

# Social lives of transgender at Bari Imam: Perspectives and Challenges

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## Abstract:

The study of the lives of transgender individuals is a broad field encompassing topics such as gender identity, gender dysphoria, societal prejudice, healthcare disparities, and legal rights. Furthermore, academic research in this field aims to broaden our understanding of these issues, promote inclusivity, advocate for the rights and well-being of transgender people, and maintain societal attitudes and misconceptions about transgender identities. This study highlighted the challenges faced by transgender people, influenced by cultural, social, legal, and economic aspects of legal recognition and implementation concerns. The transition process can be complex for transgender people, involving various social, medical, educational and legal considerations. The study brings insight through the lens of social and cultural anthropology. It also highlights the stereotypical ideas without better job opportunities and access to education. The consequences of societal stigmas for transgender individuals indulged them in emotional stress, psychological imbalances and social status. The data was collected by using ethnographic research methods, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, in the vicinity of the Bari Imam Islamabad, Pakistan. Ultimately, this study contributes to understanding the transgender community from a social and gender perspective. It delves into the community's daily challenges, offering a fresh perspective on their experiences beyond the typical narrative of poverty.

**Keywords:** Transgender, Community, Discrimination, Harassment, Violence.

## Introduction

Transgender people in Pakistan have a complex history and continue to face several challenges. Gender pertains to the socially constructed differences between males and females. It is important to recognize that gender is a societal construct separate from biological sex. It is believed that an individual's gender plays a significant role in shaping their personality. Gender is an integral part of one's identity, as people tend to identify themselves as male or female based on their biological sex. This awareness of one's gender identity can have a profound impact on an individual's

personality and life experiences (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014). However, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone identifies with traditional gender categories of masculine and feminine. Some individuals identify as transgender often viewed as socially abnormal due to their non-normative gender identity. Furthermore, the term transgender has a negative connotation, leading many to believe that individuals who undergo this transformation cannot bear children (Jami & Kamal, 2015). In South Asia, the culture of transgender (Hijras) is mentioned in old Hindu literature, such as the Mahabharata and the Kama Sutra. (Bearak, 2016).

Transgender is a socially constructed name for those people who have come in the category of hermaphrodite. It is important to recognize that the status of being a sexual and gender identity minority often overlap in complex and noticeable ways. Drawing a clear distinction between the two categories can be difficult, especially when individuals in both groups exhibit similar behaviours, such as selecting sexual partners or clothing, which can elicit biased reactions. It is crucial to acknowledge these complexities and avoid oversimplifying the experiences of those who identify as both sexual and gender identity (Mason, Button, & DiClementi, 2001). The Transgender community in the subcontinent has been subjected to discrimination, harassment, and violence for a long time. Unfortunately, their dilemma worsened during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when British colonial authorities banned many Hijra practices, including conducting weddings and soliciting public donations in India (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014). These actions have only compounded the struggles faced by the transgender community, making it even more challenging for them to live a life of dignity and respect.

Moreover, it is common for transgender individuals to hide their gender identity from their social circles, which can include family, friends, colleagues, and employers. By doing so, they are often able to go undetected as transgender. On the other hand, some individuals choose to conform to societal norms and expectations that are associated with their assigned gender (Saeed, Mughal, & Farooq, 2018). Transgender individuals in Pakistan frequently face discrimination, marginalization, and stigmatization in their routine life. To make ends meet, they often resort to begging, singing, dancing, and engaging in prostitution, which may involve homosexual activities (Farhat, Abdullah, Hali, & Iftikhar, 2020). Unfortunately, the prevalence of drug use and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is higher among this particular group as compared to the rest of the local community. Since these behaviours, such as prostitution, begging, and drug use, are legally prohibited and socially condemned, those who engage in them are at greater risk and often unable to seek protection from law enforcement agencies (Hinchy, 2019). Consequently, many transgender people were forcefully compelled to engage in sex work and other informal labour, marginalizing and impoverishing them. By tapping into their Indian ancestry, they skillfully demonstrate their abilities at weddings, newborn dedications, and several other occasions around Pakistan. (Talwar, 1999). Despite being acknowledged for a lengthy history, the transgender population in Pakistan is still facing numerous challenges, such as discrimination, violence, and limited access to work and education opportunities.

