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Access to Education for Transgender Individuals in Pakistan: Cultural and Institutional Barriers

¹Saida Noreen*and ²Dr. Khalid Rashid

1. Ph. D Scholar, Department of Education, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Education, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

| Corresponding Author | sadianoreen15@gmail.com |

ABSTRACT

Transgender individuals face multifaceted challenges when it comes to their education in Pakistan. The objective of the study was to investigate the cultural and institutional challenges faced by transgender individuals. We designed the present qualitative study to understand their nature of challenges by immersing in real-life situations. The research design was phenomenology in nature. The participants were transgender individuals from Faisalabad. The sample consisted of eight transgender individuals selected using a snowball sampling technique. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews protocol guide, which were analysed using the thematic data analysis technique following a six-stage guide by Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors found that cultural barriers that hindered their education process in Pakistan were parental issues, social unacceptance, and social stigma. Institutional barriers that negatively affected their education were a lack of policies and legal protection in schools, inadequate teacher training, and inappropriate facilities in schools. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended comprehensive awareness programmes inside and outside educational settings for the acceptance of transgender individuals in society and schools.

| Keywords: | Cultural Barriers, Institutional Barriers, Social Stigma, Teacher Education, Transgender Education |

Introduction

Access to education is a fundamental right in Pakistan (Amjad et al., 2020), yet transgender individuals face multiple cultural and institutional barriers that impede this right (Divan et al., 2016). Cultural stigmatisation of transgender individuals often stems from the rigid societal norms and conservative interpretations of religious texts, which marginalise not only them but also foster environments where discrimination and harassment are prevalent. These societal attitudes are mirrored in educational institutions (Amjad et al., 2022). Where there is a lack of inclusive policies and protective measures, making them unwelcoming spaces for transgender individuals (Hargie et al., 2017). Moreover, the absence of a legal framework that recognises and protects the rights of transgender individuals means that they are often denied essential educational opportunities from the outset (Qureshi et al., 2023). The systemic exclusion not only hinders their personal and professional development but also perpetuates the cycle of poverty and social ostracism in the transgender community (McGuire et al., 2022). Thus, addressing these cultural and institutional barriers is imperative to ensure that transgender individuals in Pakistan can exercise their right to education and contribute fully to society (Ahmad, 2021).

Cultural norms and societal perceptions significantly impact the schooling experiences of transgender individuals in Pakistan. Transgender individuals are frequently excluded from conventional educational opportunities due to the ongoing social stigma associated with their identification (Abdullah et al., 2012). The marginalisation of the transgender population is intensified by conventional practices and attitudes that exclude

them by restricting their ability to obtain social resources, such as education. An examination of these cultural elements is essential for comprehending the broader network of educational inequality experienced by transgender individuals in Pakistan (Saeed et al., 2018).

Pakistani educational institutions frequently reflect societal biases, resulting in situations that are not supportive of the integration of transgender students. These institutions, constrained by conventional values and inflexible administrative practices, are unable to cater to the distinct requirements of transgender individuals (Jamil, 2021). The absence of supporting policies and practices in educational institutions, ranging from enrollment procedures to classroom dynamics, significantly contributes to the ongoing exclusion of transgender kids from receiving an education (Amjad et al., 2023a). Furthermore, the convergence of cultural and institutional hurdles gives rise to an intricate chain of difficulties for transgender individuals who are pursuing education (Amjad et al., 2023b). Educational institutions' unwillingness to question cultural standards reinforces the marginalisation of transgender students, hindering their ability to achieve academic goals in a nurturing and inclusive setting (Amjad et al., 2021; Garvey et al., 2019). Gaining insight into these overlapping barriers is crucial for formulating strategies that can enhance the availability of education for transgender individuals in Pakistan (Amjad et al., 2023; Koirala et al., 2017).

Although transgender individuals in Pakistan have gained legal recognition and there is a global focus on inclusive education, there is still a lack of research on how cultural and institutional obstacles hinder the educational opportunities of transgender individuals in Pakistan (Amjad et al., 2022a). Although there have been few studies that briefly discussed the overall difficulties encountered by the transgender community in Pakistan (Arslan et al., 2023), there is a lack of specific studies on their educational experiences (Tabbasam et al., 2023). The objective of this study is to address the existing knowledge gap by conducting an in-depth investigation of the distinct challenges encountered by transgender individuals when it comes to accessing education in Pakistan. This research will contribute to the worldwide debate on achieving educational fairness and inclusivity.

