

# TRANSCENDING BARRIERS

Exclusion from the workforce of transgender women in Argentina.



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# 1. Introduction

*“The only space reserved for us is the street and the night. I had no choice! **The State has imposed and condemned me to prostitution,** and this is valid for all travestis. If you are kicked out of your house at age 10, what are you expected to do to survive? But the love we were denied is our drive to change the world.”*

**Lohana Berkins, Argentinian transgender leader.**

## a. Research summary

Several studies evidence the severe exclusion that trans women face in the labour market (Cutuli, 2015; Leppel, 2016; ICHR, 2015, 2020; ILO, 2016; RedLacTrans, 2020, 2021, 2022; Shannon, 2022). In the last decade, a series of changes in legislation, public policies, diversity and inclusion (D&I) trends and civil society initiatives are beginning to reverse this situation in many parts of the world. This research explores this transition process.

While most research has focused on the paradigm shift underlying these socio-political transformations, less attention has been given to how these paradigm shifts translate into action in the labour market and, more specifically, in the recruitment process. Although employers are increasingly interested in hiring trans people and trans people are looking for these jobs, various obstacles, including cultural beliefs, administrative hurdles and accessibility limitations, are still in place.

Substantial improvement in the integration of trans people can be made by better understanding the phenomena from a user-centred and systemic perspective. This research aims to contribute to this challenge by exploring **the persisting barriers in the recruiting process for trans women in Argentina,**

**limiting the scope of analysis to large companies in big cities.** As a case study, we analyse the role of Contratá Trans, a program that works with private companies to mitigate barriers in recruiting processes for trans women.

The main findings of this research highlight that in a context where radical paradigm shifts are being contested (in this case, from a cis-heteronormative paradigm (Butler, 1990) to a trans-inclusive mental mode) emerging settings, open-endedness, ambiguity, and uncertainty emerge. **In this scenario, intermediaries wield significant influence and find powerful cracks in the system to shape action and rule-setting, organise routines, and ultimately influence how these overarching paradigms manifest in practice.** These intermediaries can be categorised as “systems builders” (Seelos & Mair, 2014; Pawson & Tilley, 1997), who leverage their power to guide and influence the development and implementation of new systems and processes. However, the issue of representation is crucial to make these changes effective.

We identified how Contratá Trans operates as an intermediary facilitating the emergence of new patterns of behaviour, routines, and norms aligned with more inclusive mental models. This contributes to eroding cis-heteronormativity (the current dominant mental model) and enhances emergent systems and alternative gender paradigms. This transformation is significantly facilitated by the prominent and active roles that trans individuals assume within the initiative.

**Contratá Trans** is a transgender-led program by Impacto Digital, an Argentina-based non-profit organisation. Since its creation in 2018, the program has **successfully helped over 300 transgender individuals find employment while simultaneously providing training and advisory services to 250 companies.** The program has also trained over 6,000 people on inclusion and diversity. With the support of UN agencies, Contratá Trans is now expanding its reach across Latin America by replicating its program through a network of grassroots organisations led by transgender individuals.

## b. Research strategy

This research aims to understand the persisting barriers in the recruiting process for trans women living in large cities<sup>1</sup> in Argentina, focusing on large companies' recruiting process<sup>2</sup>. The research strategy included:

- **Literature review** of over 30 sources of information produced by trans NGOs, countries, international cooperation organisations, and universities.
- **Contratá Trans project documentation** analysis.
- A **focus group**<sup>3</sup> with trans organisations leaders.
- A **survey**<sup>4</sup> to trans people.
- **In-depth interviews** with Impacto Digital leaders.
- **Co-design workshops** with Impacto Digital leaders.

## c. Positionality

The research team consists of six individuals from Latin America. Three of us are cisgender master's students at University College London (UCL), while the other three are trans leaders from Impacto Digital. Our research approach is guided by the following principles:

- Avoiding knowledge extractivism.
- Valuing different forms of knowledge production, from personal and professional experience with the problem to academic research.
- Conducting respectful, ethical, and inclusive research.

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<sup>1</sup> Large cities refer to urban centres with more than +500.000 inhabitants.

<sup>2</sup> More than 200 employees.

<sup>3</sup> The focus group entailed a semi-structured format and spanned over a duration of two hours with the participation of ten individuals affiliated with trans grassroots organisations and local public servants. The facilitation was carried out by two facilitators from our team.

<sup>4</sup> The survey reached 126 trans people through snowball sampling. We acknowledge the risks of miss or overrepresentation of this method. We chose snowball sampling since we do not know the size of the studied population due to the lack of official statistics and because we can reach the trans population through an existing alliance with trans social organisations.

## 2. Problem landscape

### a. Problem statement

This research focuses on the change-resistant gaps that persist in the recruitment process for trans women living in large cities in Argentina.

While in the last decade, Argentina has experienced a series of trans-inclusive changes in legislation, public policies, diversity and inclusion (D&I) trends and civil society initiatives, the severe exclusion trans women face from the workforce is still a pressing issue consistently documented by various studies (Cutuli, 2015; ICHR, 2015, 2020; ILO, 2016; RedLacTrans, 2020, 2021, 2022).

### b. Problem scope and system boundaries

The system boundaries were defined around the following considerations:

- Most of the success cases in Contratá Trans have been with **large companies**, as they have a high capacity to implement D&I policies, and in large cities<sup>5</sup>.
- Within those companies, the **recruiting process** was identified as a **key barrier** to formal labour inclusion.
- **Argentina** has advanced trans rights significantly, and the lessons from this analysis can be valuable for the region.

### c. Context

The lack of legal recognition results in the statistical invisibility of an estimated number of 4 million trans people living in Latin America<sup>6</sup>, who face a dramatic, historical, and structural exclusion, even compared to other marginalised groups in the region. Alarming, the two countries with the highest murder rates of trans people are in Latin America: Brazil and Mexico (ICHR, 2015).

