

## Qualitative Research

### **SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF THE TRANSGENDER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN LAHORE, PAKISTAN**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The transgender community is considered a vulnerable group globally and like other vulnerable groups, they are susceptible to various social and cultural problems and are marginalized. This study is specifically designed to explore the various issues faced by the transgender community concerning their basic needs and social and financial problems, they are facing within the cultural context of Pakistan.

**Material and Methods:** This study is based on the phenomenological qualitative research approach in which sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted. Ten transgender and six health professionals were interviewed (including doctors, psychologists, and nutritionists) using a semi-structured interview guide. Health professionals were included in the sample to shed light and to get some knowledgeable data on the physical and health needs of transgender. Collected data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach.

**Findings:** Findings show that the transgender community is socially excluded, marginalized, and discriminated against in society at different levels. People criticize, stigmatize, and abuse them both physically and sexually which causes an inferiority complex in them. Results also show that transgenders are deprived of basic human needs and strive to survive in society. Although they have sexual and physical needs like any other human being, however, they are more concerned about the provision of healthcare facilities, educational and job opportunities for them.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that transgender is socially excluded and marginalized. Even though Pakistan as a country has officially recognized them as a third gender, still seems there is a long way for practically accepting and integrating them into the broader framework of society. There is a need to design a more inclusive multi-sectoral approached policy framework for providing equal opportunities to transgender.

**Key Words:** Transgender, Social Inclusion, Empowerment, Social Problems

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The existence of transgender is documented in various historical cultures.<sup>1-3</sup> Transgender is an umbrella term generally used to describe

people whose sexual identity and/ or gender expression is not identified at birth naturally.<sup>4</sup> Literature indicates that sometimes people intentionally adopt transgenic behavior, for instance, according to the Youth Birth and Gender Survey, 11% of active transgender people in the Philippines are intentionally transgenic<sup>5</sup>, which makes it more a concern of gender identity rather than of sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup> However, the criteria of defining a child as a transgender because of the lack of capacity of need meeting the “general definition of the male and female body” makes it a concern of sexual identity. Transgender is considered a vulnerable group

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globally<sup>7</sup> and like other vulnerable groups, they are susceptible to various social and cultural problems<sup>8</sup> and are marginalized.<sup>9</sup> Evidence shows that transgender people face problems in having access to education<sup>10-11</sup>, jobs and even basic needs like shelter<sup>12</sup> and health facilities<sup>13-15</sup>, which subject them to further marginalization and various psychological problems including depression, anxiety, social isolation, and stress.<sup>16,17</sup> Likewise, in Pakistan, the transgender community face different social integration issues at the cultural, local as well as a national level. According to Pakistan State Times, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) are recognized as a shame and ignominy in the Pakistani culture. They do not have permanent sources of income except dancing, singing, etc. They are bound to live outside of common societies and are not integrated into mainstream society. And in case of any physical attacks, they don’t have social respect and personal life safety.”<sup>18</sup> Evidence also shows that, due to social exclusion, transgender is only left with the option of either beggary or dancing to make their both end meets.<sup>19,20</sup> This lack of integration or alienation makes them vulnerable to many problems on daily basis including rejection, abuse, and harassment.<sup>21,22</sup> Literature indicates that transgenders’ human rights do not only have a profound effect on such individuals but also badly affect a country’s development. The UN's Human Rights Council has conjointly passed Human Rights, Sexual Orientation, and individual character (17/19) since 2011. Following these turns of events, the public authority of Pakistan has likewise presented legitimate changes (the Right to adjust Legal Gender, 2009; Equal Citizens, 2009; furthermore, the Rights of the Transgender Person/Protection of Rights Act, 2018). However, transgender communities are not socially included at a broader level in Pakistan as they ought to. The lack of integration of transgender into mainstream society causes many issues for this community. This study is specifically designed to explore the various issues faced

by the transgender community concerning their basic needs including financial needs, physical needs, societal demands, and health needs within the cultural context of Pakistan.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study is based on the phenomenological qualitative research design in which in-depth interviews were conducted to get in-depth knowledge about the phenomenon. The total sample of the study was 16 participants, including 10 transgender and 6 health professionals. The transgender participants were interviewed at various fountain houses and in red light areas in the Lahore City boundaries. Health professionals (including doctors, psychologists, and nutritionists) were chosen from different hospitals in Lahore, from April 2021 to August 2021. The health professionals were included in the sample after the transgender were interviewed to gain professional and more accurate opinions on the physical and health needs of transgender.

