and colleagues not accepting them (Beauregard et al., 2021). These acts can create a hostile and isolated work environment, leading to decreased job satisfaction and productivity among transgender employees. Furthermore, transgender youth entering employment must contend with gender binaries that are either implicit or explicit in workplace rules and regulations that are often not inclusive or progressive enough to accommodate diversity. This includes dress codes, uniforms, gendered roles and bathroom designations (Brown & Diale, 2017; Brown et al., 2020).

**Note:** Special Collection: Care and Support for Queering the Role of Educators in the Workplace.

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While the body of knowledge is expanding and being built from the workplace experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) employees, research focusing on the career and gender transitioning of young transgender employees within the education profession workspaces in South Africa remains limited. This study explores a single case study of Angel, a young transgender employee who has journeyed through dual career and gender transitioning in the workplace.

Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, South Africa has made significant progress in protecting the rights of all that live in it, as espoused in Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. These rights include the right to life, equality, human dignity, freedom of assembly, association, belief, opinion and expression. South Africa became the first country in the world to prohibit discrimination against LGBTQI individuals. In 2003, the government passed the *Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act No 49 of 2003* (Republic of South Africa, 2003). This legislation allows individuals whose sexual characteristics have been altered through medical, surgical or natural processes to apply to the Department of Home Affairs for alteration of their sex description and gender markers on official identity documents. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights universal goals to eradicate inequalities and identifies gender as an imperative to providing a safe, nonviolent, inclusive and compelling world for all (Chopra, 2019). Despite progressive global legislation and legal protection, many transgender employees continue to face significant barriers to career advancement and success in their workplace that do not embrace diversity and inclusivity (Brown, 2024). Although there are employment spaces that have made progress in this space and employees tell encouraging narratives, the workplace views on transgender employees continue to oscillate between acceptance and rejection (Dayal, 2022). Therefore, significant work still needs to be done regarding creating safe, inclusive, diverse and supportive spaces for all employees.

Employers place a greater emphasis on fostering a diverse workplace for sexual orientation than they do on gender identity and expression. When it comes to corporate diversity, equity and inclusion, employers often fail to consider the transgender experience (Baboolall et al., 2021). Kattaru et al. (2016) argue that an individual who is transgender is twice as likely to be unemployed than someone who is cisgender. The general public's awareness, understanding and acceptance of transgender people have increased over the last decade. However, the stigma surrounding transgender people is still pervasive, which leads to structural discrimination in society (Lerner et al., 2020). When compared to their cisgender counterparts, transgender individuals often feel less supported at work. They may also face more significant challenges in understanding workplace culture and benefits and encountering barriers to promotion (Baboolall et al., 2021).

Transgender employees often face some difficulties during their career transition, such as potential career setbacks and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions (Köllen, 2018). They are subject to job discrimination, hiring bias and misunderstandings that make it difficult for them to support themselves and their families. Some employers may refuse leave for transgender employees for transition-related health care, erroneously believing that such care is not considered a serious medical problem (National LGBTQ Task Force, 2023). In this regard, transgender employees may have to choose between putting their jobs at risk of not receiving the necessary healthcare. According to a report by the National Centre for Transgender Equality (2021), more than one in four transgender workers have been fired because of bias, and more than three-fourths have faced workplace discrimination. In addition, one in eight transgender individuals are engaged in underground economies, such as sex and drug work, to survive the high rates of unemployment and poverty (National Centre for Transgender Equality, 2021).

Walworth (2003) outlines some issues that human resource professionals ought to be cognisant and aware of, such as what to expect when an employee changes gender and how to handle the multiple issues and problems that may arise in the workplace. Walworth, while putting workplace issues in context, discusses issues of confidentiality, the initial meeting of a human resource professional with a transgender employee, the information needed from the employee, the formation of a transition team, informing and training coworkers, restroom use, document changes, problems that can be encountered and follow-up measures to be taken by human resource professionals to aid a successful transitioning. Despite the great strides in legislative protection over the last few decades, many workplaces still lack genuinely inclusive trans-voices (Beauregard et al., 2021).

