

Dancing for Applause, Dying in Silence: Transgender Visibility and Violence in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the paradox of transgender visibility and vulnerability in Pakistan, focusing on the lived experiences of the Hijra/Khawaja Sira community. While transgender persons are culturally recognized in ritual and performance contexts, they remain structurally marginalized in education, employment, healthcare, and legal protection. Drawing on ethnographic insights, governance perspectives, and empirical evidence, the paper highlights stark economic stratification within the community—ranging from elite performers who achieve social mobility to roadside beggars exposed to chronic violence and exclusion. The study further analyzes patterns of public knowledge, attitudes, and practices, demonstrating how education, age, occupation, and urban exposure shape societal perceptions. Despite increased visibility and legal milestones, including representation in governance, transgender individuals continue to face systemic neglect and insecurity. The findings underscore that visibility does not equate to safety or dignity. The paper argues for comprehensive policy interventions emphasizing education, formal employment, institutional representation, and protection mechanisms to transform transgender visibility from symbolic recognition into substantive citizenship and human rights inclusion in Pakistan.

Keywords: Hijra community, gender, culture, and LGBTQ+ narratives in South Asia

A Story That Refused Silence

This story begins with resistance.

Before policy papers, before committee deliberations, before institutional frameworks there was a child fighting to be seen.

The starting point of this document is the lived struggle of Dr. Sara Gill, Pakistan's first openly transgender medical doctor. Her journey is not a ceremonial milestone; it is a confrontation with systems that were never designed to protect her.

When I first engaged with Dr. Sara in my capacity as Chairperson of the District Human Rights Committee, I did not encounter a symbol — I encountered resilience shaped by exclusion. From

classrooms where identity became a site of humiliation, to public spaces where safety was uncertain, her life reflects the everyday cost of structural discrimination.

To pursue medicine under such circumstances is not simply academic ambition it is defiance.
To practice public health as a transgender woman in Pakistan is not merely service it is reform in motion.

Through consultations and research input from rights advocate Gul Zehra, we grounded this work in evidence. Data confirms what lived experience already reveals: transgender persons in Pakistan face systemic barriers in education, healthcare access, employment, and protection from violence. Legal recognition has not yet matured into lived equality.

Dr. Sara's personal struggle therefore becomes a mirror reflecting institutional gaps, enforcement failures, and the unfinished promise of inclusion. Her story forces us to confront uncomfortable questions:

- Are our policies accessible beyond paper?
- Do our institutions protect the vulnerable, or merely acknowledge them?
- Can public health be equitable without gender justice?

As a district administrator, I have led enforcement drives, chaired oversight committees, and navigated complex governance challenges. Yet inclusion remains the most demanding reform of all — because it requires not just authority, but structural courage and moral clarity.

This document does not begin with theory.
It begins with truth.

Struggle is the beginning.
Dignity must be the outcomes

“I was never confused about who I was. The world was.”

This is how Dr. Sara Gill once described her childhood to us during a Human Rights Committee consultation. There was no anger in her voice only clarity. Her struggle did not begin with medicine. It began with survival.

Now starts her story

“Being Pakistan first transgender doctor, public health practitioner and human right activist, it's always been a big responsibility on me to talk about issue of my transgender community and to pass the correct information and debunking the myths regarding transgender people in south Asia specially Pakistan (Khan, 2021). Most of the literature and history written about transgender people of Pakistan is by cis-gender people or by the people who don't themselves identify as transgender so most of time reader hear our story from a third person and often our narrative is twisted as per feasibility and needs of that person (Kiani & Zahoor, 2025). we don't want sympathies we always wanted people to have empathy toward us.

My knowledge and learning began in the body that walked in to room when it was not welcomed or expected, long before I became doctor or public health practitioner, I understood exposure and risk the body had. due to constant stigma and discrimination associated with our gender our mind senses the risk and danger much before policies acknowledge their existence. I grew up thinking I am a lesser being much away from being an ordinary kids and people labelled me with names and tags and most common

one was “abnormal child”. Due to constant degrading and mis treatment by society and immediate family made me vulnerable which never let me imagine myself as exception or a symbol of courage. I grew up by surviving through everyday issues and decision I made to deal with them. I was taught to be silent if I want to live, soften my presence, erasing my individuality and accept the fate society had decided for people like me. My journey was started on roads which proved much safer than my home and I become a street child. My negotiations of survival from road to public health practitioner rarely enters in journals and data hubs yet determine a clear and insight more decisively than many second and third hand data hubs and interventions.