## Literature Review

The sex/gender disruption induced by castration, along with the inadequacies of a sex/gender system, pushes castrated persons into 'liminality,' where they may view their gender identity as unclear rather than masculine or feminine.

Liminality is the condition of being on a threshold, a boundary, or at the beginning of a process (Navon & Morag, 2004). Castration provides an alternate narrative through which they can consider themselves as belonging to another gender group and may benefit from doing so. Castration causes physical and physiological changes that make it difficult for castrated people to properly experience themselves as males and question binary notions of sex and gender. However, it is essential to notice that castration is sometimes used to treat prostate cancer; every year, 200,000 new cases are diagnosed in the United States (Wibmer, et al., 2015).

The medical alteration of organs expresses that sex represents the sociologist's term about gender as a biographical disruption (Elson, 2003). Such disruptions constitute a radical turning point in an individual's narrative in ways that prevent them from maintaining previous self-understandings. Moreover, there are three types of Eunuchs such as 1) Hermaphrodite: Those who are born intersex or with mixed genitalia are called Hermaphrodite. 2) Transsexual: Those who are castrated and hence become Eunuchs are called Transsexual. 3) Transvestites: Those who are males with feminine sexual orientation; hence wear and behave like women are called Transvestites (H, L, & M, 2000).

The concept of a 'third gender' was first introduced in academic discussions by Gilbert Herdt's book, "Third Sex Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History." explained the significance of focusing on this idea, stating that there is a fundamental rationale for doing so. The code of 'tiredness' should not be taken literally to mean that in all times and places, there are only three categories possible in human classification; ... the third is emblematic of other possible combinations that transcend dimorphism (Herdt, 1993).

Furthermore, Turner urged them to renegotiate their gender identity, or else they will feel they are failing, damaged, imperfect, or worthless males (Turner, 1969). A transgender is a man who has had his testicles removed. Many men had this done for reasons beyond their control, such as accidents, disease, congenital impairments, testicular atrophy, or perhaps it was forced on them. Alternatively, becoming a transgender may be a technique to manage sexual desires and feelings (Wassersug, 2010).

In Pakistan, the transgender population is a unique gender segregation in which males behave like women, and society cannot acknowledge them as women. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, if a person transforms into a transgender person, it becomes a shame for that family, and they try to honor killing for face-saving (Ahmed, 1980). In this regard, article 18 of the Constitution of Pakistan provides equal rights to its citizens, and the Supreme Court of Pakistan ruled that all Hijras and transgender communities be registered in Pakistan to be integrated into society (Pakistan, 2018).

An interview with the Assistant Professor of Anthropology explained that castration was often used for religious or social reasons in many cultures, such as South Asia, Africa, and East Asia. Even in some cases, after winning the battles, the winners had castrated their prisoners of war or the soldiers of the defeated army to symbolize their victory, and it had practiced seizing the power of enemies. Castration had often been involved in removing the total male genitalia, and this action led to death because the bleeding did not stop.

## Research Experience among Transgender individuals in Pakistan

During this research, the researcher gained an exciting experience by spending time with the transgender community in Bari Imam, Islamabad, concerning individuality because people viewed skeptically as the researcher's fieldwork among the transgender community. A purposive method approach was adopted for conducting interviews with transgender individuals, and the interviews were conducted after the consent of all respondents; none of them were forced to get the interview. Ethical principles include:

- Respect towards study participants.
- Sensitivity to the information they were provided.
- Ensuring the respondents that their identity would not be disclosed to anyone.

This research aimed to determine the level of acceptability of transgender individuals in Pakistani society and how they face problems in their routine lives. In some societies like Pakistan, where castrated males try to hide their bodily changes, facing people's behaviour in their daily routine is challenging. As a result of the gender changes, they face social and psychological traumas in society. In response, how can they reduce this difficulty as being transgender person, and what circumstances might they face because they are considered neither male nor female. This notion has become undeniable in how society treats them with suspected eyes.

### Statement of the problem

Due to cultural, societal, legal, and economic issues, transgender people in Pakistan confront significant challenges. Despite legal recognition, discrimination, violence, and harassment continue to negatively impact education, employment, and healthcare. Economic prospects are restricted, resulting in poverty and vulnerability. Access to gender-affirming healthcare is limited, and social marginalization and familial rejection compound the problem. Education hurdles and cultural ignorance create unfavorable prejudices. The purpose of this study is to assess these issues and perspectives in order to contribute to better-informed policies and actions that improve the well-being and inclusion of transgender people in Pakistani society.

