

Inclusive Education: Examining the Role of Vocational Institutions in Supporting Trans and Gender-Diverse Communities in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper investigates the potential role of vocational institutions specifically designed for trans and gender-diverse individuals in making education more accessible to them, given that these individuals are often socially excluded in Pakistan. The study is based on interviews with alumni from Pakistan's pioneering transgender school, referred to here as the "School of Hope for the Marginalized." Through these interviews, the research aims to understand how vocational education can support the vocational wellbeing of its students. This paper's core objective is to evaluate this school's impact on its students by examining the lived experiences of trans and gender-diverse students who attended the institution in Pakistan. By focusing on these personal accounts, the study seeks to uncover the ways in which the school has influenced their lives, both positively and negatively. This includes assessing changes in their vocational skills, self-esteem, social integration, and overall quality of life. The findings are intended to provide insights into the effectiveness of vocational education in improving the socio-economic status and personal development of trans and gender-diverse individuals, who are often marginalized in society.

Keywords: *Transgender Education, Vocational Training, Gender Diversity, Social Inclusion, Transgender Rights*

Introduction

The experience of transgender individuals is often marked by a myriad of complex and ongoing challenges, encompassing social, emotional, and financial aspects. This has been extensively documented in existing literature by Divan et al. (2016), Zia (2022), and Abbas S. B. (2021). It's important to acknowledge that this paper will use the terms "trans," "gender diverse," and "transgenders" interchangeably throughout. It's worth noting that the term "transgenders" may be perceived as offensive by many individuals within the trans and gender-diverse communities. Nevertheless, the use of this term is based on its prevalent appearance in the literature supporting this study.

This paper focuses on vocational education institutions, exploring their challenges, students' experiences, and the impact these institutions have on their students' lives. The paper examines these aspects to extract lessons applicable to similar institutions, thereby highlighting the crucial role and significance of education for marginalised groups. Several studies suggest that gender expression often influences bias against individuals more than their sexual orientation or gender identity alone. Although transphobia is generally more prevalent among men and heterosexuals compared to women and LGBT individuals, there is evidence that transgender individuals can also face exclusion within the LGBT community if they do not conform to established gender norms (Salvati et al., 2018a, b).

By delving into the specific experiences of students at vocational institutions for trans and gender-diverse people, this research seeks to highlight the unique challenges and successes of these educational environments. The ultimate goal is to inform and improve educational practices and policies, ensuring that they are inclusive and supportive of all students, regardless of their gender identity or expression. This paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how education can be a powerful tool for social inclusion and personal development for trans and gender-diverse individuals in Pakistan and beyond.

Research Objectives

The primary goal of this research initiative is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the myriad challenges encountered by transgender and gender-diverse individuals, with the ultimate aim of enhancing communication and support for this community. It is imperative for professionals involved in assisting transgender and gender-diverse individuals to partake in robust educational and training programs that will empower them to provide better support and care for this community. In summary, the key objectives are as follows:

1. To thoroughly investigate the challenges faced by the institution when dealing with transgender and gender-diverse individuals.
2. To delve into the diverse and nuanced experiences of transgender and gender-diverse students within the institution.
3. To ascertain the real-life impact of the institution on the practical lives of transgender and gender-diverse students.

Literature Review

Trans and gender-diverse individuals have a long history in the Indian subcontinent, existing since pre-colonial times and often referred to locally as hijras (Sharma, 2012). Their historical presence spans over 3000 years, which is significantly longer—approximately 97% more—than Pakistan itself's 72-year history. Despite their long-standing existence, it was not until 2018 that a landmark bill granted legal recognition to the transgender community in Pakistan, officially integrating them into society.

Researchers have conducted extensive research on trans and gender-diverse populations. However, while there is increasing focus on biases against individuals who identify as trans or gender diverse (e.g., Grant et al., 2011; Morison et al., 2018), comprehensive studies covering the entire trans and gender-diverse population remain scarce in mainstream literature (Scandurra et al., 2019). Additionally, there is a growing body of research investigating the perspectives of professionals who assist transgender individuals (e.g., Kanamori et al., 2017; Stryker et al., 2019).

