

## BEYOND THE THIRD GENDER: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS TO INCLUSION FOR TRANSGENDERS IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the sociocultural challenges faced by transgender, Hijra, and Khawaja Sira individuals in Pakistan. The existing studies, the analysis identifies a persistent and interlocking system of stigma, discrimination, and structural exclusion that shapes transgender lives across the life course. Findings reveal that social rejection begins within the family and is reinforced by hostile school environments, limited access to education, and the absence of institutional safeguards. These early experiences of marginalization extend into adulthood through discriminatory healthcare practices, widespread violence, police harassment, and systemic denial of legal protections. The study demonstrates that healthcare settings are among the most stigmatizing environments, contributing to severe mental health vulnerabilities, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality. Economic exclusion further constrains life opportunities, forcing many transgender individuals into precarious informal work due to limited employment options and institutional bias. Although Pakistan has enacted progressive legislation, including the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, a significant implementation gap persists, undermining the law's transformative potential. Despite these challenges, community structures such as the guru chela system offer important sources of cultural identity, belonging, and resilience. Overall, the study concludes that transgender marginalization in Pakistan is structural rather than incidental, requiring multi sectoral reforms across education, healthcare, policing, legal institutions, and public discourse. Meaningful inclusion will depend on coordinated, culturally grounded policies that address the root causes of stigma while strengthening institutional accountability and protecting the dignity and rights of transgender citizens.*

## 1. Introduction

Transgender individuals in Pakistan represent one of the most marginalized and misunderstood social groups, positioned at the intersection of cultural norms, religious discourses, colonial legacies, and rigid gender structures. Despite progressive legal developments such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, their everyday lives remain shaped by social exclusion, stigma, and institutional discrimination. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that transgender people face exclusion across nearly all domains of social life, including family structures, schools, workplaces, healthcare facilities, and public spaces (Majid et al., 2023; Akram et al., 2023; Sherazi et al., 2023; Minhas et al., 2026).

Research reveals that transgender individuals experience deep rooted social stigmatization, leading to verbal harassment, physical violence, and exclusion from community participation. Transgenders routinely face discrimination, abuse, and denial of social support, resulting in limited access to education, employment, and healthcare (Majid et al., 2023). Similarly, Akram et al. (2023) underscore the persistence of sociocultural prejudice, employer discrimination, and the absence of safe institutional mechanisms to protect transgender people's rights. Multiple studies highlight that discrimination begins early in life. Transgender children often encounter ridicule, bullying, and exclusion in schools, contributing to early dropout rates and long-term socioeconomic disadvantage (Noreen & Rashid, 2024). Family rejection remains one of the most commonly reported experiences, with qualitative research showing that many transgender individuals are denied emotional and financial support, forcing them to migrate into marginalized transgender communities (Jahangir & Das, 2025).

Healthcare systems are also documented as major sites of neglect and discrimination. In Lahore and Karachi, studies report that transgender persons face humiliation, misgendering, refusal of treatment, and lack of gender affirming care, which leads to avoidance of essential medical services and worsens physical and mental health outcomes (Azeem et al., 2021; Manzoor et al., 2022; Younus et al., 2025). Mental health research further shows high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among transgender adults, driven by cumulative experiences of stigma, violence, and institutional exclusion (Masood & Naheed, 2025; Aqsa et al., 2024).

Violence remains one of the most severe and pervasive realities faced by transgender communities. Studies across Lahore, Swat, and Rawalpindi document routine physical assaults, sexual violence, police harassment, and extortion. In Swat, transgender individuals report that police themselves participate in violence, reinforcing a climate of fear and impunity (Tripathi et al., 2025). Reports from rights organizations similarly highlight rising cases of targeted attacks and lack of access to justice (Subrang Society, 2022).

These patterns of discrimination occur despite constitutional guarantees and the existence of protective legislation. Legal analyses indicate that the 2018 Act has not been effectively implemented due to societal resistance, bureaucratic barriers, and conflicting religious interpretations (Kazmi, 2025; Azhar et al., 2026). This gap between legal recognition and lived experience underscores the systemic nature of transgender marginalization in Pakistan.

