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**Analysis Regarding Society Acceptance of Diverse Gender Identities in Society**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper studied the levels and elements of societal acceptance of trans-spectrum identities in Pakistan. The study was based on eight acceptance dimensions in educational settings. The research design adopted a mixed-methods approach. The study included 320 respondents who filled out a questionnaire and included 14 stakeholders interviewed in semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis based on the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The results showed an average score of 3.43 (SD = 1.18), indicating a level of acceptance that, while not fully inclusive, falls between the middle and lower range. Participants said the highest level of acceptance was toward the contribution of gender-diverse persons to education (M = 3.54) and the inclusion of various perspectives in education (M = 3.50). The lowest acceptance was shown toward the provision of safe spaces (M = 3.30) and respect from peers and teachers (M = 3.38). The qualitative analysis revealed four main themes. They were limited and conditional societal acceptance in educational settings; disrespect for educational goals; multiple types of social stigma (internalized, perceived, enacted and structural); and a wide range of suggestions for change. It showed a great disparity between the legal provisions of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 and the actual situation, and the results of the Federal Shariat Court 2023 ruling made the achievement of acceptance more difficult. The findings emphasize the urgent need for multidimensional, integrated approaches to policy, teacher education, curricular changes, safe spaces, involving families, and infra-structural adjustments to transform moderate acceptance into full inclusion of gender diverse individuals within the Pakistani community.*

**KEYWORDS:** Societal Acceptance, Diverse Gender Identities, Transgender, Khawaja Sira, Pakistan, Educational Inclusion, Social Stigma, Mixed Methods Research, Stakeholder Perceptions, Gender Diversity.

**Introduction**

Gender diversity is one of the most challenging social issues in Pakistan, which continues to have an ideology of a binary system of gender. ‘Transgender’ describes people whose gender identity does not match the one they were given at birth. There is a range of gender identities and experiences that go beyond the binary way of thinking and describe the

complexity of gender. In Pakistan, the Khawaja Sira Community, formerly recognized as the third gender, have been socially marginalized throughout the years; however, they remain resilient in dealing with a society that shuns gender nonconformity. The Pakistani Supreme Court recognized the third gender in 2009, and following legislative reforms, uplifted the rights of transgender individuals, including their right to inheritance and the right to vote, and provided legal protection from discrimination. Though issues of social and political inclusion are improved, transgender individuals continue to experience social and institutional exclusion, harassment, and neglect in many of the basic and essential services that befall every person.

The transgender community in Pakistan still has no protection or legal framework to demand their education or equality. In Pakistan, nearly 4 out of 5 transgender people are denied schooling. This reflects the state's unwillingness to engage, let alone support, their educational goals. Relatively recently, some of the country's Provincial Governments have started to develop some kind of legal and institutional framework. For example, Sindh was the first to draft a Transgender Education Policy in 2024 by creating reserved admissions and a quota for hiring teachers in 2024. Balochistan also approved its first Transgender Policy in 2025. However, given that these initiatives are the first of their kind, they are both severely lacking and lagging. The transgender community in Pakistan faces numerous issues some of which include school based discrimination and harassment, exclusionary practices, and lack of curriculum which acknowledges their existence. Developing policies that extend more than just superficial gestures toward inclusion begins with knowing and understanding what barriers to the acceptance of diverse gender identities exist.

### **Statement of Problem**

Despite assurances articulated in Article 25-A of the Constitution and in the Transgender Persons Act 2018, the exclusion of transgender persons in Pakistan's education system and society is systemic. The legal and social recognition gaps are vast and wide. Transgender persons are subjected to harassment and neglected by institutions, thereby violating their rights. They internalize, perceive, and enact (against) themselves stigmatization in numerous ways. They experience the presumed and enacted stigma of exclusion from family and other social, educational, religious, and health systems; they further experience the social and economic exclusion perpetrated by society as predominantly a male-female binary, excluding them from participation. More research on educational inclusion is being published, but gaps remain in key policies. There are poor, if any, first level accountability systems. The gap between the social acceptance legal frameworks and social realities calls for the measurement of stakeholder perceptions to inform adequate social acceptance frames, interventions, and affirmative policies.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To know about the perception of stakeholders regarding society acceptance of Diverse gender in Pakistan.

### **Research Question**

1. What is the perception of stakeholders regarding society acceptance of Diverse gender identities in Pakistan?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important on many levels, both theoretically and practically, in understanding and addressing the social acceptance of diverse gender identities in Pakistan. Theoretically, this research is positioned to fill the gap in the body of literature

on gender diversity in South Asia and multiple stigmas of gender diverse people. Through the stakeholder perception assessment of eight criteria of societal acceptance, this study provides a much needed empirical basis for the development of gender responsive, culturally appropriate, and stage-specific psychosocial and structural barriers to be addressed interventions.

This research will be valuable for policymakers, teachers, and nongovernmental organizations working for gender equality in Pakistan. The research findings will assist policymakers in implementing the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 and provincial transgender education policies at the grassroots level by suggesting places in the community where the attitude of the general populace needs to be most changed. The research findings will guide educational institutions in making changes in their schools to provide both physical and curriculum changes to accommodate and represent transgender persons. Transgender persons need to be visible and valued in the community, and this research offers a base on which to advocate for changes in educational policies and practices to support the dignity and well-being of transgender persons. This research aims to contribute to real-life policies and practices at the community level in Pakistan.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

The study was delimited to

1. Diverse Gender i.e. Only Shemales in Pakistan.

### **Variable**

- **Society Acceptance**

### **Literature Review**

The acceptance of diverse gender identities in Pakistani society is an important focal point of ensuing research, particularly in light of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018. Transgender persons or khawajasira persons in Pakistan continue to experience multiple dimensions of societal discrimination despite the enactment of articles in the constitution and legislation. The gap between law and social reality continues to be evident as progress in law continues to remain unrecognized. This review of literature critically evaluates the existing literature on the societal acceptance concerning diverse gender identities in Pakistan, particularly within the educational and social spheres.

