

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Isolation to Acceptance: Improving Social Acceptance and Educational Opportunities for Transgender People in Pakistan

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Abstract

Transgender people usually face social isolation and discrimination. Although the situation is improving in developed countries, it is still grim in more traditional and conservative societies like Pakistan. Gathering data through semi-structured interviews from eight female students, eight female teachers, and eight mothers from two girls-only schools in Lahore; this study investigated their perceptions about the social acceptance and educational opportunities for transgender people in the country. It further explored their views about transgender-inclusive education, and how their social inclusion and educational opportunities could be improved. All the participants acknowledged the lack of social acceptance and educational opportunities for transgender people; however, when it came to transgender-inclusive education, opinions were more divided. Some of the participants especially the mothers had reservations due to the social and cultural values, safety concerns, and fears of bad influence and classroom distractions. The teachers also pointed out the fact that schools, communities, students, teachers, and even the transgender people themselves were not ready for transgender-inclusive education. Although most of them believed that transgender-inclusive education was the only viable way to provide education to transgender people in Pakistan, they suggested first preparing the society for it through awareness campaigns, seminars, workshops, training sessions, and school-community interactions.

Keywords: Transgender, education, inclusiveness, social acceptance, Pakistan.

Introduction

The term transgender has been evolving over the decades. Initially, it was used for those "who crossdressed or lived cross-gendered lives" (Beemyn, 2013, p. 113-114). Later, it was mostly used for those who believed they belonged to the

opposite sex (Krafft-Ebing & Chaddock, 1893). However, currently, the scope of the term has been expanded quite broadly and it has become a "challenging term to define" which is not only based on assigned sex and gender expression but also gender identity (Buck, 2016, p. 465). It is more about how one feels than how one is viewed. Multiple scientific studies have come up with conceptual models of gender with at least five dimensions i.e. birth-assigned sex category, current gender identity, gender roles, gender presentation or expression, and gendered evaluation of the social world (Hyde et al., 2019; Tate et al., 2014; Reiman, et al., 2023). In academic literature, people who are not transgender are often labeled as cisgender (aka cis).

Many cisgender people (people whose internal sense of gender/ gender identity is the same as their biological sex or the gender that they were assigned at birth) still see transgender people as those who act like a gender that is different from what they had been assigned at birth (biological sex) (Buck, 2016). This view is more common in conservative societies. Most of the people and literature about transgender people in Pakistan define them similarly. Saddique et al. (2017) described them as someone "whose gender identity differs from the sex to which it is assigned" (p. 9050). Literature shows that those people and societies who have more traditional, sex-based perceptions about transgender people tend to have stronger anti-transgender tendencies (Norton & Herek, 2013; Reiman et al., 2023).

Social Acceptance of Transgender People

Transgender people have been looked down upon and discriminated against over the centuries. Although their rights are being recognized in many countries, they still face transphobic treatment. In many societies, especially the more conservative ones; they face social alienation and exclusion (Akhtar & Bilour, 2020). They are often excluded from mainstream roles in societies and find it hard to get equal educational and professional opportunities (Divan et al., 2016; Nazir & Yasir, 2016). It not only increases socio-economic disparities (Azeem et al., 2021; Kia et al., 2021) and creates mental health issues (Bazargan & Galvan, 2012; Virupaksha et al., 2016); but also makes them more prone to violent attacks (Fatima et al., 2022). These threats to their life and liberty, fears of violence, and lack of opportunities for education and work (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Sundara, 2019; Kia et al., 2021) affect their ability to thrive socially and economically (Bockting et al., 2013). The foremost causes of these threats and discriminatory behaviors are their gender preferences and identities (Blondeel et al., 2016). Consequently, transgender communities have a higher rate of drug abuse and suicide (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

Extremism, lack of tolerance, and discriminatory attitudes towards different segments of society due to their religion, sect, race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or gender are quite prevalent in Pakistan (Khan & Amin, 2019; Ali et al., 2024). Pakistani transgender community, being one of the most alienated and socially excluded segments in the country, often faces similar kinds of threats and challenges (Abbas, 2021; Akhtar & Bilour, 2020). This alienation, social exclusion, and discrimination are mainly due to religious, societal, and cultural issues and health-related concerns (Jami & Kamal, 2015; Abbas, 2021; Azeem et al., 2021). This attitude also has historical roots as even during British India, the *hijras* (a common term used for transgender people in the subcontinent) were considered criminals (Hinchy, 2019).

A study by Akhtar and Bilour (2020) points out how transgender community is alienated and socially excluded in Pakistan.

It mentions inheritance rights, educational and employment opportunities, political activities, and gender-segregated facilities as some of the areas in which they face challenges and discrimination. In a study, Azeem et al. (2021) also pointed out social and healthcare-related prejudices and discrimination against them in Lahore, Pakistan. Abbas (2021) discusses their social exclusion and alienation from cultural and theoretical perspectives. He highlights the fact that despite governmental efforts and legislation, the overall attitude of Pakistani society is discriminatory and hostile toward them.