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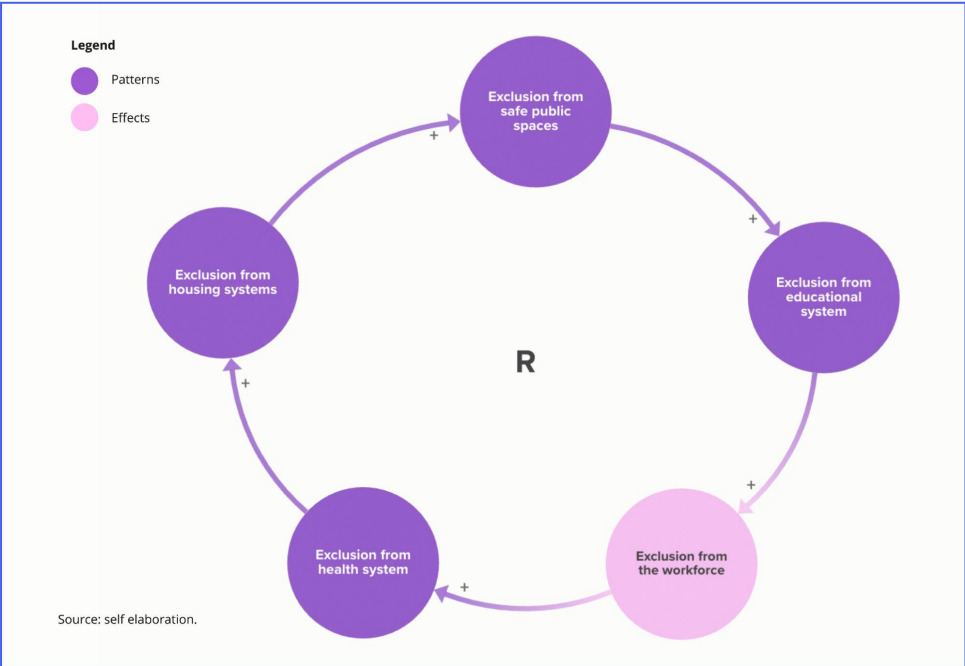
<sup>5</sup> The circumscription to larger cities is due to the team's professional experience and since, in Argentina, larger cities attract trans women coming from the rest of the country.

<sup>6</sup> This is an extrapolation of the percentage of trans people in the United States (0,6%), as there are no official statistics or estimations for the region (Williams Institute, 2022). Using a different estimation (3% in GLAAD, 2017), this number would rise to approximately 19 million people.

Violence and transphobia are widespread expressions of socio-cultural and legal systems that do not recognise trans people’s rights. Out of 33 countries, 28 national legal frameworks in Latin America do not recognise the right to gender identity (RedLacTrans, 2020, 2022).

Exclusion from formal employment is among the most pressing issues of multidimensional forms of exclusion suffered by trans people: Shockingly, a recent study found that 78% of the trans women surveyed were engaged in sex work<sup>7</sup> (RedLacTrans, 2021)<sup>8</sup>, while another study highlights that 87% of the trans women surveyed would quit sex work if they had access to employment (ICHR, 2020).

The expulsion of the formal workforce is both a consequence and a reinforcing factor to the lack of access to fundamental human rights, such as healthcare and housing. The intersectionality and reinforcing nature of these and other human rights infringements create a reinforcing cycle of exclusion that is incredibly challenging to break.



**VISUAL REPRESENTATION 1 –  
CYCLE OF EXCLUSION**

<sup>7</sup> This research is aware of the ongoing debates on the nature and definition of sex work and prostitution (ICHR, 2020). We adopt the concept of “sex work” as it is used by the organisations we have interviewed. This research does not focus on the acceptability of sex work but addresses its informal nature, as it is not regulated by law in Argentina. We also discuss trans women’s lack of choice to pursue different jobs since available studies highlight that “interviewed persons frequently described sex work as something to which they are “condemned.”” (ICHR, 2020, p.112).

<sup>8</sup>Over the past decade, trans social organisations have led data construction in Latin America. The data available due to these efforts are not statistically representative, and the lack of standardisation impedes comparability over time or across countries. Acknowledging these limitations, they are the best source of information available.



## d. Problem landscape

While the situation is still critical, Argentina has advanced in creating legal and economic policy instruments to recognise and foster the respect of trans people's rights more than other countries in the region<sup>9</sup>. The following PESTLE analysis characterises the Argentinian context faced by trans people.

### VISUAL REPRESENTATION 2 – PESTLE ANALYSIS



Source: self elaboration.

<sup>9</sup> Argentina [was recognised](#) by the World Health Organization in 2015 as a model nation for its efforts in upholding the rights of the trans community.

### 3. Systems thinking analysis

*"Years ago, I applied for a job in a call center. They did a quick interview and never called me back. I came some months later with a masculine expression. I was hired immediately. The only thing that changed was how I expressed my identity."*

**Martina Ansardi, Institutional Relations Coordinator from Contratá Trans.**

To analyse the issue, we utilised three visual tools: a user's journey, an iceberg model, and a causal loop diagram. Our goal was to provide insight into the issue from the perspective of trans women, comprehend how the problem presents itself at various levels of analysis, and identify the subsystems that either exacerbate or alleviate the problem.


#### a. Understanding trans women's journey

To better understand the systemic barriers that perpetuate trans exclusion, we created a user journey (see on page 12) based on in-depth interviews, comparing the hiring process of a trans woman to that of a cisgender person. Building the user journey map gave us three main insights:

- Beyond the socioeconomic disparities, trans women face a series of specific **barriers both during and after the hiring process** that are not experienced by cisgender people<sup>10</sup>. These escape points are identified in red.
- **Community networks** play a critical role in the trajectory of trans women, providing support and **enabling** access to fundamental human rights. While these networks guarantee the survival of trans individuals, they often lead to informal activities that offer only temporary relief from systemic exclusion, having a **retention effect**.

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<sup>10</sup>We recognise the existence of widely different trajectories based on socioeconomic and race characteristics, among others. This research constructed, through in-depth interviews, an archetypal trajectory of a trans woman seeking employment in a large city in Argentina.

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- Job placement agencies operate as **intermediaries** between community networks and companies. In the case of Contrata Trans, while solving a short-term supply and demand issue, they also act as **translators and system builders** (Seelos & Mair, 2014; Pawson & Tilley, 1997), bridging two sets of actors and building credibility, advising and facilitating exchange between actors, mitigating these barriers. These actions create inclusion points (identified in green) and trigger a long-term paradigm shift.

**PHASE 1: JOB SEEKING**

**INCLUSION POINTS**

**CISGENDER PERSON ACTIONS**

**ESCAPE POINTS**

Companies launch inclusive campaigns targeting trans people.

Intermediaries promote inclusive jobs.

Inclusive communication in websites and announcements.

"It is easier to work in self-employment or with friends from the community. Sometimes, the alternative is sex work".

1.1 Decides to job seek

1.2 Asks to close connection if they know about any positions

1.3 Checks if the company is aligned to her values

Low motivation.

Community networks (with weak social capital).

Discriminatory communication.

Sex work networks or other informal jobs.

Inclusive forms and communication

Assistance to build a CV

"Sending the CV is already being exposed to being discriminated by a cis person".

"Trans women often don't have a device or internet to look for information and use platforms".

2.2 Applies online

2.1 Builds a CV

Binary formularies.

Difficulties to build a CV.

**PHASE 2: APPLICATION**

Assistance to prepare interviews.

Individual interviews.

Respectful and trained recruiters.

Results of the interview are communicated.

Learning opportunity and motivation increase.

**PHASE 3: INTERVIEWING**

3.1. Is called for interview

3.2 Prepares to interview

3.3 Is interviewed

3.4 Receives feedback

Not knowing how to prepare.

Group interviews that reinforce exposure.