Respect for the educational aspirations of persons across diverse gender identities in Pakistan is severely lacking. Transgender persons enroll in school at a rate of 30% and reach the primary level at a rate of 7%, and only 3% reach the tertiary level. The Transgender Persons Act 2018 enshrines their right to education, but it lacks enforcement. The challenges in the enforcement of the Act have been explained by Arqum, Mushtaq, and Yunus (2023) in terms of the public's awareness and understanding. Negative attitudes are attributed to the patriarchal society, including the lack of education and religious belief, and have been explained by Ahmad and Arzoo (2025) in the context of LGBTIQ+ persons. Due to the lack of educational opportunities, many transgender persons are forced to participate in the informal economy. The decision of the Federal Shariat Court has further weakened protection for their educational rights. While legal infrastructure exists, lack of cultural, religious, and enforcement-related barriers continues to undermine the respect for their right to an education.

Pakistani schools are legally required to offer equal opportunities to individuals who do not identify with typical binary gender definitions; however, equal treatment is still a work in progress. According to Abbas et al. (2025), there are many limits and barriers to equal treatment within Pakistani schools. These barriers include family rejection, peer and

school harassment, discrimination, poor school infrastructure, and curriculum exclusion. Research from the Swat Valley shows that members of the khawajasira community experience discrimination as well as harassment and even sexual harassment by both students and school staff. Discrimination and harassment occur on school premises. Mahmood and Zamani (2024) say that the community is plagued by a high level of discrimination and a common lack of understanding. The recent Sindh government's 2024 transgender inclusion policy is progressive, as it includes the creation of a transgender admissions category and anti-discrimination and anti-harassment provisions. Tayyab and Khaliq (2026) also clarify that the primary challenge is poor implementation. At this time, equal treatment remains an unfulfilled dream.

My community endorses equal educational opportunities by gender: The community's support for equal educational possibilities by gender in Pakistan is uneven. Ahmad and Arzoo (2025) found that young, urban, and educated people in Rawalpindi and Islamabad had more acceptance for trans and intersex people, while animosity remains prevalent. Positive attitudes correlate with having media and LGBTIQ friends. Ali (2020) cites that the social and religious systems in Pakistan provide no acceptance for third-gender positions and leave gender diverse people without family and community support. Latif et al. (2025) also write that in Pakistan's patriarchal, collectivist culture, gender changes undermine norms of honor and strengthen community support. The ruling of the Federal Shariat Court against the Transgender Persons Act of 2018 has strengthened resistance to the Act. Progress remains in NGO-initiated schools and the training of teachers, but otherwise, support for these efforts remains largely unchanged and highly dependent on the location and demographic of the community.

The contributions of people of different genders to education are valued by society. The societal valuation of gender-diverse individuals' contributions to education in Pakistan is still low. Most existing research focuses on binary gender gaps. As a result, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are largely ignored. Their exclusion from the curriculum means their identities and other potential contributions to education are lacking. Public school textbooks in Pakistan still carry stereotypical gender role messages and fail to incorporate other gender identities, signally that gender diverse individuals have no contribution to make. However, there are positive signs now that are not present in the past. TahaffuzDarsGah in Lahore provides education to transgender children of high quality. The Sindh government has also created jobs for transgender teachers in order to improve representation. While these efforts have been initiated, Ahmad and Arzoo (2025) argue that for trans and gender diverse people, legal protections are not sufficient to eliminate stigma and barriers. Until the gender diverse are visible in classrooms as students and educators, their contributions will not be valued.

No Stigma Attached To Different Gender Identities In Schools And Colleges: There is still a great deal of stigma attached to gender-diverse identities, especially in Pakistani schools and colleges. Cultural barriers mean that many trans people are denied their right to education through parental rejection, social and institutional rejection, and an anti-trans stigma. Family rejection and the school environment with subsequent lack of support forces many into dropping out. Azhar et al. (2025) identify internalized, perceived and enacted stigma for khawajasira. Data from Rawalpindi and Islamabad shows that 78% of trans people have had physical attacks perpetrated against them, and 91% have had state-related discrimination. Calling them khusra, chakkas, or hijra, from an early stage, forces many into the hijra community. Teachers lack the skills necessary to teach a trans-inclusive class and the Federal Shariat Court's judgment treating transgender identity as

‘saddaz-darai’ serves to further legitimize the stigma. Ultimately, stigma is not simply present, it is a fundamental barrier to educational access and the right to well-being.

Respect for gender nonconforming students is lacking: Respect for gender nonconforming students by peers and teachers is largely absent in Pakistani schools. Research from Swat Valley shows that khawajasira students are subjected to a range of harassment and violence by classmates and teachers. Schools are more sites of victimization than inclusion for students. Noreen and Rashid (2024) found that teachers are untrained and unequipped to handle trans-inclusive classes. Ahmad and Arzoo (2025) highlight how the pathologizing views of gender nonconformity held by professionals shape negative attitudes in schools. Disrespect manifests itself as harassment as well as more insidious exclusionary practices such as a failure to provide gender neutral facilities, and the use of wrong pronouns as well as exclusion of different views. Trans activists describe being mocked and rejected by institutions. Generally, respect is more the exception than the rule, reflecting deep-seated societal bigotry found in schools and education.

