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## **Bridging the Gap: Strategies for Aligning Legal Rights and Social Acceptance of Transgender Individuals in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract:**

The rights of transgender individuals serve as a critical indicator of a society's progress toward equality and justice. In Pakistan, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 represents a significant legal milestone for a community that has historically faced marginalization and persecution. This legislation envisions a future of dignity and equality by granting transgender individuals the right to self-identify and access essential rights such as education, employment and healthcare. However, the reality on the ground remains stark as the cultural stigma, systemic violence and institutional neglect continue to overshadow these legal advancements. This research paper examines the intersection of legal progress and the persistent challenges faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan. This study employs a qualitative research methodology and relies primarily on secondary data analysis, including legal documents, policy reports, academic literature and media coverage. A thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns in societal attitudes, legal enforcement gaps and strategies for bridging the divide between legislation and practice. It evaluates the effectiveness of current laws, the cultural and institutional barriers that hinder their implementation and the need for a more inclusive society where transgender rights are genuinely recognized, protected and upheld.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The history of transgender individuals in South Asia, including Pakistan, is deeply intertwined with the region's cultural and religious heritage. Historically, the transgender community, commonly referred to as *Hijras*, held a unique position within South Asian societies. During the pre-colonial era, Hijras were recognized as a third gender and played significant cultural and spiritual roles. They were often invited to bless weddings and childbirth ceremonies as their presence was believed to bring good fortune. Moreover, in the courts of Mughal emperors, they held esteemed positions and were granted lands, titles and pensions in recognition of their services (Iftikhar et al., 2021).

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The arrival of British colonial rule in the 19th century marked a significant turning point in the history of transgender community. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 classified Hijras and other marginalized groups as "criminals," thereby stripping them of their social legitimacy and legal standing. This colonial legislation initiated a pattern of systemic exclusion that persisted into the 20th century (Iftikhar et al., 2021).

Following Pakistan's independence, the treatment of transgender individuals continued to be influenced by this colonial legacy. While the country's laws did not explicitly target transgender people, the lack of legal recognition and pervasive societal bias further marginalized the community. Transgender individuals faced widespread discrimination in employment, healthcare, education and even within their families. Many were forced into begging, sex work, or other survival-based occupations due to limited social acceptance and economic opportunities ("Status and Rights of Transgender," n.d.).

Despite the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, transgender individuals in Pakistan continue to experience widespread discrimination, exclusion and violence. This study holds significance as it seeks to explore practical strategies to align legal protections with societal realities. By addressing this disconnect, the research aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators and civil society to foster a more inclusive society. Furthermore, enhancing transgender inclusion can contribute to economic growth, social harmony and a more equitable legal system.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: What strategies can be adopted to bridge the gap between legal rights and social acceptance of transgender individuals in Pakistan?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the gap between legal rights and social acceptance of transgender individuals in Pakistan. It relies primarily on secondary data analysis, including legal documents, policy reports, academic literature and media coverage. A thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns in societal attitudes, legal enforcement gaps and strategies for bridging the divide between legislation and practice. This approach ensures a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and socio-legal dynamics of transgender individuals.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The struggle for transgender rights in Pakistan has become a significant topic of academic and policy discussion, especially after the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018. This section reviews existing literature on the legal, social and economic challenges faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan, while also exploring potential strategies to bridge the gap between legal recognition and social acceptance.

### **Lived Realities: Exclusion, Livelihoods, Violence and Resilience**

A substantial body of qualitative and mixed-method research centers on the day-to-day social, economic and health-related experiences of transgender communities (Aks Research Collective, 2020; Hossain, 2017; Nisar, 2018; Javed & Malik, 2020). These studies document recurring themes

such as economic marginalization manifested in barriers to formal employment, reliance on informal economies, pervasive social stigma, limited access to health and social services and exposure to violence and discrimination.

Research conducted specifically within Pakistani context (Aks Research Collective, 2020; Pasha, 2018; Khan, 2019) shows how social exclusion intersects with class, region and education to shape diverse experiences within trans communities. Nisar (2018) emphasizes the depth of economic exclusion and the structural barriers that prevent the meaningful workforce inclusion initiatives. This problem is also addressed by Javed & Malik (2020), as they explore workplace inclusion initiatives that aim to address these disparities, yet both note the slow pace of change.

Narratives of violence and hardship (Akbar, 2016; Amnesty International, 2021) further highlight the persistent threats to safety that legal reforms alone have failed to eliminate. At the same time, studies such as those by Aks Research Collective (2020) and field-based scholarship (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005) attend to community resilience strategies, kinship networks and cultural practices that shape survival and identity.

