



## Transgender community in Pakistan: A look into challenges and opportunities

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### Abstract

Gender is one of the basic elements that socially constructs human personality and identifies one as either man or woman in society. Transgender are the individuals whose gender identity does not match with the sex given at birth. There are at least 35 global cultures that have had representation of transgender individuals. There are number of theories based on cultural, biological, psychological and other medical grounds about why transgender people exists. In Pakistan, they draw their cultural heritage from “khuwajasara” community who guarded the ladies of the harem during the Mughal times. In Pakistan, transgender individuals are forced to set their identity in gender binaries. Failing to do so led them to a number of issues from harassment to lack of education and employment opportunities ultimately leading to increased plight and poor quality of living. While these challenges horrify society and portray how difficult their lives are, there are some great examples of people, who have broken the socially constructed barrier, and are succeeding in life while keeping their identities in existence. Also, few efforts like giving status of third sex in CNIC and reservation of 2% employment quota are being made to increase their visibility. Since current picture of transgender community in Pakistan is full of challenges with few dots of opportunities, pertinent steps, aimed at transgender empowerment and creating awareness in society, should be taken to change this picture.

**Keywords:** gender, sexuality, transgender, violence, Pakistan, challenges, opportunities

### 1. Introduction

Gender is one of the basic elements that socially constructs human personality and identifies one as either man or woman in society. In spite of this popular belief, one's sense of gender and one's anatomical sex are two distinct features. Each develops at different intervals in different parts of the body (sex between legs and gender in the mind) <sup>[1]</sup> The society generally ignores those who transcend the dual categories of man or woman; feminine or masculine, and express socially constructed and acceptable gender ‘atypical’ behavior – against the dimorphic norm of the society <sup>[2]</sup>. The social forces expect people to carry either way not the both one. As, these values have been created by people living years back and followed by their families and societies.

Shame, abnormal, whimsical or curse, these are the labels that society use to define transgender people, while avoiding the fact that they are equally human as those who set in gender binaries of men or women. For most of the people life is very tough, even empathy becomes difficult to practice in real life. Ever wondered, how it feels to be a person who does not get equal right to education, job and safety? Living such a life, and being treated as a sin for society is hellacious, knowing that one self is different from others.

The term transgender is used to indicate anyone whose gender expression or identity differs from the socially defined norm <sup>[3]</sup>. According to American Psychological Association, transgender are the individuals whose gender identity does not match with the sex given at birth <sup>[4]</sup>. Hence, it is not a diseased condition but a condition which is natural. Alas! That it took longer to prove on a larger level and recently WHO removes it from mental disorders. Some culturally sensitive societies still deny their existence as man and woman so they termed them as “third sex” <sup>[5]</sup>.

There are at least 35 global cultures that have had representation of transgender individuals like hijra or kinar in India, tranvesti in South America, Nadleehi in Navajo and two-spirit in Native America to name a few. Moreover, in context to South Asia, transgender community has a great historical and cultural past <sup>[6]</sup>. Their origin traces back to 9th century B.C. and even earlier to it. In Pakistan, they draw their cultural heritage from “khuwajasara” community who guarded the ladies of the harem during the Mughal times. Hijra, Murat, and Khusra are other names given to them in Pakistan <sup>[7]</sup>. Cinema in Pakistan, like Bol, Poshida, Chandni and Rani also include transgender characters and portray their identity. This shows that they are not aliens, belonging to any other place; they belong here, in the same society.

Transgender are human beings and they have equal human rights as other humans but unfortunately they are not treated humanely. They are not considered as part of human society and are coerced to disconnect their selves from the world. Several cases has been reported for violence against transgender and researches reveals that this violence ends up in amalgam of difficulties like sexual assault, gang rape, emotional breakdown, suicidal attempts and physical harassment <sup>[8]</sup>. An individual suffering from such violence entangles into numerous agonies. Few of them are emotional breakdown which leads to disturbed mental health. Victim may suffer from depression, mood swings and isolation. Another significant impact of violence is increase in molestation rate and decrease in physical health <sup>[9]</sup>. Transgender people are terminated from jobs and forced to leave houses. They also experience refutation of services by police, health care and government officials usually. The most common place that becomes site of harassment and violence for trans-people is restroom. These fundamental public and workplace facilities are even not secure for them. Even though the call for rights has been given in many

countries the social behavior is still the same<sup>[10, 11]</sup>. In Pakistan, the single attempt to count the population of transgender individuals was done in 2009 in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa only. Here out of a huge population, the recorded transgender individuals were 2167 and 324 respectively<sup>[12]</sup>. However, transgender rights activists reject this survey claiming that it has underrated the population. The UNAIDs estimate it to be approximately 150,000 in 2015. According to Integrated Biological and Behavioral Surveillance (IBBS) survey (2016-2017), Pakistan's total population of transgender reported in the sixth population and housing censuses is 10,418. However, a survey conducted in the 23 cities of Pakistan reported 31,790 transgender residing in this country. Out of 23, four of the cities had the major concentration of this population forming more than 60% of the total estimated number in Pakistan. These cities include Karachi, Lahore, Multan and Faisalabad<sup>[13]</sup>.