Not only do they face social exclusion in Pakistan, but they are also more prone to physical violence. Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of violent attacks on them including acid throwing, shooting and even killing (Fatima et al., 2022; Noor, 2022). In one harrowing incident, transwomen in Pakistan were raped and forced to drink urine (Pak gang leader raped, 2016).

Educational Opportunities for Transgender People

Education is one of the foremost factors for not only achieving national growth but also uplifting the status of such segments of a society that have been marginalized and discriminated against (Omvedt, 1993; Kamat, 2008). Preventing educational opportunities for any segment has lifelong implications as it leads to socio-economic challenges and deprivations. Transgender people not only face systematic discrimination in educational opportunities (especially in more conservative societies where gender-based segregation is still very common); but also adverse and hostile attitudes from their peers and teachers (Grant et al., 2010; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Sundara, 2019). As a result, they often face educational disparities and discrimination at all three levels: rights to education- barred access to educational institutions (Abdullah et al., 2012; Das, 2019; Tabassum & Jamil, 2014), rights within education- harassment and unequal treatment in the educational institutions and during the educational process (Grant et al., 2010; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Sundara, 2019), and rights after education- opportunities to employment after getting an education (McFadden, 2020; Waqar et al., 2022). These discriminations also lead to decreased educational aspirations and higher dropouts for them (James et al., 2016).

Most of the mainstream schools in Pakistan are hesitant to accept them due to social and cultural stigmatization, pressure from the parents, and lack of adequate school facilities (Noreen & Rashid, 2024). Even if they are somehow able to secure enrollments; they face multitudes of issues such as harassment and bullying, and a lack of adequate school facilities including on-campus guidance and counseling services (Khan & Imad, 2021; Noreen & Rashid, 2024; Shah et al., 2018). Teachers in Pakistani schools are also ill-prepared to cope with the challenges associated with managing transgender-inclusive classes (Noreen & Rashid, 2024).

There have been some initiatives to improve educational opportunities for transgender students in Pakistan. In 2019, a transgender-exclusive public school was opened in Lodhran, and a transgender education initiative was launched in Multan (Rashid et al., 2023). However, these initiatives have not met the needs and challenges. The transgender community in Pakistan is quite scattered with scarce populations all across the country. Inclusive education can be a better, more viable, and pragmatic option as not only can the transgender students adjust in the existing schools, but their admission and inclusion in the mainstream schools can also improve their social inclusiveness and acceptance in society.

However, there are multiple challenges in this regard. Mainstream schools in Pakistan are generally hesitant to accept transgender students. Although the government has taken some initiatives, the overall attitude of society is detrimental to such steps. Not only are society and the parents resistant to this idea but the schools and the teachers are also unprepared to meet the unique challenges associated with it.

Research Gap and Significance

For improved educational opportunities and smooth and harmonious schooling experiences for transgender students; it is imperative that the students, teachers, and parents are supportive of their inclusion. However, despite several studies about social inclusion, educational opportunities, and experiences of transgenders in Pakistan (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014; Nazir & Yasir, 2016; Noreen & Rashid, 2024), we could not find a single one about the views and feelings of the aforementioned three main stakeholders in the schools on this issue. This gap invited us to carry out this study.

Being a traditional society, parents' attitude towards boys and girls is different in Pakistan. In Eastern cultures generally, and Islamic cultures especially; females are considered sensitive and delicate and should be protected (Noreen & Malik, 2021); consequently, parents are more sensitive and concerned about their daughters. Also, most of the schools (especially in the public sector) are gender-segregated. Keeping the aforementioned points in mind, we decided to focus only on females in girls-only schools which adds to the uniqueness and significance of this study.

Although this study is about Pakistan, the findings and recommendations may also be relevant to other countries and societies with similar mindsets, attitudes, and cultures. Transgender community in many other countries (especially those from the South) also face similar challenges in social acceptance and educational opportunities (Khan et al., 2009; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015; Tower, 2016); consequently, recommendations of this study (or at least some of them) can also help to improve the situation in those countries.

Research Objectives

This study has the following research objectives.

- To investigate the perceptions of the female stakeholders in mainstream schools (i.e. female students, female teachers, and mothers) about the social acceptance of transgender people in Pakistan.
- To investigate the perceptions of the female stakeholders in mainstream schools about educational opportunities for transgender students in Pakistan.
- To find out the views and feelings of the female stakeholders in mainstream schools about transgender-inclusive education in Pakistan.
- To give policy recommendations for improving social acceptance and educational opportunities for transgender students in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Research Design

As the purpose of the study was to deeply explore the perceptions and views of the participants about the research objectives, we decided to use the qualitative research method as it allows for deeper investigation and probe (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, as the study is descriptive, we employed a qualitative descriptive approach with thematic analysis.