### **Theoretical and Regional Insights**

The scholarship on transgender rights and identities in Pakistan must be located within broader theoretical debates on gender and identity, as well as regional histories of governance and recognition in South Asia.

#### **Theoretical frameworks**

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a foundational lens for understanding gender as a socially constructed and iterative practice rather than a biologically determined essence. Within the Pakistani context, Butler's framework sheds light on the tensions embedded in the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018* (Government of Pakistan, 2018), which formally recognizes the right to self-identification yet simultaneously subjects gender identity to bureaucratic regulation. Butler's insights help explain how law struggles to capture the fluidity of lived gender identities, often rein-scribing binary categories under the guise of recognition.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework is equally critical, offering a lens to analyze overlapping systems of oppression. Transgender persons in Pakistan experience not only transphobia but also discrimination shaped by class, caste, religion and rural-urban divides. For instance, the vulnerabilities of a working-class *khwaja sira* in rural Punjab differ markedly from those of an urban middle-class trans man in Karachi. Intersectionality thus emphasize that transgender communities cannot be treated as homogenous; instead, layered experiences of marginalization must inform policy design and legal reform.

Anthropological scholarship further complicates Western-centric understandings of gender by situating gender variance within localized cultural and historical contexts. Serena Nanda's (1999) ethnography of hijra communities in India and Gayatri Reddy's (2005) work on hijra identity in South India both highlight that hijra identity is not reducible to a "third gender" label but is embedded in kinship, ritual and socio-economic practices. These insights are vital in Pakistan, where *khwaja sira* communities share profound cultural and historical continuities with their

Indian counterparts. Jessica Hinchy's (2019) historical analysis extends this lens, demonstrating how colonial governance criminalized and stigmatized hijras, embedding notions of deviance into state structures. This colonial legacy continues to shape contemporary Pakistan, where the state formally recognizes transgender rights but still polices and regulates gender-nonconforming bodies through legal and administrative mechanism.

### **Regional comparative insights**

Comparative regional scholarship highlights both shared and divergent trajectories of transgender recognition within South Asian region. Narrain's (2019) analysis of India's National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) judgment shows how judicial recognition of a "third gender" was groundbreaking but also reinforced rigid categorization, privileging certain identities while marginalizing others. Pakistan's 2018 Act faces similar critiques: although progressive in intent and scope, it risks reducing fluid and diverse identities into administratively manageable categories (Rehan, 2021).

In Bangladesh, Hossain (2017) describes a "paradox of recognition" wherein the state's official recognition of hijras in 2013 increased their visibility but failed to dismantle structural marginalization. Recognition, in this case, became more symbolic than substantive, offering political capital for the state without materially improving hijra livelihoods. These dynamics resonate with Pakistan, where the Act's promises remain undercut by weak implementation and persistent stigma (Iftikhar, Salleh, & Hayat, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021).

Other comparative insights come from diaspora contexts. Jivraj and de Jong (2011), analyzing queer Muslim identities in the Netherlands, demonstrate how even in liberal societies, state policies often silence or marginalize certain identities under the guise of inclusion. Their findings highlight striking parallels with Pakistan, where legal recognition discourse coexists alongside persistent exclusion and social invisibility in practice.

Finally, the Yogyakarta Principles (2007) provide a global human-rights framework that situates gender identity and sexual orientation within established principles of international law. While Pakistan has not formally endorsed these Principles, they serve as important advocacy tools for NGOs, activists and policymakers who seek to align domestic law with international standards (UNDP Pakistan, 2020).

### **Synthesis**

Taken together, these theoretical and regional perspectives underscore several critical insights. Postcolonial analyses (Hinchy, 2019; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005) reveal the historical roots of state regulation of gender variance, which persist in contemporary governance. Intersectional frameworks (Crenshaw, 1991) demonstrate the compounded nature of marginalization, while queer theory (Butler, 1990) critiques the state's attempt to stabilize inherently fluid identities within rigid legal and bureaucratic categories. Regional case studies (Narrain, 2019; Hossain, 2017) show that recognition can be paradoxical, advancing rights at the discursive level while simultaneously reproducing exclusion in material and structural reforms. Finally, global human rights principles (Yogyakarta Principles, 2007) set aspirational standards that continue to inform and shape transnational advocacy for gender and sexual diversity.

In this synthesis, Pakistan's transgender rights trajectory is best understood as a product of entangled histories (colonial and postcolonial), layered oppressions (class, religion, geography, gender) and regional patterns of recognition that both advance and constrain the lived realities of transgender persons.

