

## **Beyond Gender Binary: Social Acceptance of the Third Gender in Pakistan**

### **Abstract**

*This study is based on social acceptance issues of transgenders in Pakistan. Gender non binary groups gained more visibility after the Supreme Court decision to recognize them as the third gender to give them their due rights. Despite the Supreme Court verdict, the third gender group continues to face stigmatization and is unable to participate in normal social and economic lives available to the majority of people in Pakistan. Through in-depth interviews of 25 transgenders, this article analyzes the different social and institutional biases faced by khawaja siras after their identity disclosure. The labeling theory and symbolic interactionism are used as theoretical framework. The findings indicate that the khawaja sira community faces exclusion because society does not recognize them as a separate gender identity beyond gender binary (male-female dichotomy). For this reason, transgenders have to hide their true identity under the cover of either fake male or female.*

**Keywords:** *Third gender, Khawaja sira, Transgender identity, Gender non-binary, Social Acceptance*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The term transgender refers to individuals who express gender in different ways which deviate from the gender binary system. Because of gender variance, the transgender individual loses legitimacy as a social actor. This is due to the fact that in society, there is no place for individuals who are neither men nor women (Lorber, 1994). Individuals who seek to challenge the gender binary system by crossing gender boundaries are likely to be stigmatized, labeled and excluded. Gender non binary individuals meet with problems like stigmatization and discrimination because they challenge and disrupt the gender dichotomy (Lombardi, 2009). The Pakistani society is assumed to be patriarchal and heteronormative and masculinity is an expression of honour and pride that gives individuals a privileged position in society (Ali, 2018). Most transgenders as children grow up facing hatred from family, peers and other members of society. Transgender identity is also considered as a concealable identity because of the fear of being stigmatized. Most transgenders hide their gender identity in order to avoid discrimination and abuse. Despite its being clearly mentioned in Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan that all citizens are equal before law and entitled to equal

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protection of law (Pakistan, 1973) and that there will be no discrimination on the basis of sex, the law practically does not do any justice to the transgender.

To explore reasons why transgenders conceal their identity, this paper investigates the following research questions: How do gender non-binary individuals experience lack of acceptance in relation to identity disclosure? What are the different social and institutional biases faced by third gender category after their identity disclosure in society?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This research study is based on the theories of symbolic interactionism and labeling theory. Symbolic interactionism sees individual interactions and focuses on how these interactions between people influence their behavior and impact society. Through this theoretical framework we will try to explore how transgenders fight throughout their life to create a social space for themselves and the ways in which their social identities are constructed through mutual interaction. This theory further connects the subjects' daily lives and the stated interactions with each other. Through Mead's symbolic interactionism theory, various supporters of labeling theory advance the theory by proposing that people re-form and build their identities through interaction within society (Joy Moncrieffe, 2007). In order to seek the reason of exclusion faced by the transgender community, this article applies the labeling theory to explore identity disclosure. This theoretical perspective is associated with self-fulfilling prediction and stereotyping.

The labeling theory (Becker, 1960s) focus on the role of social labeling in the development of deviance. Labels are often conferred upon minorities who are seen to be deviant and deviant labels are special because they are stigmatizing labels. Deviant labels in particular are associated with stigma which indicates stereotypes to deviant labels. Once an individual is identified as deviant, it is extremely difficult to take off that label. Transgender individuals are labeled as khusra, chakkas or hijra from a very early age. This type of labeling is done by different members of society including family in many different ways on different occasions. This type of negative label such as khusra, hijra intrigue the individual to the point where the individual is compelled to believe that they really fit in the label of khusra or hijra and later join the hijra community due to lack of social acceptance. People attach labels to transgenders which reflect how others think about their identities and how they think about them. These labels affect their identities as well and people use these labels to define the self-concept of transgender. Labels are often granted upon minorities as negative tags since they are seen as deviant from the standard culture norms. This theory is concerned

about the roles that society provides for deviant behavior which is called deviant role or social stigma. The stigmatization of labels can exclude individuals from mainstream opportunities like education and employment opportunities and exclusion from such type of opportunities become the reason of exclusion from mainstream society. Thus labeling has the ability to stigmatize community individuals in a way that may move them away from mainstream society (Lanier, 2015). Stigma is a powerful negative label which changes a person's self-concept and social identity. A stigmatized person usually has lower self-esteem and may behave as deviant as a result of the negative label. It occurs when an individual is identified as deviant which is linked with negative labels and disqualifies them from social acceptance.