### Objectives:

To find out the lived experiences of gender identity, gender dysphoria, and socio-cultural, economic, and legal disparities.

### Locale of the Research

The study locale is Bari Imam, which is quite similar to the other transgender communities because their socioeconomic condition reflects their living status. Most transgender individuals live in the slums of Islamabad, and Bari Imam is the best example to see them. These persons of the Bari Imam get money from those who usually visit the Saint Bari Imam shrine.

## Material Discussion

This study on transgender persons analyzed their perceptions of society using the thematic analysis technique. It was found that they have no safe places and often face discriminatory behaviour from society and their families. In addition, interviews with transgender persons were analyzed thematically to gain deeper insight into their experiences.

## Discrimination and Stigma

Initially, it was difficult to analyze interviews regarding religious discrimination against transgender people. However, during the interviews, none of the participants expressed concerns about the limited availability of religious services, mosques, or Islamic education. It is worth noting that the participants held diverse religious beliefs, with some identifying as atheists, some being believers who do not actively engage in religious practices, and others praying at home due to restrictions preventing them from entering gender-segregated mosques. Transgender people often experience various forms of discrimination, social stigma, and harassment. Individuals in this particular group may experience marginalization and exclusion from many social activities, educational pursuits, and employment prospects. One of the interlocutors explained that they live in terrible conditions and face many problems from society in their daily lives in Pakistan.

Another interlocutor explained that the social responses towards transgender persons have become derogatory and prejudiced in public places. They are always treated with suspected eyes, and people hate to live with them. Another perspective came from the interlocutor that typical rhetoric has developed among the society that the children born with sexual deformities should not be given to the transgender because the guru (master) of the community used those children for homosexuality and prostitution.

In Pakistan, most transgender people come from low-income families, and their parents do not have enough economic resources to care for them. As a result, they go to use illegal ways to get money. Another interlocutor expressed the discrimination by society, and they make money by adopting different ways, including going to weddings without invitation, birthdays, opening shops, and other street events. They tend to leave the place once if they are given some gifts or money. It is a myth that if a transgender person goes back unhappy, it will appear as an omen to happiness, and the wrath of the divine will accompany their curse.

## Lack of Education

Learning knowledge is the fundamental right of every human being, but unfortunately, transgender people in many societies are victimized and face injustices and insecurity at school. It has already been discussed before that the majority of transgender individuals belong to low-income families, and they are verbally harassed; physical and sexual abuse at school has become a common phenomenon for these people. One of the interlocutors expressed embarrassment at the school because the students and teachers mistreated them. As a result, she left the school and joined the transgender community. They are beaten and physically abused by both teachers and classmates.

However, punishment by the teacher has become standard practice at government-sponsored schools, and it is not restricted to transgender people. Still, some participants felt beaten more often due to their femininity. Another interlocutor described this regular punishment by the teachers, often finding a safe place to escape the teacher's punishment. Some respondents expressed that the fear of punishment had become the reason to leave the school and join the community of transgender people. Another respondent claimed that poverty was the main obstacle to continuing their studies because their parents did not have enough money to spend on them.