Existing scholarship, however, also highlights the cultural significance and resilience of Hijra and Khawaja Sira communities. Historically rooted community structures, such as the guru chela system, continue to provide belonging and survival strategies for individuals rejected by their families (Wajid, 2025; Pervaiz, 2024). Yet, these communities also face internal hierarchies and external stigma, revealing the complex sociocultural positioning of gender variant groups in Pakistan.

Overall, the existing body of empirical research demonstrates that transgender marginalization in Pakistan is structural rather than incidental. Persistent stigma, institutional discrimination, educational exclusion, inadequate healthcare access, and widespread violence collectively shape transgender individuals' life trajectories. Despite the breadth of existing scholarship,

research gaps persist. First, most studies focus on specific regions, such as Islamabad or Lahore, leaving a need for broader qualitative research across different sociocultural contexts within Pakistan. Second, while previous studies identify areas of exclusion, education, health, employment, and violence, few integrate these experiences into a holistic framework that examines how these domains intersect and reinforce each other in daily life. Third, existing studies often emphasize either social exclusion or mental health but rarely explore how the cumulative impact of violence, discrimination, and exclusion shapes long term life outcomes, identity formation, and social integration. There is also limited qualitative work that foregrounds the voices of transgender individuals themselves, capturing their narratives not merely as subjects of study but as agents articulating their experiences, needs, and visions for social inclusion.

This study aims to contribute to the literature by offering an in-depth exploration of the sociocultural challenges faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan, with a particular focus on how discrimination, violence, and exclusion from education, health, and social spaces shape their lives. By centering the narratives of transgender persons, this research captures the lived complexities of their experiences and highlights the structural nature of their marginalization. It seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of exclusion to reveal the interconnected systems, familial, institutional, religious, and economic, that shape transgender individuals' realities. This study sheds light on how these challenges influence personal identity, mental health, social participation, and life opportunities.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Sociocultural Constructions of Transgender Identity in Pakistan**

The sociocultural positioning of transgender, Hijra, and Khawaja Sira individuals in Pakistan is deeply embedded in historical traditions, religious discourses, and colonial disruptions. Pre-colonial South Asian societies recognized Hijra/Khawaja Sira identities as distinct gender categories with ceremonial and spiritual roles, especially during the Mughal period. However, British colonial governance introduced rigid gender binaries and punitive laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which cast gender variant communities as deviant, fundamentally altering public perceptions and state policies toward them. These colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary institutions in Pakistan, sustaining structural discrimination.

Modern scholarship shows that transgender identities in Pakistan are socially constructed through kinship networks, community hierarchies, and shared cultural practices. Hijra and Khawaja Sira individuals often join dera or guru chela systems that provide social belonging and economic support but may reproduce internal hierarchies and power imbalances. Family rejection remains a major reason individuals seek refuge in these communities, as many are expelled from their homes during adolescence due to gender non conformity.

Religious interpretations also shape public attitudes. While Islamic jurisprudence has historically acknowledged intersex persons, contemporary religious discourse frequently conflates transgender identity with immorality, reinforcing stigma and social exclusion. Studies show that religious leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa express mixed or negative views regarding transgender rights, contributing to public resistance to legal reforms. This selective moral framing positions transgender people as subjects of pity or ridicule rather than rights bearing citizens.

### **2.2. Discrimination as a Structural and Everyday Experience**

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that discrimination against transgender individuals in Pakistan is systemic and pervasive. Research from Lahore and Islamabad reveals that transgender people face routine harassment, exploitation, and exclusion in homes, schools, workplaces, and public spaces (Majid et al., 2023; Akram et al., 2023). Early childhood

rejection, often involving verbal abuse, physical violence, or forced expulsion, initiates a lifelong cycle of disadvantage.

At the interpersonal level, transgender individuals face frequent verbal harassment and public humiliation, driving many to restrict their mobility or conceal their identities to avoid violence (Sherazi et al., 2023). Qualitative accounts describe patterns of symbolic and psychological violence that contribute to persistent fear and social invisibility.

Institutional discrimination further compounds these experiences. Studies show that police routinely harass, extort, and criminalize transgender individuals, particularly those engaged in street-based economies. In Swat, police violence is so widespread that participants described law enforcement as a source of fear rather than protection (Tripathi et al., 2025). Such patterns deter victims from seeking justice, creating a cycle of impunity that normalizes violence.