Literature Review

The educational challenges experienced by transgender individuals in Pakistan have been an area of significant interest within academic circles. The research conducted by Ahmad (2021) has emphasised the pervasive cultural prejudices against transgender individuals in Pakistan, which pose significant challenges to their ability to obtain an education. They argue that the societal stigma, which is based on traditional gender norms, significantly obstructs the integration of transgender individuals into mainstream education systems.

In addition, Khan and Malik (2019) investigated the influence of familial rejection on the educational endeavours of transgender individuals in Pakistan. Their research suggests that the presence of familial support is vital in determining the level of educational achievement among transgender individuals. Unfortunately, societal biases often result in a lack of such support. The absence of familial assistance not only impacts their mental health but also impedes their access to educational opportunities. The study conducted by Rizvi et al. (2023) provides valuable insights into the discriminatory policies and practices inside educational institutions in Pakistan, specifically focusing on institutional barriers. According to their research, transgender students frequently encounter administrative obstacles, such as enrollment procedures and a scarcity of gender-neutral facilities. These challenges contribute to their marginalisation within educational environments.

Dubin et al. (2018) delve deeper into the topic of classroom inclusivity, emphasising how the absence of knowledge and empathy among educators and students intensifies the

social isolation experienced by transgender individuals. This study highlights the necessity of providing teacher training and implementing curriculum revisions to cultivate an inclusive educational setting accommodating all students, irrespective of their gender identification.

Jan et al. (2022) analyse the consequences of Pakistan's Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, on the education system from a legal perspective. Although the legislative acknowledgment is a notable advancement, their examination indicates that implementing these rights into effective educational strategies is still insufficient. In addition, the comparative study of Akhtar et al. (2012) on the educational experiences of transgender individuals in urban and rural areas reveals a significant discrepancy. Advocates contend that transgender individuals residing in urban regions enjoy comparatively superior access to educational resources and support networks in contrast to their counterparts in rural settings, where conventional standards are more firmly established.

According to Marphatia et al. (2017), global comparisons offer a more comprehensive viewpoint. Their research examines the state of transgender education in Pakistan in comparison to other South Asian nations. The analysis reveals that while similar issues are encountered across the region, Pakistan falls behind in implementing policies and providing community support.

Material and Methods

In the present paper, the researchers focused on exploring the specific cultural norms and practices in Pakistan that contribute to the marginalisation of transgender individuals in education and how institutional practices in Pakistani educational institutions serve as barriers to the education of transgender individuals. The researchers studied the phenomenon in detail by immersing in natural settings. This in-depth investigation uses the interpretivism philosophy (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This worldview encourages the use of qualitative methods to explore phenomena in detail. Hence, in the present paper, the researchers followed the interpretivism philosophy and qualitative methods to explore the study's aim.

Research Design

The focus of the paper was to explore the cultural norms and institutional practices that serve as barriers to the education of transgender individuals in Pakistan. The phenomenon under study is of crucial importance in the marginalisation of transgender individuals. From the literature, it is evident that the lived experiences of any particular group can be best studied in phenomenological research (Frechette et al., 2020). phenomenological research helps study lived experiences even when the sample may be small (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). Phenomenological research, a modern qualitative approach, remains crucial for comprehending the intricacies of human experiences. Thus, the researchers used phenomenology research design to conduct different study processes.

Participants

Study participants were transgender individuals living in Faisalabad (Pakistan). According to the sixth population census in 2017, there are 10418 transgender individuals in Pakistan. However, alternative assessments indicate that the figure is hundreds of thousands (Saeed, 2023). It is also evident from the literature that transgender individuals do not prefer to show their gender identity (Howard et al., 2019); thus, it is difficult to mention the exact number of transgender individuals in the country. The first author identified a transgender person initially, discussed the study's theme with him, and requested him to approach other transgender individuals in the community. Following the

pattern, eight transgender individuals were selected using snowball sampling. These transgender individuals were of the average age group of 18 to 25 years.

Instrument

To explore transgender individuals' cultural norms and practices in Pakistan that contribute to their marginalisation in education and to find how institutional practices in Pakistani educational institutions serve as barriers to their education, we collected the data using a semi-structured interview. Interviewing transgender individuals is considered a matter of sensitivity and respect. Therefore, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed for interviews with transgender individuals. While developing the interview guide, they considered their cultural context, knowledge about local terms, societal attitudes toward them, and issues like social stigma, discrimination, health and economic challenges. After developing the semi-structured interview guide, it was sent to three experts (PhD in Education) for expert opinion. They reviewed the protocol guide and provided feedback on language suitability, questions' relevance to study' objectives, research questions, and sentence structure. They also suggested translating questions into Urdu language as well. Based on their expert opinion, the researchers modified the interview questions, revised them, and then collected data with the help of a modified interview guide.

