

Access to Education for Transgender Individuals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of
Pakistan: Cultural, Financial and Institutional Barriers

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ABSTRACT

The number of transgender people in Pakistan is growing. However, there is a lack of research that examines their situation and access to education. Therefore, using narrative approach, this study investigates the journey and challenges of transgender people in accessing education in Pakistan. The findings suggest that transgender people face harassment and discrimination including from their families. Such abusive situations also force many transgender people to discontinue their education and leave their families to live with a transgender community under the leadership of Guru. Despite its social, economic, and security benefits, the transgender communities under Guru mostly earn their living through dance and sexual activities, which are not a convenient environment for education. However, transgender people with supportive families and financial stability can pursue their studies through distance education. The study provides a better understanding of the experiences of transgender people in Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country. It could be vital for future adjustments and reforms.

Keywords: Transgender, gender identity, discrimination, education, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Transgender people are individuals who do not belong to the gender identity assigned at birth (Hugtho et al., 2022; Spagna, 2013). The term transgender was first used by an American transgender activist, Virginia Prince, in the 1980s (Kruse, 2021). Throughout history, transgender people have been treated differently, facing mistreatment and discrimination in many parts of the world. Research indicates that transgender people have lived in societies for a long time (Jami, 2011; Roscoe & Murray, 1997). At times, they were also given the distinguishing responsibility of guarding the Islamic holy places (Roscoe & Murray, 1997), and became the caretakers of the royal palaces in the Mughal era (Jami, 2011). However, they were mostly looked down upon and excluded from the mainstream community (Aslam, 2020; Brill & Pepper, 2008; Yaseen et al., 2020). The abuse and mistreatment that they face, especially those in conservative and developing countries including Pakistan, have forced many transgender people

to keep to themselves and live an isolated and secluded life (Ghazi & Manzoor, 2022; Munir, 2019). The level of isolation, discrimination, abuse, shame, guilt, and insult they encounter has made many transgender people to be vulnerable to mental health situations and even suicide (Tucker, 2019).

In developing countries, transgender communities find it difficult to unveil themselves due to fears of ill-treatment and stigmatization (Roenius, 2015). They are more vulnerable and prone to physical and emotional abuse compared to other minorities or genders (Chaplin et al., 2019; Garthe et al., 2021). Moreover, they are treated and disrespected regardless of their age and qualifications (Finkenauer et al., 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Nadeem & Javed, 2020), even at a national level where many countries object to their lifestyle (Chirongoma & Zvingowanisei, 2022). Hence, they are forced to avoid public spaces due to fear of harassment (Roenius, 2015). Nonetheless, despite the challenges they face, transgender people also make a significant contribution to the socio-economic and political life of countries (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014).

In Pakistan, transgender people mostly live in their own secluded communities. They have a distinctive family system where all transgenders live and, in most cases, the family system is managed by a central figure called Guru (Omer et al., 2021). Guru, as a family head, teaches and supports transgender people in terms of security, shelter, and food (Ahmad, 2010). The pupils or subordinates are called Chelas (followers/ pupils). Most of the Chelas leave their biological family due to lack of acceptance and live with their Guru in their secluded communities (Khan, 2014). The formation of a family system helps the transgender community to support and encourage each other.

Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country that makes up about 96% of the total population (Ashraf, Tsegay, & Ning, 2021). Transgender people usually start facing rejection from their family and later from the wider society. Most are stigmatized and considered a disgrace to their family, community, and country. For example, many transgender people in Pakistan did not have National Identity Cards that recognise their gender identity until 2012. In addition to male and female, the National Identify Cards of Pakistan started to provide a third option for gender identity (or Khawaja sira) in 2012 after a petition was filed in the Supreme Court of Pakistan (Ismail & Shah, 2018). Yet, the discrimination against transgender people has not stopped in the socio-economic and political life of Pakistan and many other countries (Chirongoma & Zvingowanisei, 2022). This study, therefore, is vital to explore the experiences of transgender people in Pakistan.