Structural discrimination in employment and housing also sustains marginalization. Employers frequently refuse to hire transgender applicants due to stigma and concerns about customer discomfort, pushing many into precarious informal work such as begging or dancing (Majid et al., 2023). Housing discrimination remains widespread, with many landlords denying rentals to transgender persons, forcing them into unsafe and congested living arrangements (Akram et al., 2023).

### **2.3. Social Exclusion and Marginalization Across the Life Course**

Literature conceptualizes social exclusion as a cumulative process unfolding across the life span. Early exclusion from family and education shapes long term socioeconomic vulnerability (Minhas et al., 2026). Family rejection, often driven by shame, social pressure, and rigid gender norms, is consistently identified as a primary source of marginalization (Jami & Kamal, 2015; Jahangir & Das, 2025).

Community level exclusion reinforces this marginalization. Transgender individuals are often barred from religious institutions, community decision making, and public events, reinforcing their social invisibility (Shah et al., 2018). Even within transgender communities, internal hierarchies based on age, beauty, or economic contribution influence social standing and create additional inequalities (Wajid, 2025).

Media representations compound symbolic exclusion. Studies show that transgender individuals are frequently portrayed as comedic figures or deviant characters in Pakistani media, reinforcing stereotypes and legitimizing public ridicule (Khan, 2016). This symbolic violence contributes to negative public attitudes and fuels discrimination across institutions.

### **2.4. Stigma, Violence, and the Normalization of Harm**

Violence against transgender individuals in Pakistan is alarmingly widespread and often normalized. Empirical studies from Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, and Swat document high levels of physical assault, sexual violence, and psychological abuse (Sherazi et al., 2023; Majid et al., 2023). Violence often occurs not only in public spaces but within families and community settings, revealing the depth of societal prejudice. Stigma plays a central role in sustaining this violence. Drawing on Goffman's theory of spoiled identity, scholars argue that entrenched stigma renders transgender individuals socially vulnerable, making violence appear justified or inevitable (Jami & Kamal, 2015). Repeated exposure to violence fosters psychological distress, hyper vigilance, and withdrawal from public life. Studies from Swat report extreme emotional exhaustion resulting from pervasive stigma and exclusion, with some participants expressing hopelessness about their social worth (Azhar et al., 2024). Global evidence aligns with these findings. A systematic review reported that more than 60% of transgender adults worldwide experience lifetime physical or sexual violence (McLellan et al., 2026), situating Pakistan's context within a broader human rights crisis.

## 2.5. Educational Exclusion and Barriers to Learning

Educational exclusion is among the earliest and most persistent forms of marginalization experienced by transgender individuals in Pakistan. Empirical research demonstrates that transgender children frequently withdraw from schools due to bullying, social ostracization, teacher hostility, and institutional neglect (Jahangir & Das, 2025). Gender stereotyping by peers and educators reinforces the perception that transgender students do not belong within formal educational spaces, mirroring broader societal norms that pathologize gender diversity. A qualitative study from Faisalabad highlights how cultural and institutional barriers intersect to produce chronic disengagement from schooling. Parents often hesitate to enroll transgender children due to fear of social backlash, while schools lack anti bullying safeguards, trained teachers, and gender inclusive policies (Noreen & Rashid, 2024). The absence of supportive curricula further deepens the sense of exclusion, as transgender identities are rarely represented or validated in instructional content.

Research from Lahore confirms that economic pressures, coupled with a lack of social support, lead many transgender youths to discontinue schooling. Those who experience school based harassment often migrate into transgender communities and subsequently rely on informal, precarious livelihoods (Majid et al., 2023). Although the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 formally recognizes the right to education, its implementation remains weak. Educational institutions rarely adopt gender inclusive admission systems, resulting in continued disparities between legal commitments and lived realities.

The consequences of exclusion extend far beyond academics. Limited educational attainment restricts social mobility, entrenches poverty, and increases vulnerability to exploitation. Consequently, the education system becomes a key mechanism through which inequality is reproduced, shaping transgender individuals' life trajectories across Pakistan.