Misgendering and transphobic questions.

No feedback or answer received.

Discomfort, anxiety, self-doubting and feeling of "not belonging".

"The interviewer can make questions that are violatory and not related to the job position, such as if the person uses hormones".

"The waiting process is a big trigger for anxiety because the work is on the key's to remove a trans person from a vulnerability situation".

Consistent, regular and active training.

Probation period as "learning curve" phase.

Respect of pronouns from colleges and leaders

Protocols in place, creating a safe environment.

Colleges and leaders trained in D&I.

Companies working in D&I with their whole value chain.

**PHASE 4: ALLOCATION**

4.4 Is upskilled

4.3. Passes probation period

4.2 Goes through induction

4.1. Takes pre-employment medical examination

4.5. New responsibilities and promotion.

Harassment from coworkers and leaders.

No learning opportunities.

Downgrading to administrative tasks.

Misgendering in ID, emails and others.

Lack of training in D&I in the company.

Pathologization and institutional violence.

"Trans people are just treated like cis people, while different and specific processes should be applied to them".

"There is no integration process so that the trans person can be integrally accompanied across their journey".

**b. Iceberg model**

The literature review and primary data collected informed the construction of an iceberg model, using conceptual tools proposed by Meadows (1999) and Kania, Kramer & Senge (2018). The analysis exposed several layers where problems manifest that are perpetuated by less explicit, systemic forces at the levels of behaviour patterns, structural conditions and mental models.

**Events**

- The **unemployment rate** among transgender women is higher than any other social group.
- 80% of transgender women in Latin America worked as **sex workers** by 2014 (RedLacTrans, 2014).
- 80% of transgender people in Latin America consider **looking for a job a hostile situation**.



**Patterns**

**Transgender women experience**

- Trans women **lack motivation to look for a job**, as they don't have expectations to be hired.
- **From the application until the end of the recruiting process**, trans women face negative experiences, reinforcing the perception that they don't belong in the job market.
- When people transition while already having a job, they frequently face **social exclusion and harassment** from peers and superiors, blocking their professional trajectories.
- This derives in **weak professional networks and social capital\***.
- Following the expulsion from the formal labour market, **community networks act as safety nets**, providing alternative sources of income (such as sex work or government subsidies), housing and social support, among others.
- However, this net also has a **retention effect**, reproducing trajectories in the systems' margins.

**Companies experience**

- Emerging **diversity and inclusion (D&I)** policies and practices in international companies.
- **Queer-washing** practices (low impact actions) within companies.
- Increasing **visibility in the public arena** of the transgender agenda (encouraged by the rise of the LGBTQ+ agenda).

\* *Social capital refers to the value of relationships, which can be mobilized to specific means (in our case, for example, to find a job). In words of Bourdieu, social capital are "durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (1985: p. 248).*

Source: self elaboration.

**Structures**

**Socioeconomic**

- Early expulsion from the **educational system**.
- **Restricted access to healthcare**.
- **Housing crisis**, caused by expulsion from family homes and reluctance to rent or overpricing to transgender people.
- **Assassinations, physical aggression, and other forms of violence in public spaces**.

**Emerging policy framework**

- Legal recognition of the gender identity (2012).
- Mandatory training in gender for public servants (2019).
- Transgender quota for the government (2021).
- Non-binary identity card (2021).

**Mental models**

**Cis-heteronorm (Butler, 1990)**

- Understanding gender as **binary and biologically determined**.
- Assuming there are **essential and immutable differences between men and women**, excluding transgender women who do not conform to traditional gender norms and expectations.
- The assumption of **sex work as the only possible destiny** for transgender women, reinforced by the lack of alternative role models and **hypersexualisation in the media**.

These mental models operate at an individual model (biases and prejudices) and at a broader paradigm level (social representations, shared beliefs and values).

The analysed dimensions operate in interdependence, resulting in a disposition of the workforce that upholds cis-heteronormative paradigms and socio-cultural and economic exclusion. By visualising this articulation, we identified the root causes of the problem and understood the key relationships and interconnections within and across the system.

## c. Systems map<sup>11</sup>

Building a Causal Loop System Map provided three main insights:

- **Queer-washing delays:** low-impact actions delay structural change implementation within companies and human-resources areas.
- **The community networks paradox:** survival networks can enable opportunities and simultaneously have a retaining effect as they reproduce the same social cycles. Understanding this dynamic gave us insight into leverage points for transforming social networks.
- **Agenda setting cycle:** D&I initiatives and human resources policies are influenced by public policy changes. Historically, political wins reinforced the agenda-setting capacity of LGBTIQ+ organisations, creating a positive feedback loop. Intermediaries played a critical role in this process. However, this fueled an anti-trans agenda, creating a balancing feedback loop. These are detailed below.

### Companies level: the queer-washing cycle

Incorporating the trans perspective into a company's D&I agenda can have heterogeneous effects. On the one hand, it can lead to **more inclusive internal policies**. However, we observed how companies sometimes opt for **implementing low-impact actions, such as merchandising or other marketing strategies, identified as "queer-washing"**<sup>12</sup>. These actions often perpetuate stereotypes and do not involve trans individuals in their design, failing to address the root causes of discrimination in the workplace.

Despite its limitations, **queer-washing can sometimes ignite changes**, such as opening conversations about the inclusion of trans people in the job market or the willingness of the company to pursue D&I trends. **Ultimately, the difference between queer washing and impactful actions depends on the involvement of trans people in these policies' design**. As a result, we view them as a delay in the