Education of Transgender People: Situation, Challenges, and Commitments

Transgenders are often among the lowest literate segments of society in Pakistan (Alam et al., 2019; Ullah et al., 2020). Disassociation with their families, lack of birth certificates and other identity documents, financial issues, and rejection from society are some of the factors that prevent them from accessing education (Alam et al., 2019). Those who manage to gain admission to formal, mainstream schools, often face verbal and physical abuse, and rejection from not only students but also from many teachers and the wider society (Goldberg et al., 2019; Greytak et al., 2009; McGuire et al., 2010). These factors often compel many students to drop out of school and discontinue their education (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014) whereas others challenge the injustices by engaging in campus advocacy or activism (Goldberg et al., 2020). Rejection from their families and society forces many of them to live with Gurus who patronize and provide them with security, shelter, and food (Ahmad, 2010). However, many Gurus also abuse and exploit their Chelas, as they force them into sex work and other involuntary and harmful activities (Hali et al., 2018). Those Gurus do not prioritize education as it would allow their Chelas to find alternate ways to make a living and become self-dependent (Nazir & Yasir, 2016).

Education has a key role in enabling transgender people to find their voice, identity, respect, and ability to earn a decent living (Arthur, 2016; Dutta et al., 2019). However, many countries and societies view transgender as a taboo and non-negotiable issue. Therefore, there is very little chance for many governments to include transgender people in their inclusion and equity policy considerations or take proactive measures to improve educational opportunities for them. Nonetheless, most countries' constitutions and the international law for human rights state that all human beings, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, nationality, race, color, and gender identity, have equal rights to life, sovereignty, freedom, security, protection, freedom of expression, and other basic human rights (D'Amato, 1982; Macklem, 2015). Access to education is one of the basic human rights which should not be discriminated against anyone based on gender identity (Lundy & Sainz, 2018). This indicates that, in principle, transgender people are entitled to equal access to education (Lyttan & Laloo, 2020). Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) also declares the right to education as a basic human right inherent to everyone equally (Stanfield, 2021). Both Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also emphasize the eradication of discrimination and the provision of basic education to all (Robert, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005; United Nations, 2012). All these protocols and conventions demand the provision of equal opportunities for education to all without any discrimination or prejudice, but the situation can be the opposite in reality as personal and social attitudes play a significant role in protecting human rights (Barton, 2020; Carpenter, 2020).

Being the signatory of all the major international protocols and conventions for equal and equitable rights, Pakistan is bound to provide equal educational opportunities to transgender people. However, in reality, the situation has been less than desirable. Until 2009, there was no practical action for protecting transgender people and providing them with equal rights to education and other services (Farooq, 2020). . The intervention of the Supreme Court of Pakistan changed many situations for transgender people, helping them to get recognition on their National Identity Cards, and equal opportunities (Farooq, 2020; Ismail & Shah, 2018; Saddique et al., 2017). In 2013, the Supreme Court of Pakistan also declared that transgender people have the same rights as other citizens of Pakistan (Saddique et al., 2017). Federal and provincial governments were ordered to ensure transgender people's rights to education, work, and inheritance (Nazir & Yasir, 2016). These declarations helped transgender people to work in government offices and vote in elections (Khan, 2021). Furthermore, in 2018, the government of Pakistan passed the transgender protection act, providing equal rights for all citizens regardless of their gender identity (Government of Punjab, 2018). That act included equal access to education for citizens. In 2018, the government of Punjab also adopted a new policy to empower transgender people via education, including the provision of transgender people with monthly stipends and funds for educational and social support (Government of Punjab, 2018; Durrani & Halai, 2020).

Many countries in the West are moving fast in recognizing and respecting different gender identities. Although there is some progress in policies and actions, the transgender community in Pakistan is still facing discrimination and isolation. They are still not treated equally and are often considered outcasts by society, which deprives their fundamental human rights including education (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014). There is also a lack of research that examines the situation of transgender people in Pakistan, on which our study is expected to focus. This study investigates the challenges of transgender people in accessing education in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

The study explores the trajectories of transgender people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, with a specific focus on their educational journeys and the challenges faced. More specifically, the study aims to find out 1) the transgender people's conditions concerning their educational ambitions and journeys and 2)

the challenges that they face in these regards. Therefore, qualitative research is applied to understand transgender people's experiences.