Visibility is often considered as an event-oriented thing and most of time it means how a community is accepted legally and presence in media. For Pakistani transgender community is not like event or legal recognition, it is a slow erosion of privacy. We are seen not because we choose to be seen, but because society norms make us different and distinguished. This produces a chronic exposure of scrutiny and judgment which impact psychologically, socially and physically. Visibility like this is not a positive sign and can be labelled and seen as indicator of positive discrimination.

As a medical student and later as doctor and public health practitioner, I learned that visibility carries cumulative costs. Every ward round involved assessment of me beyond clinical competence and skills. Every professional interaction carried an unspoken question: Is she really a doctor? Is she normal? who allowed her in hospital and university? What is she doing in Islamic country? This constant evaluation produces what I now recognize as a form of occupational stress and mental trauma specific to gender-diverse professionals. From a public health perspective, this matters because stress and trauma are not abstracts. Constant evaluation and judgment affect person confidence, immunity, decision-making, burnout rates, and dropouts. When transgender persons leave fields prematurely, most of time it is not because of lack of skill or talent but because of constant scrutiny and judgment systems which are not designed to sustain them.

It’s a common assumption that marginalized communities especially transgender community naturally provide shelter and refuge to other community members and much of it is based on culturally infused “Guru -Chaila” system which is present not just in Pakistan but also in many other south Asian countries like India and Bangladesh. My experience complicates this narrative. Transgender communities in Pakistan are structured by hierarchy, lineage, economic access, and survival strategies. Community offers protection, but it also enforces their own made rule. It offers belonging, but sometimes at the cost of autonomy. guru-Chaila system does provide safety up to some extent from outside world but its high-risk system where Chaila is obliged to do what ever guru ask. So, we get protection but also become an example of modern-day slavery where we are free to go and do util we are within system. Whenever anybody try to challenge it that person must face social boycott from all community and to get accepted again, they must compensate financially or fulfill the assigned punishment. This system is another pandora box which have both pros and cons. As someone who entered professional medicine and a well-known human right activist, I occupied a liminal position. I was celebrated by some as proof of possibility, resilience and questioned by others on legitimacy and my access to hospital on based of cultural and religious cards. My own community was dividing into same two ways, this tension revealed something critical: mobility within marginalized groups can be disruptive, not only to dominant society but to internal structures as well.

This insight is important for researchers and policymakers who imagine us, the transgender community, as a single stakeholder. Interventions that ignore inter community conflict, guru-Chaila system hierarchy, and power dynamics within community. Effective public health work must recognize that transgender people navigate multiple social contracts simultaneously with families, gurus, peers, employers, and the state.

When I entered clinical spaces, I was forced to confront how knowledge itself is policed. I was not evaluated solely on diagnostic accuracy or bedside manner. I was evaluated on whether my presence unsettled the expected order. This is a subtle but powerful mechanism of exclusion. From a public health lens, this has consequences beyond individual careers. When transgender professionals are excluded, entire populations lose culturally competent care. Due to continuous negligence and absence of transgender professionals in health sector cause lack of access to health intervention and communities avoid hospital visit and more dependent off-the counters drugs and medicines of pharmacies. This impact the health of not just a whole transgender community but also result in exclusive society which become a dangerous indicator for human rights and society progress, Preventable conditions become fatal. These outcomes are not failures of individual behaviour; they are failures of system design.

Violence is more than just an Anomaly; It's an environmental Factor. Violence on transgender people in Pakistan is well known although is very less as most of time community don't report it either due to weak judicial system, lack of access to security and safety, insensitive law enforcement agencies or due to fear of receiving more hate and violence if they report one. Transgender community in Pakistan face continuous attacks, hate crimes, individual perpetrators and social exclusion. From within the body, violence feels different. It effects person internally in way that it shapes movement patterns, economic choices, high risk behaviours and health-seeking behaviour so the impact of violence on a transgender person remains for a long time.