In Pakistan, there are very few safe spaces for gender-diverse learners. The mainstream society protects almost no one. This means many trans people are forced to take a ‘guru-chela’ path due to family and community stigmas. Jahangir and Das (2025) write that Pakistan’s legal reforms have addressed many of the challenges faced by the trans community, but with respect to the education and employment of trans people, these reforms have not translated to actual systemic change. Things are beginning to change. For example, a shelter, school, and meals are offered by the organization/project TahaffuzDarsghah in Lahore, for homeless and orphaned trans children. This is also true of the Walkway School. The Sindh government policy on transgender education is also targeting harassment-free schools and support groups for students. While progress is happening, it occurs in isolation. It also seems that there is “silence” within institutions regarding trans harassment and that there are no protective policies. Although there are pockets of safety, the rest of the community remains unsafe.

Discussions in education require consideration for gender diversity: Marginalization of non binary voices is apparent in Pakistan’s educational discourse, along with the lack of gender diverse perspectives. Public school textbooks perpetuate traditional binary gender stereotypes and completely disregard other gender identities. Teachers in Pakistan’s schools encourage these traditional norms and expectations. In addition, the hidden curriculum provides limited opportunity for varying gender expressions. Research is limited, but it is assumed that private schools in Rawalpindi have similar issues with mainstreaming gender due to poor institutional capacity. The complete lack of transgender representation in curriculum is a major barrier in inclusion efforts. University efforts, such as NUST’s gender balance initiatives, only address inclusion efforts for the binary, and not the full gender spectrum. Ahmad and Arzoo (2025) emphasized the importance and necessity of immediate intervention and discourse to promote inclusion. Curriculum reform, as well as gender sensitive training for teachers, and institutional efforts to advance the voice of marginalized people, are essential for true inclusion.

This paper examines research in Pakistan on the social acceptance of several gender identities. It illustrates evidence gaps between laws and social realities. In all eight dimensions analyzed, evidence supports the social exclusion and discrimination of trans and gender non-conforming persons. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 and protections in Article 25-A of the constitution provide a framework for protections, yet the implementation of this framework remains weak and contentious. Cultural and religious frameworks dominate social attitudes. In urban settings, and among

educated persons, some acceptance may be present, but social hostilities remain. Emerging frameworks, interventions, and social policy initiatives may provide some advancement. However, the transgender Persons Act of 2018 was struck down by Pakistan's Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, a decision that may set back the efforts to promote social acceptance. This study integrates Social Constructionism, Labeling Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, Minority Stress Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, and Intersectionality to better analyze social acceptance of multiple gender identities in Pakistan. Specifically, Social Constructionism posits that social institutions and religion inform gender attitudes and structures, as opposed to biology (Butler, 1990). This describes how Pakistan's rigid social binary prejudice and stigmatize khawajasira and all trans and gender non-conforming people. Labeling Theory and Symbolic Interactionism show how persons are given derogatory labels, such as khusra and hijra, and interact with teachers and/or students, resulting in school bullying and the concealment of one's social identity. Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) describes how social and personal rejection is transformed into social exclusion and desperation.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains the process and levels of acceptance, as well as the family system (microsystem), peers (microsystem), the system of policies (exosystem), national and cross-cultural systems (macrosystem), and systems of court rulings (macrosystem) and the changing systems of accepted social order and national norms and values (chronosystem). Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) states that levels of acceptance vary based on class, location, level of education, and religion. The young, urban, and educated groups show positive levels of acceptance, and the rural and conservative groups show negative levels of acceptance. These theories help in understanding the social construction of and the multi-level systems of stress and the various intersecting levels of acceptance and resistance among the stakeholders in Pakistan.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** Mixed Method Research Design was employed to fully hold the perceptions together with challenges and educational requirements that diverse gender individuals face in Pakistani society. This research studies lived experiences through Concurrent Triangulation Mixed Method Approach to understand how diverse gender individuals perceive education.

**Population of the study:** A population contains every member of a specific group for which researchers seek knowledge or make conclusions. The collection of data occurs from a specified group defined as a sample. Each sample measurement includes fewer member numbers than the total population numbers. Research uses the term population beyond its reference to human beings. All shemale living in Pakistan was forming the study population.

**Table 3.1: Population and Sample Distribution of the Study**

| Population/Category             | Population        | Sample |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Transgender persons in Pakistan | Target Population | 320    |
| Total                           | Target Population | 320    |

**Sample size and Sampling Techniques:** Snowball sampling is a chain-referral, non-probability technique where existing participants recruit others from their network. It is effective for hidden populations that are hard to reach due to stigma or safety concerns. The transgender community in Pakistan fits this category, as many hide their identity

because of marginalization. Referrals through trusted members helped access educated participants and build rapport for reliable data.

**Research Instrument:** The researcher was using a questionnaire and also conducts a structured interview for the purpose of data collection. Standardized questions were designed for all participants to get exactly the same set of queries and identical question sequence. The standardized approach works to reduce interview bias and boost data validity and interview reliability. The researcher was implementing their self-designed interview.

**Reliability of the Research Instrument:** Cronbach Alpha is one of the most widely used technique in social sciences. Therefore, the researcher performed Cronbach Alpha technique to calculate reliability of questionnaire. Cronbach Alpha value of the Research Instrument was 0.876.

**Procedure of the Study:** Individual researchers were performing the data collection process. Individuals who live in Pakistan's different geographical areas will help the investigators reach all participants through their network. Primer researchers will introduce the study aims to subjects while guaranteeing they can only use participant data for research purposes. The researcher was executing the questionnaire while speaking to participants in their native language and understanding their responses, although the instructions remain in English.

