
VOCATIONAL WELLBEING OF TRANS AND GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE OF PAKISTAN: AN INSIGHT INTO AN EXCLUSIVE LEARNING MODEL FOR PAKISTAN'S TRANS COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of vocational institutions that cater exclusively to trans and gender-diverse people to make education accessible to them as trans and gender-diverse people are (most of the time) socially excluded in Pakistan. To develop this conjecture, this paper interviewed some alumni of Pakistan's first transgender school; School of Hope for the Marginalized, and carries a conjecture through interviews on the students who graduated from School of Hope for the Marginalized to understand how vocational education sustains the vocational wellbeing of its students. The objectives of this paper, henceforth, are to understand how this school impacted the lives (if at all) of its students by looking at the trans and gender-diverse students' lived experiences at the school in Pakistan.

KEYWORDS

Vocational Education, Trans and gender diverse community in Pakistan, Trans rights, Access to Education, Exclusive Education for Trans

INTRODUCTION

Typically, a transgender person is likely to endure a lifelong succession of social, emotional, and financial struggles, sufferings, and obstacles. (Divan et al., 2016; Zia, 2022; Abbas S. B., 2021) Whilst this statement stands corrected even now, we need to understand that for the extent of this paper, the terminology used will move between trans and gender diverse and transgenders. This paper however recognizes that the term 'transgenders' is often received as an offense by trans and gender diverse people, however, the literature used to support this paper does use the term "transgender" and therefore is used inconsequential to the referred citation. Additionally, although the school has given informed consent, this paper has still anonymized the school's name to "School of Hope for the Marginalized" to maintain the safety of the students who

attend, especially given the ever-changing ideological stance of trans and gender diverse children globally, especially in Pakistan.

The paper looks at vocational education institutions; its problems, challenges, students' experiences and its impact on the students' life so that lessons can be learned for this and other such institutions. This may also increase awareness about the role and importance of education. According to a handful of studies, bias may be influenced by people's gender expression more so than by their sexual orientation or gender identity alone. While transphobia is certainly more prevalent among men than women and heterosexuals than LGBT people, there is evidence that transgender persons may be excluded within the LGBT community when they breach established gender norms (Salvati et al., 2018a, b).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing in the subcontinent from pre-colonial times, locally addressed as hijras (at that time); trans and gender diverse folks have been a part of a rich and interminable history spanning at least over 3000 years (Sharma, 2012). This shows that the history of transgenders existence is 97% more extensive than the history of Pakistan's existence in the subcontinent, as Pakistan has only spanned history for 72 years, yet it wasn't until 2018 that a landmark bill accorded the transgender community with a legal status and considered it a part of the society. Numerous studies have been conducted in the area of trans and gender-diverse studies. And although more research is being done on the biases that exist towards those who identify as trans (and/or gender diverse) (e.g., Grant et al., 2011; Morison et al., 2018), thorough studies that focus on the whole trans and gender diverse population are still missing from the mainstream (Scandurra et al., 2019). Similarly, a growing corpus of study is looking into how assisting professionals view transgender people in particular (e.g., Kanamori et al., 2017; Stryker et al., 2019).

According to published research, vulnerable groups such as transgenders that participate in one hazardous conduct are more likely to do so again in the future (Jordan, 2000). Making it utterly essential to comprehend the social environment and realize the risk behaviors that are driving trans and gender diverse folks to act or behave in an unacceptable way, in Pakistan's social context. Khan et al. (2009) notes that early identification of the causes of rising drug misuse, driving transgender people into commercial sex, and suicidal tendencies can improve people's life. This will assist in creating a successful intervention that aims to change behaviors and safeguard individuals depending on their gender identity and expression.

Trans and gender diverse communities of Pakistan are widely outcasted from the education sector and are thereby stranded of any cognitive social capital and

scaffolded framework to be conscientiously included into the nation's populous. With no concrete evidence in research on the well-being of trans and gender diverse people through education, this research, thereby dissects an educational institution, "School of Hope for the Marginalized", which caters to trans and gender diverse community vocationally and that such a school may be the only sustainable solution for knowledge dissemination for the aforementioned community. To do so, this paper interviewed the alumni of the school to look at the impact the school and vocational education have made on the trans and gender-diverse community.

More studies with Pakistani transgenders and Urdu-speaking samples is still required because there aren't many of them, especially when it comes to social transgender educators' exclusive knowledge about and views regarding transgenders and their issues. The existing studies in the field, however, are undertaken with English-speaking samples and do not always represent the context-sensitive situation that we see at present in Pakistan. Henceforth, this literature review consists of ideating the concept, context, educational content, competency and societal attitudes towards transgender education.