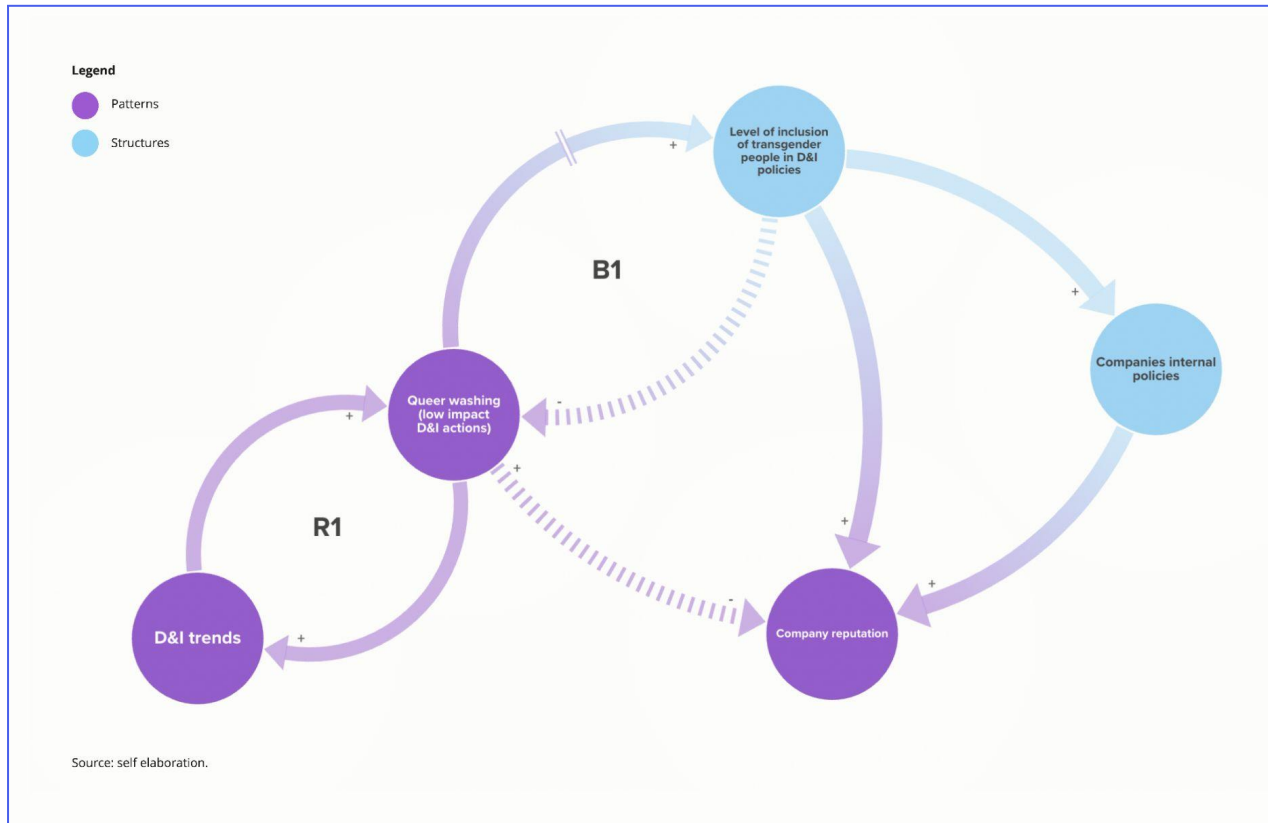
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<sup>11</sup> Link: <https://embed.kumu.io/550955875c13c074c1a4b4dccb4090c5>

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Rice (2022) defines "rainbow-washing as "public-facing statements of support for the LGBTQIA+ community without the intent to fulfill the promises implicit therein".

system rather than a balancing loop.

#### VISUAL REPRESENTATION 5 – QUEER-WASHING CYCLE NESTED SYSTEM



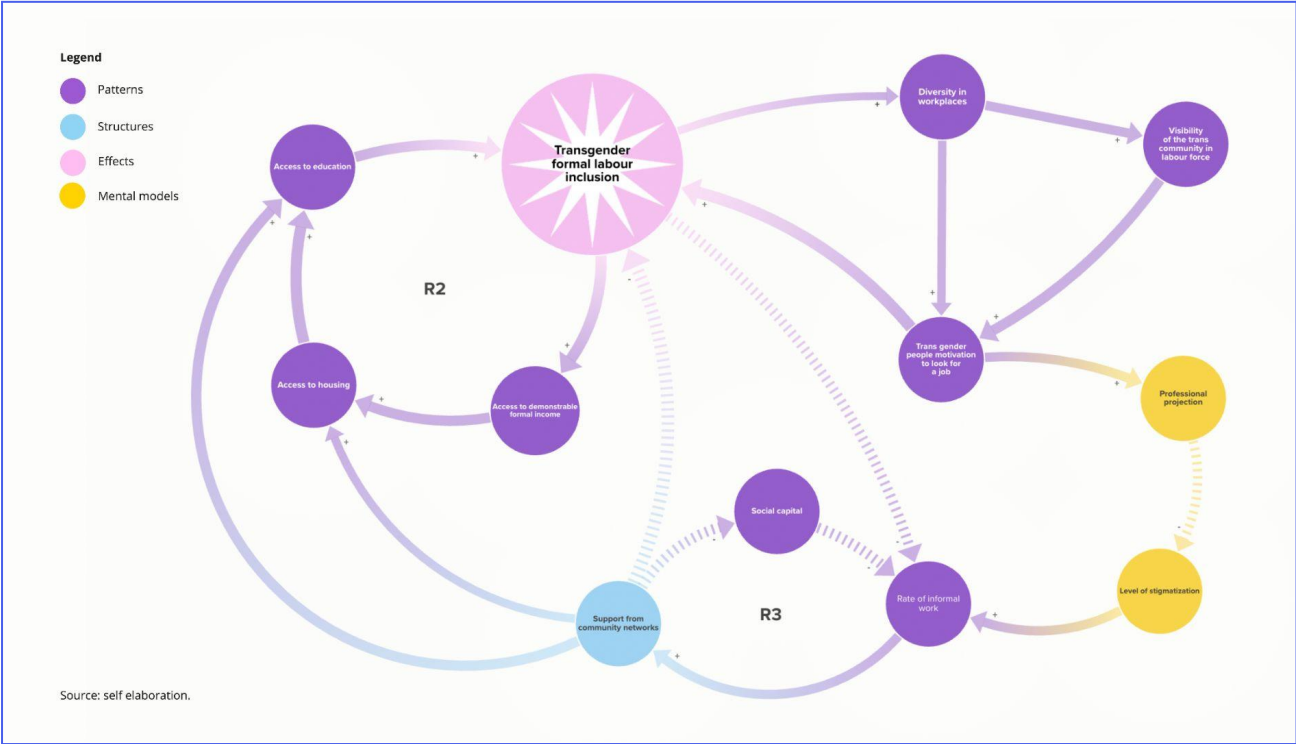
### The community networks paradox

Community networks play an essential role in trans women’s lives, as they are one of the few means to gain access to housing, education or informal jobs (such as sex work). Community networks **become strong support networks, with an enabling effect regarding opportunities that have been denied through other channels.**

Although these networks create valuable social connections in informal contexts, they also have **a paradoxical effect.** While they enable survival, sociability and carrying out life projects in a “trans community networks” subsystem, they can also limit the connection of trans people with the “formal labour” subsystem. This limiting effect can create a **retention effect:** individuals

may find themselves reproducing disconnected networks<sup>13</sup>, sticking to the same social circles and limiting to expand their connections.

**VISUAL REPRESENTATION 6 – COMMUNITY NETWORKS PARADOX NESTED SYSTEM**



**Public policies and legal frameworks: the power of structures**

The experience of Contratá Trans in other countries of the region contrasts with their work in Argentina: having a robust legal framework creates incentives for companies to implement inclusive recruiting policies.