**Data Analysis:** Researcher used NVivo software for thematic data analysis for qualitative data analysis, and use Mean, Percentage, SD to analyse the quantitative data.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

**Table1: stakeholders' perception of society acceptance of Diverse gender identities**

| Statements                                                                                  | N          | Mean (M)    | SD          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. The educational goals of different gender identities are respected by society.           | 320        | 3.40        | 1.24        |
| 2. In educational settings, people with different gender identities are treated equally.    | 320        | 3.39        | 1.20        |
| 3. Equal educational rights for all genders are supported in my community.                  | 320        | 3.49        | 1.15        |
| 4. The contributions of people of different genders to education are valued by society.     | 320        | 3.54        | 1.11        |
| 5. In schools and colleges, there is no stigma associated with different gender identities. | 320        | 3.42        | 1.18        |
| 6. Peers and teachers respect students who are gender nonconforming.                        | 320        | 3.38        | 1.19        |
| 7. Diverse gender learners can find safe spaces in society.                                 | 320        | 3.30        | 1.23        |
| 8. Discussions in education value the perspectives of people of different genders.          | 320        | 3.50        | 1.16        |
| <b>Overall</b>                                                                              | <b>320</b> | <b>3.43</b> | <b>1.18</b> |

The following table contains data about stakeholder perceptions on 8 statements regarding societal acceptance of diverse gender identities in educational contexts. With N=320, the overall mean score is M = 3.43, SD = 1.18, on the given scale. Assuming a 5-point Likert scale where 3.0 = Neutral, this overall mean suggests a level of acceptance above neutral and classified as moderate. Stakeholders perceive the highest level of acceptance with "The contributions of people of different genders to education are valued by society" with a mean of 3.54 and a SD of 1.11 and "Discussions in education value the perspectives of people of different genders" with a mean of 3.50 and a SD of 1.16. This suggests while

there may be some limitations regarding interpersonal acceptance, the contributions of gender-diverse individuals within an educational and intellectual context are more accepted. The statements “Equal educational rights for all genders are supported in my community” (mean: 3.49, SD: 1.15); “In schools and colleges, there is no stigma associated with different gender identities” (mean: 3.42, SD: 1.18) are in the moderate range of acceptance. This shows that while there is some level of acceptance regarding educational rights, there is still concern regarding the stigma. These statements are “Diverse gender learners can find safe spaces in society” (mean: 3.30, SD: 1.23) and “Peers and teachers respect students who are gender nonconforming” (mean: 3.38, SD: 1.19). These lower means and higher SDs indicate greater disagreement among stakeholders and an extreme lack of acceptance. The mean scores for all the statements fall in the range of 3.30 to 3.54 indicating neutral to moderate levels of acceptance.

**Stakeholder Divisiveness.** The range of ~ 1.15 to 1.24 for the moderate SD indicates differences of opinion among stakeholders. The data captures some stakeholders noticing more progress in recognizing their contributions and educational rights. It also shows substantial gaps in providing equal treatment, safety, and respect within schools and from peers and teachers.

With respect to societal acceptance, stakeholders have recognized some progress in appreciating diverse gender identities in education, but there is still a significant gap. Acceptance is more pronounced in the case of engagement and participation, but less so in the creation of safe and respectful environments. This shows a disparity between expressed acceptance and lived experience.

To illustrate, one participant recognized that societal acceptance has progressed to a limited degree, but this is not sufficient: “Different people understand, some accept it and some try to educate, but this is not sufficient.” For many, societal acceptance remains at a very low level: “Some people think that this is also good for society, some people think this is a vile thing.

### Thematic Analysis

In order to determine stakeholder perceptions on societal acceptance of diverse gender identities in Pakistan, coded themes from participants of semi-structured interviews were analyzed. The interviews were conducted with transgender individuals, community leaders, teachers, and social workers. Responses considered to be of a similar nature were grouped together to establish themes. The objective of the study was to understand “the perception of stakeholders related to society acceptance of Diverse gender in Pakistan.

### Themes and Codes

| Themes                                     | Codes                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Societal Acceptance in Educational Context | LimitedAcceptance,ConditionalAcceptance, Schools as Exclusionary Spaces, Legal Recognition vs Lived Reality, Urban Rural Divides, Institutional Discrimination |
| Respect for Educational Goals              | Family rejection, Disrespect for aspirations, Institutional barriers, Curricular invisibility, Honor based discrimination, Financial dependence                |
| Social Stigma and Bais                     | Internalized stigma, Perceived stigma, Enacted stigma, Peer harassment, Teacher harassment, Structural stigma, pathologization.                                |
| Recommendations for Change                 | Awareness Program, Teachers Sensitization, Policy Implementation, Safe Spaces,Family Engagement, Curriculum Reform, Infrastructure Improvements                |



### **Theme 1: Societal Acceptance in Educational Contexts**

As assessed from interview answers, stakeholders believed societal acceptance of gender diverse members in Pakistani educational settings is extremely limited and conditional. Stakeholders believed that trans and gender non-conforming individuals are more tolerated than accepted, and acceptance itself relies on gender norm conformity and the maintaining of the secret of gender identity. One stakeholder said: "Society only accepts them if they hide who they are. If they dress according to their birth gender and don't express their true identity, then people might tolerate them. But the moment they express their true gender, they face discrimination." (S-7, Urban)

Another common theme was that schools were perceived as spaces of exclusion and not of inclusion. Participants considered educational settings as hostile spaces that trans and gender non-conforming people are continuously targeting with discrimination and harassment. One stakeholder said: "Schools are the worst places for them. From the moment they enter, they are subjected to ridicule. Teachers make fun of them, students bully them, and the administration does nothing. Instead of being a place of learning, school becomes a place of trauma." (S-9, NGO Worker)

Multiple stakeholders pointed out the legal recognition and the lived reality are extremely disparate. While referring to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, stakeholders emphasized that the lack of societal acceptance of trans people is more apparent than the legal safeguards. One stakeholder stated: "The law says they have rights."