The literature from Pakistani khawaja sira community falls broadly into two categories. One is the anthropological investigation of khawaja sira gender identity and their lives. Secondly, the impact of social exclusion on khawaja sira lives. With some exceptions, most researches have been done with a focus on HIV prevalence or their sexual practices (Bokhari, 2017). Transgender phenomena may be considered "postmodern" since the epistemological concern lies at the heart of transgender critique and motivates the transgender struggle for social justice (Whittle, 2006). Gender is a social institution and internalized sense of self that demands conformity to a binary system where females present themselves as feminine women and males present themselves as masculine men. But this internalized sense of gender does not apply to all individuals who fit within the binary system. Gender identity as a social phenomenon is subject to social norms and operates as an axis of inequality (Johnson, 2015).

Gender diversity was stigmatized, anthologized and often criminalized throughout the twentieth century in many countries across the globe. According to an estimate, 0.3 % of the adult population in Asia and the Pacific may be transgender (Winter, 2012). There are between 9.0 and 9.5 million transgender people in this region according to UN population data 2010 (Winter, 2012) and a number of indigenous terms exist to describe gender variant identities in the Asia-Pacific region. Terms used for transgender or third gender include hijra kinaar in India, khawaja sira in Pakistan, meti in Nepal, Waria in Indonesia, khthoey in Thailand, Mak nyah in Malaysia and *kwaasing-bit* in Hong Kong. These terms have their own unique histories in which some indigenous terms are used as insulting labels for transgenders (Paul Boyce, 2018). This article employs khawaja sira in writing as the term used in Pakistan. There is no discrimination in Articles 25, 26 and 27 of the Constitution of Pakistan on the basis of gender, religion, race, sex, cast, language and residence. According to article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan, all citizens are equal before law but most khawaja siras face various forms of discrimination and suffer unequal treatment wherever they go. Anti-discrimination legislation often does little to improve the life of sexual minorities who are most vulnerable to oppression and at worst continue inequalities in the legal

system (Spade, 2009). The Supreme Court of Pakistan has granted a number of rights to the gender non-conforming persons who are usually known as khawaja sira between 2009 and 2012 in a series of historic landmark rulings with the judiciary pursuing the transgender policy bill through legal and policy development perspectives (Khan F. A., 2019). The Supreme Court ordered that the hijras be accorded the same rights and status as other Pakistanis, in matter of inheritance, employment and election registration (Walsh, 2010). The Supreme Court of Pakistan has therefore granted a separate legal identity to the khawaja sira. Before the Supreme Court ruling there was no third gender category available so the khawaja sira were not recognized as persons by the state. The Supreme Court amended this by issuing multiple directives regarding the legal identity of khawaja siras (Nisar, 2016). The Government of Pakistan has passed Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act to provide for protection of rights, relief and rehabilitation of transgender individuals and other relevant matters (Punjab Social Protection Authority, 2018). This Act prohibits discrimination in school, at work place, in public places and when receiving medical care. This Act guarantees citizens the right to express their gender as they want and regarding gender identity which is defined as, an individual's sense of self as male, female or a blend of both or neither of the sexes assigned at birth. This act allows transgenders to identify themselves as per their sense of identity without consideration of biological factors (Awan M. A., 2018).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This article is based on qualitative data that was collected over a period of 8 months. The data was collected from three districts of Punjab province including Lahore, Jhelum and Bhawalnagar. The paper employs indepth, semi-structured, face to face, and telephonic in-depth interviews with 25 working and non-working transgender participants including 15 from Lahore, 8 from Jhelum and 2 from Bhawalnagar. The researcher visited the third gender hosting institutions and two khawaja sira deras (place generally owned or rented by guru where different members of the khawaja sira community live together). We started interviews in the first week of June, 2019 and completed it in the last week of December 2019. There were several challenges while gaining access to the research respondents. The researchers came to know of a khawaja sira support program by an NGO based in Lahore. Through this program we were able to get in touch with a khawaja sira group. This group of khawaja siras introduced us to the monthly meeting of khawaja siras at Fountainhouse Lahore. From there, through snowball sampling, we started meeting more khawaja siras.