We used narrative inquiry to collect data as the approach reveals the lived experiences of an individual or a group and hence provides rich and contextual data for in-depth analysis (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorencen, 2010). According to Ary, Jacobs, and Sorencen (2010), the key question in narrative inquiry is "what is the story and its meaning as told through this person's experience?" (p. 468). Hence, narrative approach could enable us to explore transgender people's experiences regarding their educational journeys and challenges.

Data Collection

The study is based on narrative interviews with five transgender people who transitioned from male to female in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. For narrative inquiry, data can be gathered through textual (written journals, diaries.) or oral form (narrative interviews, oral history recounts). We used narrative interviews as it allows more flexibility during the process (Anderson & Kirkpatrick 2016).

According to the 2017 census, there were 10418 transgenders in Pakistan, and 913 of them live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (Basit et al., 2020). The participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Special consideration was given to their gender identity, ambitions for education, and experience of formal schooling with varying degrees of success. As indicated above, transgenders prefer to keep to themselves and live in secluded communities. Hence, we also used snowball sampling to get additional participants as the technique is suitable for such secluded communities and individuals (Gyarmathy et al., 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interviews were carried out at the participants' places as they did not feel comfortable going to the researchers' place, or any other place.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study employed narrative approach to analyze the data. Interview transcripts were used to identify common patterns and themes as well as discrete experience-based text segments in which the participants talked about specific occurrences or experiences (Oliver, 1998). The researchers went over the transcripts looking for places where the experiences took place or diverged. To create a logical sequence or story, the segments were put together in a logical order with explanations/ linking sentences in between. Each segment had a distinct topic (Baldassano et al., 2017). The generated story revolved around a series of events that mirrored the participants' experiences and the ideas that emerged (Suter, 2012). The accuracy of the recreated events was improved by member verification with the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Appropriate ethical principles were considered throughout the research. In particular, the study followed the basic ethical principles and applications of respect for persons, beneficence and justice stated in the Belmont Report of 1978. As the topic is sensitive, and the participants belong to a vulnerable segment of society, utmost care was taken about consent and anonymity. A consent form was used to ensure the voluntary participation of the participants and their identity was kept confidential. The participants were informed about the study and their right to leave the research at any time. Their names were also replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. In agreement with the participants, gendered pronouns like "he" or "she" were avoided and the plural non-gendered pronoun "they" is used. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Wah University.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are presented in a form of stories from the participants. The stories are narrated separately since the participants' situations and contexts are different. As indicated above, common patterns and themes, and discrete experiences were identified from the interview transcripts for clarity and a better understanding of the participants' experiences (Oliver, 1998).

The Story of Aliya

Aliya was 30 years old with a master's degree. They had been living with their Guru who was financially supporting them.

Educational Ambitions and Dreams: Initial Challenges

In the beginning, Aliya was supported by their parents and siblings to continue their education and live a respectable life. They went to a regular school, but soon became a target of catcalling and offensive behavior from their schoolmate. It became too much for their parents and especially siblings who found Aliya a source of shame for their family. Aliya stated:

My parents were not allowing me to go outside of our home when they knew that people outside are calling me strange and bad names. My siblings also started calling me those names when I quarrel with them. This made me leave my home and I was disowned by my parents and started living with a Guru. I came back home after one year but my parents did not accept me.

It was apparent that the fear of shame and disrespect forced Aliya's parents to disown their children, forcing them to stay with other transgender people where the overall environment and educational opportunities were not promising. However, the Guru tries to send the young ones to school.

Life at Educational Institutions: Continued Challenges and Harassment

Aliya said that all transgender people go to boys' schools where they would often be teased by their classmates. They would call them strange names, and make offensive gestures. Aliya said:

I was always afraid of harassment because I knew the intentions of the students. To avoid this, I was leaving at least ten minutes before the off time. At college, different federations were insisting I should join their meetings and forcing me to dance. I was being tortured if I refuse to join them.