I have known transgender women who plan their lives around expected assault. Even my friends had planned there life accordingly. For them a single slap or even sometime getting rape is considered as easy way out from the violence and harassment. They make deals with abusers, so they don't face same abuse next time. They choose times, routes, and clothing not for expression but for risk reduction. This is not resilience in-fact it is adaptation to structural neglect and acceptance of violence as fate. The only thing the do is how they can minimize it. Public health frameworks must begin to recognize violence as an environmental exposure, not a discrete event. When violence is constant, trauma becomes normalized, Symptoms go unreported, Mental health deteriorates silently, Substance use becomes coping rather than pathology. Without acknowledging this continuum, interventions remain superficial. visibility in media, fashion, or advocacy confers protection. My experience challenges this assumption. Visibility can amplify vulnerability by expanding the number of observers without increasing the number of protectors. visibility every time doesn't result in positive outcome. This is particularly relevant for younger transgender individuals who aspire to visibility as liberation. Without structural safeguards, visibility can accelerate burnout, harassment, and isolation. Role models must therefore be accompanied by systems of care, not just symbolic celebration.

When Transgender protection Act 2018 passed, Pakistan was considered among the pioneer countries who acknowledge transgender people and gave them legal rights as citizen of the country (Government of Pakistan, 2018). Although it seems to be a progressive step toward community right, but a major chunk of community opposed it and still are not willing to get their gender status corrected on national identity card from male(m) to transgender(x) (Sohail, 2024). To know the reason backup context is necessity so before 2018 specially from 2011-2018 many focus group discussions, consultation was carried out by many CBOs in Pakistan working on transgender rights including gender interactive alliance, Moorat interactive society (now known as Sarah Gill Foundation), Subrang society, Saathi foundation and Wajood. Prominent transgender activist lobbied on continuous level with policy makers and implementing bodies and submitted feedback and recommendation of community on the draft version of bill. NCHR was also taken in loop by community for this. In 2018 when this bill was about to pass several community members objected on the lack of community inclusion by government and ignorance of community feedback specially the usage of alphabet "x" for transgender community. continuous ignorance of community recommendation led to fall of transgender protection Act at national level with only limited

number of transgenders changed their status from “M” to “X”. Most of community and society linked the usage of alphabet “x” to sexual activities and opted not to have id card.

Although transgender community got the right of citizenship and correction of status, but no major awareness and sensitization activities were carried out for mainstream society that resulted in more visibility but less impact and high risk of tracking by preparators. foreign policies were not aligned with updated constitutional rights of transgender people and as a result all transgender people, flying from flights having operational centers in middle east, having “x” cards were stopped at airport and were not allowed to board, emirates appear to be the first one doing this and answer was “we are not allowing people with “x” cards” as per our updated policy. This was a big slap not just to transgender movement but also to the failed foreign policy and legislative implementation. Many embassies didn’t allow or have “x “column making visa application process more complicated. heritage was also challenged due to “x” card issues, and many transgender people were cut down from inheritance or given lesser part.

Having a NIC was not what my community was in need for they wanted a safe society where they could live with dignity and self-respect but none of it was outcome of this intervention. Due to continuous problems a major chunk of community got united with people especially religious scholars to oppose the Act like x-senator “Mushtaq Ahmed” from jamaat-e-Islami. As a result, this Act was challenged at Shariat court and was overruled by Shariat court and now our appeal is pending in supreme coat. This shows that’s just because a law has been made for rights doesn’t mean it will be accepted by communities and society. lack of awareness of community on the “x” alphabet usage and stubborn nature of government of not changing it become the core point of its failure at mass level even major transgender activist including myself hadn’t open to get “x” cards because of fear of travel bans by airline, visa complications, educations issues specially In getting admission for higher studies and not clear inheritance guidance.

