

Reflections from Implementing the APTN Seed Grant: Between Access, Bureaucracy, and Survival

This piece reflects on an APTN Seed Grant project in Delhi that was designed as a documentation support camp for gender-diverse people, and how it partially collapsed due to a sudden bureaucratic rule change. It explores what happens when access work fails in real time, how communities absorb the cost of inconsistent state systems, and why emotional care and political clarity became as necessary as paperwork.

My name is Sonali. I am based in Delhi, India, and I run a small community organisation called GLAD Foundation. This article is about a project that did not go according to plan, and what that failure revealed.

The Seed Grant was intended to support gender-diverse people with identity documentation. The plan was straightforward: a one-day documentation camp to help update Aadhaar and PAN details (India's primary national identity and tax identification systems), prepare affidavits (legally sworn statements), and move people closer to having documents that matched their lives.

For many participants, this was not symbolic. It was about being able to travel, work, rent a room, open a bank account, or avoid daily humiliation during routine interactions with the state.

I began this project knowing the system was hostile, but assuming at least procedural consistency. That assumption turned out to be wrong.

The work took place in the Delhi National Capital Region (Delhi NCR), but the experience I am describing could happen anywhere in India where rules change without notice and accountability is absent. I am writing this because failure in community work is often hidden, softened, or reframed as success. I do not think it should be.

The Equal ID project was planned carefully. Participants were identified. Volunteers were coordinated. Costs were calculated. People prepared themselves mentally to engage with documentation centres, which for many trans and gender-diverse people are sites of repeated rejection, scrutiny, and humiliation.

One day before the scheduled camp, Aadhaar and PAN centres across Delhi NCR began demanding Gazette Notification as mandatory proof of gender change. A Gazette Notification is a formal publication by the government announcing a legal change, and in this context, it requires time, legal navigation, and money.

This requirement had not been consistently enforced before. There was no public notice, no transition period, and no clarity across centres.

This single change broke the project.

Gazette Notification is expensive, takes months to complete, and is out of reach for most people in the community. A same-day documentation camp immediately became impossible. The timing was

brutal. Participants had already rearranged their lives to attend.

We still went ahead with a reduced version of the activity. We supported affidavits, basic form-filling, applications for the Transgender Identity Card (a government-issued ID under Indian law), and covered essentials like food, printing, and local transport. But we had to tell people that Aadhaar and PAN updates would not move forward.

What stayed with me was how quietly people absorbed this information. There was frustration, but more than that, resignation. Several participants assumed they had done something wrong.

That response is not accidental. The system trains people to blame themselves.

With APTN's approval, we reallocated the unspent funds into what became The Q.U.E.E.R. Project, a one-day workshop that intentionally combined three elements: documentation literacy, emotional grounding, and political reflection. Twenty-one people attended.

The documentation session was deliberately unromantic. We laid out what actually works, what does not, how Gazette Notification functions in practice, how Transgender ID Cards differ from Aadhaar and PAN, and what timelines realistically look like. For many participants, this was the first time the process felt legible without paying intermediaries or relying on hearsay.

The emotional grounding session was not planned as a centrepiece, but it became one. People spoke openly about burnout, anger, shame, and exhaustion. At one point, a participant fell asleep during the session. No one reacted. The group adjusted around their rest.

That moment captured the state of our community more honestly than any survey could.

We also held a political reflection conversation. We talked about tokenism, NGO gatekeeping, uneven access to resources, and how leadership within marginalised communities can sometimes