## **LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS**

### **The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018**

On May 8, 2018, the National Assembly of Pakistan enacted the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, a groundbreaking piece of legislation aimed at ensuring the protection, recognition and inclusion of transgender individuals within the country. This act not only acknowledges the fundamental rights of transgender people but also explicitly prohibits all forms of discrimination, harassment and denial of services on the basis of gender identity. Additionally, it places an obligation on local governments to actively promote the welfare of the transgender community and foster an environment of equality and respect.

### **Definition of "Transgender Individuals"**

The Act defines "transgender persons" in broad and inclusive terms to reflect the diversity within the community. It encompasses intersex individuals, commonly referred to as *khusra* in local terminology, as well as individuals assigned male at birth who may have undergone sex-reassignment procedures, often known as eunuchs. It also recognizes *Khwaja Sira*, an important socio-cultural identity deeply rooted in South Asian tradition. Beyond these traditional categories, the law includes transgender men, transgender women and individuals whose gender identity or expression does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth. This comprehensive definition ensures that all individuals who fall under the transgender umbrella are protected under the law (Williams, 2014).

### **Self-Identification of Gender Identity**

One of the most progressive provisions of the Act is its recognition for the self-identification of gender. Under this law, transgender individuals are empowered to determine and declare their own gender identity without requiring approval or certification from any external authority. This principle of self-identification extends to official recognition, as the Act mandates the registration of transgender persons with all relevant government departments, including the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). This step is crucial in granting transgender individuals access to identity documents that reflect their self-identified gender, which in turn facilitates their participation in various aspects of public and private life ("1526547582\_234.pdf," n.d.).

### **Essential Rights**

The Act guarantees a comprehensive range of essential rights to transgender individuals, aligning them with the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of Pakistan. It explicitly prohibits discrimination in educational institutions, workplaces and healthcare facilities. It also addresses harassment and abuse, whether in public spaces or within private settings, ensuring that transgender persons are protected from harm based on their gender identity or expression. Furthermore, it acknowledges and upholds the rights of transgender individuals to inherit property, vote in elections, access education, secure employment, obtain healthcare and participate

in public life. Collectively, these provisions aim to dismantle the systemic barriers that have historically perpetuated the social and economic marginalization of the transgender community ("1526547582\_234.pdf," n.d.).

### **Role of Local Governments**

To facilitate the integration and welfare of transgender individuals, the Act specifies responsibilities to local governments. Municipal authorities are required to ensure that transgender persons are accommodated in institutions such as shelters, hospitals and correctional facilities. In addition, the law emphasizes the importance of public awareness by mandating training initiatives and educational campaigns to combat prejudice and promote understanding of transgender issues. These measures aim to create a society where transgender individuals can live with dignity and respect, free from discrimination and exclusion.

### **Response and Significance**

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 has been widely recognized as a monumental achievement in the fight for transgender rights in Pakistan. Advocacy groups and members of the transgender community have celebrated its enactment as a significant step toward legal equality, social inclusion and justice. Although challenges persist in fully implementing the law and ensuring its widespread acceptance, the Act represents a powerful commitment by the state to uphold the rights and dignity of transgender individuals. It stands as a testament to the resilience and determination of those who have fought tirelessly for recognition and equality and marks a crucial milestone in the broader struggle for human rights in Pakistan (Khan, 2020; Ahmed & Jafar, 2021).

### **Societal Stigma and Cultural Barriers: Case Study of Alisha**

Alisha was a prominent transgender activist in Pakistan and a key member of TransAction Alliance, a group advocating for the rights of transgender individuals in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. She dedicated her life to raising awareness about the systemic discrimination, violence, and marginalization faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan. Her activism highlighted the deep-rooted social stigma and institutional neglect that continue to shape the lived realities of transgender community.

### **The Incident**

In May 2016, Alisha was shot multiple times in Peshawar by a man who had been harassing her and attempting to coerce her into an unwanted relationship. Following the attack, she was rushed to Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar for emergency medical treatment.

### **Discrimination in Healthcare**

Upon her arrival at the hospital, Alisha reportedly faced delays in receiving care. The discrimination, which ultimately led to her untimely death. Reports indicate that the hospital staff delayed her treatment due to her transgender identity. Staff members argued over whether to admit her to the male or female ward, wasting critical time. Her condition deteriorated and she ultimately succumbed to her injuries.