The story of Aliya shows that they were not only verbally abused, but also physically attacked and sexually harassed. Many students consider it common and normal to sexualize, harass and abuse transgender people. The worst part is that the abuse was not only perpetuated by students but also by teachers. Some of them even tried to sexually abuse them at school. They said, "Not only students but the teachers as well were calling me names which were hurtful. Even (some) tried to molest me".

Out of Educational Institutions' Walls, Out of Sight? Not Really!

Aliya said that physical, emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse did not end when they walked out of the educational institutions (school or college). On the contrary, it increased as the strangers thought it was their "fundamental responsibility" to harass a transgender person. As they were living in a village, the villagers also thought that transgender people are a bad example for their community and continued to

harass them. Aliya described it in these words, “I was not allowed to go outside except to college; people used to harass me whenever I was going to college”.

Challenges from within Transgender Community

Transgenders in KPK have *Dera System* (a house where they all live with their Guru as Chelas). According to Aliya, living there itself was a hurdle for pursuing education. Those places would arrange late-night programs, and the residents would sleep the whole day. Aliya said that many of the Gurus did not want their Chelas to gain education as it may dissuade them from dancing and participating in activities that benefit the Gurus.

Enough Money, but not for Education

Aliya told that transgender people mostly depend on their Gurus for financial needs. Guru mostly makes money through dance parties and other functions where transgender people perform. Gurus are often happy to spend money on dresses and make-up items for transgender people, but not for education. Aliya narrated:

My Guru was not allowing money for education due to our routine. After a lot of requests, I was allowed for distance education and was paying for the semester fee from the little amount being paid to us as pocket money.

Aliya said that their educational journey was fraught with challenges and that it was not uncommon for any transgender. They said that it is due to these challenges and issues that many transgender people do not get access to education, or drop out quite early. Even those who managed to get a university degree could not use their education for any financial benefit as society would not allow it.

Even though I was having a Bachelor's degree and could do a job somewhere to fulfill my needs but I even could not go outside alone due to fear of harassment from society. So how could I do a job where I had threats of harassment at every step of my journey?

The Story of Farwa

Farwa, a 25 years old transgender person was also living with their Guru. They discontinued their education during the second semester of their master's degree as the pressure and harassment become too much to bear.

Parental Support for Education

Farwa said that they were supported by their parents for their education. Their parents realized that Farwa would face multiple challenges due to their gender identity and thought that education could help them in this regard. Farwa said:

From the very beginning, my parents were aware of my gender identity because I was always playing with girls. Seeing my strange behaviors, they were worried about me and were trying to support me in my education so that I may not depend upon others in the future and live an honorable life.

Farwa lived with their parents until completing their bachelor's degree, but later left for the transgenders' community and started living with a Guru.

Life at Educational Institutions: Dreams Turning into Nightmares

Fatwa's educational dreams turned into nightmares when they went to school. Like other transgender people, they were also admitted to boys' primary schools where they faced multiple challenges. The school was a toxic environment, where they were abused and harassed by their fellow students. Fatwa explained:

The students in the school were verbally abusing me while calling me Hijra (a derogatory term for transgender people). Due to the support of my parents, at the primary level, the teachers could not say any insulting words but were not engaging (with) me like they do with other students and were ignoring me in various activities because I was a transgender person.

Although, it is expected that adults may behave in a more respectful and humanizing way; Farwa explained a similar and even worse situation at the university level.

Students at the university were calling me abusive names and were trying to harass me. Even though my parents were insisting on the completion of my master's degree, I discontinue my education and started living with a Guru due to these hardships mainly fear of harassment.

Not a Single One, but the majority

Farwa winced with pain while saying that those harassment instances were not few or isolated, but very common and frequent. While out of the house, traveling, and at functions, and gatherings, Farwa was harassed by an overwhelming majority who knows Farwa is a transgender person. While going to the university, they were called *Ghata Bibi* (big mother) and other disrespectful terms. They said, "I could not move freely in society due to the fear I had in my mind. While going to school and university, the males were trying to sit close to me, touching me inappropriately and teasing me".