Data Collection

The data were collected using a face-to-face interaction. After obtaining informed consent, they were interviewed at the decided place. Interview locations and settings were selected according to their convenience. After getting their permission, interviews were recorded using the audio function of an Android mobile phone. The sample questions were, "Can you describe your personal experiences with education in Pakistan as a transgender individual?" and "How do you think teachers' and fellow students' attitudes towards transgender individuals influence their educational experiences." The interview time ranged between 15-25 minutes. These interviews were conducted during May and June of 2022.

Data Analysis

After conducting interviews, they were transcribed. The first researcher transcribed it, and the second researcher validated it with the audio recordings. After transcribing interview data, it was analysed using the thematic data analysis technique to provide the themes related to their concerns and challenges regarding cultural norms and institutional barriers to their education. For the analysis, we followed the six-step guide of Braun and Clarke (2006) for the thematic analysis.

Research Ethics

Conducting interviews with transgender individuals, especially in a sensitive culture such as Pakistan, it becomes essential to approach the research with a strong emphasis on ethical considerations. It included ensuring informed consent, wherein participants possess comprehensive knowledge of the research's objectives, methodologies, and potential ramifications. They could withdraw study participation at any time without facing any adverse consequences. It was crucial to maintain privacy and confidentiality by guarding sensitive personal information and ensuring anonymity when sharing research findings. To write research findings, the researchers used pseudonyms to hide the identity of the study participants. Conducting these interviews with cultural sensitivity and respect, using suitable terminology, and refraining from making assumptions about the participants' experiences or identities was crucial. Researchers offered assistance in case the interview process revealed distressing experiences or needs. Furthermore, the research design took into account potential hazards to participants, particularly in a societal setting where

transgender individuals may encounter prejudice or bias. This ethical framework assured the safeguarding and reverence of participants but also enhanced the credibility and integrity of the research itself.

Results and Discussion

The present paper focuses on exploring the societal and institutional barriers to transgender individuals' inclusion in Pakistan. The data were analysed using the thematic data analysis technique. Transcribed data were analysed following Braun and Clarke's six-stage guide for thematic analysis (2006). Different codes were identified and reviewed repeatedly before assembling into patterns and themes. After data analysis, the following themes and sub-themes emerged from the data by the study's objective and research questions.

Theme 1: Cultural Barriers

The first research question aimed to explore the social and cultural barriers hindering the education process of transgender individuals. This theme of cultural barriers includes sub-themes like parental fears and related issues, social unacceptance of the transition, and social stigma.

Sub-theme 1.1: Parental Issues

The present sub-theme involves participants' narratives of parental issues they faced in the community. When the question was asked, two of them argued.

"My parents were more worried about what our relatives and neighbours would say than my feelings. Their fear of being judged overpowered everything else."

Asad

"I sensed a constant struggle in my home. My parents were torn between loving me and fearing for our family reputation."

Hina

The above responses of Asad and Hina reveal a profound conflict in their families, where the parental fear of societal judgment often overshadows the needs and well-being of transgender children. This internal family struggle is indicative of the wider societal stressors that dictate conformity over individual identity, significantly impacting the mental health and self-esteem of the study participants.

Sub-theme 1.2: Social Unacceptance

The present sub-theme involves participants' responses to the behaviour and attitudes of the people of the community they are living. Most of the participants showed their concerns about social unacceptance. In response to a question, Jamil and Saima responded,

"When I started my transition, the backlash was not just from strangers. It involved many voices. I got more hurt when my friends turned their backs on me. It felt like I was navigating a minefield daily at home and social gatherings."

Jamil

"The hardest part was the loneliness. People I grew up with acted like I was a stranger, all because I was being true to myself."

Saima

The above responses of Jamil and Saima highlight the harsh reality of social unacceptance that transgender individuals face during their transition. The loss of friendship and social isolation experienced in societal settings underscore the need for more inclusive and supportive school environments that embrace diversity. These responses led to the conclusion that all the study participants faced the challenge of social unacceptance in their community.