Participants of the Study

Boys and girls are generally treated differently in Pakistan especially when it comes to sensitive topics. Keeping in mind the objectives of the study and the aforementioned context, it was decided to focus on females only. As a result, the participants of the study consisted of female students, female teachers, and mothers.

We decided to gather data from two elementary public schools in Lahore. Both schools were located in middle-class locations and most of the students came from average socio-economic backgrounds. We employed a purposive sampling technique with a homogeneous sampling strategy. The homogeneity criteria for each group were different. For teachers, it was gender, teaching level, and school; for students, it was gender, age group, level of education, school, and socioeconomic background; and for mothers, it was gender, children studying in that school, and their level of education.

It is important to note that after the selection of the two schools, students were the focal point of the study. The other participants were related to them in one way or the other (mothers of the same students, and the teachers teaching the same students). All the students were from grade eight. All in all, twenty-four participants were selected: eight students, eight teachers, and eight mothers.

Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Data was collected through semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews give plenty of room for flexibility, detailed responses, and further probing (Patton, 2002) while one-to-one interviews are useful when collecting data about sensitive topics.

Three separate interview guides were developed for the participants. Some of the interview questions were the same while others were different. Later they were sent to experts in the field of qualitative research for content validity through expert opinion. We looked at their comments and feedback and made some changes to the interview guide.

Supplementary questions were asked when needed.

Liamputtong (2007) strongly emphasized creating rapport when conducting studies about sensitive topics. Keeping in mind the fact that all the participants were females, interviews were carried out by the first researcher. It was believed that being a female herself, she could create a better rapport with the participants, thus helping them to speak more openly and frankly.

Data Analysis Technique

Interviews were conducted in Urdu language. They were first transcribed and then translated. We employed Marshall and Rossman's (2014) strategy for qualitative data analysis. Both of us did coding and categorizations independently. Later, we discussed them for further refinement and finalization. Following Malik et al. (2020), this whole process was carried out through MS Word using cut, copy, paste, and highlight functions. The final draft used verbatim quotations, keywords, and themes.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitivity of the topic and concerns shown by the participants, extra caution was taken about ethical considerations. It is important to note that many schools refused our request for data collection due to the sensitivity of the topic. The purpose of the study and their rights as voluntary participants were clearly explained to them. They were ensured that their identities and affiliations would be concealed to prevent any emotional, reputational, or psychological harm. They were also assured that their original voice recordings would not be shared with anyone or put on any open-access platforms. The verbatim quotations were shown to them and added to the final write-up only after their consent. In the case of the students, consent was also obtained from their mothers as they were below the legal age of consent.

Data Findings

Other than participants' information, data findings consisted of five main parts: transgender people as defined by the participants, social acceptance of transgender people in Pakistan, educational opportunities for transgender people in Pakistan, views and feelings of the participants about inclusive education for transgender students in Pakistan, and recommendations for improving social acceptance and educational opportunities for transgender students in Pakistan.

Participants' Information

Data was collected from twenty-four female participants (eight mothers, teachers, and students each). Their further details are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Information

	Pseudonym	Role	Age	Academic Qualification
1	Rida	Student	12 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
2	Shafa	Student	13 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
3	Hira	Student	13 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
4	Sibra	Student	15 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
5	Shazi	Student	12 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
6	Sheena	Student	13 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
7	Kiran	Student	13 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
8	Noveen	Student	13 yrs.	Grade 8 (student)
9	Raheela	Mother	35 yrs.	Masters
10	Anam	Mother	30 yrs.	Bachelors
11	Tasleem	Mother	32 yrs.	Masters
12	Ayesha	Mother	35 yrs.	Masters
13	Safia	Mother	33 yrs.	Bachelors
14	Fakhira	Mother	37 yrs.	Masters
15	Zahra	Mother	29yrs.	Bachelors
16	Iffat	Mother	37yrs.	Masters
17	Sana	Teacher	37 yrs.	Masters
18	Sumaira	Teacher	40 yrs.	Masters
19	Shabana	Teacher	47 yrs.	Masters
20	Muneeba	Teacher	35 yrs.	Masters
21	Nimra	Teacher	35 yrs.	Masters
22	Zarnab	Teacher	37 yrs.	Masters
23	Maham	Teacher	35 yrs.	Masters
24	Uzma	Teacher	33 yrs.	Masters

Transgender as Defined by the Participants

Participants were first asked to define transgender. It was an important question as it would reveal whether their perceptions and views were associated with cross-dressing or biological sex only or whether they had any deeper understanding.

Amongst the students, Sheena said that a transgender was a person who was “man but wants to be a woman”. Noveen said that “they are not what they want to be”. Rida believed that transgenders were “different from others, and they acted differently”. The students often used terms like “different”, “strange”, and “dress differently” to describe them. Amongst the mothers, Safia said that a transgender person was one who “likes to dress, act or behave like people from other sex.” To Iffat, transgenders “did not like their own sex and were more interested to live like other sex.” It was evident that the students and mothers did not have a deeper understanding about transgenders, and based their definitions with cross-dressing or biological sex.