After gay marriage was approved in 2010, **the trans movement leveraged the connections and agenda-setting capacity (e.g., connections in Congress and media, alongside fundraising capacity) from the broader LGBTIQ+ movement to pass the legal recognition of gender identity in 2012, which accelerated a cultural paradigm shift.**

This same cycle occurred when new legislation was passed, and new public

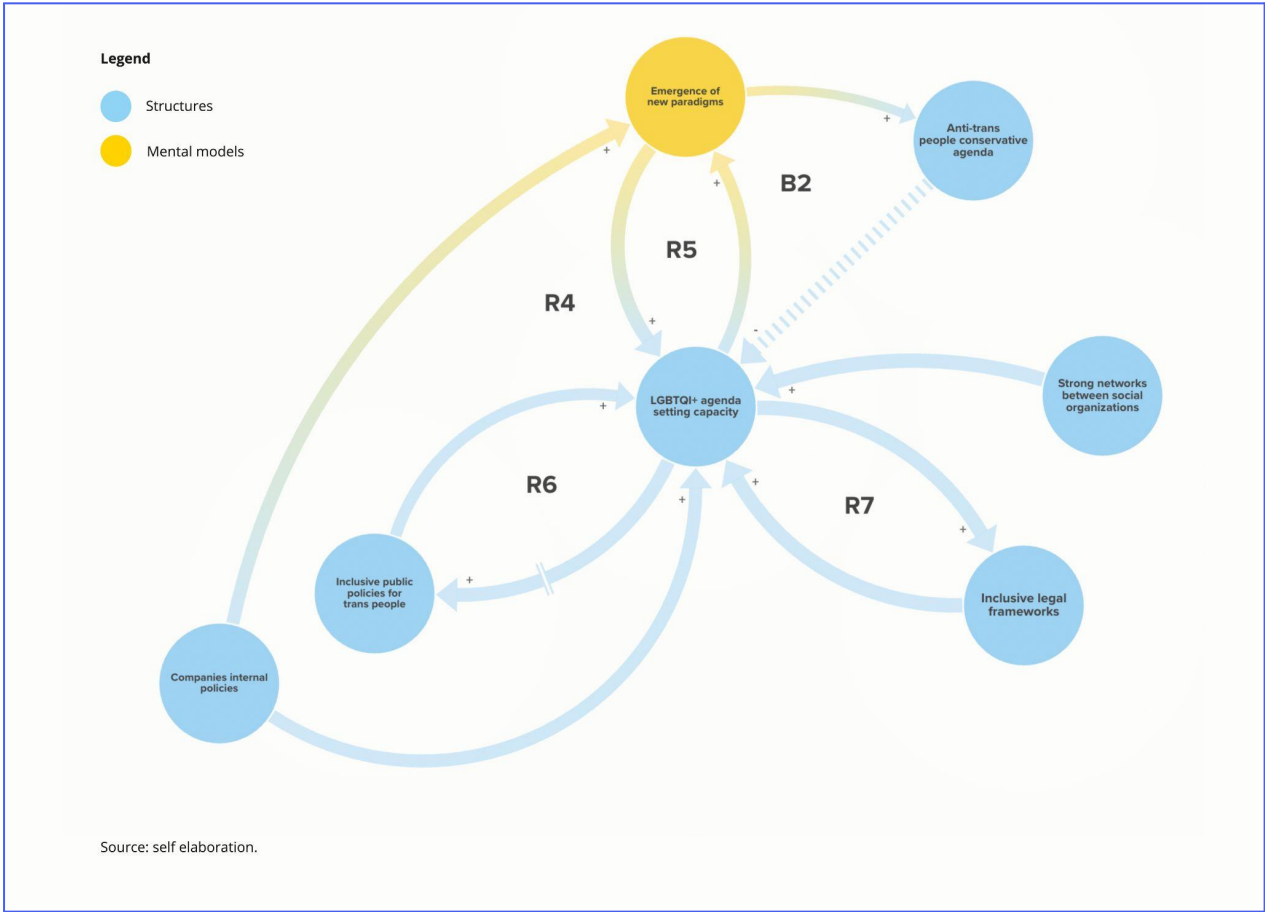
<sup>13</sup>Odone (2012) investigates survival strategies and the impact of social support networks in the lives of unemployed workers in Argentina. Similarly, Bhattacharya and Kesar (2020) explore the recreation and the reproduction of survival networks in informal labour settings in India. These concepts can be applied to our problem to better comprehend the social network paradox we identified through our research.



policies were created in the last decade (e.g., government quota, and non-binary documents, among others). From a system analysis, this is a positive feedback loop that enhances traction for advancing towards a gender and diversity paradigm shift. Likewise, **creating internal company policies also reinforces the LGBTIQ+ agenda-setting capacity.**

Nonetheless, this paradigm shift also provokes resistance, fueling an anti-trans agenda. These movements have emerged across Latin America and built strong connections in the political system, limiting the LGBTIQ+ agenda-setting capacity. At a systemic level, this operates as a balancing feedback loop<sup>14</sup>.