Sub-theme 1.3: Social Stigma

The sub-theme of social stigma involves participants' narratives of the irritating behaviour they faced after being identified as transgender individuals. They got bad names and hateful eyes backing them through the streets of their city. In response to the questions, Kiran and Bilal argued,

"I was constantly bullied and ridiculed. It is like being transgender made me a walking target for everyone's joke and cruelty."

Kiran

"Teachers and students alike looked at me differently. The whispers, the stares…… it was a daily reminder that I was 'other.'"

Bilal

The above response of two transgender individuals reflects all the study participants. Jamil, Asad, Samia, Hina, Abida, Kiran, and Bilal depicted a pervasive social stigma attached to being transgender, manifesting in both overt bullying and subtle, yet equally damaging, forms of discrimination. This stigma, deeply ingrained in the school culture, not only affects academic performance but also significantly impairs the mental well-being of transgender individuals in society.

The study's findings shed light on the complex and multi-layered cultural barriers faced by transgender individuals in mainstream schools. The combination of parental fears, social unacceptance, and stigma creates an environment that is often hostile and unsupportive. These barriers not only hinder the educational journey of transgender students but also contribute to broader challenges of mental health, social well-being, and societal exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires systematic changes in attitudes and policies within educational institutions to foster understanding. The narratives underscore the urgent for awareness and sensitivity training in schools, supportive counselling services, and the establishment of anti-discrimination policies to protect transgender students from stigma and exclusion.

Theme 2: Institutional Barriers

The study's second research question aimed to understand the institutional barriers to including transgender individuals in schools. This theme includes significant insight into the institutional barriers with the help of the following three sub-themes.

Sub-theme 2.1: Lack of Policies and Legal Protection

The present sub-theme involves participants' responses regarding educational institutions' lack of policies and legal protection. In response to the questions, participants argued,

"There are no clear policies in place in schools for transgender students. I often felt like I had no protection against discrimination."

Abida

"Without legal backing, our issues are invisible to the system. We are left to fend for ourselves in a hostile environment."

Hina

"I became very restless and stressed when I came to know that there are no such policies for the inclusion of transgender individuals in mainstream schools."

Sheela

The above three responses highlight the lack of specified policies and legal protections for transgender students in educational institutions in Pakistan. This absence of policies and legal frameworks leads to a sense of vulnerability and a perception of being overlooked by the system, exacerbating their discrimination and challenges.

Sub-theme 2.2: Inadequate Teacher Training and Awareness

The present sub-theme provides the detail of responses of the participants regarding the inadequate teacher training and awareness of transgender individuals' issues and inclusion in schools. In response to the questions, they responded,

"My teachers seemed clueless about how to support me. Their lack of awareness made my school life even more difficult. They do not stop my fellows from ridiculing me."

Saima

"I faced insensitive comments from teachers who just did not understand transgender issues. It is not just about acceptance but also about education and awareness."

Jamil

The above responses of Samia and Jamil indicate a significant gap in teacher training and awareness regarding transgender issues. This lack of understanding among teachers not only leads to insensitivity and discrimination but also contributes to an environment where transgender students cannot get adequate support. Abida, Asad, Bilal, and Kiran's responses aligned with Samia and Jamil's responses.

Sub-theme 2.3: Inadequate Facilities and Support Services

The sub-theme of inadequate facilities and support services reflects participants' responses for their lack of educational facilities and absence of support services in school setups. In responses to the interview questions, Bilal and Kiran argued,

"There were no facilities I could comfortably use, and no one seemed to care. It was a daily struggle."

Bilal

"The absence of support services like counselling made it harder to cope with the challenges I was facing at school."

Kiran

The above narratives of Bilal and Kiran shed light on the lack of adequate facilities and support services for transgender students in schools. This deficiency significantly impacts their daily school experience and overall well-being, emphasising the need for inclusive infrastructure and dedicated support services.

The study's findings reflect the multifaceted institutional barriers that hinder the inclusion of transgender students in schools. The lack of particular policies and legal protections leaves them vulnerable to discrimination and without recourse. The inadequacy in teacher training and awareness further exacerbates the situation, as teachers play a crucial role in shaping the school environment. Without proper understanding and sensitivity, teachers may unintentionally contribute to the marginalisation of transgender students. Moreover, the absence of adequate facilities and support services directly affects the daily experiences and mental health of these students, underscoring a pressing need for schools to develop inclusive infrastructures and support mechanisms. Addressing these institutional barriers is vital for creating an educational environment where transgender students can feel safe, supported, and equal. This requires policy changes, legal protection, and a concerted effort to educate and train school staff. Additionally, the development of appropriate facilities and support services is essential to ensure that transgender students have access to the resources they need to succeed academically and personally.