Challenges from within the Transgender Community

Farwa stated that they were supported by their Guru who would behave like their real parents. However, the place where they lived was not conducive to education. Also, they were supposed to take part in all other activities at the place. They explained it in these words:

As transgender people, we have a tough routine. Every night we go for a dancing program due to which we end up sleeping until the late hours of the day. We have no time to go to school or a university. All the time, we have music and preparation for the programs. Even though it was a bad decision to leave home but now I have adopted the way a transgender person lives in this society and earning through this way is my profession.

Money? Not a Big Issue!

Farwa said that they did not have a financial issue as initially they were supported by their parents, and later by the Guru. Moreover, they also contribute to the income by performing at functions organized by the Guru. However, the struggles and constant harassment prevent them from achieving their educational goals or even living in an honorable way as society would not accept it. They earn a handsome amount but at the cost of losing their parents, freedom, honor, and respect in society. They said, "I earn enough money with my profession for all my needs, but I lost my parents and honor in the reverse".

The Story of Gulwareena

Gulwareena who was 25 years old, also lived with their Guru. They discontinued their education in grade ten.

Supportive Family, Toxic Institutions

Gulwareena was supported by their parents for education. They had three siblings who also supported them. However, the environment and the reaction of the fellows at school were not encouraging. Gulwareena described their early life and home environment as follows:

I was behaving like a female from the very beginning and my parents were trying to correct me to behave like a boy. When they came to know that I am a different gender, so they struggled for my education. But being in a poor family, I was facing hardships in my education as the students were disgracing me all the time and the teachers were not paying attention to that. Due to the push from my parents, I used to go to school but later on, all of us were much discouraged and I discontinued education.

With tearful eyes, Gulwareena further recollected the memories at school, especially about their fellow students:

All the students in my school were teasing me and laughing at me whenever I was speaking. Whenever I was complaining to teachers, they also ridiculed me and did not take my complaint seriously. Due to this, I used to throw my bag out of the classroom window towards a graveyard near the school and used to sit in the graveyard for 2 to 3 hours daily till the time school was off.

Those emotional and psychological abuses eventually discouraged Gulwareena and they decided to leave their educational dreams aside.

Living with a Sense of Guilt, Fear, and Threats

Gulwareena recalled how society would generally dislike them due to their gender identity. They were continuously harassed and ridiculed while traveling to school and home.

While going to school, the people in the way were calling me strange names and trying to harass me. They were forcing me to go with them. But whenever I was refusing to go with them, they were threatening me. My father was a poor person and I did not want to make problems for him. So I discontinued my education starting living with Guru.

Gulwareena further shared some of the grimmer incidents of their life, explaining how they had been threatened and attached.

Although I am living with my Guru, some wicked people come to our room and try to molest me and my colleagues. If we refuse to go with them, then they threatened to kill us. Once they shoot me with a pistol. My friend took me to the hospital, but the doctors were not paying attention to us and were laughing at us. Not only the doctors, but even the police also teased us. We complained, but they did not take us seriously.

Gulwareena noted that life as a transgender person is very hard to the level that even the people in public institutions do not care about them.

Challenges from within Transgender Community

As indicated above, Gulwareena faced many challenges in their educational journey. They also said that, although their Guru was supportive, the culture and the overall mindset of the transgender community were not conducive to education. They explained the situation as follows:

I am not banned by the Guru from going to school but here we do not have time for education. At night-time, we go dancing and other functions and during the day time, we sleep until late hours. In times when we do not go to any function, people who like our dance and sex come to sit with us for a long time. So we cannot wake up early for school as we still end up sleeping up to late hours in the day.

As can be seen, the night activities not only left them with very little time for studies but all the fatigue and exhaustion did not let them focus on their personal lives. Over time, their passion for education started to wither. Instead, they fully devoted themselves to their professional activities.

Poverty and Transgender: Double Challenges

Gulwareena said that she is from poor parents. They noted that poverty and being a transgender person are double challenges that forced Gulwareena to discontinue education and live with a Guru. They said:

I started living with a transgender community because of two reasons. The first was that being a transgender child of poor parents was challenging. People all around were disgracing me and some of them were harassing me. The second reason was that I wanted to support my family. Here I am dancing and earning money which I give to my parents for their needs, but for the last two years, the situation here is also tough.