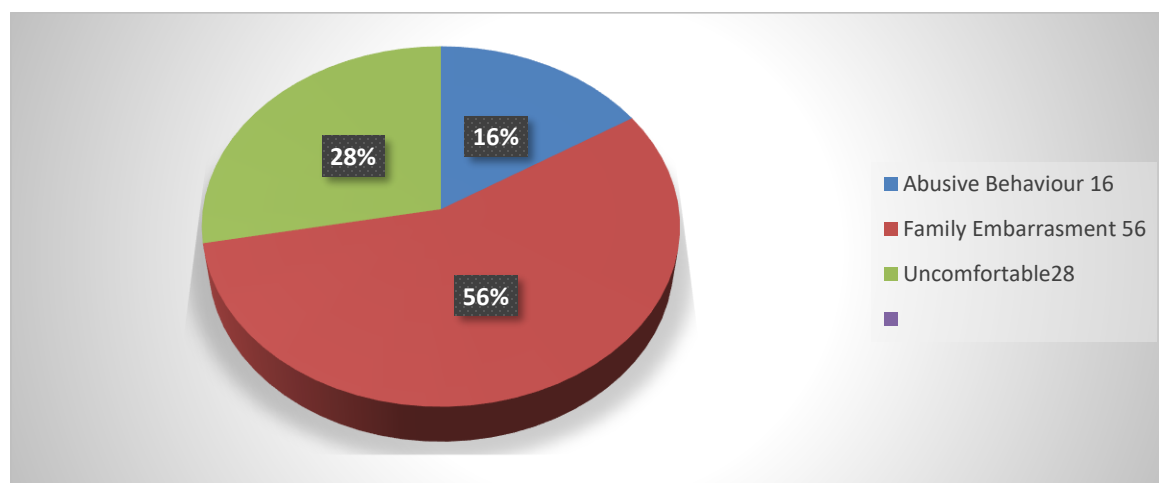
Escaping from school is not the only way to overcome these insecurities, and one interlocutor explained her experiences of being victimized at school. However, she faced all because her parents did not have enough resources to enter her into a private school. Furthermore, she explained that after registering the complaint to the teachers about being touched and teased by classmates, which was not taken seriously by the school administration. As a result, she left the school with a broken heart, and after some time, she joined the transgender community in Bari Imam and lived happily with them.

### **Violence and Harassment**

One transgender person described how she played with dolls, put on make-up, and dressed like a girls at seven. She said that her family neglected her, and she was beaten by her father, brothers, and cousins. Moreover, this abusive behaviour made her very disappointed; as a result, she tried to find a place where she could live according to her desire. In addition to this, most transgender persons have poor backgrounds, which makes them vulnerable to harassment by people in public and private places. This discrimination makes the transgender community one of the most disempowered groups in society. In other words, it is considered the dysfunctional segment of society where people mistreat them and in-tolerated ways.

The other interlocutor expressed that if any family has a transgender person, it becomes malicious for that family, and the family member hesitates to disclose her identification. These societal disorders make the family intolerant toward that person, and they do not give them respect. Some disheartening stories were shared by several respondents about the shame and misbehaving of the family, which is shown in chart one.

**Chart 01: What were the reason for leaving their families?**

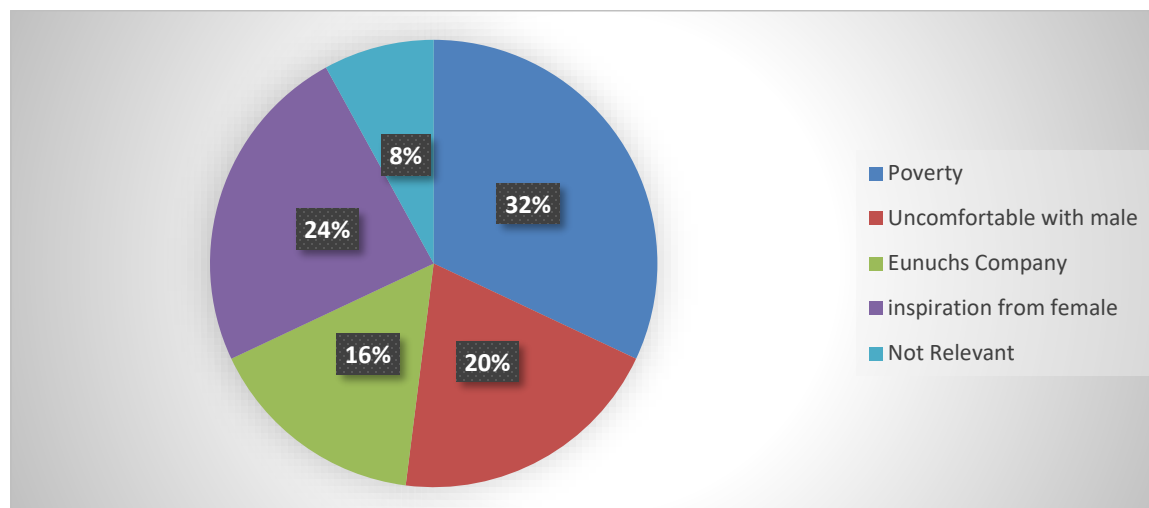


Based on chart 01, it seems that there were various reasons why people left their homes. It is concerning to see that 16 per cent of the respondents experienced abusive behaviour from society, which is unacceptable. What is even more troubling is that most of the respondents (56 per cent) were unhappy with the attitude of their families. It must have been tough for them. Another 28 per cent of the respondents said they felt uncomfortable within their families and decided to leave. This must have been discouraging for them. It is really sad to see that some respondents even mentioned that their father did not like talking and was abusive towards their female get-ups and appearances.