Teachers, on the other hand, showed a better understanding of the term. Sana said that it was what “people want to be or do not want to be.” Maham said that it was “more than physical state. It is what one likes, how one presents oneself, how one wants others to view.” Uzma refuted the idea that transgenderism was cross-dressing, saying,

“No, it is not crossdressing. See, there are many girls. They wear jeans, t-shirts, and joggers [wearing generally associated with males in Pakistan], but they are not transgender. They just dress differently. Transgender is different. It is psychological and sociological. It is how you view yourself, and how you want others to view you. Yes, it is related to physical sex, but it is not about it only.”

Social Acceptance of Transgender Community in Pakistan

The next key interview question was about the participants’ perceptions of social acceptance of transgender people in Pakistan. There was a consensus that transgender people were marginalized and discriminated against in the country. The students said that transgender people were not seen as normal citizens. Rida said that they were not treated in the same way. She said that her family and neighbors would only see them as “acts”, someone to laugh at, to make fun of. While recalling how they were looked down upon and kept at a distance; she said, “Once they came to my house, on the birth of my nephew, for dancing. I tried to talk. My mother scolded me badly. She told me not to talk to them. They are bad.”

Not only did the students think that transgender people were treated differently by society, but some of them also thought so. “They are different. I mean... (giggles), you know, they are different,” said Sibra.

The teachers agreed that they were not accepted as “equal beings” (Sana), and were mostly looked down upon. Zarnab said that many in Pakistan viewed them as “filthy and dirty”. While acknowledging the efforts made by the governments for their equal rights, Maham argued that society was still not willing to embrace them. There was also a consensus amongst the mothers about the social rejection, maltreatment, and discrimination against transgender people in Pakistan. Raheela said that some transgender people lived in her neighborhood but the whole community would avoid interacting with them

“as if they were a plague”.

Many mothers admitted that they did not want their children to interact with them due to the fear of negative influence. Iffat said, “I don’t want my children to speak to them, visit them. I am afraid they will become like them.”

Educational Opportunities for Transgender People in Pakistan

The participants were then asked about the educational opportunities for transgender people in Pakistan. The students said that they had never seen any transgender student in their class or even in the school. “I do not know, maybe they study in other schools, but not in mine. I never saw [them] in my school,” Rida said. Hira echoed the same, saying that she saw a lot of boys and girls going to schools and colleges; but never even a single transgender student. It is worth noting that many students admitted that they never even thought about it. It seems that providing education to transgender people was not even part of public discourse in the country.

The teachers also shared the same opinion. Uzma said that despite recent policies, both schools and the communities were not prepared to accept them wholeheartedly. Sana said that even if a school wanted to accept them, the community did not support it. “I talked to some parents about it. They were uncomfortable. Some even said that they would withdraw their children from the school if they were in the same class.” The mothers also agreed to it. Fakhra who had previously taught in a private school, explained it in these words, “See, Pakistan is a traditional country. The education system is mostly gender-segregated. We have boys-only schools, we have girls-only schools; but for transgenders? I heard there are some vocational institutions, but regular schools? I don’t see any.”

Views and Feelings about Transgender-inclusive Education in Pakistan

The participants were then asked about the idea of transgender-inclusive education in Pakistan. Many students thought that there was nothing wrong with it. “They are also human beings so they should be able to get education in schools,” Hira said. Many students felt pity for them and wanted them to improve their lives with better educational opportunities.

Kiran and Noveen, on the other hand, were not supportive of it. They said that both transgender and cisgender students would “feel uncomfortable” because of it. “In many cases, they [transgender students] are shy of boys, and girls are shy of them,” Noveen said.

However, when asked how would they feel if transgender students were studying with them in their classes, their responses changed drastically. This time, only Rida supported it. “I will do my work, they can do theirs,” she said. However, other students’ emotions and responses ranged from shyness to apprehension to complete rejection. Noveen and Kiran strongly opposed it citing personal safety, adverse emotional and psychological effects, and fear of disturbance in the class. Shazi, Sibra, and Hira were concerned about its impact on both transgender and cisgender students, and also on the learning environment. Hira said, “When boys and girls are together in the class, some boys and girls focus less on studies, and more on each other. If transgenders are in the class, it will be worse.” Shafa and Sheena were shocked and shy when this “what if” scenario was presented to them. They found it “uncomfortable and shocking”.

It is important to point out that most of the students were less apprehensive about transboys (AFAB); however, when it came to transgirls (AMAB), they had stronger reservations. Shazi explained it in these words, "We came to a girls-only school because we do not want to sit and work with boys. For transboys, it is okay, but transgirls. I don't think I can sit and work with them."