Transgender community is although one of the most marginalized communities of Pakistan but at same time one of the most visible communities too. This combination raises several questions. kami chaudaury, Pakistan first transgender model, explained it well that “transgender community is seen and present almost at every signal and roads of the country for begging ,we go to people’s home for wedding functions and most of our community are either forced in to sex work or either they have no other option to survive so this make us so much visible and prone to harassment and violence at same time so visibility doesn’t benefit us all the time and in fact proved to be more damaging in many situations” (Buzzfeed News, 2017). She also emphasized that being Pakistan first transgender model when she went and choose a profession different from stereotype she was treated very differently than male and female model and the respect and pay was much less than them. She said, “even I was a model who was walking ramps and was highly visible but was always seen and treated like a sex object, my identity was compromised, my gender was targeted and due to this I had taken medical help for mental well-being too”. She mentioned the workplace harassment and occupational hazards she faced due to her gender were very shocking and traumatic, but she remains solid and kept work till date.

Zehrish Khanzadi, transgender TMC (Town municipal corporation) councilor, gave a different view on visibility specially on transgender historical existence and myths that benefit the community in lens of culture (Zero Say Digital Podcast, 2023). She mentioned that “we are indigenous community, even before the independence of Pakistan ,sub-continent era, we visit people home on their child birth ,called “Badhai”, we were highly respected and still are specially in interior Sindh and southern Punjab sides because of “Thursday Myth” or because of the reason that we have the power to curse, which is a myth itself”. She explained “Thursday myth” as “every Thursday many of our community members visit people home in their surrounding and nearby and offer prayers and in return people give them money and

even sometime more expensive things as people believe God listen to our prayers and curses more and quickly”.

During the interview with “Payal Jaan”, well know transgender dance performer, shared her experience on different aspect of visibility (Faizan, 2022). She said “I perform on weddings, boys only events and travel different cities for that as I can’t live at one place for long because after a certain time people who give me money expect me to sleep with them too and whenever I said no I became a victim ,I was raped twice ,got shot once, my head was shaved three times and been a victim of harassment and abuse several time. The only fault of mine was I got too visible and little famous in dance field that’s where I realized that even we can’t rely on so called stereotypical professions as they lead to sever consequences”. She mentioned her life even right now is in danger and she has no option other than to leave the country or to live in shadows.

One of a senior community member, a senior “GURU”, Kiran gave a contrasting statement that clearly show generation gap existence within transgender community and its role on the thought process and safety (Syed, 2025). She said, “I feel no danger as am not a person who is doing sex or something “haram”. I am “Fakeer” and when I visit people home, they respect me and call me inside offer me food and I give them prayer. I did haj and I am not into any sexual activity”. She also said that “from the time the bill came, Khawaja-sira community started calling themselves “transgender” and from there problem started. People labelled us “western agent” and that’s the reason we suddenly got so much hate”. Her statement was totally opposite to the views of younger generation transgender people and show inter community diversity and rifts within community on way of expression and professional choices. She cleared that term “fakeer” is not equal to beggar for them but in Sindh specially they are highly respected, and people find them close to God and away from sins so that’s why people call them “Fakeer”, term of respect not a derogatory term.

Harassment laws were already part of Pakistan constitution yet the word” female” was used instead of “ever one “which led to several harassment cases gone unreported and effected data and policy formulation. Recently transgender people have been included in update harassment law, and it shows a positive step toward transgender right and safety. Many transgender people who had left Pakistan and living as refugee in other countries are seeing it as a hope to come back to their own country in future where they can feel safe and legally protected. one of transgender person who is currently at process of asylum mentioned that “I feel exhausted and sad even by thinking that I can’t live in my own country with freedom and never been treated like a respectful citizen. I never even got the right to be included in national census and votes which show they only got rights on paper but not on real ground”. She explained that during national census of Pakistan 2023 she was expecting to be documented and included but no one came to her place to document her identity and include in national census. She said, “teams at her area deliberately left her house and not acknowledge her status and as a result our overall population showed in 2023 national census were even lower than it was in 2017”. In 2017 census Pakistan transgender community was included first time in national census at least as per policy level and although community had shown reservations on it (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017) and clearly said that the number shown in 2017 census is much less than actual transgender people in Pakistan. As per 2017 national census total transgender people recorded were 21,774 across Pakistan and in Sindh it was 5,954. instead of dealing community concerns on the number and documentation process 2023 census proved to be more damaging and unplanned as per community and community activist mention the undercounting and discrepancy in 2023 census (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Decline was seen in a major way like in Sindh it declines to 3871. 2023 census had raised several questions on how transgender community is treated during census and government surveys and its impact on policy formulation including quota system which highly depend on number of community member present in the country.