This article is underpinned by Schlossberg's Transition Model, which provides a framework for any transition individuals experience throughout life and how they cope and adjust (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg defines transitioning as any event or non-event that changes relationships, routines, assumptions and roles (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Schlossberg (2011) suggests that her transition model 'can be used as a framework for researching any group or person in transition' and a 'guideline for developing interventions with individuals' (p. 7). In the context of this article, to understand the meaning of transition for a young transgender employee, the transition type, context and impact must be considered carefully. The theory argues that no transition is precisely like another. Thus, the individual's experiences are placed at the centre of the transition. This assertion is true for transgender individuals as they all are unique humans who differ and go through transitioning phases differently, and so do their experiences of transition (Anderson & Goodman, 2014).

## Research methods and design

### Research design

A qualitative, phenomenological single case study design was adopted to allow for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of a transgender employee, providing rich insights into the complexities of gender and career transitions in the workplace (Yin, 2018). The approach focuses on the essence of lived experiences or phenomena open to observation or perception by diverse individuals with diverse viewpoints (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

### Participant – The case of Angel

This phenomenological case study focuses on the experiences of a single participant, assigned the pseudonym 'Angel' for anonymity. To provide context for my discussion, it is essential to reflect on the background of my participant. At the time of the interview, Angel worked at an educational institution in Gauteng. When she started her gender transitioning journey, she had just moved from one unit to a higher position in another unit of the institution, simultaneously undergoing a career transition. From the beginning of our engagement, Angel identified herself as a transgender woman.

### Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through a face-to-face semi-structured interview, allowing Angel to describe her gender and career transition from a self-reflective perspective. We employed content analysis to analyse the data, following a systematic process: familiarisation, initial coding, categorisation of codes into themes, theme refinement and final interpretation. To ensure rigour, we used member checking and peer debriefing. This analysis yielded rich insights into Angel's career and gender-transitioning experiences and how she navigated the transition. The emergent themes form the basis of my findings and discussion, providing a deep understanding of the participant's lived experiences during her dual transition (Brown, 2024).

### Ethical considerations

This single case study was part of a more extensive study on Southern African perspectives of gender violence towards gender-non-conforming and transgender people, including the lived experiences of trans people in Namibia. Angel was informed that her anonymity would be maintained throughout the study. The purpose and potential implications of the research were thoroughly explained to her before obtaining informed consent. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (No. Sem 2-2020-172).

## Results

Considering the extensive data set from the engagement with Angel, I only drew on two themes for this article that focused

on the aim: (1) multiple faces of gender and career-transitioning in the workplace; and (2) experiences of becoming and being the self.

### Multiple faces of gender and career-transitioning in the workplace

Unaccustomed society assumes that there is a neat binary in gender variance, just as they think that career transitioning is a straightforward one-size-fits-all process, adding a career-transitioning face to her already complicated transformation. This assumption leads to employers and colleagues accusing transgender people of making up their experience out of seeking attention without considering the realities and the impact this has on trans people's political, economic and social selves (Faye, 2021). Angel's career transition involved moving to a different department within the same institution, taking on new responsibilities and a higher position. Angel expresses the multiple faces of transitioning she encountered as a transwoman in the workplace, as a triad experience of social, medical and formal transition. In describing her social transition, Angel notes that:

'When I started my social transition journey at work, I expected it to be a little bit [um]comfortable for a few people because then I now didn't look like a woman dressed like a man but looked like a woman and dressed as a woman. So, because people know that I am transitioning from male to female, the assumption is that I am homosexual, so that's the first thing they say, "You gay".'

The employer and fellow employees perceived Angel as gay. This was based on her dress code and the assigned gender at birth, which was informed and constructed by the hegemonic and gender-boxed workspace. Throughout her journey, Angel was determined to clarify her gender identity with her colleagues so they could understand who she was. Alluding to a question on how she handled her identity, Angel said:

'Previously, when people were still under the impression that I was gay, the reason for my disclosure was that there were speculations about my gender identity. I wanted to confirm things and the talks and the speculations as quickly as I could, so I said I'm gonna try and tell my story as quickly and as precise and concisely as I can so that I can move past it and focus on what we supposed to be all focusing on in the work[place] that we supposed to do.'

Angel's finding herself in her early career journey was challenging. While career development and the world of work play an essential role in the professional lifespan of any young person, the process is not smooth. It is always challenging for minority and vulnerable groups such as transgender individuals as it takes place at a structural, interpersonal and individual level because of their visible transitioning process (Ciprikis et al., 2020). Angel recalls in her early career days:

'When I got to the parking, I had first to check who was around, then I would take out my shoes and run to the office, so people do not see me in a dress and heels.'