Although Gulwareena was constantly harassed, there was nothing they could do. They did not also want to create problems for their parents. On the contrary, Gulwareena wanted to financially support their family.

The Story of Hooria

Hooria was a 28 years old transgender person who was living with their guru. They discontinued their education at the master's level.

Early Times: Under home confinement

When Hooria's parents came to know about their gender identity, they kept Hooria in isolation. Hooria was not allowed to meet anyone as they were considered a sign of shame and guilt for the whole family. Hooria described this in these words:

My family was not supporting me in all walks of life, including education. They were very strict and rigid towards me. When they came to know about my gender, they locked me in a room, and I was not allowed to play with others. This behavior from the family side compelled me to run away from home and live with a Guru.

Once Hooria left the house, their parents and siblings refused to remain in touch with them. Hooria was told that they were "dead for the family".

Struggles and Challenges to Pursue Education: A Tragic Tale of School Life

Hooria tried to gain admission to different schools, but was harassed, abused, and rejected. They had to change many schools but could not find peace and acceptance with anyone. Many schools refused to give them admission with the perception that Hooria would "rot the school environment". They narrated their struggles and pains in these words:

At school, when the students were calling me shemale or transgender, the teachers used to accuse me of spoiling the environment. They were not saying anything to the boys. Instead, they were telling me that I was attracting boys because of my strange behavior. Because of these things I was expelled from school by the teachers so many times. I felt rejected, I felt I did not belong to society.

Despite all the challenges, they continued to gain education, and reached university; but the situation only became worst there. They shared their experiences with these words: "In my university life, I was abducted by fellow students three times, and was physically and sexually abused. However, whenever I complained, the teachers and even the police ignored it". Abductions and sexual abuse at university were too much for them, and Hooria was left with no other option but to quit their educational dreams.

The Perception of Society: Society has the Right to Harass Transgender people?

Hooria believed that most of the people in my society took it as their right to harass and molest transgender people. For many, it was not a crime or sin, but a fun activity. People harass me wherever they find me, including on the way to university.

While going to university, many people were trying to touch me and molest me. If I resist, they threatened to kill me. Recently, two transgender individuals were shot dead in KPK and police did not say anything to the killer. We went to the press club in Peshawar city, where the police came and promised that they will catch the killer, but still they have done nothing.

Hooria said that the transgender community became more and more isolated due to constant fears and threats. Formal schooling is a learning and socializing process. However, society refuses to accept transgender people, which discourages them from going to school and attending formal education. This perhaps reflects the lack of sexuality education which is often opposed by societies in many countries (Dixon-Mueller, 2010).

Challenges from within the Transgender Society: Neither Opposing nor Supporting Education

Hooria said that their Guru and colleagues in the transgender community did not discourage them from going to school, but they were also not supportive of it. The situation they live in and the routine activities they do did not provide them with an environment where they could focus on their study and learning. They said:

I am much happy to live with other transgender people because here no one calls me shemale or taunting. I am sure if I ask my Guru for my education, he/she will surely support me, but the outside environment is not supportive. The other reason is that living here means that we have a busy life. So, I have no time for education.

Hooria also expressed their community's apprehensions about education. Their fellow transgenders would often question the benders of investing so much time and effort into education, saying that even "even if

you complete your master's degree, society does not accept you as a respectable and productive citizen". The issue is that transgender people are many times seen for their gender identity as a bad example to others. This discourages them from attending universities as they feel they will not be given opportunities regardless of their qualifications.

Money is Not much of an Issue, but Society is!

Financial issues did not bother Hooria as their parents were quite affluent. However, they did not accept Hooria's gender identity. In the transgender community, Hooria had to resort to traditional ways to earn money.