## 2.6. Healthcare Discrimination and Barriers to Access

Healthcare discrimination against transgender individuals in Pakistan is extensively documented. Studies from Lahore show that transgender patients frequently encounter ridicule, moral judgment, and medical neglect, leading many to avoid hospitals altogether (Azeem et al., 2021). A pervasive lack of training on gender affirming care results in misdiagnosis, delayed treatment, and avoidance of essential medical services. A large cross sectional study found that almost 70% of transgender individuals in Lahore reported receiving poor quality healthcare, citing humiliation, non acceptance, and the absence of identification documents that reflect their gender identity as major barriers (Manzoor et al., 2022). CNIC mismatch often leads to denial of treatment, transforming bureaucratic procedures into mechanisms of exclusion.

In Karachi, qualitative accounts reveal additional layers of discrimination. Transgender individuals report being misgendered, harassed in waiting rooms, or treated as spectacles by hospital staff (Younus et al., 2025). Many therefore rely on self medication or costly private clinics thought to be less hostile. As a result, chronic illnesses frequently go untreated, and mental health conditions intensify. Specialized domains such as oral healthcare replicate the same patterns. Studies from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa show that transgender women encounter stigma, financial barriers, and the absence of gender inclusive protocols within dental clinics (Jadoon et al., 2025). Participants recommended structural reforms such as gender neutral waiting areas and anti discrimination guidelines, yet implementation has been limited.

Mental health research highlights the compounding effect of healthcare discrimination. Encounters marked by humiliation, misgendering, or religious stigma exacerbate psychological distress, leading to heightened risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Aqsa et al., 2024). In sum, healthcare institutions, which should serve as protective systems, often reproduce the social inequalities transgender individuals face elsewhere.

### **2.7. Mental Health Outcomes and Psychosocial Struggles**

The literature consistently documents elevated mental health vulnerabilities among transgender individuals in Pakistan. A mixed methods study in Punjab reports high levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, linking these outcomes to family rejection, discrimination, and systemic barriers to healthcare (Masood & Naheed, 2025). Transgender adults frequently describe cumulative trauma rooted in social exclusion and institutional neglect. Qualitative research deepens this understanding by mapping the emotional and social dimensions of psychological distress. A thematic analysis of transgender men identifies recurring challenges such as identity confusion, religious stigma, familial neglect, and the ongoing struggle for self acceptance within a hostile cultural environment (Latif et al., 2025). These findings reinforce that mental health challenges arise not from gender identity but from persistent exposure to structural violence.

Religion plays an ambivalent role. While some experience religious stigma that contributes to internal conflict and psychological harm, others use spirituality as a source of coping and resilience (Javed, 2026). This dual role underscores the need to contextualize transgender mental health within Pakistan's cultural and religious landscape. Studies from Swat further reveal severe psychological harm resulting from entrenched stigma. Transgender individuals report intense internalized shame, chronic stress, and emotional exhaustion, often expressing that persistent exclusion renders life devoid of dignity (Azhar et al., 2024). Conceptual research situates these vulnerabilities within broader histories of colonial criminalization, social exclusion, and the lack of gender affirming mental health services (Mahesar et al., 2025).

### **2.8. Violence, Policing, and Institutional Neglect**

Violence is one of the most extensively documented aspects of transgender experiences in Pakistan. Studies from Lahore reveal widespread incidents of physical assault, sexual violence, and psychological abuse perpetrated by family members, neighbours, strangers, and service providers (Majid et al., 2023). This violence is not episodic but structurally patterned, reflecting deep societal prejudice. Urban research from Karachi and Rawalpindi points to rising trends of targeted attacks, honour based violence, and sexual exploitation (Subrang Society, 2022). Legal recourse remains limited, as police frequently refuse to register complaints or blame victims, perpetuating a climate of impunity. In Swat, policing itself emerges as a major source of harm. Transgender individuals report routine harassment, extortion, assault, and profiling by law enforcement officers, particularly those assumed to be engaged in sex work (Tripathi et al., 2025). Police behaviour often reinforces social stigma, leading transgender individuals to avoid public spaces or legal institutions altogether. Violence also intersects with public health vulnerabilities. Research on HIV indicates that economic hardship and discrimination push many transgender women into sex work, where they face increased exposure to sexual violence and coercion (John et al., 2025). Fear of police harassment discourages safe sex practices, while discrimination in healthcare limits timely testing and treatment. Global research corroborates these findings. A recent systematic review showed that more than 60% of transgender individuals worldwide experience lifetime sexual or physical violence, placing the Pakistani experience within a broader global human rights crisis (McLellan et al., 2026).