Mothers were even more divided on this idea. Raheela, Tasleem, and Ayesha favored it while Safia, Fakhira, Zahra, and Iffat had reservations and concerns. Although Anam supported it, she believed that transgender students should be taught in separate classes.

Raheela found Islamic beliefs and principles as the basis to support it, "Our religion demands equal rights to everyone whether they are transgenders or other creatures of Allah. It is their basic right to study with other students in the same class." Ayesha and Tasleem also supported it as it would improve their acceptance "as equal and respectable members of the society" (Ayesha). However, they anticipated a lot of challenges due to the prevailing cultural and societal norms. Ayesha also raised the issue of their biological sex, saying that the parents may have different attitudes towards transboys (AFAB) and transgirls (AMAB).

"For co-education classes, it may be okay. We have different rows for boys and girls in co-education. Girls sit with girls; boys sit with boys. In those classes, even if there are transgender students, they can sit on separate benches. But in girls-only classes, it's complicated. Parents send their daughters to girls-only schools because they do not want them to study with boys. If it is a transgirl, physically it is a boy. I am afraid many will have objections. If it is a transboy, it may be okay."

While supporting it, Anam suggested that they should be taught in separate classes. She said that "it would be better if there are separate classes for them. Like many private schools, there are separate classes for boys and girls."

Safia, Fakhira, Zahra, and Iffat had strong apprehensions about transgender-inclusive education. Fakhira said, "It is not possible now. Maybe in the future by preparing children, their parents, teachers, and transgender students mentally; but now? We are not ready." She believed that "it needs one generation to provide transgenders adequate educational opportunities in Pakistan." Safia, Zahra, and Iffat also expressed grave concerns about the negative influence of transgender students on their daughters. They were also worried about the safety issues. Safia said, "If they are boys and behave like girls... they are still boys. If they are girls and behave like boys, they may try to look at their fellow girls like boys do. You know what I mean." Iffat also expressed concerns about the psychological influence of transgender students.

Amongst all the participants, teachers were the most supportive and accommodating to it. Not only did they support the idea of providing transgender-inclusive education, but most of them were open to teaching such classes. Shabana said that society should accept their right to equal education. Nimra had a very strong logic for supporting transgender-inclusive education.

“These children in the school will grow to become mature citizens of the society. If they learn to live and work with the transgender students in the school, they will learn to live and work with transgender people in the society.”

However, they pointed out multiple challenges such as lack of proper training for teachers for such classes, fears of bullying and harassment, adverse reactions of the parents and the society, increased classroom distractions, and challenges in using gender-neutral vocabulary. Sana said that the biggest hurdle would be from the parents and the society as they feared the "bad and dirty influence of transgenders". Zarnab also reported fears from the parents about their children's safety and security.

The teachers also expressed concerns regarding their readiness and training for it. Nimra pointed out the complete lack of any training, workshop, or seminar for it. She said, "Like teaching inclusive classes with children with disabilities, teaching inclusive classes with transgender students needs highly specialized preparedness and training. Many teachers, even if they want, cannot manage it." Uzman and Maham also pointed it out and called for extensive teacher training for the effective implementation of transgender-inclusive classes. However, it was heartening to note that despite expressing some concerns and apprehensions, all the teachers were united in their support for transgender-inclusive education in Pakistan.

Recommendations for Improving Social Acceptance and Educational Opportunities for Transgender Students in Pakistan

Finally, the participants were asked to give recommendations for improving social acceptance and educational opportunities for transgender students in Pakistan. All the themes that emerged after data analysis were put into two categories: awareness campaigns and policies to improve the overall mindset and attitude of the people, and steps and strategies for providing transgender-inclusive education.

Awareness campaigns and policies to improve the mindset and attitude towards transgender people

All participants unanimously stressed launching a campaign to improve the perception and attitude of society toward transgender people in Pakistan.

The teachers said that alienation of and discrimination against transgender people was more of a "cultural and societal issue" (Sana) as they were, by and large, looked down upon and considered "dirty and inferior" (Nimra). They argued that schools alone could not do much. "We need to change the thinking of Pakistani people, how they view transgenders, we need to make the people realize that they are also equal human beings," Uzma said. Muneeba argued that until and unless there was a concerted effort by both the government and the public, nothing could change. She said,

“Both the government and the community should stand up. Awareness campaigns about transgenders, their equal rights, their human rights. Then schools and the community should play their role. Schools should have meetings with the parents, local community leaders, and religious scholars in the local area, only then we can change

something. Otherwise, nothing can happen. Nothing will change."

Even amongst the mothers, increasing awareness emerged as the most commonly reported theme. Raheela believed that only through an awareness campaign involving both the government and influential people from different walks of life, can we think to improve the attitude towards transgender people. She said,

"Government should launch campaigns to raise awareness about the rights of transgenders. They should make society realize that they are human beings too and should have the equal right to enjoy basic educational rights. But it seems a very difficult task. People from different areas of life whether they are religious scholars or doctors or teachers should gather for awareness campaigns and to formulate policies about it."