As a researcher I have noticed that most of data extracted about transgender community is collected and assessed by cis-gender people. Most live experience is considered as raw material rather than epistemology. Interviews are conducted, data collected, data coded, hypothesis testing done and conclusion drawn yet the interpretive authority remains external to the community.

My contribution here is not only to “add data” but to reframe what counts as evidence and facts. I argue for a shift toward reflexive co-authorship where transgender scholars and researchers write not only as informants but as theorists and documenter of their own lives and data linked with it so they are able for effecting lobbying and policy formulation.

Legal recognition alone is insufficient, and change requires multidisciplinary alignment including:

- 1) Equal Education rights without discrimination.
- 2) Access to health care and sensitized health care personal on transgender rights.
- 3) Diversity as main component of all government initiatives and program.
- 4) Community led intervention on visibility.
- 5) Employment structures that value competence over conformity.
- 6) Transgender community included in all research as stake holders and authors for maximum impact.
- 7) Shelter and safety to all.

Most importantly, it requires patience. Transgender inclusion is not a checklist. It is a restructuring of assumptions. Am writing this piece as an act of responsibility toward my community and our movement. If this contribution does anything, I hope it unsettles comfort. Not through shock, but through precision. Transgender lives in Pakistan do not need more attention, they need different attention. transgender community need visibility that listens, learns, and restructures not just seen as visually.”

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Questionnaire

Qualitative Interview Questionnaire

Transgender Visibility, Survival, and Violence in Pakistan

Target Participants

- Transgender persons (Hijra / Khawaja Sira / Transgender women or men)
- Aged 18 years and above
- Living in urban or peri-urban Pakistan

Section A: Background Information

How would you like to describe your gender identity?

1. How old are you?
2. What is your level of education, if any?
3. What is your primary source of income?
4. Do you currently live with family, a guru/community, or independently?

Section B: Identity and Visibility

6. In your daily life, where do you feel **most visible** as a transgender person?
7. Can you describe situations where being visible feels positive or empowering?
8. Are there situations where visibility feels unsafe or threatening? Please explain.
9. Do you ever try to make yourself less visible? Why or why not?

Section C: Livelihood and Survival

10. How did you come to choose your current means of earning a living?
11. Were there other employment options available to you? Why were they not accessible?
12. How does society react to your work (e.g., dancing, begging, formal employment)?
13. Do you feel respected for the work you do? Why or why not?

Section D: Violence and Insecurity

14. Have you ever experienced verbal abuse, harassment, or physical violence?
15. Where do you feel most unsafe (streets, workplaces, police stations, hospitals, etc.)?
16. How do you usually respond when violence or harassment occurs?
17. Do you feel that reporting violence leads to justice or protection? Please explain.

Section E: Institutions and the State

18. How have your experiences been with:
 - Police
 - Healthcare providers
 - Government offices
19. Do you feel laws protecting transgender rights have improved your daily life?
20. What barriers still exist despite legal recognition?

Section F: Social Attitudes and Public Behavior

21. How do people in public spaces usually treat you?
22. Have you noticed differences in treatment based on age, class, or occupation?
23. Do you think media and social media representation helps or harms your safety?

Section G: Dignity, Citizenship, and Change

24. What does living with dignity mean to you?
25. What changes would make your life safer and more secure?
26. What message would you want policymakers and society to hear from you?

Section H: Closing

27. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed?
28. Do you have any advice for researchers studying transgender lives in Pakistan?

Ethical Notes

You should explicitly state that:

- Participation was voluntary
- Informed consent was obtained
- Participants could withdraw at any time
- Pseudonyms were used
- Emotional well-being was prioritized