Studies indicate that vulnerable groups, such as trans individuals, who engage in one risky behaviour are more likely to repeat such behaviours in the future (Jordan, 2000). This highlights the importance of understanding the social environment and identifying the risk behaviours driving trans and gender-diverse individuals to act in socially unacceptable ways, particularly in the context of Pakistan. Early identification of factors contributing to drug abuse, commercial sex work, and suicidal tendencies among transgender people can lead to more effective interventions aimed at modifying behaviours and protecting individuals based on their gender identity and expression (Khan et al., 2009).

The education sector in Pakistan largely excludes trans and gender-diverse communities, depriving them of cognitive social capital and a structured framework for meaningful inclusion in society. There is a lack of concrete evidence in research regarding

the well-being of trans and gender-diverse individuals through education. This study, therefore, examines the "School of Hope for the Marginalised," an educational institution that provides vocational training to the trans and gender-diverse community. The research explores whether such a school could serve as a sustainable solution for knowledge dissemination within this community. To achieve this, the study conducted interviews with alumni to assess the impact of the school and vocational education on the lives of trans and gender-diverse individuals.

Current research in this area is limited, necessitating more studies involving Pakistani trans individuals and Urdu-speaking samples. Most existing studies, conducted with English-speaking samples, fail to adequately represent the context-sensitive issues faced by trans and gender-diverse people in Pakistan today. Therefore, this literature review aims to conceptualise the context, educational content, competencies, and societal attitudes towards transgender education.

This paper aims to deepen our understanding of the struggles faced by trans and gender-diverse people and improve communication with them. To better support this community, it is critical for professionals who assist trans and gender-diverse individuals to engage in effective educational and training experiences.

Research Hypotheses

1. Transgender and gender-diverse students in Pakistan are eager to improve their lives and social status. However, they face significant barriers due to systemic social, economic, and educational constraints.
2. Specifically designed educational institutions provide a greater sense of safety and security for transgender and gender-diverse students in Pakistan. These schools offer a supportive environment tailored to their unique challenges, helping them feel more protected and understood compared to mainstream educational settings.

Research Methodology

We used qualitative research to look into the importance of education in the lives of trans and gender diverse people in Pakistan. We also studied how a school created specifically for them is helping to improve their lives. The research focused on the alumni of "School of Hope for the Marginalized".

We chose the alumni of the school to participate in the study. We collected data through interviews, including demographic information. To ensure reliability and validity, we

conducted the interviews in a natural environment and used only the stories of the trans and gender diverse students. We carried out structured interviews with the alumni of the school. Most of them are currently undergoing vocational training at the school and some have no previous experience in reading and writing, so most of the data collection was in oral form.

We created an open-ended questionnaire guide for the interviews in order to include the perspectives of individual trans and gender-diverse people. To protect the identity of the participants, we collected demographic information based on age and duration of enrollment at the school, considering the sensitive nature of the study.

We analyzed the detailed responses from the interviews using the Gibbs Reflective Cycle, which is a structured approach to logically reflect. We identified key issues that appeared repeatedly in the responses and comments by reading and listening to the transcripts and highlighting potential sub-themes and themes.

Data Analysis and Results

22 years old, Responder A belongs to the “Syed” family, an honourable family name of Muslims recognised as direct descendants of the Prophet (SAW), and suggested that it may be possible for them to behave as who they really are, perhaps in front of the world but never in their family. Therefore, Responder A identified this as their primary challenge in life, stating that they had previously been unaware of their own agency and wondered if they could ever escape their problems. However, when they joined the School of Hope for the Marginalized, they learned valuable skills and gained confidence that they could establish their own social standing in society based on their skills, potentially eliminating the need to rely on their family.

Respondent A is a recurrent student of the school and has completed several courses within the School of Hope for the Marginalized. They initially enrolled in a stitching course at the School of Hope for the Marginalized and, after completion, joined the computer course. After graduating, they went back to the School of Hope for the marginalized and enrolled in a beautician course. At the time of the interview, they had just graduated from their beautician course, which, according to them, they were taking for the second time. They enrolled to fully understand all aspects of makeup, with the ultimate goal of becoming a make-up artist.