### **Family Rejection**

Some respondents expressed their views on how they go home. They said their families know that they are working some labour in Islamabad. Suppose their parents know that they work as a transgender person. In that case, it will negatively impact their families, and there is a strong possibility that they will face dire societal consequences. Generally, these people congratulate and ask for money after the child's birth, which means they want to confirm the identification of the newborn. If the baby is Eunuch, they claim their custody; otherwise, if the newborn is normal, they leave him/her to his/her parents.

Nonetheless, there is a possibility that they will take the child against your will. The myth is widely believed that a baby born as Eunuch develops similar characteristics (dancing, singing), which are acceptable in the transgender community only. These are born with sexual deformities and ultimately join the transgender community.

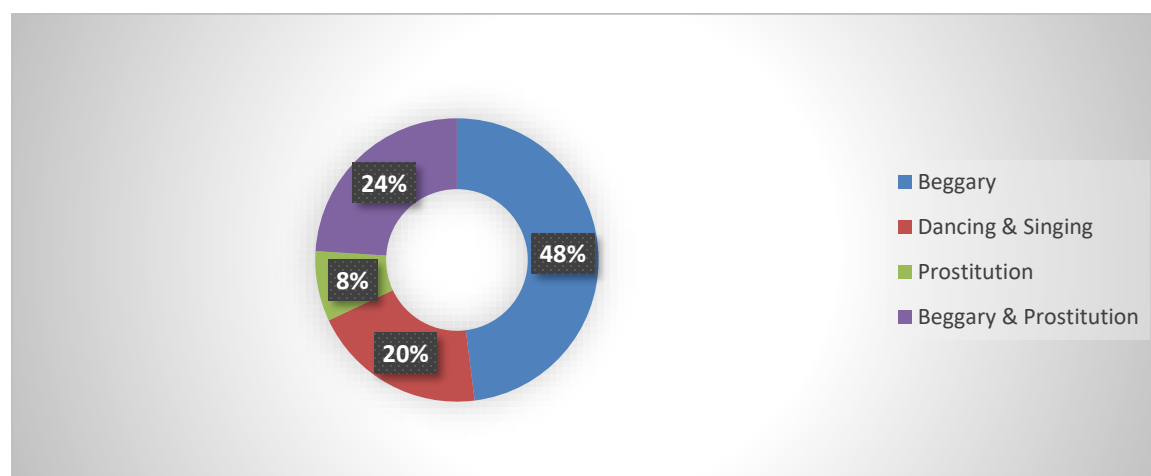
**Chart 02: Reasons for Changing Sex**

According to Chart 02, there are some important reasons why some people choose to change their sex. 32 per cent of respondents indicated that poverty and unemployment were the driving factors behind their decision. Another 20 per cent claimed they felt uncomfortable living with a male body, while 16 per cent preferred the company of transgender persons. Additionally, 24 per cent of the respondents were inspired by female body shapes and aspired to look like them. Interestingly, 8 per cent of the respondents could not trace why they changed their sex.

### **Economic Marginalization**

They are known as Hijras, they live in separate communities, and they have communication between their societies. Hijra in Urdu Language means transgender or eunuch, which denotes male-to-female transgender people. Some of them have the experience of ritual castration, but most people do not have the experience of any ritual. They usually wear Kameez Shalwar and heavy make-up that looks like a woman. One of the respondents claimed that they perform as a part of dance programs in marriage ceremonies. The primary sources of our earnings are associated with begging and singing, and by doing this, we can get sufficient money quickly. These communities are led by a guru (master) and his/her followers called 'Chellas' (juniors). The respondents described their economic patterns, and they said their ways of getting money; some were angry about the social behaviour of the society and how they were used as prostitutes, but none of the members mentioned that their family members sexually abused them.