Tasleem also said that as "the problem is with the mindset of the people", an awareness campaign may work. She argued that forcing a solution upon the people may only cause more disturbance, especially in a country like Pakistan where "people tend to react emotionally and impulsively on these issues." Ayesha also pointed out the power and politics in the country, saying that any enforced solution would only create a backlash. "These issues are exploited by religious leaders, political leaders, and now even by social media influencers because people buy it, it sells. Only a sensible and comprehensive approach, involving the participants, creating awareness, educating the common people may work," she said.

The participants also believed that the whole society should play its part in facilitating transgender people as they are amongst the most vulnerable segments of society.

"Society must play a role in providing equal opportunities to transgenders. You know, if they go to the road and try to protest, people laugh and make fun. Society should support them. If someone denies or humiliates them, he should be discouraged, reported, stopped." (Ayesha)

Steps and strategies for providing transgender-inclusive education

The second category was about the steps and strategies for providing inclusive education to transgender students. It was not surprising that most of the suggestions and recommendations came from the teachers. The participants mentioned multiple points such as discouraging and eliminating gender disparities and bullying in the schools, improving the school environment, school-wide campaigns for inclusiveness, using gender-neutral vocabulary, providing specialized teachers training for handling complex issues arising from transgender-inclusive classrooms, and the provision of specialized counseling and guidance services.

Teachers vehemently supported the idea of providing a safe and healthy school environment for transgender students. Sumaira said, "We cannot change the society, but we can change the school culture where they feel safe and secure." They talked about turning the school into a haven for transgender students by eliminating bullying, discrimination, and

prejudice. While talking about it, Sana said, “It [bullying] should not be compromised. Through awareness campaigns, education, seminars, rules and regulations, and punishments; leave no stone unturned. Only then not only will they come to schools but also stay there.”

They also highlighted the role and importance of specialized teacher training for transgender-inclusive classes. Many teachers said that even if they wanted to, they were ill-prepared to meet the unique challenges arising from teaching and managing such classes. Sana admitted that she never taught any class with transgender students; however, she said that she could “feel the challenges, many challenges like classroom environment, gender equality, teasing, distractions, and many more. I don’t think I can manage. I want, but I don’t think I can manage.” She further added that even in a co-education class with both boys and girls, the environment was tougher to manage “and with transgenders, I can imagine.”

The teachers suggested comprehensive training workshops, covering different aspects of pedagogical techniques, classroom management, and gender-neutral vocabulary. Maham elaborated on its need and importance in these words, “It is so unique, so difficult. If transgenders are there in the class, we should be more careful about what we say, how we say it. It is not about discipline or control only, it is not about pedagogical techniques only, it is also about understanding and respecting their feelings. It is delicate.”

While talking about the strategies for transgender-inclusive education in Pakistan, many teachers suggested a step-wise approach. They recommended school-level inclusivity as the first step where transgender students can study in the same school, but in different classes especially in gender-segregated schools. However, even in that case, one should not ignore ensuring a supporting, caring, and non-discriminatory school environment. Uzma said,

“There can be the arrangement of separate classrooms for transgenders. Special care and attention should be given to transgenders by teachers especially when they are out of the classrooms with other students. Moreover, teachers should strictly discourage bullying behavior by fellow students or school staff. With all these measures, we can overcome these challenges.”

Mothers also advocated for school-level inclusivity, especially in girls' schools. Many of them did not want transgender students studying in the same class with their daughters. Anam strongly refuted the idea that this strategy was discriminatory against transgender students, saying, “Look, I don’t like my daughter to study with the boys even. In Pakistan, mostly we have separate schools for boys and girls. It is our culture, our religion. Many parents will not support it, I know.”

They were especially concerned about transgirls studying with cisgender girls, saying that they were “actually boys” (Safia). Ayesha said that keeping in mind the sensitivity of the issues, cultural values, and safety concerns; there should be a comprehensive policy to address those “sensitive and burning questions”. She believed that imposing any policy which did not align with the cultural and societal values of the country, may be counterproductive as it would only cause backlash and negative reaction.

The last recommendation given by some teachers was about providing guidance and counseling services for transgender students in the schools. Nimra said that they were often not only more vulnerable and sensitive but also more fearful and hesitant to come up and share their concerns and issues. A dedicated counselor who can provide them with psychological and emotional support is essential. “Someone they can easily go to, talk to, and share their problems without any fear of being ridiculed. Someone who knows how to consult and guide them,” Muneeba said.

Discussion

This study investigated the perceptions of female students, female teachers, and mothers about social acceptance, educational opportunities, and inclusive education for transgender people in Pakistan. The participants were first asked to define transgenders: what were transgender people to them. It was not surprising that both the students and the mothers had a very limited understanding of the term. They mostly related it to their biological sex. To them, transgender was a person who acted and behaved like someone from the other sex. Only some of the teachers had a better conceptual understanding of the term. Much of the literature about transgender people in Pakistan (e.g. Saddique et al., 2017) also defines them similarly. Many studies have reported that those who believe in traditional conceptualization of the term, tend to have stronger anti-transgender views (Norton & Herek, 2013; Reiman et al., 2023). The same has been observed in this study as mothers had the hardest stance toward transgender people while teachers were the most accommodating.