### **2.9. Legal Frameworks, Policy Debates, and the Implementation Gap**

The legal landscape governing transgender rights in Pakistan has undergone major reforms over the past decade, most notably through the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018. While this act legally recognizes gender self-identification and prohibits discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, and property rights, multiple studies stress a widening gap between legislative ideals and implementation. A comprehensive socio legal review argues that the protections offered by the 2018 Act have not been meaningfully realized due to persistent criminalization, social stigma, and institutional resistance (Kazmi, 2025). Even

though the law recognizes diverse gender identities and prohibits harassment, structural barriers, such as bureaucratic delays, lack of legal literacy, and discriminatory attitudes within state institutions, limit its practical effectiveness. The study situates these challenges within colonial histories that criminalized gender variance, especially through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, whose legacy continues to shape institutional attitudes toward Khawaja Sira and Hijra communities.

The political climate surrounding transgender rights has further complicated implementation. Religious leaders hold substantial influence in public policy, and their interpretations often conflict with progressive legal reforms. A qualitative study in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found that many religious scholars express ambivalence or opposition to transgender rights frameworks, contributing to public misunderstandings and resistance (Azhar et al., 2026). While some scholars acknowledge transgender individuals' right to dignity, others view state recognition as incompatible with religious teachings, reinforcing stigma in policy environments. The disconnect between law and lived experience is also evident in policing practices. Despite legal guarantees, police violence, harassment, and refusal to register cases remain pervasive. A 2024 study documents how Khawaja Sira individuals in Swat face multiple forms of violence at the hands of law enforcement, revealing a troubling contradiction between constitutional protections and state behavior (Tripathi et al., 2025). Ultimately, the legal literature emphasizes a persistent implementation gap, where rights exist on paper but remain inaccessible in practice. This gap reflects structural barriers, institutional prejudice, and socio religious power dynamics that undermine even progressive legal reforms.

#### **2.10. Economic Marginalization, Labor Discrimination, and Precarity**

Economic marginalization is deeply intertwined with sociocultural exclusion. Due to family rejection, school dropout, and structural discrimination, many transgender individuals are excluded from formal labor markets and forced into precarious informal work. A case study focusing on Islamabad reveals that transgender individuals face near complete exclusion from stable employment, driving many into begging, dancing, and sex work for survival (Akram et al., 2023). Participants recounted repeated experiences of job refusal, wage theft, workplace harassment, and forced invisibility, illustrating how the labor market reproduces broader social prejudices. Research on social exclusion in Lahore similarly found that economic discrimination is widespread, with most transgender individuals relying on informal economies due to lack of educational qualifications and pervasive employer bias (Majid et al., 2023). In many cases, employers explicitly refuse to hire transgender individuals, citing customer discomfort or reputational risks, thereby normalizing exclusion as a business decision.

Economic marginalization has serious consequences for health, safety, and well-being. A qualitative study on HIV vulnerability reveals that economic hardship and lack of alternative employment options push many transgender individuals, especially transwomen, toward commercial sex work, increasing their exposure to violence, health risks, and exploitation (John et al., 2025). Discrimination in healthcare settings further prevents them from accessing prevention or treatment services.

Historical and cultural analyses show that this economic marginalization contrasts sharply with the elevated roles transgender individuals once held in South Asia. Historically, Khawaja Siras served in royal courts as advisors, diplomats, and guardians, roles that afforded them social status and economic security (Pervaiz, 2024). Colonial interventions and post-colonial state structures dismantled these roles, replacing them with legal and social regimes that pathologized gender variance. Currently, the economic exclusion of transgender individuals forms a structural trap, where lack of education leads to limited employment, which in turn reinforces poverty, vulnerability, and social stigma.

### **2.11. Cultural Identity, Community Structures, and Historical Continuities**

Understanding transgender experiences in Pakistan requires attention to the cultural and historical identities of Hijra and Khawaja Sira communities. These identities are not simply modern expressions of gender variance, they are embedded in centuries old cultural, spiritual, and social traditions. A detailed cultural historical analysis explains that the Khawaja Sira identity has deep roots in South Asian societies, with complex communal structures such as the guru chela system shaping everyday life (Wajid, 2025). These kinship structures provide belonging, protection, and shared identity within a hostile society. However, they can also reinforce internal hierarchies that limit autonomy for younger community members. Despite marginalization, Hijra communities retain culturally significant roles in rituals such as births and weddings, though these roles have diminished over time (Pervaiz, 2024). Outside these ceremonial contexts, Hijras face systemic exclusion, often being reduced to stereotypes that obscure their rich cultural histories.