Respondent A is currently pursuing their studies in accordance with their family's wishes, while also working to meet their financial obligations. Their family is unaware of their affiliation with the School of Hope for the Marginalised, which they themselves

acknowledge as a barrier to their ability to communicate openly with their family. They attribute this to the stigma associated with their identity and the general nature of their circumstances. Respondent A credited the school, School of Hope for the Marginalised, with having taught them the dignity and love of their labour and taught them that it's their absolute right to earn an honourable livelihood and that nobody can stop them.

Respondent A rated their overall learning experience at School of Hope for the marginalised at 70% and acknowledged that they wish to hone their prowess to 100%. They expressed their desire to work in a salon that values and encourages their skills. Respondent A adamantly pointed out that they've experienced harsh life experiences and have come to the realization that only education can bring them the rewards they seek, and that they can never trust anything other than education to help them become independent.

Respondent B, 27 years old, completed the beautician course at the School of Hope for the Marginalized, yet is currently looking for a job. At the time of the interview, they spent most of their time at home. Respondent B shared that their family is aware of their contribution at School of Hope for the Marginalised and is content with Respondent B having pursued the beautician field at School of Hope for the Marginalised.

Respondent B firmly asserted their education and interpersonal skills, refuting any instances of societal ostracism stemming from their gender identity. When recalling their time at School of Hope for the Marginalised, Responder B shared that there was always a "belonging" and that they all miss each other a lot. Additionally, Responder B pointed out that there is absolutely no "superiority" or "inferiority" amongst them, irrespective of what one's job status and designation may be.

Moreover, they expressed their satisfaction and comfort with the knowledge they have gained at the School of Hope for the Marginalized, given that they had no prior knowledge of even the most basic skills before enrolling there. Respondent B went on to express their desire for the School of Hope for the Marginalized to offer a wider range of courses, including those related to skin treatments, hair cutting, and music.

Finally, Responder B revealed that they typically connect with their friend at a well-known

During their time at School of Hope for the Marginalized, they also reached out to their friends outside of school, as they had already made friends and were content with their current life.

Responder C, who is currently employed at a university, identified herself as a "she-transgender," a term we will characterize and assume to refer to a transgender (or gender diverse) woman. Respondent C expressed that their gender identity is often overlooked and misrepresented in society. Despite having a good job, they chose to attend the School of Hope for the Marginalized as a means of empowering themselves independently. Prior to enrolling at School of Hope for the Marginalized, Responder C worked as a university employee. He reported that he had been a part of the school for almost five years, and he shared that he had sent many of his peers there. However, he only joined the school a few months ago, and he has now completed his course. Furthermore, Responder C asserted that he was the most experienced student at School of Hope for the Marginalized, emphasizing that all the other students were familiar with them. As a result, they consistently received respectful treatment at School of Hope for the Marginalized, even during their current visits.

Responder C, reminiscing about their time at School of Hope for the Marginalized, expressed that the organization consistently embraced their individuality, allowed them to express themselves freely, and upheld their rights. They revealed that they encounter numerous challenges in the workplace due to policies that solely support men and women, requiring individuals like them to alter their hairstyles and refrain from wearing lipstick, among other restrictions. However, they never had to do that at the School of Hope for the Marginalized, and they recalled it as an act to teach them that they need to normalize themselves in society so that people start to accept them as they are

Respondent C wished to continue at School of Hope for the marginalized, but due to other commitments and jobs, they couldn't continue after their stitching course. If they do get time, they will try to join the school again to, as they put it, "become someone successful." Even though they don't currently use these skills for a job, they find personal satisfaction in the fact that they can now sew their own tops, saving money and providing comfort.

Respondent D joined School of Hope for the marginalised for multiple courses, with the computer course being their latest. She currently works from home and stitches clothes. They recalled that the best part of School of Hope for the marginalised was the stipend or honorarium they received at the end of each month to cover their class expenses. Respondent

D shared that the stipend relieved them of any stress regarding coming to school, and instead everyone liked coming to school.