**Chart 03: How they earn money.**

According to chart 03, it was found that a majority of people were associated with beggary, with 48 per cent involved in it. A significant proportion, 20 per cent, earned money through dancing and singing at various places. Only 8 per cent were directly involved in prostitution, while 24 per cent were engaged in begging and prostitution to make ends meet. When asked if they were satisfied with their job as a transgender person, the answer was a resounding yes. Despite being ostracized by their families and society, they lead a life of compassion and kindness. Unfortunately, they have no quotas in government jobs or educational institutions due to negative perceptions of society.

### **Social Isolation**

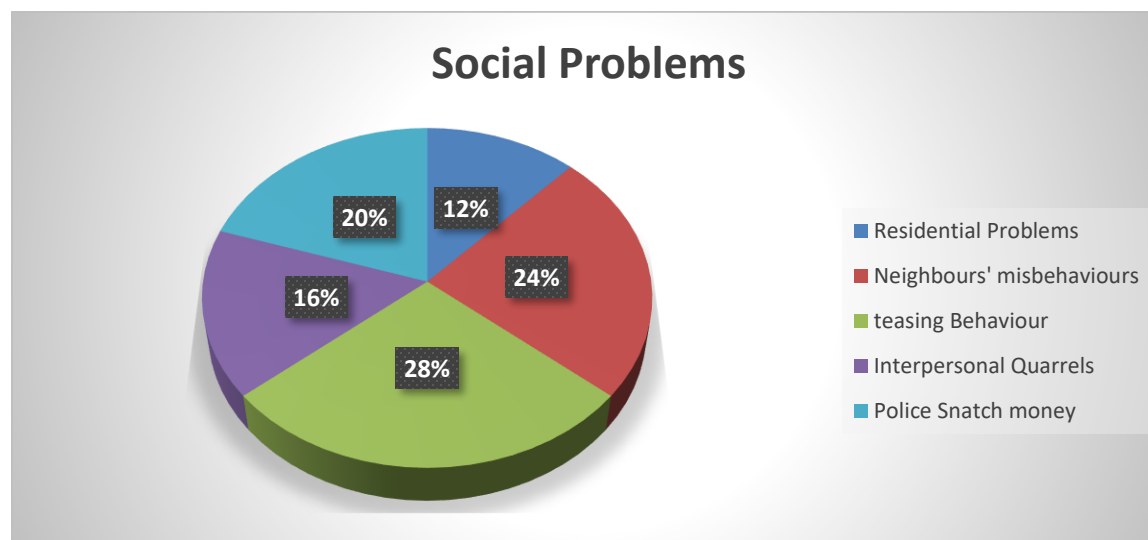
Pakistan has a sad history of prejudice and difficult acceptance of the transgender community. They have reportedly been the targets of violence and harassment, which is unacceptable. It is heartbreaking to hear that society's abusive and unequal behaviours towards the transgender persons have frightened them and made it hard for them to recognize their own identity. One of the respondents explained that it is essential to understand that the transgender persons do not accept gender divisions in society and have cultural customs and distinctive dress codes that differ from what we might typically associate with transgender identification.

It is also worth noting that transgender individuals are generally cooperative and do not harm society, but they will retaliate harshly if someone abuses or harasses them. One respondent claimed that society has created a negative attitude towards the transgender community and portrays them as flawed human beings who are not treated like humans in society. This is untrue, and we must create a more accepting and inclusive society for all.

It is heartbreaking how transgender individuals in Pakistan have to deal with daily stupid attitudes and abusive behaviour from society. During an interview, a legal expert revealed that such individuals face significant social challenges due to conservative societal standards and the lack of legal safeguards to protect their rights. It is difficult for them to participate in society and enjoy equal opportunities fully. As a society, we must work towards creating a more

inclusive and accepting environment for transgender individuals in Pakistan. They deserve to live their lives free from discrimination and harm.

**Chart 04: What types of problems they face while living in eunuchs community.**



Based on chart 04, many respondents in the transgender community face various issues. Around 12 per cent of the respondents reported facing residential problems, while 24 per cent experienced misbehaviour from their neighbours. Additionally, 28 per cent mentioned that they are often teased in public places, which can be distressing. Furthermore, 24 per cent reported having problems among themselves in the begging areas, which can be a cause for concern. Lastly, 12 per cent of the respondents criticized the police for snatching their money, a troubling issue that should be addressed. Overall, it is clear that several problems need to be resolved to ensure that the transgender community can live peacefully and without any discrimination.