Transgender participants were located using purposive and snowball sampling while health professionals were selected using a simple random sampling. Rapport was built with respondents and their confidence was gained. Each interview lasted for 30-40 minutes. Separate interview guides were developed to collect data from transgender and health professionals. The interview guides were developed in English under the supervision of the experts and were translated into the local language- Urdu to minimize the language barrier. The interviews were conducted in the Urdu language and were tape-recorded, afterward was transcribed and translated into English for the thematic analysis. A three-step analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The transcribed data were characterized into different codes (Step 1) to extract the embedded meaning in the sentences. The second step was categorization, to decide which codes were important and transform them into categories (Step 2). Then Thematic coding finds the relation between codes to categorize and to develop the themes (Step 3).

## FINDINGS

### Social Marginalization

Transgender is the most marginalized community in society because of the behavior and discrimination of society towards them. When the transgender was asked about the behavior of society towards them, almost all of the participants reported criticism, harassment, and abuse including both physical as well as sexual. Moreover, some of the transgender also highlighted the aspect of stigmatization and labialization by saying that people call them different and weird names like: “Chaka and Watercooler”. In addition, participants also reported social rejection and discrimination towards them. One of the transgender stated: “Some people behave well and some rejected me, make fun of me. In general, people don’t consider us human beings” while another also mentioned: “Most of the people mentioned discrimination against them”. The same participant also mentioned being discriminated against: “after the death of my father”. However, very few (only three out of ten) participants reported some positive experiences. One of the participants said that “Well-educated people treat me well”, while another added that “some of the people from society treat me properly but there are also those who don’t.” Likewise, another said: “the behavior of the police was also very good with me, they helped me many times.”

### Physical and Sexual Abuse

Almost all of the participants reported incidents of sexual and/ or physical abuse. Participants mentioned incidents of physical violence by male members of families, university students as well as the general population. One of the transgender mentioned: “I faced hate from my brothers; they beat me because of the so-called honor in the society” while another participant added: “I was beaten multiple times by my brothers. Many times I was beaten. Brothers used to beat me and many times cut my hair. Faced physical assault when I went to a dance party. I started getting afraid and quit the dance for a long time.” When the participants

were asked why do not get legal help to tackle the physical violence, they reported the incidents of sexual violence by saying: “Police even don’t behave well. When we go to the police to report them, they also sexually abuse us.” Two other participants also highlighted the aspect of sexual violence by mentioning the incident of gang rape, yet one of the two participants added: “I was raped by three men in my childhood, but I didn’t complain because no one listened to us.” Similarly, another participant mentioned: “I was sexually abused for the first time in class 7 after then people used me for their sexual or physical needs.” Participants also discussed how these experiences have subjected them to further marginalization and have caused an inferiority complex in them. One of the 26 years old transgender, while narrating a severe incident of gang rape mentioned: “I didn’t complain because I knew no one would stand beside me.” Furthermore, a transgender beggar while mentioning various hardships faced in life stated: “I never go to the police because we are not included in society and I know that police wouldn’t listen to me.”

### Basic Needs and Issues

Every human has a few basic needs in society that are water, air, food, clothing, and a place of reproduction which are required to live a normal life. When the transgender was asked about the required necessities in life, many of them just narrated food and clothing, which highlights the extent of their marginalization. When further probed, one by one regarding each basic need, participants agreed on all the necessities however, all the participants refused to have any kind of sexual desire. Even one of the transgender, who works as a dancer in parties told: “I don’t have any sexual desires. My basic needs are food, clothing, and songs. My dignity goes down if I don’t dress well.” Similarly, another participant added: “Those who are transgender by birth don’t have sexual needs” while the rest of the participants didn’t even talk about their sexual desires, however, most