As a transgender person, I go for dancing with the protection of Guru and earn that much which fulfills my needs. Even if I do my master's degree, I am sure that there is no job for a transgender person. So, I depend only on the money gained through dancing and other activities, but I am worried about one thing. When I grow old, I cannot get money to fulfill my needs [through what I am doing now]. Here I am requesting that the government should pay attention to highly educated transgender to get a job quota and make shelter homes for those who are aged to live in peace till their death.

Hooria believed that although getting a higher education is good, it did not help them in any way in society as the people around them are often "more interested in their body than knowledge".

The Story of Komal

Komal, a 27 years old transgender person, completed their studies through distance education. Komal's life story was different from the rest as they were accepted by their family. Komal's family supported them through thick and thin and encouraged them to pursue their education and step foot into professional life working as a journalist.

Parental Support: United We Stand

Komal gave a lot of credit to their family who supported them in their educational journey. Not only the parents were supportive, but Komal's siblings also stood with them. It was that unity and support that helped Komal in overcoming educational and other challenges. As Komal said, "United we stand". Komal further explained how their family supported them in their educational ambitions. They said:

In the process of pursuing education, my parents supported all my siblings, including me, in the same manner. They were aware of my gender identity from the very beginning and focused more on my education as they did on my siblings.

Not only were the parents supportive of Komal's educational ambitions, but they did not also discriminate against them based on their gender identity. Komal believed that it was "I am living with my parents and live a respectable life, being a journalist, because of my parent's equal treatment". Komal's story shows that parents have an essential role in empowering transgender people. On the other hand, if the harassment starts at home, the situation becomes worse for a transgender person.

Life at Educational Institutions: Abuse, Harassment, and Mistreatment

Komal stated that despite the utmost support of their family, their whole educational journey was fraught with abuse, harassment, and mistreatment. The mistreatment and abuse kept increasing as Komal and

their fellow become older. Finally, they were forced to take refuge in distance education. They recalled those memories in these words:

Not only at school but in college as well, all my classmates and teachers were very good to me because they knew about my family support. But my classmates were abusing and torturing me with different names like their girlfriend, wife, etc. and I was feeling quite unsafe. It was due to these problems that my parents advised me to leave college and continue my studies through distance education.

Komal noted that society has not changed the way their view transgender people, regardless of the support they get from their families.

The Perception of Society: Normal amongst Abnormal, or Abnormal amongst Normal?

Komal repeatedly shared the challenges and issues that they faced due to their gender identity. They said that "being a transgender itself is a challenge in Pakistan" and that it was "very common to face verbal and physical abuse". People at the marketplace, and on the way to school and other places often catcall and harass Komal. Komal wondered if they were "normal amongst abnormal, or abnormal amongst normal". They were questioning if those people have a valid reason to harass anyone because of their gender identity or if they are just doing something an abnormal person could do. It could be noted that those ideas of Komal emanate out of surprise at what used to happen to them without a reason.

Although having entered into professional life and working as a radio journalist had earned Komal some respect, they would still face some problems while traveling on public transport. They shared their thoughts as follows:

The most disgusting situation was that when I sit on a bus on a seat specific for a male then they say that I am not allowed to sit with males. If I change the seat and sit with women, then they also do not allow me to sit with them. This means there is no place for a transgender to travel on public transport.

Guru and Financial Stability: Two Vital Elements

Komal stated that it is quite important for a transgender person to find a Guru because a guru could better understand their needs and challenges. They said:

Even though I live with my parents and siblings but still I have a Guru and I often visit them to guide me about the problems transgender individuals face. As a highly educated person and a journalist, the transgender people [around] respect me a lot and I help them to disseminate their voice and issues to stakeholders.

Moreover, Komal said that they were financially stable throughout their life. Initially, they were supported by their parents, and later they started to make a living as a journalist. One of the reasons behind their satisfied and steady life was that Komal never had to indulge in dancing or sexual activities to make money. They said that they were not only financially stable, but they also financially help poor and needy transgender individuals.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a narrative inquiry about transgender people's experiences in Pakistan with the focus on their educational settings. The study also explores the discrimination, harassment, and isolation of transgender people by their families, classmates, and society in general. It also discusses the mechanisms that transgender people use to lead their life within their community.