What is reality for them? They can't go to school, they can't get jobs, they can't even go about their day without getting abused. The law? It exists only on paper. (S-2, Legal Professional)

There is an evident urban-rural divide in the acceptance of societal issues. Participants from urban areas reported higher acceptance levels compared to rural and conservative areas. A rural stakeholder said: "In a small town, being transgender makes you an outcast of your family, they will disown you. Your community will laugh at you, there is no future, no hope there. In the city, at least there are organizations that can help, in the village, there is nothing." (S-10, Community Worker)

Rural and conservative areas have conditions placed on accepting people with varying identities. Urban areas have conditions as well, but their limited acceptance is preferable to rural areas' complete rejection.

### **Theme 2: Respect for Educational Goals**

Another finding from the interviews was that society does not value the educational goals of gender-diverse individuals. Participants talked about the failure of the system to identify and support the academic goals of transgender and gender-nonconforming people. One participant said: "When a trans person says I want to study, society laughs. They say what are you going to do with your education? You are not meant for that life. Their dreams are called irrelevant (S-6, Teacher)."

Participants also explained that the biggest barrier to the realization of educational goals was the family. Participants said that families refused to support the educational goals of their gender-diverse family members and that supporting the education of gender-diverse family members brought disrepute to the family. One said: "Family is the first support system but for trans people the first source of rejection is the family. They say you have brought shame to the family, we can't support you. (S-4, Community Leader)"

Participants also explained that there are numerous institutional barriers that obstruct educational achievement, including the admission process which forces applicants to pick a binary gender category, inadequate facilities, and inadequate teacher training. One said: "Even if they get admitted, where will they be able to sit? Where will they be able to use the bathroom? Schools were not made for them. The resources are exclusionary. (S-5, Academic Researcher)"

Some participants also explained that a barrier is the curriculum that marginalizes gender diversity.

The lack of trans individuals represented in textbooks creates the impression that trans individuals have no place in the educational discourse. One participant noted the following: "Open any textbook in Pakistan, you will find only 'male' and 'female'. There is no provision for trans in the textbooks. It appears that we do not exist in any curriculum and as a result, we are completely out of the education system. How society can treat our educational aspirations when we are not present in the educational system?" (S-2, Legal Professional)

These participants demonstrate that family rejection, institutional barriers, and curriculum omissions combine to disrespect the educational goals of transgender individuals.

### **Theme 3: Social Stigma and Bias Affecting Education**

Stakeholders listed a number of social stigma types and bias forms that affect the education of transgender individuals. These included stigma forms: peer and teacher harassment, structural stigma, perceived stigma, internalized stigma, enacted stigma. One stakeholder commented on internalized stigma: they "listen to people call them worthless, to people call them a curse of shame on the family. They start to believe. So why study? They do not deserve an education" (S-1, Psychologist).

Stakeholders cited perceived stigma as the negatively formed perception of the transgender individual, which results in the trans individual believing society holds a negative view of the individual and their attainment of education. One stakeholder said: "They have an idea of what society thinks of them. That people think they are sex workers. That they are uneducated. 'Bad' people. That perception forms a barrier. Why try? Society will never view me as acceptable" (S-8, Human Rights Activist).

Of all the stigma forms cited, the most frequent was enacted stigma, which represents forms of positive discrimination and exclusion. Stakeholders indicated that trans individuals experience exclusion from the family, educational institutions, and community. One stakeholder said: "Society beats them, mocks them, and kicks them out of schools. This is enacted stigma" (S-4, Community Leader).

Within these forms of stigma, peer and teacher harassment was a dominant theme.

Stakeholders noted instances of workplace harassment in educational environments where employees empowered to inflict or tolerate bullying include perpetrators. A stakeholder stated: "I have heard stories that break my heart. Transgender students are locked in rooms, sexually assaulted, and then when they report it, the teacher blames them. The perpetrator is protected, and the victim is punished." (S-14, Community Organizer)

Stakeholders referred to structural stigma as the priming of institutional policies and practices. The lack of accountability mechanisms and the invisibility of data were noted as structural discrimination. A stakeholder noted: "The system itself discriminates. From admission forms to bathroom policies to teacher training, everything is designed for binary genders. This structural stigma is invisible but incredibly powerful." (S-3, Social Worker)

The responses captured in this survey document the various forms of stigma that affect gender-diverse children and young people, including the stigma that is internalized by

educators and peers, bullying, and harassment and the impact that structurally unjust educational systems have on gender-diverse students.

#### **Theme 4: Recommendations for Change for Creating Safer and More Welcome Environments**

Stakeholders asked for changes to improve the capture of gender diversity students through a variety of approaches focused on creating safe and welcome environments through strategic engagement of families, designing curriculum and classroom structures, creativity with safe space design, developing inclusive policies, training teachers and staff, and offering awareness programs. Stakeholders noted the value of safe and inclusive awareness programs that breakdown common society stereotypes and address the needs of gender diverse people. One said: “We need to educate society. People discriminate because they don’t know. They don’t understand that being transgender is not a choice, not a disease, not a sin. We need public awareness campaigns.” (S-6, Teacher)

Creating safe and inclusive environments for transgender students is the responsibility of the teacher. However, without training, teachers are unable to meet these responsibilities. An advocate said: “Teachers are the frontline. If we can train teachers to be inclusive, to treat transgender students with respect, to create safe classrooms, we can transform education. But currently, they have no training.” (S-12, Academic)

Policy and legal changes that strengthen existing challenges and protections are necessary. One respondent said: “We need implementation. The laws are there, but they are not being enforced. We need monitoring mechanisms. We need accountability.” (S-13, Policy Expert)

Creating Safe spaces for gender diverse learners is an important first step.