**VISUAL REPRESENTATION 7 – PUBLIC POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS NESTED SYSTEM**



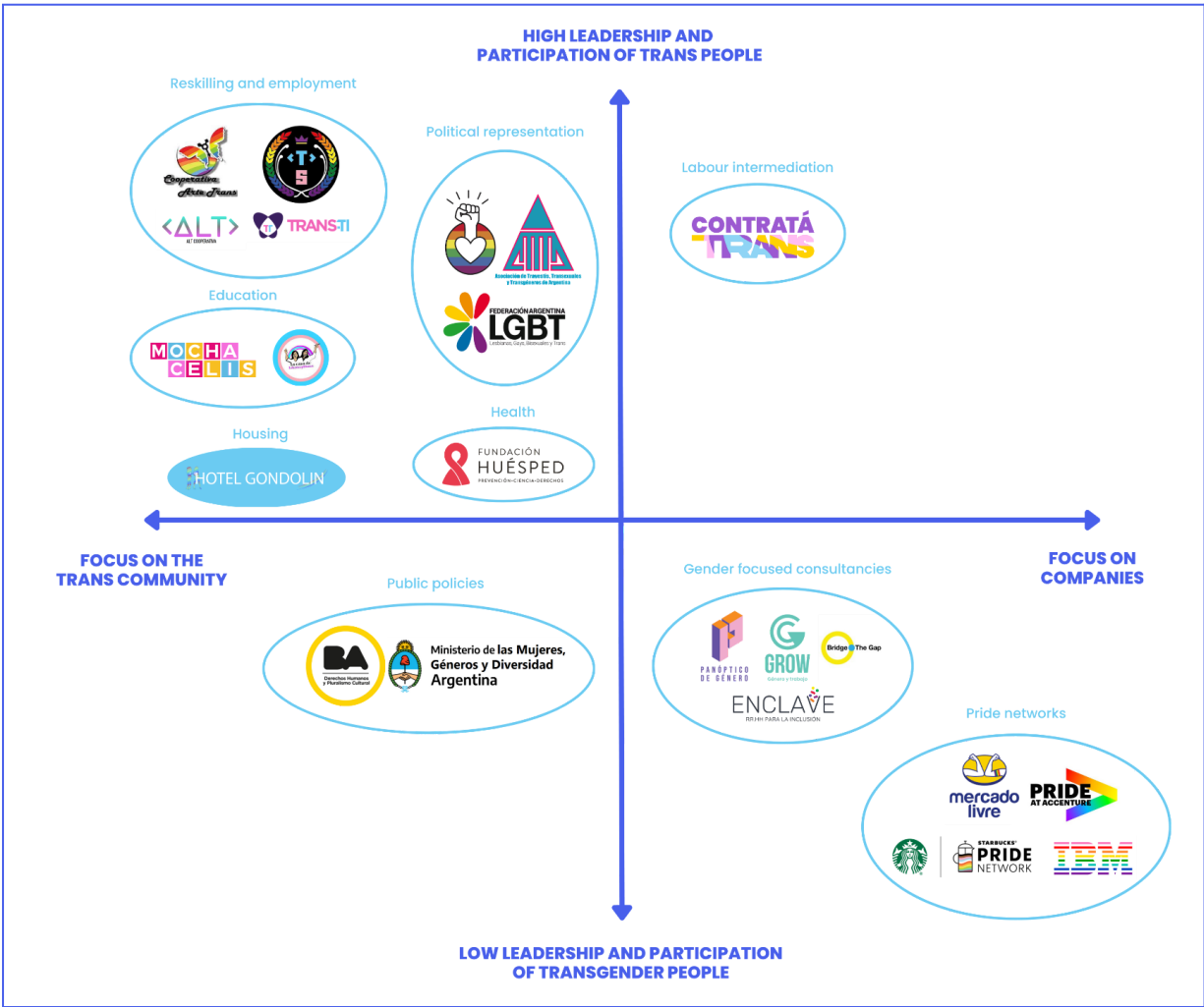
<sup>14</sup>Certain tactics involve vilifying Comprehensive Sex Education and denouncing the rise of a global “LGBT agenda”. Religious groups have been particularly active in establishing political connections to influence public policies. For a more in-depth analysis of how the specific backlash mechanisms operate see Lopez (2020).

# 4. Solutions landscape


To understand the solutions landscape, we identified the actors with relevant influence and impact in the system. The mapped solutions can be grouped into:

- Those focused on working with the trans communities
- D&I initiatives within companies
- Intermediaries, like Contratá Trans, which connect the two previous types of solutions

VISUAL REPRESENTATION 8 – SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE



Source: self elaboration.



On the one hand, **many initiatives that aim to develop participation and leadership skills work directly with trans people.** These organisations focus on improving trans people's living conditions and employability through broad support and training. Their impact is local, and lack the funds and operational structure to scale up. Furthermore, impacting corporate D&I policies remains out of their scope.

Additionally, we have found certain groups, such as Orgullo y Lucha, Federación LGBT, and ATTTA, which are focused on political representation. They have established strong ties with the political system, but their connections with the corporate world are relatively weak.

On the other hand, we observe a growing number of **consultancies and Pride initiatives focused on making workplaces more inclusive.** Since these stakeholders often lack direct access to the trans community networks, trans people are absent in the design of these initiatives.

While working directly with trans people is essential, it is equally crucial to redirect intervention towards the institutions, organisations, and regulations that perpetuate the exclusion cycle.

## a. Analysis of the existing solutions


VISUAL REPRESENTATION 9 – SOLUTIONS ANALYSIS

Focus of intervention	Organization type	Primary beneficiaries	Key interventions	Synergy with the private sector
Skill enhancement & employment opportunities.	Non-profit organization.	Trans individuals.	Empowering through skill development and directly employing trans individuals.	●●○ Moderate
Advocacy for inclusive policies.	Non-profit organization.	Policymakers.	Dynamic lobbying and grassroots mobilization for trans-inclusive policies.	●○○ Weak
Educational empowerment.	Non-profit organization.	Trans individuals.	Facilitating high school education to lay the foundation for future success.	●●○ Moderate
Safe shelter provision.	Non-profit organization.	Trans individuals.	Providing a haven through emergency housing to those in immediate need.	●○○ Weak
Holistic health & wellness.	Non-profit organization.	Trans individuals.	Offering medical checkups and assistance, alongside training for healthcare providers.	●●○ Moderate
Employment facilitation & sensitization.	Non-profit organization.	HR Professionals.	Streamlining job allocation while fostering Diversity & Inclusion through training.	●●● Strong
Crisis support.	Public policy organization.	Trans individuals.	Extending a lifeline through subsidies and emergency assistance in times of crisis.	●○○ Weak
Inclusive corporate consulting.	For-profit enterprise.	Corporate managers.	Cultivating an inclusive work environment through D&I training.	●●● Strong
Celebrating diversity.	In-company initiatives.	Employees.	Amplifying voices and visibility within the company to embrace diversity.	●●● Strong

Source: self elaboration.

Unfortunately, most existing solutions focus on one strategy or the other (focus on trans individuals or companies). Therefore, they recreate subsystems with their own shared mental models but with limited connections or "bridges" between them, resulting in a fragmented system overall.

Intermediaries, such as Contratá Trans, can fulfil this gap by operating as a mediator between a corporate environment that **wants to change and is open to**



**inclusion** and a community that needs to work but cannot find safe paths to inclusive working environments.

In a nutshell, Contratá Trans' intervention model is based on identifying companies that want to open trans-inclusive job searches and finding a match in their database. The recruitment and induction process involves identifying potential barriers and working with the company to mitigate them. This process is closely monitored until three months after the new hire is brought on board.

Contrata Trans primarily addresses a particular supply and demand issue that has been clearly identified. However, it is crucial to recognise that this initiative also acts as a catalyst for a broad spectrum of supplementary measures. These measures encompass skill development, streamlining of protocols, fine-tuning communication policies, and establishing D&I Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), among other aspects. Collectively, these actions contribute to instigating a more comprehensive transformation. How intermediaries can pull these levers for change is discussed in section 5.

## **b. Limitations on the intervention model**

During the process, we worked with the Contratá Trans team to identify limitations of the intervention model and improvement opportunities:

- Some crucial actors, namely labour unions, are notably missing from this landscape, despite their significant relative power in the Argentine labour market.
- Contratá Trans is not affecting small businesses and the informal economy sector. Furthermore, the project is mainly concentrated on big cities, which restricts its scope.
- The core of the operations is mediated by a [digital platform](#), enhancing the scaling opportunities of the project. However, a large portion of the recruiting process is work-intensive, creating a bottleneck for the project growth.
- The project mainly monitors the recruitment process, relegating the long-term effects within the company. We proposed an independent

evaluation to assess if company practices inadvertently lead to re-victimization.