She recalls coming across questions from fellow employees that made her feel uncomfortable and bordered on symbolic bullying and discrimination, mainly because of the manner and the spaces they were posted in. Ciprikis et al. (2020) mention that transgender employees generally face discrimination, abuse and harassment despite the public's awareness, understanding and acceptance of their identity. Also, Brown (2024) asserts that the daunting discrimination instigates inequality among diverse sexual and gender identities in the workplace.

Angel's medical transition caused turbulence in her career life as she was ready to quit her job to go through the process and start afresh somewhere as a female. Although she had the support of her line manager, the workplace was still an uncomfortable space, potentially impacting her career development. Angel explains this experience as follows:

'So then, the subsequent thing to follow would be questions about my physical appearance, so certain things like (laughs) are your breasts real and have you had your genitals changed type of questions. I got real questions like that at work (laugh). A question posed in a public space is OK; it becomes very sensitive for one to answer. I've had that question before in a public space and the workplace, and often, I try not to respond to those questions, and if I do respond to them, I say yes, it is. It just concludes the conversation very quickly.'

In a study by Ozturk and Tatli (2016), they found that colleagues would ask offensive and intrusive questions to their transgender colleagues, refuse to sit next to them at lunch or even exclude them from social gatherings. Angel's recollection of her formal transitioning experiences was that of ticking a title in an official form and picking whether she was a Mr or a Ms. While she had transitioned, her staff card still labelled her as a Mr, and when she ticked a Ms, she would receive unwelcoming gestures. Angel mentions that:

'[T]he system itself also perpetuates this because I never got an opportunity to pick a box and unfortunately, in my case, the box that was ticked for me is this one [referring to male] because of my ID, this is a systemic form of discrimination.'

Francis (2021) emphasises that although the South African legal systems affirm and protect the rights of transgender workers, many still find themselves subjected to socially constructed sexual and gender discrimination in the workplace. Lerner et al. (2020) further state that specific medical interventions and legal gender markers often lead to transgender individuals being subjected to experiences of self-representation, ostracism and microaggression.

### Experiences of becoming and being the self in the workplace

Angel's lived experiences at work after she had spoken out about her sexual identity and her process of transitioning assisted in her moving from becoming to being the self in the workplace. Angel narrates the tension in her

experiences at a personal and close collegial level and an organisational level. While she enjoyed the support at the collegial level, she found the organisational level uncomfortable and discriminatory. In asserting her identity in the workplace, Angel mentions, 'It was tricky for me to navigate the two spaces of my personal life and my professional life'. Despite this 'tricky navigation' at work, Angel found her colleagues and direct line manager to be a great support system. She alludes to this experience, starting with a personal talk with her boyfriend after a photo shoot where she wore a dress while at work, where they perceived her as a gay man. The boyfriend then dared her to post the picture on her WhatsApp status, hiding her face, to see how people would react. Her line manager saw the picture, and a couple of days later, she innocently asked, 'I saw something on the lines of um...' and said, 'Can I show it to you?'. Angel said she already knew what the manager would ask her and agreed. It is at that stage that her manager asked her:

'Look, I don't need to climb into your personal space, and I am pleased to stop, and then you tell me if it makes you uncomfortable. I'm curious, um, this picture with this person in this picture [I then said, OK, I have an opportunity here to either keep quiet, or I could tell the conversation was welcoming, and it gave me a platform for me to speak with her without fear, so I said OK I am going to use this to speak to her and see to test the waters]. I told her it was me in the picture, and then she said oh, you look really good, ... she told me OK, but why don't you dress like this to work?'

While Angel expressed her excitement that her line manager accepted her transitioning, she had to respond and verbalise her fears. In her response, Angel explained her situation as follows:

'Well, I don't dress like this to work because of fear of discrimination, that I will be violated here, that opportunities will be lost for me regarding growth and fear of being victimised.'