An interview schedule was followed majorly but new questions were added according to the participant's responses to follow a unique line of thought. The researcher used convergent theme generation technique during data analysis process. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher started analysis coding and categorizing techniques used for doing this. This process involved a detailed reading of transcribed interviews time and again, after which the identified and broad themes were traced.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

During the field work, four major themes that emerged from the narratives of the research respondents (1) Discrimination based on gender (2) Stigmatization, humiliation and shame & honour (3) threat of Violence (4) Harassment and threat of Physical and Sexual assault. **Figure1** illustrates driving factors for non-acceptance of gender non binary group on the bases of discrimination and stigmatization that make reason to exclude them from mainstream society.

### Discrimination based on gender

Mostly khawaja sira faced discrimination based on their gender. One of the biggest problems today faced by khawaja sira is discrimination despite fundamental guarantees under the Constitution of Pakistan. Article 25 of the constitution of Pakistan provides for the equality of all citizens before law and states the general prohibition on discrimination. It is clearly mentioned in the Transgender Persons (protection of rights) Act that no one shall discriminate against a transgender person in relation to gender.

Physical/appearance discrimination is where discrimination is treated because of personal characteristics. This discrimination includes bullying someone due to physical features such as height, shape or other characteristics including the way of talking and the feminine gait make reasons for discrimination.

Guria shared her experience regarding appearance:

*It was difficult to get ID card as they were not accepting this thing that what they write male.....or female.*

Balochan shared her experience in public transport

*If we sit in bus, people don't like to sit with us. We get ticket in Daewoo but in local bus, they don't allow us to sit. They ask us to stand here and there. If the transport fare is 100 Rupees they take 150 rupees from us. How can we know that what is the fare because they tell us that took 200 rupees from other passengers and from you we are taking 150 rupees only. In fact they take 100 rupees from others.*

Perveen stated that her feminine appearance will create problems for performing Umrah

*I want to change the picture in the ID card because I want to go on the umrah. I want to paste a picture in male set up on ID card because the picture with dupatta will create a problem.*

Rani shared her experience

*I got this feeling of being different when people made me realized that you are she male (khusara), khawaja sira and hijra. Boys tease me, irritate me, they call me zanana/khusara. Teachers also annoy me. They asked to say*

*“oye Khusra come here, how you study, you are a zanana”. Sometime I feel that being khawaja sira is a crime.*

The research participants shared that first they were discriminated from their family members and later from society. According to them, they have feminine soul inside but our family members insist us to wear male dress and close shaven hair. This type of discrimination limits the livelihood opportunities for khawaja sira community.

Rani spoke about discriminatory behavior by primary institutions and society

*Yes at every place there is unequal treatment with khawaja sira. First people at home start discrimination. Then at school it happens and at work place too. No one likes to sit with us. Even for medicine taking, there is discrimination. This world is not made for us.*

Analysis shows that khawaja sira usually face discrimination while searching for a job and because of discrimination they are compelled to a traditional source of income including begging, blessing and function. Furthermore, wage discrimination is a major problem in the workplace for transgenders.

Mahi Peyasi shared her experience at the workplace

*They ask me to clean floor and washrooms. When I answer that my work/job is cooking and not this. They asked me straightforwardly to go from there ad that they don't want me to work there. Even my salary was delayed several times and no paid after which I had quit the job.*

The participants shared how they become victim of low wages due to their gender identity. According to them, if they work in any house as domestic worker then people don't give us complete wages.

### **Fear of Stigmatization, Humiliation and Shame & honor**

The respondents of this research study spoke about their intimate relationship and how they were separated by the primary institute of care. Their rejection/non acceptance from their family primarily create a sense of social exclusion. This rejection makes this stigmatized group more vulnerable and negatively stereotyped.

Laal shared her experience being an election candidate

*I contested elections from PP 26 Jhelum. The candidates from major political parties were threatening me that why I am contesting election against them and asked that you don't know that who are you? No major political parties recognized us or give us tickets. So first time I contested election independently*

Continuous humiliation is a disruptive influence on the behavior of the individual. The research respondents shared that they constantly experience some form of ridicule, scorn or other degrading treatment by the members of society. In case of transgenders,

a person who belongs to the gender non binary group humiliating by another individual from the gender binary group is often used as a way of asserting power over them.