### **Public Outcry and Response**

Alisha's death sparked widespread outrage and protests across Pakistan, especially among transgender activists. The incident highlighted the systemic discrimination that transgender individuals face, even in critical and life-threatening circumstances. Key responses included;

- **Protests by TransAction Alliance:** Demonstrators called for justice for Alisha and demanded an end to violence against transgender individuals.
- **Media Attention:** Her case drew significant national and international media coverage, amplifying awareness of struggles of the transgender community, leading to a broader conversation about their rights and safety.
- **Government Action:** In response to the protests and mounting pressure, the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa promised to investigate the incident and improve conditions for transgender people.

### **Broader Implications**

The incident exposed the gap between the legal framework and societal practices. Although Pakistan had introduced progressive measures such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, cases like Alisha's showed that legal advancements did not automatically translate into societal acceptance or the elimination of violence and discrimination.

### **Economic Exclusion and Employment Challenges**

Multiple studies reveal that transgender individuals in Pakistan face significant economic marginalization, with widespread denial of employment opportunities rooted in societal prejudice. Despite legislative protections for workplace inclusion, private sector employers often hesitate to hire transgender individuals, forcing many into low-income jobs such as begging or sex work (Nisar, 2018; Javed & Malik, 2020).

Workplace discrimination is one of the leading causes of psychological distress among employees in organizations. When coworkers discover that their peers are neither men nor women, it can lead to intrapersonal anguish and conflict. Transgender individuals are often discriminated against and their opinions are frequently undervalued. According to research, this discrimination could be mitigated through implementing practices that foster a positive attitude toward transgender individuals. For example, introducing work uniforms that specify appropriate attire and professional conduct could help reduce distress. Activists play a crucial role in driving societal change, advocating for transgender rights and establishing workplace groups to implement non-discrimination and transgender-affirmative policies (Javed & Malik, 2020).

The situation is even more precarious in informal economies, which are prevalent across Asia and remain unsafeguarded or unregulated by the state. Over two-thirds of women in Asia work in informal wage jobs. These individuals, often referred to as transwomen, trans people, or transgender, are male by sex but have appearances that resemble women. They are economically exploited as informal workers and are culturally vulnerable due to their gender identity, leading to unequal treatment and discrimination. In informal employment, transwomen often work as beauticians, sellers and peddlers for very low wages. They accept these low-paying jobs due to a

lack of stable, secure and long-term employment opportunities, which stems from limited education and societal bias against their gender identity. These living conditions of transgender workers reflect the limited opportunities available to them, creating significant challenges for transwomen in South and East Asia to improve their quality of life (Javed & Malik, 2020).

## **POTENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR BRIDGING THE GAP**

### **Strengthening Legal Implementation**

According to Khan (2020), one of the most significant barriers to implementing transgender rights in Pakistan is the lack of institutional commitment. Although the Pakistani legal system is capable of enacting progressive legislation, bureaucratic inefficiencies often hinder or entirely obstruct the enforcement process. Government institutes, law enforcement agencies and the judiciary frequently lack the necessary training and resources to handle cases related to transgender rights. Many transgender individuals struggle to obtain identity documents that reflect their self-identified gender, as officials at the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) often hesitate to process such requests due to personal biases or fear of backlash from conservative groups.

Khan (2020) argues that institutional accountability mechanisms are essential for legal rights to have real value. Without a dedicated task force or monitoring body, the government agencies remain disconnected from ground realities, leading to the continued exclusion of transgender individuals from legal protections. The establishment of a human rights oversight committee within the government, specifically focused on ensuring transgender rights, could serve as a vital step towards bridging this gap.

Another critical issue highlighted by Khan (2020) is the role of law enforcement agencies in failing to protect transgender rights. Police officers often display ignorance or hostility toward transgender individuals, resulting in cases where victims of violence are further harassed instead of being protected. Even when legal complaints are filed, there is a lack of urgency in investigating and prosecuting crimes committed against transgender individuals, leaving them vulnerable to ongoing cycles of violence and discrimination.

### **Public Awareness and Education**

Public awareness and education play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between legal rights and societal acceptance of transgender individuals in Pakistan. While laws such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 provide a progressive legal framework for equality, deep-rooted social stigmas and misconceptions about gender identity continue to impede genuine inclusion. As Rehman (2021) points out, a lack of awareness among the general public and institutional stakeholders is one of the primary barriers to transgender inclusion. Without widespread education initiatives and advocacy efforts, these legal protections remain ineffective in practice.