Angel's fears are supported by Lerner et al. (2020) that transgender workers generally struggle to access resources because of discrimination and victimisation, thus making them vulnerable to workplace violence. Also, Ciprikis et al. (2020) observe that because of the cis-normative culture and the transphobic nature of the workplace, transgender workers may experience lower career inclusion and unequal occupational opportunities. However, in Angel's case, the line manager's pledge of support allowed her to become herself at work. She crafts this freedom of expression by saying:

'That's how I started having conversations about transitioning from male to female. I then had informal conversations with my team. We'd be having lunch, and I would find a way to introduce the topic of LGBTQI and see how they react to it. I would also make it comfortable for them to talk to me about their suspicions.'

It is a given that young employees entering the world of work require good role models to guide them in navigating the new workplace environment successfully. By showing

a diversity of gender identities, management can serve as role models for individual transgender employees and guide and support them in their journey towards personal and career growth (Fletcher & Marvell, 2023). However, working for a large organisation such as Angel's institution, she had to work with other stakeholders outside her domain. It is at this level that Angel experienced various forms of prejudice and workplace discrimination, including career demotion, forced positioning, symbolic violence and subtle bullying in the workplace. Angel narrates how she was treated differently and prejudiced when she started wearing dresses, makeup and heels. One example that Angel narrated was:

'Recently, we met with numerous stakeholders, and one male stakeholder member insisted that I order lunch. It was the way that the person was saying it in front of everybody, and he would sometimes say Bro, bro, I'm talking to you, and I mean everybody could see that I look and am dressed as a female; it made me feel extremely violated.'

Another form of prejudice and discrimination experienced by Angel during her transition was her career demotion, as she was subtly treated as a junior and given work that was below her position. She narrates this experience as follows:

'I get asked to do very trivial stuff, like set up meetings. I feel sometimes like I've been forced down the ladder to start again afresh ... sometimes it feels like they're like we are women born women, and we're going to teach you how to be a woman.'

Angel further explains her experience of prejudice as that of forced positioning. In her words, she describes this positioning as:

'People try to put a timeline on the process, so they ask how long it will take. Thus, it often feels like I'm being restricted from transitioning comfortably in my own time and space.'

Angel also found workplace policies non-inclusive in that they refer to generic issues around sexual harassment. However, they fail to capture the nuances that transgender employees experience.

Considering Angel's case, I argue that gender identity policies and staff development can help employees appreciate and support their transitioning colleagues by assisting employers in creating welcoming workplaces for transitioning employees. (Kleintop, 2019). One of Angel's concerns was the assumed nature of her workplace. She found that people saw it natural to talk about her story without asking her or to easily name her as an example of the transformation of public spaces without her consent. These points of reference made an unfortunate assumption that she was comfortable with her story being told anywhere and anyhow. Furthermore, they assumed that gender transitioning was a uniform process and that one trans story would be generic to all without understanding the dynamics involved in the process:

'What I don't like is people assuming that all LGBTQ people are made to be ambassadors, advocates, and activists in the workplace. The workplace should not put that pressure on people. Inevitably, the workplace expects that the person must play the role.'

Steffens et al. (2016) argue that these forms of actions are bound to have negative social and emotional consequences and can profoundly impact the transgender employee's ability to make friends and meet romantic partners. In summing up Angel's sexual identity in the workplace, it can be deduced that being a young aspirant professional navigating her gender and career transition, the journey is not a straightforward path. It means that Angel has to assert herself in these changing roads and depend on her resilience.

## Conclusion

The article explored the experiences of a young transgender employee at the crossroads of gender and career transitions in a South African workplace. The findings illuminate several critical issues, including prevalent workplace discrimination, the impact of uninformed assumptions and the need for more inclusive policies. Angel's case highlights the complex intersections between gender identity, career development and workplace dynamics, emphasising the importance of fostering a culture of respect and understanding. The study reveals gaps in implementing South Africa's progressive Constitution in protecting transgender rights in the workplace. It underscores the need for employers to develop systems that consider transgender workers' identities, with clear transformational goals to address inequalities. Recommendations include developing transitioning-at-work policies, adopting zero-tolerance approaches to transphobia and commemorating events like Trans Day of Visibility. Future research should explore these themes across diverse workplace contexts to develop comprehensive strategies for supporting transgender employees in their professional journeys, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable work environments.

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### Author's contributions

B.M.D. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available upon request from the author. However, they are not publicly available because of privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Disclaimer

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