Studies from Islamabad further reveal that community life often becomes the sole refuge after familial rejection. Hijra groups offer collective survival strategies, yet they are also stigmatized as immoral or deviant by the broader public (Kalhor & Ali, 2021). This duality, community as sanctuary and stigma at the same time, shapes many transgender individuals' sense of identity, belonging, and resilience. Cultural analyses consistently emphasize that policies that fail to recognize the historical and cultural specificity of Khawaja Sira identities risk imposing Western, medicalized frameworks that do not resonate with community realities (Kazmi, 2025). Effective policy must therefore engage with cultural histories, community structures, and indigenous knowledge systems.

### **2.12. Intersectionality, Structural Inequalities, and Layered Marginalization**

Transgender individuals in Pakistan experience marginalization through intersecting forces of gender identity, class, religion, regional disparities, and caste like hierarchies. These intersections produce layered inequalities that shape everyday life. Research in Swat demonstrates how regional conservatism, religious norms, and patriarchal structures amplify stigma and exclusion for Khawaja Sira individuals (Azhar et al., 2024). Their experiences differ significantly from those in major urban centers, highlighting geographic variations in transgender marginalization. Economic precarity intersects with gender identity to restrict access to justice, healthcare, and safe housing. Studies show that transgender individuals who are poor or homeless face compounded discrimination from police, landlords, employers, and healthcare workers (Tripathi et al., 2025). Health vulnerabilities also intersect with gendered and economic inequalities. Transgender people with limited financial resources are more likely to engage in high-risk work, face barriers to preventive care, and experience worse mental health outcomes (John et al., 2025). Intersectionality reveals that transgender marginalization is not uniform, it is shaped by location, class, caste, religion, and age. Young transgender individuals, for example, face intensified family rejection and mental health struggles due to lack of support networks and limited access to services (Aqsa et al., 2024).

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based research design to examine the sociocultural challenges faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan, including discrimination, violence, and exclusion from education, health, and social spaces. As the study does not employ surveys, interviews, or other empirical fieldwork, the analysis relies entirely on existing scholarly research, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and qualitative studies identified through systematic engagement with the academic corpus.

The study uses a qualitative interpretive approach, which is suited for understanding socially constructed realities, cultural meanings, and lived experiences as represented in textual sources. Qualitative inquiry is widely employed in transgender studies to uncover social structures,

power dynamics, and marginalization processes embedded in cultural contexts. Existing research on transgender communities in Pakistan strongly supports the value of qualitative approaches for understanding the depth of exclusion and identity formation (Jahangir & Das, 2025). Similarly, studies analyzing gendered discrimination and structural barriers in Pakistani society often use interpretive qualitative methods to theorize marginalization and the layered effects of socio-cultural norms.

#### **4. RESULTS AND FINDING**

The findings of this study reveal a deeply entrenched system of sociocultural, institutional, and structural marginalization experienced by transgender, Hijra, and Khawaja Sira individuals in Pakistan. Although the issues of discrimination, violence, and exclusion have been documented across multiple studies, synthesizing this literature shows how these experiences are not isolated phenomena, but components of a mutually reinforcing structure of inequality that spans the life course. This chapter interprets the findings through a qualitative, interpretive lens, highlighting theoretical implications and situating the results within broader scholarly debates.

##### **4.1 Sociocultural Stigma as the Root of Systemic Exclusion**

The consistent observation across the literature is that stigma lies at the foundation of every form of exclusion, educational, economic, legal, and health-related. Sociocultural stigma devalues transgender identities and frames gender nonconformity as moral, religious, or cultural deviance (Azhar et al., 2024). This conceptualization aligns with Goffman's notion of a spoiled identity, whereby socially constructed deviance leads to patterned social rejection. Such stigma is not merely interpersonal but becomes embedded in institutions, shaping school policies, healthcare interactions, and employment practices. Family structures emerge as early sites of enforcement, where shame and honor are intertwined with gender norms. Literature shows that rejection begins at home, often leading to childhood homelessness and forced migration into community networks like the guru-chela system (Jahangir & Das, 2025). This early exclusion not only limits access to education but also catalyzes a trajectory of vulnerability. The findings reinforce intersectional understandings of gender-based oppression, where stigma at the micro (family) level mirrors macro-level institutional attitudes.