Stakeholders supported TahaffuzDarsghah in Lahore and the Walkway School. One said, “Transgender students need spaces that make them feel safe. They can be themselves there. TahaffuzDarsghah in Lahore is a model. We need similar things.” (S-14, Community Organizer)

Stakeholders said family and community involvement is key to addressing rejection which commonly occurs at home. One said, “Family rejection is the source of so many problems. We need to work with families. We need support groups for parents of transgender kids. We need to help families so they can understand and accept their kids.” (S-8, Human Rights Activist)

Stakeholders said reforms in curriculum were important to address the invisibility of gender-diverse identities in educational resources. One said, “Textbooks should have gender diversity in children. They should show that transgender people exist, and are part of society. This reduces the stigma of transgender people.” (S-7, Urban)

Lastly, stakeholders said there needed to be improvement in the infrastructure of institutions. This would include the addition of gender neutral facilities, more inclusive admission forms, and the institution accepting and using the student’s name and preferred pronouns. One said, “Admission forms should have a third option. Students should have the right to choose their identity.” (S-2, Legal Professional)

The responses show stakeholders see the need for multi-faceted approaches in attitude and policy change at an institutional and individual level to make spaces safer and more welcoming.

#### **Overall Results of the Qualitative Study**

There is restricted and contingent societal acceptance of diverse gender identities in the Pakistani education system. The results confirmed this and additionally pointed to a

variety of institutional and systematic exclusion of gender diverse persons. In fact, schools are more like sites of exclusion than inclusion. Participants highlighted the legal and social separation between Pakistan's Urban and Rural regions. The educational goals of gender diverse persons are largely disregarded. Family rejection, institutional barriers, and a curriculum that fails to recognize their existence are the most significant barriers that gender diverse persons face. Multiple forms of social stigma, including but not limited to self, perceived, and systemic stigma, as well as peer and teacher harassment and structural violence, create a barrier to participants' educational involvement. Stakeholders articulated comprehensive recommendations for change that included awareness initiatives, the creation of safe spaces, improvements to curriculum and policy, as well as the creation of safe spaces, family engagement, and changes to institutional infrastructure. Though stakeholders recognized the efforts of some initiatives and the legal frameworks that have been put in place, they continue to address the many challenges that fail to provide meaningful acceptance to gender diverse persons in Pakistan.

### **Triangulation of Results**

To enhance credibility and validity, this study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the qualitative data, interviews with varied stakeholders informed the narratives. The goal was to interpret stakeholders' perceptions of societal acceptance of a variety of gender identities along with the quantitative data provided in Table 1.

According to the triple analysis, the interview data overlap with quantitative analysis. Generally, the mean score across the interviews was 3.43 on a 5-point Likert scale. This reflects moderate social acceptance, which aligns with stakeholder interviews that described acceptance as "limited and conditional". Including both qualitative and quantitative data in the analysis builds the trust and validity of study results.

The results from the triple analysis reflect convergence between the data sets on social acceptance. In interviews, stakeholders described schools as sites of exclusion and gender-diverse individuals as being harassed and excluded. Research respondents recorded the mean scores across the eight elements of acceptance as 3.30 - 3.54. The lowest quantitative scores were for Item 7 ( $M = 3.30$ , "Diverse gender learners can find safe spaces in society") and Item 6 ( $M = 3.38$ , "People respect gender nonconforming peers and teachers"), which stakeholders described as unsafe and disrespectful.

Likewise, data triangulation regarding respect for educational goals shows a high degree of concordance between interview and survey responses. Stakeholders interviewed talked about widespread disrespect showing family rejection and institutional barriers. The quantitative data correlates this lack of respect and acceptance. Items 1 ( $M = 3.40$ , "The educational goals of different gender identities are respected by society") and Item 2 ( $M = 3.39$ , "in educational settings, people with different gender identities are treated equally") show a moderate perception, where they fall below complete acceptance.

Another finding of the triangulation analysis is **consistency across data sources regarding the gap between legal recognition and lived reality**. Respondents and participants expressed that although legal frameworks, such as the Transgender Persons Act 2018, exist, they also expressed that the implementation is weak, and social change is lacking. This convergence confirms that legal protections have not been sufficient to bring about acceptance.

The triangulated analysis shows agreement regarding acceptance in urban versus rural areas. Quantitative data indicative of a moderate-to-high standard deviation across the

items ( $SD = 1.11-1.24$ ) indicates a large range of perception in the data. This is confirmed in the qualitative data and is attributed to differences in exposure and education as well as difference in location. Stakeholders interviewed in urban areas expressed a greater acceptance, as reflected in the quantitative data.

Both sources show similar findings and indicate that stakeholders perceive the highest level of acceptance in abstract or discursive dimensions (Item 4:  $M = 3.54$ , “The contributions of people of different genders to education are valued by society”; Item 8:  $M = 3.50$ , “Discussions in education value the perspectives of people of different genders”) and the lowest level of acceptance in interpersonal and concrete dimensions (Item 7:  $M = 3.30$ , safe spaces; Item 6:  $M = 3.38$ , peer and teacher respect). This pattern was consistent in the interview data, where stakeholders discussed more positive perceptions of broader societal valuation, while acknowledging the absence of interpersonal acceptance.

The results of triangulation analysis indicate that the qualitative interview and the quantitative survey data work together to provide convincing evidence of the moderately low level of societal acceptance of diverse gender identities in Pakistan. In addition to providing valid evidence, triangulation also provides a comprehensive picture of the obstacles and opportunities that exist when considering societal acceptance of gender diverse individuals in multiple dimensions.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this research provide valuable information about the levels of acceptance for differing gender identities across Pakistan, and about stakeholder perceptions of acceptance of such identities within Pakistan. Generally speaking, stakeholders are of the view that society is accepting of gender identities, but not fully inclusive. Most respondents in this study scored the level of societal acceptance between “neutral” and “agree” on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating a level of acceptance at a moderate position. This finding is in keeping with the existing research which shows that in spite of the legal protections of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018 and the Constitutional guarantee provided in Article 25-A, Pakistani transgender persons continue to be excluded.