This paper, hence, attempts to better understand the struggles of trans and gender-diverse people and to communicate with them more effectively, it is crucial for assisting professionals who work with trans and gender-diverse individuals to engage in successful educational and training experiences

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the challenges faced by the institution
2. To explore the experiences of the students
3. To find out the impact of this school on students' practical life

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

1. Trans and gender diverse students in Pakistan are eager to improve their status in the society but have limited opportunities.
2. Trans and gender diverse students in Pakistan feel safer in a school which exclusively caters to them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows a qualitative research design to explore the relevance of education in the lives of trans and gender diverse folks in Pakistan and how a school exclusively set up for them is facilitating them to improve their lives. Population of this research was the alumni of "School of Hope for the Marginalized".

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that alumni of the school are thoroughly

represented in the sample. Data collection was conducted using interviews, including demographic information. Reliability and validity were managed by ensuring that the interviews took place in a natural environment and only using the narratives provided by trans and gender diverse students to describe characteristics, averages, trends, etc. for vocational education for trans and gender-diverse people. Primarily (structured) interviews were conducted with the alumni of “School of Hope for the Marginalized”. Given that most of the participants are (still) undergoing a vocational training course at the school and some don’t have any prior experience in reading and writing, very few data gatherings have been in written form yet mostly in oral form.

Considering that the most important part of the paper is to include individual trans and gender-diverse people’s perspectives, a detailed open-ended questionnaire guide has been developed for interviews. To keep ecological validity and gather a realistic interpretation of the institution whilst protecting the identity of the participants given the sensitive theme of the study, the demographics were collected based on age and duration of enrolment at the school. The detailed responses from the interviews with trans and gender-diverse people were analyzed in a manner consistent with the Gibbs Reflective Cycle, as it “provides a structured approach to logically reflect” (Zhan et al., 2023). The key issues that appeared repeatedly in responses and comments, were identified by reading and listening to the transcripts and highlighting potential sub-themes (from the interviews) and themes (from the reflection) as they appeared.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interview 1: Alumni A

22 years old, Alumni A belongs to a “Syed” family, an honorable family name of Muslims recognized 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. Hence, Alumni A claimed this to be the prime challenge in their life and mentioned how they were previously unaware of their own agency and if they could “ever” escape their problems until they joined School of Hope for the Marginalized and learnt skills and be confident that they can have their own social standing in society on their skills and may no longer have to rely on their family.

Alumni A is a recurrent student of the school and has completed several courses within School of Hope for the Marginalized. They initially enrolled at School of Hope for the Marginalized for a stitching course and after completion joined the computer course. After graduating, they went back to School of Hope for the Marginalized and enrolled in a beautician course. At the time of the interview, they had graduated from their beautician course which according to them, they were doing it for the second time and joined to completely grasp all knowledge regarding makeup and then finally step into the practical world, as it is their dream to become a make-up artist.

Alumni A, is currently studying as per the wishes of their family and also works to pay their bills and their family doesn't know that they were and are part of School of Hope for the Marginalized as they themselves put it, "... so I can't open up to my family the way one can/should, sometimes because of the stigma attached to my identity and sometimes because of how things generally are." Alumni A credited the school, School of Hope for the Marginalized, to have taught them the dignity and love for their labor and taught them that it's their absolute right to earn an honorable livelihood and that nobody can stop them.

Alumni A, rated their overall learning experience at School of Hope for the Marginalized to 70% and acknowledged that they wish to hone their prowess to a 100%. They furthered their views and shared that they wish to be employed at a salon where their skills are appreciated and encouraged. Alumni A, adamantly pointed out that they've had harsh experiences in life and have realized that only education can give the rewards they seek in life and that nothing else beside education can ever be trusted and thus continues to learn more and more to become independent.

Interview 2: Alumni B

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

Alumni B strongly affirmed themselves as an educated individual who knows how to deal with people and thereby denied to have ever been made to feel ostracized by the society due to their gender identity. When recalling their time at School of Hope for the Marginalized, Alumni B shared that there was always a "belonging" at School of Hope for the Marginalized and that they all miss each other a lot. Additionally, Alumni 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 said that they are still learning and will continue to learn but are satisfied and comfortable with what they had learnt at School of Hope for the Marginalized, as they didn't know before coming to School of Hope for the Marginalized even the slightest of the skills. Alumni B, furthered, and suggested that they wished the variety of courses was more diverse and courses regarding skin treatments, hair cutting and music were also introduced at School of Hope for the Marginalized.