## 5. Cis-tem transformation

### a. Imagining cis-tem transitions

Today, the entry barriers for trans individuals to the workplace are a consequence of the persistence of cis-heteronormativity. System transformation is complex and resistant since these paradigms are embedded in the foundations of our society (including its legal structures and patterns of behaviour). Following Seelos & Mair (2018), social systems architecture is shaped by beliefs, access to resources, and norms by which people and groups interact. In their words, “different systems have different architectures and thus generate different patterns of behaviour” (2018, p. 36). This is expressed in the following two-loop model<sup>15</sup>.

In the first loop, a series of stabilisers act to keep the status quo from the dominant system (cis-heteronormativity), such as violence against trans people and exclusion from the workforce. However, emerging paradigms erode the binary concept of gender, challenging our identity, values, and ambitions. A slight shift towards the emergent system starts when pioneers identify the problem and experiment with new approaches seeking paradigm change<sup>16</sup>.

In the second loop, ideas, solutions, and structures emerge in response to trans people's exclusion. As a result of the interconnected efforts between actors seeking change, trans-inclusive legal frameworks arise<sup>17</sup>.

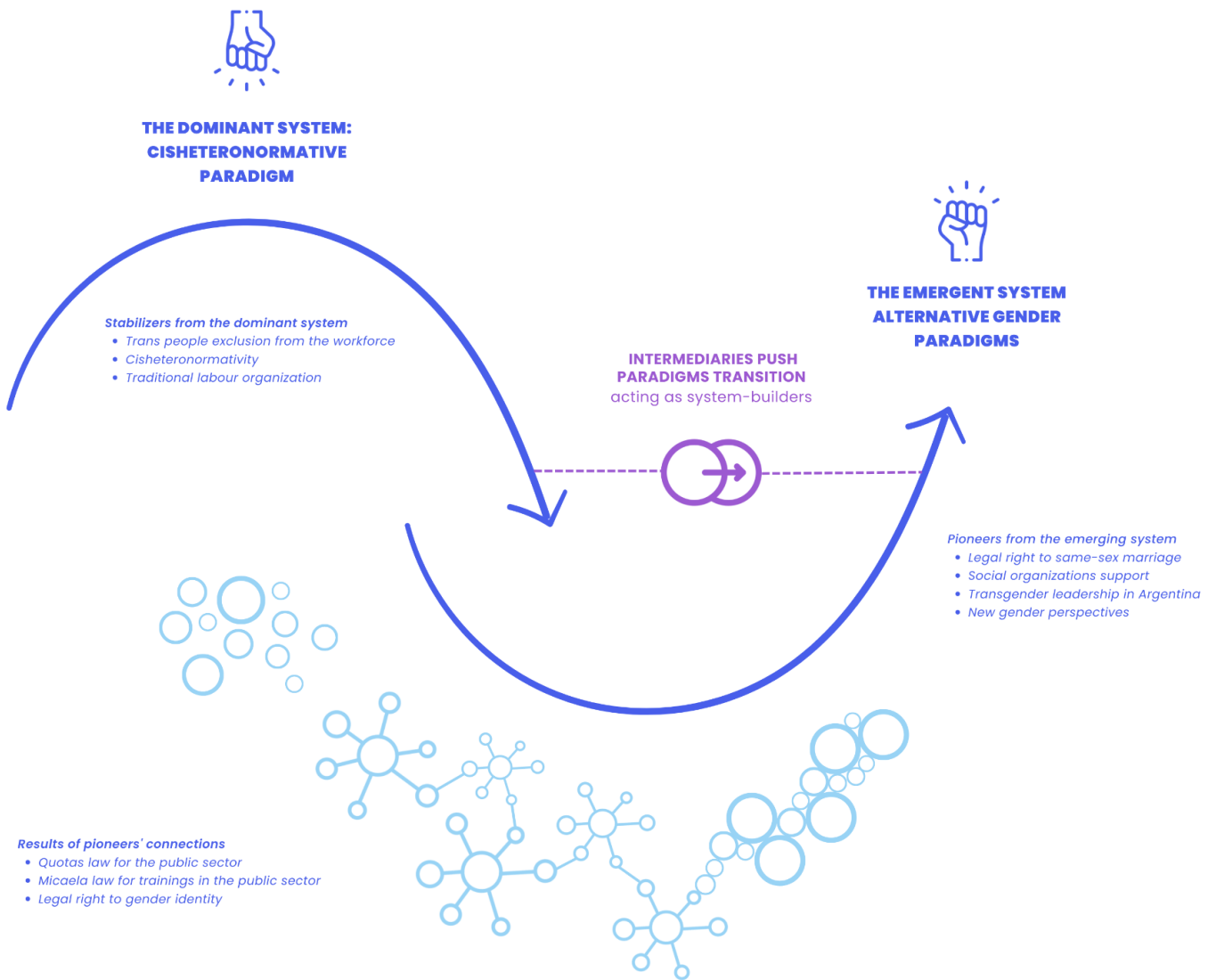
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<sup>15</sup> [The Berkana's Institute Two-Loop Model](#) is a change management framework that describes the process of transformation in complex systems.

<sup>16</sup> One of the most meaningful pioneers were trans leaders like Lohana Berkins, that used to lead the Association for the Struggle for Travesti and Transsexual Identity (ALITT) and Diana Sacoyán, founder of the Anti-Discrimination Movement for Liberation (MAL, 'bad' in Spanish). The legal right to same-sex marriage, a conquer for the LGBTQI+ community, also pioneered the foundations for legal frameworks that were later achieved by the trans community.

<sup>17</sup> Such as the legal right for gender identity (2012) and the quotas law for the public sector (2021).

VISUAL REPRESENTATION 10 – TWO LOOP MODEL



Source: adapted from Norman (2022).

The transition from one paradigm to another is not linear. It demands the restructuring of social relationships, norms, practices and structures: **the system's architecture needs to be rebuilt**. This creates opportunities for intermediaries: organisers, connectors, and storytellers that help redesign the system (Mulgan & Leadbeater, 2013). While an emerging trans-inclusive legal structure is taking shape in Argentina, **Contratá Trans pushes the system transformation forward, operating as an intermediary between two subsystems that are still**

**disconnected** (trans community networks and private companies) by establishing trust, providing guidance, and enabling communication.

As much as Contratá Trans and other solutions caused different levels and types of impact, systemic change requires orchestration from different stakeholders and strategies (Mulgan & Leadbeater, 2013). Combined, those actors and actions have the power to accelerate a transition from a dominant expulsive system to a more inclusive emergent system.

However, as identified in the following section, not every stakeholder is in a position of enabling these changes. Unlike other intermediaries, Contratá Trans stands out by ensuring transgender individuals hold leadership positions, enabling them to lead training, consultations, assessments, and public visibility initiatives.