### **Lack of Healthcare Access**

Despite being granted equal legal rights and obligations in society by the Constitution of Pakistan, Transgender individuals are still facing discrimination and deprivation. It is disheartening to hear the narrative of respondents that they are not given any government job opportunities, and no quota is allocated for them. Moreover, they are often denied fundamental rights like education and healthcare. One of the respondents stressed that it is high time that society accepts and embraces the reality that being born as eunuch is a matter of nature, and everyone deserves equal opportunities and respect. Transgender persons often struggle to receive proper healthcare due to discrimination and stigma from healthcare providers and society. This can result in lower-quality medical treatment and slower recovery times, which is unacceptable. An interview with a healthcare professional stressed the importance of recognizing and addressing these issues to ensure all patients receive the best care possible. It is also concerning that transgender individuals often have limited access to sexual health information and resources. Without proper education, they may engage in risky sexual activities that could lead to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and other reproductive health issues. Everyone must have access to the necessary resources and information to protect their health.

## Analysis

Transgender individuals in Pakistan have a long and complex history that spans several centuries. Historically, they have been known as Hijra or Khawaja Sara; their presence can be traced back to ancient civilizations in the Indian subcontinent. Here is a brief account of transgender individuals in Pakistan:

**Ancient Roots:** The concept of Hijra dates back to ancient Hindu and Islamic traditions, where they held essential roles in religious ceremonies and social gatherings. They were believed to have the power to bless or curse and were frequently sought for blessings during births and marriages.

**During British colonial rule,** The Hijra minority has always faced discrimination and marginalization, and it only got worse when the British authorities of the subcontinent passed laws that banned their cultural customs and identities. This made them feel even more dehumanized and oppressed, which was tragic. Acknowledging and addressing these injustices to work towards a more equitable society for all is essential.

**Post-Independence:** After the independence of Pakistan in 1947, the transgender community faced many challenges in the country. Many Hijras struggled with social isolation, limited job prospects, and a lack of access to healthcare and education. Unfortunately, even today, discrimination against the transgender community persists in many parts of the world. We must strive to create a more inclusive and accepting society that respects the rights of all individuals, regardless of their gender identity.

**Legal Recognition:** In 2009, the Pakistani government legalized the third gender, allowing individuals to identify as transgender person (Hijra) or Khawaja Sara on official documents. The intention behind this recognition was granted people more rights and opportunities. While progress has been made, there are still areas where implementation could be more equitable. The primary objective of this legal move is to ensure the safety and protection of the transgender communities in Pakistan, shielding them from the shame they may otherwise face while interacting with other communities.

**Activism and Awareness:** Activists and NGOs have been strongly advocating for the rights and well-being of marginalized communities, working to combat the prejudice, violence, and economic challenges these individuals face. Their efforts are vital in creating a more equitable society.

**Challenges Persist:** Unfortunately, despite legal recognition, specific populations in Pakistan are still facing significant hurdles. These individuals continue to encounter prejudice, assault, and limited access to healthcare and education. Socioeconomic disparities continue to be a significant concern for their well-being, and we must work towards equal opportunities for everyone.

### **Limitation of Study**

The limitation of the study was seeking consent for interviews because of the nature of the topic; From the Eyes of the Transgender: Life world of Transgender persons in Bari Imam. Another difficulty was the variety of languages. There was potential data loss even though the transcription from Saraiki, Punjabi, and Urdu to English was done as accurately to the original narration as was humanly possible.

### **Conclusion**

Transgender individuals are a marginalized and discriminated segment of society. They face many challenges and inequalities that others do not. Sadly, many people are still driven by myths and misconceptions regarding transgender persons, leading to further discrimination and mistreatment. Despite legal protections, the transgender community in Pakistan still faces many difficulties, including having to turn to sex work and other informal labour to survive. It is essential to recognize and acknowledge the distinct gender identity of transgender individuals in order to create a more justice and equitable society for all. They also face moral condemnation and social unacceptance in certain societal contexts, which can harm their mental health and well-being. It is important to promote acceptance and understanding of transgender individuals to create a more inclusive and supportive society.

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