Lastly, Alumni B shared that they usually reach out to their friend at a renowned

beauty salon of the country for any career advice and during their time at School of Hope for the Marginalized had also reached out to their friends outside school as they have made their friends already and are satisfied with life as it is going.

Interview 3: Alumni C

Currently an employee at a university, Alumni C introduced themselves as a “she-transgender”, which we for this research will characterize and presume as trans (or gender diverse) woman. Alumni C mentioned that their gender identity as poor (and mis-) representation in the society and although they have a good job they still went to School of Hope for the Marginalized to make something out of themselves on their own.

Had been a university employee before enrolling at School of Hope for the Marginalized, Alumni C reported to have been part of School of Hope for the Marginalized for almost five years and shared that they sent a lot of their peers to this school yet only joined themselves recently a few months ago and have now completed their course. In addition, Alumni C claimed to be the most senior than all the students at School of Hope for the Marginalized and shared how all the students knew them and they knew the students and thus were always treated with respect at School of Hope for the Marginalized, even now when they visit.

When recalling their time at School of Hope for the Marginalized, Alumni C stated that School of Hope for the Marginalized had always encouraged them to be who they are and wear whatever they want and were given all their rights. They shared that there are a lot of problems that one has to face at a workplace as their policies only encourage men and women and people like them are asked to not keep their hair the way they have and not wear lipstick etc. However they never had to do that at School of Hope for the Marginalized and recalled it as an act to teach them that they have to normalize themselves into the society so that people start to accept them as they are.

Alumni C wished to continue at School of Hope for the Marginalized yet due to other commitments and jobs couldn't continue after their stitching course yet if they do get time they will try to join the school again to, as they put it, “become someone successful”. They mentioned that it is in their own benefit, that even if they are not using these skills currently for a job, if they for instance need a top to be stitched they can now do it themselves and save their money, which is a great source of comfort for them.

Interview 4: Alumni D

Alumni D joined School of Hope for the Marginalized for multiple courses with the computer course being their latest and currently works from home and stitches clothes.

The best part of School of Hope for the Marginalized, they recalled, was the stipend/honorarium they were given at the end of every month to meet their expenses of classes. Alumni D shared that the stipend relieved them from any stress regarding coming to school and instead everyone liked coming to school.

Alumni D accredited and appraised School of Hope for the Marginalized for their grooming and emphasized on the “unconditional love” that was given to them and how no one ever called them names or passed any derogatory remarks. Having done multiple courses from School of Hope for the Marginalized, Alumni D mentioned the beautician course to have been the best as they are themselves more inclined towards fashion. They mentioned that they were relatively quiet at School of Hope for the Marginalized and would observe more instead of actively taking part in any activities, and further remarked that School of Hope for the Marginalized arranged almost all types of recreational activities except dance.

An aspiring fashion designer, Alumni D, shared that they currently have a “Guru”, who also supports them and the faculty at School of Hope for the Marginalized has also encouraged them to pursue fashion designing but currently they have their hands tied as they believe everything runs on “money” and they simply do not have the means currently to pursue their goals.

Interview # 5 - Alumni E

30 years old, Alumni E claimed to be a “Guru” and thus have students (chelas) they have to supervise and currently manage functions for their students to sustain their livelihood. They shared their concern of aging and how that limits their work for them. Alumni E joined School of Hope for the Marginalized for beautician course and one year after graduation joined the school again for 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 recalled time at School of Hope for the Marginalized as welcoming and that everyone was treated equally like students and nothing else.

Lastly, they recalled all of their time spent at School of Hope for the Marginalized with great affection yet mentioned that they never sought advice or support from anyone at School of Hope for the Marginalized as such as they didn’t believe anyone to understand the gravity of their issues and thereby they only (still) reach out to their close friend who is also a Guru. Alumni E, concluded that they never joined School of Hope for the Marginalized 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.

Following are the questions and their corresponding responses by each alumni on which this paper formulates its argument of how vocational education for trans and gender diverse students at School of Hope for the Marginalized has impacted the practical lives of the trans community. The five questions were asked in accordance with the research objectives and navigated the student experiences at the School of Hope for the Marginalized and its impact on them, post-facto to them graduating from the school.

Theme 1: Alumni's awareness and enthusiasm for education and/or School of Hope for the Marginalized.

Alumni A: Through a friend.

Alumni B: Through a friend.

Alumni C: I had known about this school for almost five years and many of my students and friends were already enrolled here.

Alumni D: Through a friend.

Alumni E: Through my student (chela).