Respondent D praised the School of Hope for the Marginalized for their grooming, highlighting the "unconditional love" they received and the fact that no one ever called them names or made any disparaging remarks. Having completed multiple courses at the School of Hope for the Marginalized, Responder D highlighted the beautician course as the most beneficial, given their personal inclination towards fashion. They mentioned that they were relatively quiet at the School of Hope for the Marginalised, preferring to observe rather than actively participate in any activities. They further remarked that the school arranged almost all types of recreational activities, with the exception of dance.

Responder D, an aspiring fashion designer, shared that they currently have a "Guru" who supports them, and the faculty at School of Hope for the Marginalised has also encouraged them to pursue fashion design. However, they currently face obstacles due to their belief that everything revolves around money, and they lack the means to pursue their goals.

Responder E, who is 30 years old, claims to be a "Guru" and has students, known as chelas, whom they currently supervise and manage for their livelihood. They shared their concern about aging and how it limits their work. Respondent E joined the School of Hope for the Marginalised beauty course, and one year after graduation, she joined the school again for the stitching course.

Furthermore, they shared how they don't look for jobs as they are already aware they won't be able to find one and instead will be mocked and asked to leave, and so entirely depend on what events they get to earn a livelihood, which is erratic as sometimes they don't get an event to perform in for a month and sometimes they get two events on the same day. They remembered their time at the School of Hope for the Marginalized as a welcoming environment where everyone received the same treatment as students.

Lastly, they fondly reminisced about their entire tenure at the School of Hope for the Marginalized. However, they expressed their reluctance to seek advice or support from anyone at the school, citing a lack of understanding of the severity of their issues. Consequently, they relied solely on their close friend, who also happens to be a Guru. Respondent E concluded that they never joined the School of Hope for the marginalised to

get a job, as they never expect anyone to give them a job but to make use of the time they have, and as they age, they need to think of other reliable sources of income.

The paper explores how vocational education at the School of Hope has impacted the practical lives of trans and gender diverse students. Alumni shared their experiences, including awareness and enthusiasm for education, experiences of ostracization, knowledge about their rights, improved reading and writing abilities, and expectations after graduating. Despite individual differences, all alumni found their experience unforgettable and many wished to remain connected to the school. They asserted that the school helped them advocate for their rights and become more confident citizens.

Discussion and Recommendations,

Discussion

Trans and gender-diverse individuals in Pakistan evidently face exclusion and marginalisation in society. Despite these challenges, there is a growing movement advocating for trans rights in Pakistan. Activists and organisations are working towards creating inclusive policies and promoting acceptance within communities. Thus, this paper acknowledges the social exclusion of trans and gender diverse people from general society, which can be due to cultural, religious, or both factors. In one way or another, all alumni interviewed reported experiencing ostracism from society and their close ones. However, they believed their experience at School of Hope for the Marginalized to be different and instead felt "confident" and welcomed/accepted. Divan et al.'s (2016) study on the exclusion of the trans community, which identified the human rights gap in only a few trans students advancing to higher education due to feelings of "resentment" and eventual "dropping out" of the institutions, largely aligns with this conclusion.

While there has been progress in improving the state of trans and gender-diverse individuals in Pakistan, there remains a significant distance to cover. Various stakeholders, including the government, civil society organisations, and the general public, must sustain their efforts to ensure equal rights, inclusion, and acceptance for the trans and gender-diverse community. This paper concludes that in the absence of sustainable and adequate infrastructure to support the trans community across the nation's population, schools such as the School of Hope for the Marginalised play a crucial role in promoting education for the trans community by providing exclusive vocational education.

Recommendations

Future research on this subject matter should further investigate the model of such a school to determine whether it is vocational education or the need for "exclusive education" that fosters a sense of safety and belonging among trans and gender-diverse communities. To study this aim, the researchers should also include the currently enrolled students and perhaps the school's faculty as well.

Additionally, a comparative analysis of the experiences of trans and gender diverse students enrolled in "regular" schools with male and female students, and in a "exclusive" school with only trans and gender diverse students, will truly benefit academia. This comparison of not only the academic and vocational aspects, but also the emotional and social well-being of trans and gender diverse students, may allow for a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

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