Upon asking, why Guria would feel bad if people called her “Khusara or hijra” and what she knew or understand “being a khusara meant, she tried to explain

*Better to call “Guria” either Guria or khawaja sira. It does not make any difference but when the word “khusara” comes, it generates very bad thoughts and it goes to bad topic. If you call me “khawaja sira” then there is no issue. Now this word “khusara” sounds really bad. Gays are also called “khusara”. That’s how our community (khawaja sira) get sully (Badnam).*

Labels play a great role in the construction of identity of the labeled person. This labeling is affecting individual self-concepts and stigmatize the individuals which cause further exclusion from mainstream society. There are multiple situations due to which these transgenders feel compelled to join the khawaja sira community. The respondents highlighted that the main reason of leaving home, apart from those mentioned above included the shame that their identity brings on their family. Their deviance is considered to threaten the family honor. Guria spoke about an experience that disturbed her regarding her identity.

*My father doesn’t allow me to meet others. He wants to hide me inside the house. Then I started veil (Burqa) but my gait used to show that I am a khawaja sira.*

Sadiq perveen recalled how her feminine behavior was condemned by her brothers.

*Upon visiting my home, my younger brother said, “bhai (brother) when you come here, please wear male cloths. Now whenever I go, I wear male dresses. He also said to me to wrap up your hair. I never go to my sister’s home in day light and always visit them late at night. If I don’t care then the neighbors will create problem for my sisters and her family.*

### **Threat of Violence**

Violence impacts people in various forms including self-directed violence, interpersonal violence which is within the family and collective violence by a large group of individuals. The respondent of this research became the victim of all types of violence possible. Findings from the interviews reveal that, despite gaining legal recognition, respondents experience both visible and invisible and much more violence at home, workplace and even in the medical and social institutions. The khawaja sira community still faces both verbal and physical violence despite the incremental progress regarding rights for the gender ambiguous people. Different forms of violence are reported by the interviewees.

Uzma got violence by her guru

*I left home at the age of 13. Few shemales were living near my house. I straightaway went to them. But after sometime, I got a clash with them; they tortured and sold me in fifty thousand rupees to some other transgender who came from Faisalabad. She was my guru.*

Rani shared her experience to become victim of verbal violence and bullying during school days.

*Boys teased me a lot. They used to pull from aside, use bad language and threw to us “zanana khusara” dirty jokes. It was very difficult in school days. Teachers also annoyed me by asking “oye Khusara, how you are studying here, you are a zanana”. I discontinued my studies because of all this violence.*

Narratives show that most members of the khawaja sira community are expelled from their homes after they become victims of verbal and physical abuse and they face sarcastic remarks, ironic comments and dirty jokes by the general public.

Uzma shared her experience of collective violence as,

*I was attending a village fair where I was supposed to perform a dance party. There few people came and took me with them forcefully. They really tortured me, beat me up really badly and tore my clothes.*

Mahi also shared her story of becoming a victim of collective violence by a group of individuals during the settlement of a matter of mortgage

*The people whom I gave money for mortgage (girvi) later beat me and broken my face bone when I asked my money back. They even took my mortgage (girvi) papers and thrown me in bushes. When I came to senses after two hours someone took me to hospital. When I got little better then I went to liaqatabad police station. When they asked me the place of incident and responded that your police station is green town. The police made me visit different police stations and eventually made me to take my case back. We have to face double violence as even police consider us inferior and rejected.*

Research respondents who are members of khawaja sira community spoke about various forms of police abuse where often they use dirty language and harassment in the form of sexual favours. It is clear through narratives that khawaja sira face a lot of violence. It occurs at home, school, and work places and even the law enforcement agencies. This is another main reason of social boycott.

### **Harassment and threat of Physical and Sexual assault**

Harassment is a form of discrimination which includes an unwanted verbal or physical act that humiliates someone. According to the Human Rights Section 2(h), harassment includes physical, sexual and mental harassment including unwelcoming remarks or

jokes regarding gender identity or on the grounds of discrimination. Whereas the interviewees stated their general experiences loaded with open harassment on a daily basis.