Theme 2: Alumni's experience of ostracization.

Alumni A: There weren't any issues as such, but I did have to hide disclosing that I am enrolled at School of Hope for the Marginalized due to family values.

Alumni B: No, everyone around me knew and I never had to face any issues regarding joining School of Hope for the Marginalized.

Alumni C: Not really. I have been facing issues since childhood so by now I also know how to deal with issues but so far haven't faced any challenges.

Alumni D: Never in School of Hope for the Marginalized, but yes as you know outside this school people harass us all the time.

Alumni E: Never inside School of Hope for the Marginalized as we are all "shemales" here, so no one "hoots" here or anything, everyone is very sensible.

Theme 3: Alumni's knowledge about their rights.

Alumni A: Absolutely, it helped us know who we are and we were informed of the slightest of our rights of how we can carry ourselves in the outside world.

Alumni B: Yes, the school's existence in itself is showing us that we have rights and it is a great step.

Alumni C: It is all about "awareness" and when people like us reach a certain age we already start to know ourselves and what our rights should be. So at School of Hope for the Marginalized, by just being ourselves without any restrictions taught us that we do have rights and it is okay to be ourselves.

Alumni D: Yes, absolutely, we've gotten all guidance from our teachers and the stipend that we get is really helpful in this regard as well.

Alumni E: Yes, they support us a lot. They include us in Ramadan and distribute food items with us on both Eid ceremonies and make us part of the community as much as they can.

Theme 4: Alumni's ability to read and write.

Alumni A: 100%

Alumni B: A lot.

Alumni C: After School of Hope for the Marginalized, I have now full confidence in my abilities...

Alumni D: A lot, I have learnt a lot at School of Hope for the Marginalized.

Alumni E: It's fine, as in, I have felt much better now regarding reading and writing.

Theme 5: Alumni's expectations after graduating from School of Hope for the Marginalized.

Alumni A: A good working place, salon, where I am appreciated.

Alumni B: I wanted to start teaching these skills I have learnt to others and I am currently working on it and I think this will also help others too.

Alumni C: I wanted to remain a part of School of Hope for the Marginalized, as I enjoy it a lot so I will stay at School of Hope for the Marginalized for different courses.

Alumni D: I am currently pursuing more courses and working or arranging funds for it, to become a fashion designer.

Alumni E: To start my own work, so I am trying for it and now only Allah knows best what happens.

Despite the individual differences of each participant, all alumni of the school recalled their experience with school as unforgettable and almost all of them wish(ed) to remain attached to the school in some manner. Moreover, all students advocated for the school to have helped them advocate for their own rights and made them more confident citizens of the country.

DISCUSSION

Trans and gender diverse individuals in Pakistan evidently face exclusion and marginalization in society. Despite these challenges, there is a growing movement advocating for trans rights in Pakistan. Activists and organizations are working towards creating inclusive policies and promoting acceptance within communities.

This paper thus simply acknowledges that trans and gender diverse people are socially excluded from the general society either because of culture or religion or both. All alumni interviewed reported feeling or having been ostracized by the society and their

closed ones in one way or the other. They, however, believed their experience at School of Hope for the Marginalized to be different and instead felt “confident” and welcomed/accepted. This conclusion is mostly aligned with Divan et al. 's study (2016) on exclusion of the trans community which identified the existing human right’s gap in only a few trans students advancing to higher education due to feeling “resented” and eventually “dropping out” of the institutions.

In summation, while progress has been made in improving the state of trans and gender-diverse individuals in Pakistan, there is still a long way to go. Sustained efforts are needed from various stakeholders, including the government, civil society organizations, and the general public, to ensure equal rights, inclusion, and acceptance for the trans and gender-diverse community. This paper, thus, concludes that unless sustainable and adequate infrastructure is not available to sustain the trans community into the entire nation’s population, schools like the School of Hope for the Marginalized play an integral part in the welfare of education for the trans community by offering (exclusive) vocational education to folks of the trans community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A recommendation for future research into this subject matter will be to further investigate the model of such a school to analyze if it is vocational education or the need for “exclusive education” that helps trans and gender-diverse communities feel safe and thus feel belong at the school. To study this aim, the researchers should also include the currently enrolled students and perhaps the faculty of the school as well.

Additionally, the academia will truly benefit from a comparative analysis of the experiences of trans and gender diverse students enrolled in “regular” schools with male and female and students and in an “exclusive” school with only trans and gender diverse students, and thereby a comparison of not only academic, vocational but emotional and social well-being of trans and gender diverse may allow a better understanding on the subject matter.

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