## 2. Theoretical Perspective

Many models and theories exist which describes transgender identity development. Medical and psychiatric perspective according to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition, posit normality as a biological and gender identity match with transgender viewed as individuals with some sort of psychiatric disorders. The majority of this approach focuses primarily on gender identity as binary construction. Opposed to this, a number of feminist, postmodern, and queer theorists suggest gender identity as a construction of society within systems of power and thus favoring a more fluid notion of gender identity<sup>[14]</sup>.

According to this, gender identity is not essentially linked to biological sex assignment at birth, but is created via complex social interactions. This is in accordance with Bilodeau's perspective that referred to Gender-ism as a set of rules and expectations society sets for an individual to show behaviors that are consistent with their observed sex. When a child is born, a sex is assigned immediately and with this a gender is assumed. With such practice, the society inhibits the opportunity for gender exploration for those individuals who may not identify with their observed sex and the gender roles expected by the society from them<sup>[15]</sup>. This eventually led to issues such as harassment, violence and isolation.

Another theory of Gender schema has put forward the concept of how we as individuals process the concept of gender in ourselves. According to this some people are sorted in terms of gender and some are not. A gender schema supports and filters one thought to fit in as masculine or feminine. The theory was challenged also with lot of huge theoretical phenomenon and concepts<sup>[16]</sup>.

There are number of theories based on cultural, biological, psychological and other medical grounds about why transgender people behave in such manner. There is no single underlying cause of why some people are transgender; genetics and prenatal hormones play a vital role here. Furthermore, early life experiences, adolescence and adulthood contribute to the development of transgender identity<sup>[17, 18]</sup>. However, there is no more evidence for psychiatric illness associated with being transgender as it is a natural phenomenon<sup>[19]</sup>.

Learning theory, cognitive developmental theory and Freud's psychosexual theories can also be referred in order to develop insights and build connections in order to support

Tran sexuality and develop the literature based basis of different gender options by different people.

## 3. Challenges

While the visibility of transgender individuals is increasing, they still face so many challenges in order to adjust themselves in gender dichotomies. Some of the issues faced by transgender individuals are: stigmatization and discrimination causing them to be rejected by their families; they are pressurized to set their identity in gender binaries, to act as either man or woman and failing to do so leads to separation from their families and sending them to transgender community where they are brought up by Guru. Their exclusion from families makes them isolated and unnerving for others which lead the prejudice towards them<sup>[20]</sup>. In Pakistan, transgender live on the fringes of society, socially excluded and being vulnerable. Illiteracy, poverty, injustice, lack of opportunities, social and cultural boycott, power imbalances in relationship, and obstinate attitude of religious leaders are some of the reasons for social exclusion of this community. Other than that, inability to reproduce and coping with their sexual orientation further adds to their disdain<sup>[21]</sup>. They encounter negligence, humiliation and discrimination everyday on the basis of their physical, social and even cultural characteristics. In some cultures they are not allowed to be part of religious practices, while in other cultures, they are believed to be blessed with divine power<sup>[22]</sup>.

With this, they also fail to find a secure place to study, which leads to diminished education. Trans-activists think that 98-99% of trans-community in Pakistan is illiterate while UNAIDs 2014 report affirms that 42% of the transgender sex workers surveyed were uneducated. In Larkana, a study revealed that 67.8% of hijra population is uneducated. Furthermore, there is no quota system in educational institutions for them in Pakistan<sup>[23, 24]</sup>. Even if some of them try to get education, they face a lot of problems in terms of their enrollment, selection of groups and answering to unknown questions of others around. Since, social hatred and discrimination keeps them away from educational institutions, they are compelled to adopt such means livelihood like prostitution, singing, dancing at weddings or childbirth, and begging for pennies, work which is condemned by our mainstream society. They are not hired for household work, for daycare services or for any other job for which they can learn the skills easily and thus, are constrained to live in such setups where adopting such means become an easy option<sup>[25]</sup>.

These experiences of severe marginalization by families and community lead to immense health risks for transgender, including increased risk for sexually transmitted disease like HIV infection, mental health disparities, and drug abuse<sup>[26]</sup>. In Pakistan, 44.2% transgender sex workers and 31% non sex workers transgender have reported using alcohol/drugs. Moreover, approximately 71% of transgender sex workers who use injectable drugs have sexual relationships with other drug users and up to 33.7% of them did not use a condom in the last coitus with their clients. A study revealed that, out of 409 participants, 84% had sold sex, 94% could identify a condom, but 42% reported never needing one, 58% had sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and 38% had multiple infections. The commonest infections were syphilis (50%) and gonorrhea (18%). Seven percent had inguinal lymphadenopathy, 1% had ureteral discharge and

3% had genital sores. All of these were associated with physical abuse and low condom usage<sup>[27]</sup>.