##### **4.2 Education as a Mechanism of Social Reproduction**

The findings confirm that school's function less as protective environments and more as engines of exclusion, reinforcing structural inequalities. Transgender youth are routinely pushed out of schooling through bullying, misgendering, and institutional neglect (Noreen & Rashid, 2024). According to Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, educational institutions operate as a microsystem that directly influences developmental outcomes; here, the hostile school environment restricts academic engagement and social growth. The literature demonstrates that exclusion from education has a cascading effect on employment and economic mobility (Majid et al., 2023). This supports the idea that education is not only a right but also a structural determinant of life chances. By being denied this access, transgender individuals are funneled into informal economies, often high-risk professions, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. Thus, educational exclusion is not merely a symptom of societal bias but a structural mechanism that reproduces inequality across generations. The findings call attention to the urgent need for inclusive schooling policies and sensitized teacher training, without which legal protections remain symbolic.

### **4.3 Healthcare as a Site of Structural and Symbolic Violence**

The literature highlights healthcare spaces as some of the most hostile environments encountered by transgender individuals. Healthcare discrimination, ranging from misgendering and moral judgment to outright refusal of care, creates a dual burden of physical neglect and psychological harm. Studies from Lahore and Karachi identify discriminatory provider attitudes, denial of treatment based on CNIC mismatch, and ridicule during clinical encounters (Azeem et al., 2021; Manzoor et al., 2022). Symbolic violence is evident in the way healthcare settings reinforce stigmatized identities. For example, the fear of being treated as a spectacle leads many to avoid hospitals, worsening untreated conditions. These findings resonate with minority stress theory, which posits that healthcare discrimination produces elevated mental health risks, documented here through high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Aqsa et al., 2024). The lack of gender-affirming protocols, absence of training among healthcare providers, and institutional barriers such as documentation requirements further demonstrate how healthcare is entangled with legal and bureaucratic structures of discrimination. The literature clearly indicates that access to health is not only a clinical issue but a reflection of structural inequity.

### **4.4 Mental Health Impacts as Outcomes of Structural Oppression**

The findings reveal pervasive mental health challenges among transgender individuals, but crucially, the literature shows that psychological distress is not an inherent feature of transgender identity. Instead, it is a direct outcome of multilayered stigma, exclusion, and violence. Studies highlight cumulative trauma resulting from family rejection, community hostility, and institutional neglect (Masood & Naheed, 2025). For transgender men and women, identity conflict is intensified by religious framing, which may serve both as a source of distress and a site of resilience. Javed's (2026) study demonstrates the complex role of faith, which can both invalidate identity and provide coping mechanisms (Javed, 2026). This duality aligns with broader South Asian scholarship on spirituality's ambivalent role in identity formation. By viewing mental health outcomes through a structural lens, rather than an individual deficit model, the findings underscore that reducing psychological distress requires addressing social and institutional determinants, not merely providing clinical interventions.

### **4.5 Violence and Policing: Institutional Reinforcement of Marginalization**

One of the most urgent findings is the normalization of violence, often perpetrated by the very institutions meant to offer protection. Transgender individuals are disproportionately subjected to assault, rape, extortion, and police brutality (Majid et al., 2023; Tripathi et al., 2025). This is consistent with global patterns documented in international research, which identifies transgender individuals as among the most vulnerable to interpersonal violence, with lifetime exposure rates exceeding 60% (McLellan et al., 2026). In Pakistan, however, such violence is exacerbated by institutional neglect: police refusal to file cases, discriminatory law enforcement practices, and targeted violence against those suspected of engaging in sex work. These findings reflect Foucault's conceptualization of state power, where policing becomes a tool of surveillance and punishment against marginalized populations. Violence, therefore, is not incidental but structurally patterned, reinforcing social hierarchies and preventing transgender individuals from accessing justice, safety, or public space.