The participants agreed that transgender people in Pakistan were not seen as equals, something which has also been pointed out by the literature (Abdullah et al., 2012; Azeem et al., 2021). By and large, they are viewed as filthy and inferior in Pakistan (Akhtar & Bilour, 2020; Azeem et al., 2021), and often live in isolated and secluded communities with their unique social structure (Khan, 2020). What was more disturbing was the fact that some of the participants saw their alienation and exclusion as a normal and even essential thing. It shows that due to an overwhelming cultural influence that has been shaping the minds and thoughts, discrimination and prejudice against them have been normalized. Some of the mothers were especially repulsive to the idea of transgender people interacting with their children due to the fears of polluting and negatively influencing their minds. It is worth noting that the reports about their harassment, humiliation, violence, and even killings have been increasing in recent years (Fatima et al., 2022). What was heartening though, was at least the realization by the participants about the lack (actually in many cases, absence) of equal educational opportunities for transgender communities in Pakistan, something which has been repeatedly reported in the literature (Abdullah et al., 2012; Tabassum & Jamil, 2014; Noreen & Rashid, 2024).

However, when it came to transgender-inclusive education, the participants were divided on it. Although most of the teachers and the students supported it, many mothers were less than thrilled about it. The students were generally shy to speak about it as LGBTQ+ and other topics are considered socially taboo in Pakistan (Sani et al., 2023). Still, they supported transgender-inclusive education. Teachers also advocated for it as it could improve their social acceptance. School learning is not only about classroom teaching but also through the socialization process (Garibaldi & Josias, 2015). Teachers believed that if transgender students studied with cisgender ones; it would not only speed up their social acceptance in society but also help them in their learning. However, many of them pointed out some hurdles and

challenges such as bullying and harassment, rejection by other students, increased distractions in the classes, lack of required knowledge and skills among the teachers to manage such classes, and adverse reactions from the parents and the community. Such concerns have been expressed in many studies (Das, 2019; Noreen & Rashid, 2024). They are often multiplied in a conventional and traditional society like Pakistan which has seen constant threats and incidents against vulnerable segments (Fatima et al., 2022; Noor, 2022).

The mothers voiced their concerns about the psychological and mental influence of transgender students on their children. They were also concerned about the safety of their daughter especially in the case of transgirls (AMAB) studying in the same class. The first argument represents the overall thinking of the society which alienates and discriminates against transgender people (Abdullah et al., 2012; Azeem et al., 2021). The second can be understood better in the context of the social and cultural values of the country. Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim country with very strong religious values and a traditional mindset (Nauman, 2015). Education in Pakistan especially in the middle and higher secondary schools is mostly gender segregated with separate schools for boys and girls (Ahmad et al., 2014). Even in most of the private schools where they study in the same building, their classes (sections) are separate. In the backdrop of this culture, their apprehensions are understood. Many mothers did not oppose the idea of providing education to transgender students in the same school but in the same classroom. It is also important to know that in Pakistan, parents have a very strong influence over the critical decisions about different aspects of their children's lives including education. Being a patriarchal society where females mostly live a protected and dependent life (Noreen & Malik, 2021); the parents' role and influence become even more dominant in the matters and affairs of female students. Consequently, the schools and the policymakers must address the concerns of the parents to ensure a smooth implementation of such policies.

Realizing that the discrimination against transgender people in Pakistan is more of a cultural and societal issue than an administrative or financial one, the participants strongly emphasized increasing awareness about it. Multiple studies have also highlighted the importance of increasing awareness about equal human rights and fair treatment to them (Dayani et al., 2019; Zakria et al., 2023). Understanding the sensitivities of the issue, its peculiar nature, and the power politics in Pakistan (where most of the issues are exploited for personal, political, or religious vendettas or vested interests), participants strongly stressed involving different segments of the society for an effective campaign. When different segments of a society work together on any issue, its chances of success are multiplied (Perry, 1949). It was also suggested that due to the religious nature of the society, religious scholars should also be involved so that they can nullify the misinterpretation of Islam which has been used to malign transgender people. This will not only encourage them to step out of their isolation but can also help in gaining equal status. Developing and improving policies for this purpose were also recommended.

Although some transgender-exclusive schools have already been opened in recent years, they are only situated in some big cities (Tanveer, 2021). This is also a good initiative but it cannot solve the problem as transgender people are scattered all across the country. Only admitting them into the existing schools may resolve this issue. Studies have shown that even when transgender students muster up their courage to gain admission into schools, they are less than welcome (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Sundara, 2019). A hostile and discriminatory environment within the schools not only results in

higher dropouts for them (James et al., 2016) but also discourages others from joining the schools in the first place (Tabassum & Jamil, 2014). The participants believed that only when the schools were turned into a safe haven for transgender students, can we expect them to join.