Mahi shared her harassment and bullying experience at the workplace

*I started my Biryani (spicy rice) on thela. I was making good income. Slowly when my business started getting regularized, people started calling me out as khusara, they used to eat Biryani and didn't give me any money. They used to call out loudly as "oye khusara is making Biryani, which would turn us into khusara as well".*

Rani shared her experience of harassment by security/police

*After returning from a function I was stopped by the police. They asked me to bring for them the cigarettes or juices from the grocery store which was quite far away. I used to serve them despite I used to be tired, as I knew no cooperation would bring lots of harassment from the police in terms of false allegations of theft or stealing etc.*

These narratives show that research participants engage in verbal harassment on a daily basis by most people. It is observed from the interviewees' narratives that they are being harassed even at the holy shrines. Transgenders become more vulnerable because they are abandoned by their own family members and therefore become easy victims for physical and sexual harassment. Victims are first sexually and then socially harassed which becomes even more humiliating.

Disco shared her childhood experience to show how she was subjected to sexual abuse by cousins

*When my cousins (boys) came to know that I am different gender wise, they started to touch me followed by sexual assault. I was not aware about sexual abuse but I became the victim of it at very early stage.*

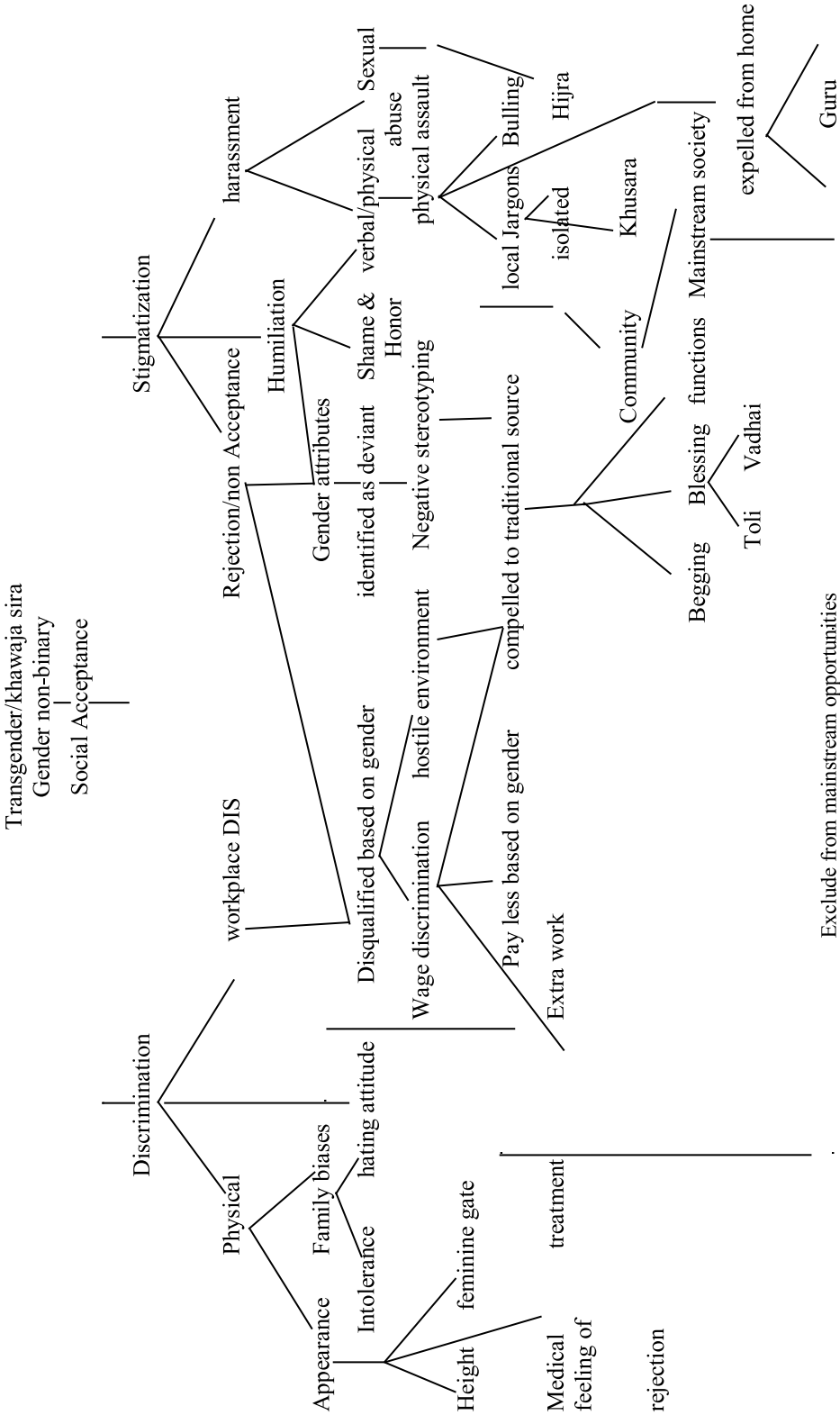
Narratives such as these show that transgenders have higher chances of sexual and physical harassment since early ages.