Discussion

This study highlights the intricate and diverse challenges encountered by transgender individuals in Pakistan's educational system. These challenges are intricately connected in cultural and institutional contexts, aligning with the broader scholarly discourse. The cultural obstacles found in our study, which include familial disputes and societal pressures, align with the observations made by Ahmad (2021), highlighting the widespread community disapproval and cultural biases against transgender individuals in Pakistan. The findings of our study reveal the internal conflicts in families and the external influences from society, which are indicative of the prevailing cultural norms that greatly influence the mental well-being and overall health of transgender pupils.

Our findings support Khan and Malik's (2019) study, which emphasises the significance of family support in promoting educational success among transgender individuals, particularly in relation to social rejection and isolation. The findings of our study highlight the necessity for creating more welcoming and encouraging environments in families and educational institutions in response to the reported experiences of social rejection and isolation. Furthermore, our study demonstrates that teachers' lack of knowledge and understanding aligns with Dubin et al.'s (2018) argument that teacher training and curriculum adjustments are crucial for creating an inclusive educational environment. The teachers' claimed insensitivity and lack of help align with the findings of Dubin et al. (2018), which emphasise a notable deficiency in teacher training regarding transgender concerns.

In contrast to the positive viewpoints expressed by Jan et al. (2022) on the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, our study highlights a notable deficiency in the act's execution in educational approaches. As indicated in our study, the lack of specific regulations and legal measures in educational institutions emphasises a significant area of concern. Furthermore, our research indicates a variation in the experiences of transgender individuals depending on their geographic location, aligning with Akhtar et al.'s (2012) comparative analysis of educational experiences in urban and

rural areas. This feature highlights the subtle variations in the challenges experienced by transgender individuals in various socio-cultural contexts within Pakistan.

In the broader South Asian context, our study agrees with the research conducted by Marphatia et al. (2017), which highlights shared difficulties throughout the region. This comparison indicates that although Pakistan faces comparable challenges as its neighbouring nations, it falls behind in the implementation of efficient legislation and the provision of community backing for transgender education. In due course, this study emphasises the necessity of implementing extensive structural reforms in Pakistan's educational system to address the challenges encountered by transgender students successfully. The proposed modifications should encompass training programmes aimed at increasing awareness and sensitivity, creating counselling services that provide support, and implementing comprehensive policies that eliminate discrimination. Implementing such measures is crucial for establishing a more comprehensive and encouraging educational setting for transgender students, effectively tackling cultural and institutional obstacles that hinder their schooling and overall well-being.

Conclusion

The results of this study emphasise the systemic and entrenched challenges encountered by transgender individuals inside Pakistan's school system. Cultural barriers, such as public stigma and familial rejection, greatly hinder their educational experiences. Institutional barriers, such as a deficiency of comprehensive policies, poor teacher education, and inadequate support services, worsen these challenges. The outcome is an educational setting that frequently lacks friendliness and fails to provide appropriate support, resulting in negative consequences for the academic and personal development of transgender pupils. The study emphasises the immediate necessity for a fundamental change in Pakistan's educational policy towards transgender individuals. Recognising and addressing the various challenges that lead to their marginalisation is crucial. Implementing comprehensive structural reforms is necessary to eliminate biases and establish a supportive educational environment that fosters learning and development for transgender pupils. This transition necessitates a collaborative endeavour from all parties involved to provide equal access to education and promote a more tolerant and encouraging community.

Recommendations

In order to address these challenges, the study makes several crucial recommendations. First and foremost, educational institutions should implement thorough awareness and sensitivity training programmes to foster an environment characterised by tolerance and acceptance. The scope of this training should encompass teachers, administrative employees, and students. Furthermore, it is imperative to prioritise the creation and execution of comprehensive policies and legal frameworks that promote inclusivity. These rules should explicitly address the rights and requirements of transgender students, assuring their safety and equitable opportunities in educational environments. Additionally, the research proposes implementing specialised support programmes, such as counselling and mentorship initiatives, specifically designed to address the distinct requirements of transgender students. These services are crucial for offering emotional and psychological assistance and aiding students in navigating their difficulties. Furthermore, it is recommended that the educational infrastructure be improved by incorporating gender-neutral facilities to provide a secure and inclusive environment for all pupils. It is crucial to actively include community leaders and parents to cultivate a nurturing cultural mindset towards transgender individuals, which is vital for achieving lasting transformation and embracing diversity.

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