A major finding of this study is the discrepancy between the legal framework and the lived reality of transgender persons. The participants of this study noted that, while on the books, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 is in existence, the practical application of this Act has been hampered by contradictory legal provisions, and most of the beneficial provisions of this Act are not applicable. Such disparities are most evident in the education system, wherein, in spite of legal provisions that guarantee the right to education and prohibit any form of discrimination, there exist numerous challenges for transgender persons. The barriers to the right to education have been documented in the systematic review by Abbas et al (2025), such as, family and school based harassment, victimization, exclusionary and transphobic practices of peers, and the absence of a responsive curriculum.

The qualitative data collected in this study add to the existing literature on this gap. Study participants described schools as sites of exclusion rather than inclusion. One respondent stated: “Schools are the worst places for them. From the moment they enter, they are subjected to ridicule. Teachers make fun of them, students bully them, and the administration does nothing” (S-9, NGO Worker). This illustrates the nature of the harassment documented in the existing literature. Khawajasira stated that teachers and other students sexually harass them in school.

After 2023, the Federal Shariat Court ruled against sections of the Transgender Act of 2018, and in line with its ruling, transgender people were described as "saddaz-darai" (an evil that must be blocked). The court provided legal coverage to a highly charged and controversial system of beliefs and was perceived to be legitimizing the rights of Muslim parents to raise their children without the alien and cross-dressing "evil".

The data presented some interesting differences in acceptance concerning the eight dimensions analyzed. The highest mean scores were for Item 4 ( $M = 3.54$ , "The society values the contributions of people with different genders to education") and Item 8 ( $M = 3.50$ , "The perspective of different genders is appreciated during education through discourse"). These dimensions reflect societal valuation and discourse inclusion. This indicates stakeholders think there is more acceptance at an abstract or discourse level. This could reflect the first potentially successful efforts, such as the establishment of the first transgender educational institution, TahaffuzDarsghah, in Lahore, Pakistan which resulted in a transgender student achieving 70% marks in the Intermediate Part-I examination. The approval of Pakistan's first transgender education policy by the Sindh government in 2024 and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's notification of departmental guidelines for transgender persons are also positive indicators that may impact stakeholder perceptions at the discourse level.

The mean scores for Item 7 ( $M = 3.30$ , "Diverse gender learners can find safe spaces in society") and Item 6 ( $M = 3.38$ , "Peers and teachers respect students who are gender nonconforming") were the lowest of the items. These items reflect immediate experiences with peers and the availability of safe spaces. Respondents indicated that they perceived the greatest challenges to occur on the social interaction dimension and the institutional element of safety. This is consistent with research that focuses on the absence of safe spaces in the mainstream of society, resulting in many trans people organizing in the traditional guru-chela system. The absence of safe spaces along with peer and teacher harassment is illustrated through qualitative data.

Standard deviations that fell in the range of 1.11 to 1.24 across the items reflect high levels of perceived variability amongst the respondents. This is likely a function of regional differences, educational levels, age, personal experiences and levels of engagement and exposure to gender variance. Ahmed and Arzoo (2025) report findings from a quantitative study of 368 respondents in Rawalpindi and Islamabad that, among the Younger, the Urban and the Educated, there was more acceptance, and overall, hostility and discrimination, especially against trans and intersex people, was more pervasive. In the qualitative data, respondents from rural areas were more stigmatized and socially isolated. The results show that people with LGBTIQ friends, and those that are not as bothered with media representations, tend to have more understanding and supportive attitudes. This can mean that exposure and awareness are pivotal for the acceptance of a society as a whole. The Hijra Festival 2025 is one of the many opportunities for the trans community to demand and demand respect, appreciation, and opportunities. They also continue the fight for the dismantling of negative structures.

The authors of the study found that there were many forms of stigma that specifically restrict the education and the opportunities of the gender diverse community. Stigma that stemmed from the minority stress theory was evident when describing the forms of internalized, perceived, enacted, and structural stigma.

The forms of stigma found from the qualitative part of the study found that the most commonly found form of stigma was the enacted stigma, or the exclusion and the discrimination of gender diverse people from families, schools, religious places, and

clinics. The data that describes the discrimination of trans individuals tells a stark story of how trans individuals in Rawalpindi and Islamabad experience 91% state related discrimination and a shocking 78% report physical attacks on them.

Health impacts are significant and extensive due to this stigma. A study conducted in Islamabad in 2026 found that 68% of khawajasira participants exceeded the clinical threshold for significant distress, of which 34% did not have a job and 66% had insufficient income to meet their basic needs. Additionally, 45% of participants reported that they either felt or were made to feel unsafe when they went to the healthcare institution, due to the stigma and discrimination that they face. The study demands that there are programs that are culturally appropriate and provide mental health services and social protection.

The report shows that despite the challenges, progress is possible through innovative strategies, some of which are very encouraging. An example is the initiative, TahaffuzDarsqah, which provides support and shelter to homeless, abandoned, and displaced transgender children through provision of food, residence, education and vocational training. Some of the policy frameworks include the education policy for transgender persons in Sindh; the transgender workplace policy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the approval of the transgender policy by the Balochistan province in September 2025. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government also created the Transgender Protection and Welfare Policy.

The participants of the survey noted that the policies were inadequate and separated from the challenges that they face. One of the participants was quoted as saying, "*We need implementation. The laws are there, but they are not being enforced. We need monitoring mechanisms. We need accountability*" (S-13, Policy Expert) which was supported by the systematic review which reported that significant policy gaps exist, weak enforcement of the Act of 2018, absence of monitoring, and insufficient accountability, coupled with the absence of basic education and outreach beyond the Provincial boundaries of Punjab.