The study suggests that transgender people in Pakistan like anyone else value education and want to contribute to society. However, many of the respondents discontinued their studies due to fear of harassment. In the beginning, they were all supported by their parents to complete their studies but later many parents withdrew from providing support and some even tried to keep them at home to avoid social humiliation (Garthe et al., 2021). The participants noted that they were harassed, threatened, and called different names at their schools, in the market, and any other places. The worst part is that some of the harassment was coming from their close ones including siblings at home. This made schools, society, and even home unsafe places for transgender and it forced them to live in isolation, which often leads to other challenges including sexual exploitation and mental health problems (Ghazi & Manzoor, 2022; McGuire et al., 2010; Nadeem & Javed, 2020).

To skip the humiliating spheres around them, they looked for a Guru and a similar community that could give them a better space and experience than those they found at school and home. For instance, Gulwareena stated that they were spending two to three hours in a nearby graveyard skipping school since they were tired of the harassment at school where the teachers were careless about their situation and complaint. These alone hours were a time of peace for Gulwareena as no one sees and disturbs them in the graveyard. On the other hand, the story of Komal indicated the role of parents and financial stability for transgender people. Support and acceptance from parents/home make a big difference in educational attainment and leading a professional life. Parental support and motivation could somehow also decrease the harassment and abuse transgender individuals face. At least, it gives them the courage to face the situation and look forward. As can be seen from the participants' stories, in most cases, the grounds for their departure from home are a lack of acceptance from parents, schools, and society.

At school, students and even teachers tease and call transgender people odd names and attempt to harass them (Goldberg et al., 2019) while various federations at college try to grip them for dance and sensual activities (Hali et al., 2018). If they resist, they are often threatened with death and other horrific things. Those who threaten transgender people know that they do not get a serious punishment for doing so because transgender person's complaints are often ignored by schools and even the police, as narrated by Gulwareena and Aliya. These challenges have made transgender people look for ways to avoid any space which could expose their situation and vulnerability to abuse and harassment such as traveling alone or attending schools. For those who have enough money, the option is to enroll in distance education as Aliya did to get their master's degree.

The findings further revealed that transgender people have developed their community system consisting of the Guru (head) and Chela (follower, where the Guru provides shelter, food, and work. Guru teaches other transgender people how to navigate their life in society and overcome any challenges they face. Among the seven participants, only Komal was living with their family but was also regularly visiting Guru for guidance. Despite its social, economic, and security benefits (Ahmad, 2010), living with Guru is not convenient to pursue educational ambition because the transgender community is involved in different activities such as dancing and sexual activities (Hali et al., 2018). Even if the Guru allows them to continue their education, their late-night functions and hustle in their living places are not education-friendly environments (Nazir & Yasir, 2016). This exploitation is on top of the abuse they face at

educational institutions. However, most of the participants also note that they will not get a job even after completing their higher education qualifications because they do not have a place in society. So they argue that they do not see the need to spend their time and money to a degree that is not to be useful. Instead, they try to earn their living through their dance and other events, although they feel these events would not be sustainable.

CONCLUSION

The study indicates that the harassment and discrimination against transgender people start with a lack of parental support and acceptance. These events are also connected with transgender people's academic and professional success. Those with strong parental support can get the courage, motivation, protection, and financial support to pursue their education and find a professional job. However, as this study suggests, most transgender people in Pakistan are disowned by their families to avoid social humiliation. It is important to note that life as a transgender individual is hard with most people trying to harass and abuse them at schools and other places. This leaves transgender people without a choice but to find and join Guru. Nonetheless, joining a Guru and fellow transgender community is good for protection and earning their basic needs through dance and sex but not pursuing their education.

The study provides a robust explanation of the experiences of transgender people in Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country. It mainly contributes to understanding the ambitions and challenges of transgender people in acquiring education. Hence, it provides a better understanding of the challenges faced and interventions required to improve the experiences of transgender people, which could be vital for future adjustments and reforms. This research is one of the few studies on the transgender community in Pakistan. It is also confined to a limited number of participants from one province. Therefore, further study is required to better understand the experience of transgender communities in Pakistan.

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