of the literature indicated the role of the transgender to be sex workers in society, therefore, the aspect of sexual desires of transgender was also probed from health professionals to get some scientific knowledge in this regard. One of the doctors negated the transgender to have any kind of sexual desires by asserting: "The people, who are genetically abnormal by birth, are intersex. Their anatomy is neither males nor females and they don't have sexual desires." However, one of the health professionals highlighted: "it is very normal for transgender to have sexual desires as it is in human nature however it is also a personal preference". One of the health professionals elaborated the sexual desires of transgender as: "Yes, they do have sexual desires. They have needs according to their classification whether they are on the male side or female side. The trans who have male hormones in excess may get attracted towards the female and the trans who have a female hormone in excess get attracted towards the male. They have the same desire as females and males." In addition to this, health professionals also highlighted the variation in the sexual preferences of the transgender to be "heterosexual or homosexual like any other person". All of the health professionals mentioned transgender as "normal human beings" and stated that they have physical and sexual needs as any other person. However, when the health professionals were asked about the classification of transgender into different groups, health professionals came up with different classifications. One of the doctors suggested: "transform a transgender to either male or female by surgical process", however, others suggested their categorization, as one of them said: "If a transgender has more tendency towards a male, then can be classified as male transgender/trans men and if a transgender has more tendency towards a female anatomy, then can be classified as female transgender/trans women".

### **Financial Problems**

With being marginalized in various sectors of society, the transgender is also marginalized

economically. Transgender belonging to different professions described their issues regarding their earning sources and how they are being mistreated in society. Economically their wages are very low in society. On one hand, they do not get equal job opportunities as one of the participants added: "We are treated worst than animals when we go out for jobs", while on the other hand, transgender working in their private setups of dress tailoring and/ or hair and makeup salon, report the incidents of harassment and mistreatment by the general population and their clients. One of the participants reported such an incident by narrating: "I started a shop of stitching clothes and most of the time people came and started beating me for no reason, I stayed quiet and didn't go to the police station because I knew nobody would listen to me" In addition to this, most of the transgender reported earning from dancing and begging. These are the only professions transgenders are left with as one transgender mentioned: "I earn from dancing. We also take WADHAI from families where a baby is born. But, now most of the people do not give us WADHAI, although it is our right", while another transgender stated: "there are thousands of us who are being pushed towards begging and dancing due to their financial needs". However, one of the transgenders highlighted a deeper issue of lack of education facilities for transgender by stating: "Job requires education and a degree and we are not being provided with even the primary education so that we can achieve that level where we can compete with others in the job sector".

### **Medical and Health Challenges**

With being an unequal recipient of various benefits of society, the transgender community also lacks access to basic healthcare services. Because of being economically marginalized, transgender face hurdles in paying for their medical expenses. One of the participants mentioned: "a few days back I suffered from high blood pressure. The medicine was too costly that I quit using it because of affordability issues".

In addition to this, almost all of the participants mentioned a lack of knowledge and/ or ethics of doctors in treating transgender patients. One of the participants vocalized this issue by stating: "Sometimes I face discrimination from doctors too. First of all, I would say that they are not aware of how to treat transgender, especially young doctors harass us many times when we go for medical emergency", while another participant added: "When I get sick, I prefer to visit the aged doctors than young ones because they understand our problems and behave nicely with us". When doctors were asked about their experiences and/ or knowledge regarding treating transgender, almost all of the doctors mentioned that: "lack of extensive knowledge for treating transgender". One of the doctors mentioned: "only one topic on transgender in their whole tenure of medical graduation is taught due to which they have limited knowledge in this regard."

## DISCUSSION

Transgender people are considered as a marginalized community globally as well as in Pakistan which leads to their social exclusion and economic instability<sup>23</sup> which further subjects them to vulnerability. The present study gives insight into how the transgender communities are socially excluded and how transgender is unequal recipients of various benefits of society including basic human needs i.e., access to earn a livelihood and access to basic healthcare services. The present study found that transgender is socially excluded, stigmatized, labeled, and are subjected to various kinds of violence including physical as well as severe forms of sexual violence. The reasons for this marginalization could be found in the deep-rooted socio-cultural boundaries of the country. Pakistan is a country having very strong social, cultural, and religious values where people have a firm belief in socio-cultural standings and people rely more on the pre-existing and unauthentic religious myths rather than on any scientific knowledge including transgender. Similarly, the findings also highlight the physical