## Conclusions

This study looks at the Pakistani stakeholder perception of the acceptance of different gender identities in society and how they interact with eight different elements. The research outcomes showcase a hard environment that is a bit more accepting and inclusive, yet still quite far from being fully accepting. The majority of the respondents fall between neutral and agree, indicating that while some advances have been noted, there are many gaps in the entire spectrum of the dimensions.

The research found a huge gap between the legal and actual recognition. Although the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 and Article 25-A of the Constitution exist, transgender persons remain educationally and socially excluded, stigmatized, and discriminated against. The Act has been challenged in the Federal Shariat Court, creating more legal chaos, and providing hurdles to advocating for civic acceptance.

The findings note acceptance differs based on where it exists in the spectrum. The stakeholders have noted higher acceptance of abstract or verbal assessment of inclusion over actual inclusion and acceptance of gender diverse persons. The least acceptance, and the highest challenge, remains in actual inclusion and safe spaces, along with peer and teacher respect.

Diverse persons in this study faced multiple stigma. Persons in the khawajasira community and other gender diverse groups have been documented to experience high levels of mental stress, high levels of unemployment, and economic stress.

Despite limitations, the study highlights some advancements and interventions that offer some optimism. Initiatives such as TahaffuzDarsghah, provincial transgender education policies, and departmental guidelines seriously engage with the need to promote inclusion. Nevertheless, the respondents highlighted that these initiatives remain siloed and partial. This illustrates the need for multiple integrated levels of interventions encompassing the entire spectrum of acceptance ranging from individual and family attitudes to institutional practices and policies.

The combination of Social Constructionism, Symbolic Interactionism, Labeling Theory, Minority Stress Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Social Systems Theory, and Intersectionality has provided a useful tool to analyze multiple dimensions of social acceptance. The study shows that social acceptance is constructed symbolically and simultaneously stressful, distributed ecologically across multiple levels of society, and differentiated intersectionally. This integrated theory frames an analytical approach on how stakeholders comprising individual family members and institutional actors and members of the cultural community perceive and construct responses to gender diversity in Pakistan.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance societal acceptance of diverse gender identities in Pakistan:

- Strengthen Implementation of the Transgender Persons Act 2018: Enact laws that obligate all legislatures to set up comprehensive monitoring systems, set up accountability structures, and enforce the law at the provincial level. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's departmental guidelines present a strong example for all other provinces.
- As Sindh has done, all provinces should develop province-specific, comprehensive transgender education policies that address format of admissions, anti-harassment policies, gender-inclusive facilities, and quota systems for transgender persons in the teaching profession.
- The existing ambiguities regarding legal frameworks related to self-perceived gender must be addressed, and provisions must include all forms of gender in the protections provided for the prevention of harassment and sexual violence as described in the Pakistan Penal Code.
- As proposed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, sustainably fund transgender welfare through a dedicated social protection and healthcare program and education by creating an endowment fund.
- Develop innovative teaching and learning methods that are respectful and non-discriminatory while utilizing supportive and gender-inclusive learning environments.
- Ensure that transgender persons have safe access to and use of gender-responsive school facilities including restrooms, locker rooms, and change facilities in a gender-responsive manner.
- Ensure that all teaching and learning materials address transgender persons in an appropriate manner and reflect the complex nature of transgender persons to support comprehension of transgender persons and the gender diversity.
- Create safe spaces within educational facilities in which transgender persons can escape pressures of society and access peer and mentor support.



- Create public education campaigns to promote understanding and dismantle stereotypes and misconceptions about gender diversity. Use media, community talks, and other religious and faith-based activities to do this.
- Create counseling programs and support groups for the families of gender diverse persons and interventions that tackle honor-based rejection of family members.
- Use faith-based and other community activities to create understanding by engaging religious scholars and other community leaders on compassion and the worth and dignity of each and every human.
- Give priority funding and support to trans-led organizations and initiatives. Ensure that the trans community is actively involved so that the intended activities, strategies and programs are designed and implemented as intended.
- Ensure the availability of separate registration counters, wards, and washrooms in all health facilities. Ensure non-discriminatory services are also provided.
- Develop Culturally appropriate mental health programs to address the high levels of depression, anxiety and psychosocial problems that are common amongst members of the transgender community.

### **Suggestions for Future Researchers**

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following suggestions are proposed for future research:

- Studies should utilize the voices and experiences of trans individuals. This means prioritizing designs in which trans people are not simply researched, but are vested in the research.
- The impact of social policy and social initiatives on the well-being of trans and gender diverse people can be measured through further research using longitudinal methods.
- Research should be undertaken using an intersecting methodology. This is a research method used to understand the multiple ways in which people experience and are accepted or rejected based on their multiple social identities.
- Research should be undertaken to understand social acceptance and ways to best intervene across all provinces and regions of Pakistan, including rural and underserved areas.
- The existing educational interventions and transgender policy are to be researched to see what works best and what can be expanded.
- An important line of further research should aim to understand what social non-acceptance means for trans individuals.
- Analysis should be conducted on the family rejection and acceptance processes to ensure that family-based interventions are effective.
- Research should be conducted to understand how social non-acceptance is influenced by the media and social platforms.
- Research should be conducted to understand how acceptance can be influenced by religious leaders, based on the primary role of religion in social acceptance in Pakistan.
- Create and test instruments suitable for measuring levels of social acceptance of gender diversity in Pakistani society, addressing the limitations of available instruments.

- Analyze the economic impacts of social non-acceptance on employment, including discrimination and economic marginalization as well as on the effectiveness of affirmative action including job quotas.
- Conduct a study that compares acceptance of different gender identity groups (transgender men, transgender women, non-binary persons, intersex persons) and determines distinct patterns of acceptance and the most significant gaps.

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