## **b. Gaps, levers for change and leverage points**

*"We provided guidance to a bank that needed to register its employees using a foreign third-party system. This system did not accommodate the recently approved non-binary ID. When the bank requested modifications to the system, the third-party company initially responded with 'this is not possible'. After numerous attempts to find a solution, the bank was forced to 'hack' the system by inventing a third gender category to register non-binary individuals".*

**Martina Ansardi, Institutional Relations Coordinator in Contratá Trans.**

The binary gender paradigm permeates details of every form in companies, including only two options in the gender fields. This is an example of how changing the methods of collecting and storing information represents an easy opportunity to prompt companies to reconsider gender, challenging the dominant cis-heteronormative paradigm.

This illustrates some of the leverage points identified, understanding them as "places within a complex system where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything" (Meadows, 1999, p. 3). As our causal loop map



describes, changes in the identified levers can provoke change at multiple systemic levels.

**VISUAL REPRESENTATION 11 – LEVERS FOR CHANGE**

Gap	Lever for change	Meadows leverage point
<b>Social networks disconnection:</b> community networks are important for transgender women's access to basic rights, but they do not often connect to formal job opportunities due to a lack of social capital.	<b>Enabling new social circuits:</b> intermediaries bridge the gap of the "community network paradox", increasing their social capital. Every time a trans woman is employed, she starts operating as a system intermediary herself.	"The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organise <b>system structure</b> " (point 4).
<b>Queer washing:</b> as described in our analysis, some companies implement low-impact actions that delay more profound changes in the root causes of discrimination in the workplace.	<b>Involving trans people in D&amp;I policy design and implementation:</b> companies can address queer washing delays by explicitly setting a goal to hire transgender people, and involving them in the decision-making around internal D&I policies.	"The strength of <b>negative feedback loops</b> , relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against" (point 8). "The <b>lengths of delays</b> , relative to the rate of system change" (point 9).
<b>Individualistic focus on trans people:</b> current efforts concentrate on improving the individual situation of transgender people, their employability and life conditions, missing structural causes of exclusion.	<b>Transforming organisational practices and culture:</b> intermediaries like Contratá Trans have changed structural corporate practices and culture by reengineering hiring protocols and training cisgender people to address exclusion.	"The gain around driving <b>positive feedback loops</b> " (point 7).
<b>Gaps between policy design and policy implementation:</b> Article 11 of the National Law 27636, which establishes fiscal incentives' policy for private companies to hire trans people, has not been regulated. This impedes the effective implementation of this unprecedented incentives policy.	<b>Engaging in institutional pressure and partnership with the State:</b> the in-depth technical knowledge of Contratá Trans opens the opportunity to support the incentives policy regulation. This will also help build capacity for other policies.	"The <b>rules of the system</b> (such as incentives, punishments, constraints)" (point 5).
<b>Missing labour market stakeholders:</b> labour unions are absent from the transgender labour debate, despite their considerable power in Argentina.	<b>Building coalitions:</b> intermediaries have the ability to bring new players into the game. A gap in Contratá Trans' intervention is the missing engagement of labour unions. This is an area that could be improved upon.	"The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organise <b>system structure</b> " (point 4).

Source: self elaboration.

Our research shows how intermediaries, such as Contratá Trans, act as "translators". They skillfully navigate dialogues among stakeholders and bridge networks. They operate as "system builders", contributing to the emergence of more inclusive systems. The following are some of the levers that intermediaries, like Contratá Trans, can activate.

There is a unifying element that connects all the levers for change: the integral role that transgender individuals play in the conceptualization, execution, leadership, and oversight of the initiatives. For instance, in Argentina, the efficacy

of public policies can be attributed to the active participation of trans movements. Similarly, corporate policies frequently stumble when there is an absence of inclusion of trans representation in the formulation phase. Finally, our predominant hypothesis to explain the apparent disengagement of unions in D&I initiatives points towards a deficiency of representation from the LGBTIQ+ community within these organizations.

### **c. Lessons learned: from the Argentinian case to a regional approach**

The analysis from a system thinking perspective permitted us to identify lessons from the case study in Argentina that we consider valuable insights for organisations, governments and relevant stakeholders promoting trans-inclusive systems transformation in Latin America.

- **Promoting inclusive legal frameworks:** the legal recognition of gender identity created tools and incentives for changes in corporate policies and promoted paradigm shifts. This is a crucial lever to protect trans people's rights. Other key policies include statistical recognition and job quotas.

**Meadow's leverage points:** "The rules of the system" (point 5). "The mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises" (point 2).

- **Strengthening community networks:** trans-led organisations have been the protagonists in advancing trans rights in Argentina. Empowering them promotes short-term wins and long-term systemic transformations.

**Meadow's leverage point:** "The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organise system structure" (point 4).

- **Building political and social organisations' coalitions:** the agenda-setting capacity that the trans movement leveraged from the broader LGBTIQ+ movement was fundamental to achieve legislative changes that triggered mental model changes in society.

**Meadow's leverage points:** "The gain around driving positive feedback loops" (point 7).

## 6. Conclusion

Trans women's exclusion from the workforce in Argentina is a complex problem embedded in a cisheteronormative paradigm and change-resistant system architecture. Adopting a **systems approach** permitted us to "zoom in and zoom out", navigating from lived experiences to systemic dynamics.


Our research identified systemic factors at the levels of events, patterns of behaviour, socioeconomic and legal structures, and mental models that are intertwined and hold the problem in place. Understanding the interconnections and causal relations across the system allowed us to identify gaps in existing solutions and levers for "*cis-tem transformation*".

Among the research limitations, we focused on changes in the recruiting process and analysed companies that were early adopters of D&I trans-inclusive practices. To gain a better understanding of how paradigm shifts occur in other areas or companies with different values, further research is needed. The core issue of effective integration and long-term career development was not addressed in this research study. Additionally, the lessons learned can be useful for other countries in Latin America, but it's important to consider the unique characteristics of each country before applying these experiences elsewhere.

Transcending barriers to trans women's labour inclusion requires both systemic understanding and action. Our research was based on the collective construction of knowledge with an organisation that works with this problem. Aligned with this, our hope is that this research can inform the action of those working on the systemic transformation that we see emerging in Argentina and facilitates systemic change in Latin America. We are determined to do so.

*"When a Travesti gets into college, her life changes forever.  
But the day many Travestis get into college, it's the life of the  
whole society that's going to change".*

**Lohana Berkins, Argentinian transgender leader.**



As Lohana Berkins dreamed of college, every time a trans person finds a job, the whole working environment starts a transformation process. Opening the debate about gender identity in the workforce implies acknowledging the socialisation system that affects everyone, not only trans people. **By breaking down stereotypes and promoting understanding, we can create a more inclusive and less violent society for everyone.**

## 7. Acknowledgements

We are incredibly grateful to the IIPP family (students, researchers, staff, and friends), that gave us input, feedback, support and motivation. We especially thank Dr Kate Roll, who patiently guided us throughout this storming journey. Her insights, love and care have made this experience truly valuable and memorable. Thank you, Kate, for turning this into a fantastic learning opportunity and for your unconditional support!