The participants also suggested launching school-wide awareness campaigns involving parents and the community, specialized training for teachers for transgender-inclusive classes, strict implementation of anti-bullying rules and regulations, and providing guidance and counseling services in the schools. Nazir and Yasir (2016) also argued that awareness campaigns for their equal rights and fair treatment can improve their educational and employment opportunities. Similarly, studies have pointed out the role and importance of parents and the community in this regard (Chandra, 2017). Involving parents and the community becomes even more pivotal in countries like Pakistan where there is general contempt and concerns about transgender people. In the same way, teachers in Pakistan are not trained to deal with the issues arising with transgender-inclusive classes (Noreen & Rashid, 2024). Teachers need highly specialized training to maintain discipline, prevent harassment, and ensure equal treatment in such classes (Chandra, 2017). Even using gender-neutral vocabulary is something that Pakistani teachers are not used to. Transgender are usually more shy, apprehensive, and less keen to communicate (Heinz, 2018). The participants suggested that not only should the teachers need to provide extra support to them, but the schools should also appoint specialized guidance and counseling experts to guide, facilitate, and support them.

Finally, some of the participants suggested that keeping in mind the overall mindset, culture, and values of Pakistani society; it is better to introduce step-wise inclusive education for transgender students, especially in gender-segregated schools. In the first step, there should be separate classes for transgender students within the same school. Once the students are comfortable with them, and some broader level of acceptance is developed, they can start joining the students in the classes. The participants argued that in a co-education school, it would be acceptable to teach transgender students in the same class; however, in gender-segregated schools, the concerns of the parents had to be addressed. Furthermore, the participants were more accommodating towards transboys (AFAB) in girls-only schools. Again, keeping in mind the fact that the schools are girls only, it is quite natural that some of the participants were not comfortable with the idea of biological boys in the classrooms. It is recommended that to break the ice, it may be a better idea to admit transboys (AFAB) into girls-only schools; while transgirls (AMAB) be admitted into boys-only schools. The best option might be to admit them into co-education schools where gender segregation is not an issue.

These recommendations may be frowned upon by some; however, keeping in mind the context, culture, and values in the country, they may be the most acceptable ones. Many theories like moral relativism and cultural relativism have already argued that while devising policies and practices, we need to respect the moral values, and concerns of that culture (Harman, 1978; Lukes, 2008; Tilley, 2000). In this way, we can devise and implement policies more acceptably. Forcing policies upon society, especially a policy about an issue as sensitive as this one and a society as conservative and emotional as the Pakistani one, may be counterproductive and induce more disdain and even violence against the transgender community in the country.

Conclusion

Transgender people in Pakistan often face unequal and unfair treatment with social exclusion and a lack of equal educational opportunities. Education can play a pivotal role in not only opening new doors for prosperity for the transgender people in Pakistan but also in their social inclusion in society. Due to the scattered population of the transgender community in the country, this study suggests transgender-inclusive education as the most viable option. However, keeping in mind the overall culture and attitude of the society, one must devise policies that do not force any solution upon the people, but create awareness and educate them.

This study suggests two main steps for improving social inclusion and educational opportunities for transgender people in Pakistan: creating awareness and developing policies to improve the overall mindset and attitude of the society, and improving schools' culture and environment so that transgender students can not only come and join but also stay here as equal and respectable students.

However, in a conservative country like Pakistan where most of the public schools are gender-segregated, such policies should be developed and implemented contextually. It may be acceptable to give admissions to transgender students in co-education schools, but when it comes to gender-specific schools (especially girls' schools), one should be more careful. In many cases, parents send their daughters to girls' schools as they do not want them to study with the boys. Some of the participants said that in the first step, it would be better if transboys (AFAB) are given admission to girls' schools, and transgirls (AMAB) are given to boys' schools. We believe that in such sensitive topics, policies should be culturally relative so that they are accepted and adopted by society willingly rather than being imposed which may result in backlash and negative reactions.

Limitations of the Study and Further Research

This study comes up with some important and relevant findings and recommendations. Most of the participants were in favor of trans-inclusive schools and even classrooms. However, it is important to note that it is a qualitative study; consequently, the findings cannot be generalized. Also, Pakistan is a very diverse country. The participants of the study belonged to Lahore (the capital and the biggest city of the Punjab province), one of the more modern cities in the country. Many other regions and areas (e.g. Balochistan province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, interior/ rural areas of Sindh province, Southern areas of Punjab province, etc.) are a lot more conservative and traditional. Further studies (preferably using mixed-methods) should be carried out about those areas to explore the perceptions and views of the stakeholders about the idea of trans-inclusive schools to devise a more comprehensive and effective policy on this issue.

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