### **4.6 Economic Exclusion and the Structural Trap of Precarity**

The discussion reveals a clear feedback loop between sociocultural stigma, educational exclusion, and economic marginalization. Transgender individuals are routinely denied formal

employment, either due to lack of qualifications, stemming from earlier school exclusion, or due to direct discrimination by employers (Akram et al., 2023). As a result, many transgender individuals rely on begging, dancing, or sex work as primary sources of livelihood (Majid et al., 2023). Literature on HIV vulnerability further reveals how economic pressures push individuals into unsafe environments where violent encounters and health risks are common (John et al., 2025). This structural trap highlights that economic exclusion is not a by-product but a mechanism of systemic marginalization, limiting mobility and reinforcing dependence on stigmatized economies.

#### **4.7 Legal Protections Without Enforcement: The Implementation Gap**

Although Pakistan's 2018 Act represents one of the most progressive transgender rights laws in South Asia, the literature is unequivocal about the disconnect between legal recognition and lived reality. The implementation gap persists due to bureaucratic inertia, public misconceptions, and religious opposition (Kazmi, 2025; Azhar et al., 2026). Legal recognition alone cannot counteract entrenched cultural biases. For example, gender-appropriate identification documents remain inaccessible to many transgender people due to institutional hurdles. Police violence continues unabated despite formal constitutional guarantees (Tripathi et al., 2025). These findings underscore the need to move beyond legal reform toward institutional accountability and cultural change.

#### **4.8 Cultural Identity and Community Structures: Resilience Amid Marginalization**

Despite pervasive discrimination, transgender communities maintain strong cultural identities rooted in centuries-old Khawaja Sira and Hijra traditions (Wajid, 2025). Community structures such as the guru-chela system provide networks of belonging, economic support, and cultural continuity. Although these networks can reproduce internal hierarchies, they serve as essential survival mechanisms in a society where family and state structures fail to protect gender-diverse individuals. The literature illustrates that resilience emerges not only from resistance to stigma but also through shared cultural practices, historical memory, and collective identity. These findings align with indigenous and decolonial theories that emphasize the importance of reclaiming marginalized identities outside Western gender paradigms.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that transgender, Hijra, and Khawaja Sira individuals in Pakistan continue to face deeply entrenched sociocultural, institutional, and structural marginalization. Despite the promise of progressive legal reforms, most notably the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, the everyday experiences of transgender individuals remain shaped more by social stigma, systemic discrimination, and institutional neglect than by legal protections. Stigma functions as the foundation of exclusion, beginning with family rejection in childhood and persisting through school environments, public spaces, and community interactions. This stigmatization influences every dimension of life, limiting access to education, healthcare, employment, and safety.

Education emerges as one of the earliest sites where structural inequality is reproduced, with school-based bullying, discriminatory policies, and inadequate institutional safeguards contributing to long-term socioeconomic disadvantage. Healthcare systems similarly reinforce exclusion through discriminatory treatment, denial of gender-affirming care, and administrative barriers that make medical spaces unsafe or inaccessible. These challenges are closely linked to elevated mental-health vulnerabilities, including anxiety, depression, and suicidality.

Violence, both interpersonal and institutional, further compounds marginalization. Persistent physical assault, sexual violence, police harassment, and failure of legal systems to offer protection deepen vulnerability to homelessness, unsafe labour, and health risks. Economic marginalization remains both a cause and consequence of these inequalities, confining many transgender individuals to precarious or stigmatized forms of work.

Overall, the literature makes clear that legal reform alone cannot secure meaningful inclusion. Addressing the systemic nature of transgender marginalization requires coordinated, multi-sectoral efforts across education, healthcare, policing, law, and cultural discourse. Sustainable change must be culturally grounded, community-informed, and supported by institutional accountability to bridge the ongoing divide between rights in law and realities in practice.

Meaningful inclusion of transgender, Hijra, and Khawaja Sira individuals in Pakistan requires coordinated, multi-sectoral reform. Priority actions include enforcing existing rights laws, strengthening accountability in policing and public institutions, and introducing gender-inclusive policies in schools and healthcare settings. Public-awareness initiatives must address stigma by engaging religious leaders, educators, and community actors. Expanding economic opportunities through vocational training, employment quotas, and anti-discrimination frameworks is essential to reducing vulnerability. Finally, culturally grounded interventions that recognize indigenous identities and actively involve transgender communities in policy design are crucial for ensuring that legal protections translate into lived equality and dignity.

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