Transgender sex workers start sex work at a young age of 16.9 years and have reported to be involved in sex work for approximately 10.9 years. They earn PKR 10,000 per month from sex work. Approximately 57% have reported being involved in unpaid sex, only 13.1% of transgender sex workers and 9.7% of non sex workers transgender have reported consistently using condoms which makes them prone to STIs. About 43% of all Transgender knew where an HIV test is being done and 34.2% of them reported getting tested. The overall prevalence of HIV was about 7.1%<sup>[28]</sup>. According to WHO, Pakistan has seen a 45 % increase in new HIV infections since 2010 with officials believing that HIV is largely concentrated in high risk group that includes people who inject drugs, the transgender community, sex workers and their clients and men who have sex with men<sup>[29]</sup>.

In addition to that trans-people are also the target of abuse and brutality not only by their families but also at schools, workplace as well as their gurus. In 2016, 46 murders and 300 attacks had been documented across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Likewise, the occurrence of sexual abuse in childhood among transgender is about 82%. More than half of them reported being beaten, choked or threatened with a knife or other weapon, while 56% of them reported being tricked/ laid into having sex without consent. While physical wellbeing of transgender remains at stake, psychological health is also adversely affected owing to the fact that physical and psychological abuse by people becomes a scourge for them<sup>[30]</sup>.

While these challenges horrify society and portray how difficult their lives are, we also have some great examples of people, who have broken the socially constructed barrier, and are succeeding in life while keeping their identities in existence, like first ever Pakistani transgender model followed by transgender working as news caster, hair stylists, fashion designers, interior decorators and trans activists working for the growth of their community. They have proved that being a transgender is not a disability; rather it is their identity<sup>[31]</sup>.

#### 4. Opportunities

Violence, poverty, human rights violations, inequality, lack of educational opportunities, and insufficient legal and medical services remain the significant issues faced by transgender community today, but efforts are being made in this regard. In 2009, Pakistan Supreme Court for the first time gave transgender a status of third sex in CNIC and ordered reservation of 2% employment quota. Moreover, in 2012 the court recognized their rights of employment and inheritance after death of parents. Besides this, the Lahore High Court for the first time issued the order to include transgender community in 2017 population census<sup>[32]</sup>.

Transgender Protection of Rights policy has been published by Punjab Social Protection Authority on May 24, 2018, Act No. III, which recognizes the identity of transgender person, prohibits discrimination and harassment against them, and promises to provide equal status, medical facilities, psychological care, counseling, education, and employment opportunities to this community (*Acts, Ordinances, President's Orders and Regulations, Act No. XIII*, 2018). With that, Transgender Welfare Policy has also been published by PSPA, which aimed to identify the factor that

result in social vulnerabilities of transgender and future implications for the welfare of transgender population<sup>[33]</sup>.

Other than this, there are many NGOs working to empower transgender community like Wajood, a community-based transgender community organization in Pakistan which launched the Pakistan Transgender Empowerment Association: voice for social change and empowerment, and Gender Interactive Alliance. They aim to empower and raise a voice for transgender community rights and issues at national level<sup>[34]</sup>. Other examples are of Exploring Future Foundation's project "The Gender Guardian" which is Pakistan's first all-transgender school and which provides both formal education and vocational training. With this, Blue Veins Khyber Pakhtunkhwa based advocacy group is giving educational scholarships to transgender community. These kinds of initiatives are making way for socio-economic inclusion of these individuals<sup>[35,36]</sup>.

In the sector of healthcare efforts for reducing healthcare disparities faced by transgender community can be seen at provincial level. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sehat Insaaf Cards are issued to transgender individuals to ensure health for them. This initiative will ensure free-of-cost coverage for HIV/AIDS and cancer tests and treatment and it will also offer medical coverage of Rs 400,000 per family for health emergencies. Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences at Islamabad, under the Transgender Protection of Rights Act 2018, allocated a separate ward for transgender individual where they would be treated for free<sup>[37,38]</sup>.

#### 5. Recommendations and Conclusion

At community level, projects aimed at transgender empowerment like transgender literacy projects can be initiated by NGOs. Also, programmatic interventions can be organized by NGOs to deconstruct the stigma associated with transgender individuals. Additionally, mass media can be used to create awareness in general public by organizing dialogue between legal and religious experts to facilitate talk on the existing notion. At national level, anti-discrimination laws should be formulated and implemented to address workplace discrimination while also enforcing existing policies. Strict actions should be taken by law enforcement agencies against society individuals involved in any act of violation of their rights like harassment or abuse. With this, all law enforcement agents should be equipped with human right training so to improve their treatment with transgender individuals. Also, there should be incorporation of compulsory gender course or subject at some level of education to increase awareness to all segments of society.

In Pakistan, transgender individuals are forced to set their identity in gender binaries. Failing to do so led them to a number of issues from harassment to lack of education and employment opportunities ultimately leading to increased plight and poor quality of living. Since current picture of transgender community in Pakistan is full of challenges with few dots of opportunities, pertinent steps should be taken to change this picture.

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