violence on transgender by the male members of the family which highlights the fragile masculine aspect of the society. Results further show that social exclusion of transgender starts from their family. Families abandon their trans children because they consider it as a mark on their honor. These results are consistent with the results of the previous studies that state that families disown their genetically abnormal children because of the fear of social stigma and social pressure.<sup>24,25</sup> Socially excluding and abandoning children in the initial stages of life does not only affect their social identity<sup>26</sup> but also restrain them from having access to various benefits and opportunities being provided in society at a broader level.<sup>27</sup> Likewise when transgender are abandoned by their families, survival becomes their basic concern. Findings show that transgender hardly thinks of and get access to basic educational facilities, skill development, or professional development due to which becoming a beggar, dancer, and/or prostitute becomes their only choice and a way to survive. Another sector, where transgenders are unequal recipients of services is healthcare service access and utilization<sup>28,29</sup> despite the evidence of high risk of HIV infection and cancer among transgender.<sup>30</sup> The study found that the transgender lack access to specified healthcare facilities. Doctors are not adequately trained and skilled to satisfy the health needs of the trans community and if the transgender gets access to adequate specified healthcare services, they lack finances to fulfill their medical expenses. On the other hand, findings show that some doctors, instead of providing health services to transgender, mock and harass them, which does not only highlight the extreme social exclusion of this community. This highlights that the issue of social exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization of transgender is not a unilateral issue but is a multi-facet problem whose roots can be found in the economical, educational as well as health sector of society. Society's perception of transgender is the same as they were before, they still have

bad behaviors/attitudes towards them.<sup>31</sup> Transgender individuals are usually subjected to enormous social weight to conceal their identity due to their social pressure. The environment is depressive to transgender visibility as it is considered abnormal.<sup>32</sup> Transgender individuals are often marginalized and encounter stigma and discrimination due to their sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions.<sup>33,34</sup> Transgender always faced humiliation and criticism from our society.<sup>35</sup> There is a tradition in society that a man or a woman can perform any task well but no other gender can do it. Because of the social pressure, people don't give jobs to trans just because of fear of the labeling.<sup>36,37</sup> It has been a tradition in society from the beginning that transgender people only do the job of dancing and singing well, so most of them are only given this job, while many transgender people do it to fulfill the societal pressure and their basic needs<sup>38</sup>, despite the fact most of them do not want to get indulged in these professions anymore. Due to societal pressure and stigmatization, if someone oppresses them, they do not raise their voices against injustices. Even if they do report, they are treated differently and harassed which adds more misery to their lives. In short, social pressure is associated with rejection and discrimination, lack of support and stigma, the presence of loneliness, transphobia, and violent behavior with trans people are very common in our society.<sup>39</sup> Social scientists have demonstrated the pervasiveness of gender as a central organizing factor in all societies. As a system, gender is taken for granted, often completely overlooked, until the norms of gender presentation, interaction, or organization are inadvertently violated or deliberately challenged. While some believe gender is rooted in our biological make-up as a system it receives constant surveillance and is policed continually through social interactions that socialize new members of society and sanction those who violate the rules.<sup>39</sup> However, the awareness and acceptance should prevail that the

transgender is not aliens but are normal human beings. In a world, where being transgender has been categorized as a matter of gender and not of sexual orientation. Pakistan is a country where we have not accepted them even as mere human beings due to which they are deprived of the necessities required for survival. The development of any society largely depends upon the provision of human rights and the social inclusion of various groups. In other words, a society is well developed when everyone has the equal freedom to use their capabilities and participate in social, political, and economic activities.<sup>40</sup> The rights of independence from segregation; equality; life; liberty; individual security; independence from torture and debasing treatment; acknowledgment of an individual under the watchful eye of the law; balance under the watchful eye of the law; and the rights to the wedding and have a family all are perceived according to Declaration of Human Rights. Trans individuals are at higher risk of homelessness, family abandonment, begging, dropping out of school, prostituting, and partner violence, than their heterosexual counterparts.<sup>41</sup> UN Committees have also spotlighted the constant violation of transgender individuals' human rights including state promote execution in some countries. It States that transgender's human rights not only have a profound effect on only these individuals but also harmfully affects a country's development, therefore there is a high need to reconsider the structure of different sectors of society including health, education, and economic sectors and the overall broader structure of society in such a way that integrates transgender community in a well-mannered way and makes them an equal recipient of various services being provided at the broader level.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that transgender is socially excluded and marginalized. Even though Pakistan as a country has officially recognized them as a third gender, still, there

is a long way to practice accepting and including them into the broader framework of society. Transgender is excluded and marginalized in various sectors of society, development in one sector cannot be achieved by neglecting the other sectors. There is a need to develop more inclusive policy approaches. Policymakers, academicians, health professionals, civil societies, and religious scholars should come together and propose multi-sectoral approaches to create acceptance for the transgender community and to socially integrate them at a broader level.

### AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

SA: Drafted the article  
 MI: Critical review  
 RS: Data analysis  
 HA: Data collection  
 MT: Literature search  
 HS: Data collection & literature search

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