Disco further shared that how she became the victim of sexual abuse by police

*The police are standing on every next naka (check post), if they find us there then they will start saying that they are extremely bored. They use us for their entertainment. We have to remain silent as they get nasty if we resist. We are not human for them; we are just "garbage" to them which they can use as they want.*

This and other narratives show that the khawaja sira becomes an easy target of sexual abuse, physical assault and thus have feelings of rejection. Most transgenders become victims to sexual harassment because transgender rights are not properly implemented in society.

**Fig 1: Social Acceptance Factors for Transgenders' Identity Disclosure**



Exclude from mainstream opportunities

Chela

## CONCLUSION

This article explores gender non binary individuals facing lack of acceptance based on the narratives of this study's participants. The findings of this study suggest that the issues of the transgender community have their roots in family disownership and their childhood neglect leads to the violation of their basic human rights. This culture of family disownership is the first step where denial to education, inheritance, health, dignity and other fundamental rights begin. Transgenders are not accepted by society unless they are accepted, respected and treated as normal individuals beyond gender binary within their family fabric. The analysis of social discourse in this case reveals that research participants face lack of acceptance in society due to stigma and discrimination. They fail to resist the social stigma and therefore encounter harassment, violence and discrimination. In that sense, a non-binary gender identity is still a stigmatized identity. They grow up with a lack of acceptance by informal social institutions which influences one's identity and is perceived as a deviant identity because the family shows intolerance and does not try to understand the gender identity of their khawaja sira children (Hershberger, 1995).

The Supreme Court of Pakistan proceeded to consult the khawaja sira's legal identity which had little relevance with their self-identity. Another important point that the social position envisaged by the court for the khawaja sira was that disabled individuals are not a gender queer group. According to Butler, sex and gender are distinct through socially constructed aspects of an individual's identity (Butler, 1999). The legal identity construction of the khawaja sira was only one part of the Supreme Court decision and the other part of the decision which was redistribution of justice for khawaja sira was ignored and not implemented. Still the social and economic marginalization of khawaja sira persist because of limited implementation of the Supreme Court decision. Thus the formal social recognition of khawaja sira resulted in minor changes in their daily lives because of the limited implementation and the power of informal social institutions that continues to exclude khawaja sira even after the Supreme Court directive.

Due to their feminine characteristics these individual become victims of harassment, ostracism, extreme discrimination and abuse which begin at home and extends to all spheres of their life. Literature reveals that verbal and sexual harassment are common at the hands of policemen despite the improvement in the status of khawaja sira after getting legal identity (Khan F. A., 2014). Zafar argues that most transgenders become victims to sexual harassment because transgender rights are not properly implemented in society (Zafar, 2019). They are assaulted in public places like parks, markets, buses and trains. They don't have any support against these incidents which take place frequently. Thus transgenders as individuals have been struggling with social acceptance due to the unbalance between gender and sex. There are individuals who

join the group because they want to tackle societal rejection and associating themselves with the khawaja sira community distances them further.

Some form of social exclusion faced by the research participants who were part of the khawaja sira community include exclusion from informal social institution family leading to exclusion from social participation, violence at home by parents, brothers, relatives which includes shame & honour , humiliation and harassment, labeling (local jargons), lack of protection from state authorities such as police, sexual favors and arrest on false allegations, restricted access to health services, education and public spaces as well as exclusion from economic and livelihood opportunities.

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