### **The Role of Schools and Educational Institutions**

One of the most effective ways to promote acceptance of transgender individuals is through the integration of gender diversity education into school curricula. Rehman (2021) argues that introducing concepts such as gender identity, human rights and inclusivity at an early age can help reduce prejudice and promote empathy. Evidence from the countries that have implemented



inclusive educational programs have seen positive shifts in public attitudes toward transgender individuals. In Pakistan, however, the formal education system remains largely silent on gender diversity resulting in generations growing up with little to no awareness of transgender rights. Providing gender-sensitivity training for teachers and incorporating transgender issues into textbooks could play a transformative role in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society.

Additionally, higher education institutions can serve as centers of change by conducting research on transgender rights, organizing awareness campaigns and offering scholarships to transgender students. Despite legal protections, many transgender individuals face discrimination in schools and universities, leading to high dropout rates. Universities can play a proactive role in promoting inclusion by establishing anti-discrimination policies, providing counseling services and creating transgender-friendly campus environments.

### **The Role of Media in Shaping Public Perception**

The media has a powerful influence on how society perceives transgender individuals. In Pakistan, however, television dramas, films and news reports often portray transgender people in stereotypical or demeaning ways, reinforcing negative biases (Rehman, 2021). These portrayals fuel discrimination rather than challenging societal prejudices. To counter this, media organizations must take responsibility for promoting accurate and respectful representations of transgender individuals.

Rehman (2021) suggests that media awareness campaigns featuring transgender success stories can play a pivotal role in reshaping public opinion. Showcasing transgender professionals, activists and entrepreneurs in mainstream media can break the narrative that transgender individuals are limited to entertainment, begging or sex work. Additionally, social media platforms offer an opportunity for transgender individuals to share their experiences, raise awareness and challenge misconceptions. Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can effectively leverage these platforms to run educational campaigns and advocacy programs aimed at promoting inclusivity and reducing social stigma.

### **Religious and Community Engagement**

Religious and community leaders hold significant influence over public attitudes in Pakistan. Many misinterpretations of religious teachings have fueled discrimination against transgender individuals, leading to exclusion from families, workplaces and public spaces. However, a growing number of religious scholars have taken progressive stances, advocating for transgender rights within an Islamic framework (Rehman, 2021).

### **Health and Social Support Systems**

Health and social support systems are essential for the well-being and inclusion of transgender individuals in Pakistan. Despite the existence of legal protections, transgender individuals still face numerous barriers in accessing appropriate healthcare, mental health services and social support. These challenges stem from a lack of awareness among healthcare providers, societal discrimination and the absence of government-backed initiatives that are inclusive of transgender people (Rehman & Laxmi, 2019).

One of the primary difficulties faced by transgender individuals is the inadequacy of healthcare services specifically tailored to their needs. Rehman and Laxmi (2019) emphasize that many healthcare professionals are not trained to deal with transgender-specific medical concerns, such as hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgeries, which often results in misdiagnosis and mistreatment. This knowledge gap leads to many transgender individuals being reluctant to seek medical help due to fear of discrimination or mistreatment. Rehman and Laxmi (2019) argue that establishing specialized medical training, gender-sensitive healthcare guidelines and making transgender-specific healthcare services widely accessible would help alleviate these concerns and promote better health outcomes for transgender individuals.

Mental health is another critical yet frequently neglected dimension of transgender well-being in the Pakistani context. Due to the pervasive social stigma, family rejection and discrimination transgender individuals face, mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies are prevalent within the community (Rehman & Laxmi, 2019). However, access to mental health services remains limited due to financial constraints and social stigma surrounding mental health. Rehman and Laxmi (2019) emphasize that integrating mental health services into primary healthcare settings would make these services more accessible to transgender individuals. Furthermore, community-led initiatives, such as peer support groups and safe spaces for transgender people to share experiences are essential in providing emotional and social support.

Rehman and Laxmi (2019) also highlight the significance of social support networks comprising family, community organizations and government programs, in improving the lives of transgender individuals. In Pakistan, family rejection is one of the leading causes of homelessness and economic instability for transgender individuals. To address this, Rehman and Laxmi (2019) advocate for public education campaigns aimed at educating families about transgender identities and promoting acceptance, which could help reduce rejection and improve family support. Additionally, expansion of government welfare programs providing financial assistance, housing, vocational training and employment opportunities would go a long way in fostering the social inclusion of transgender individuals.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a vital role in providing support to transgender individuals, especially in the absence of sufficient government intervention. These organizations provide essential services such as vocational training, legal aid and healthcare services, however, their reach remains limited. Rehman and Laxmi (2019) emphasize the need for stronger institutional support from both government and civil society organizations to enhance the scope and effectiveness of these services. Collaboration between NGOs, international human rights organizations and the government can help create a more sustainable and inclusive support system for transgender individuals.

For the realization of a truly inclusive society, Rehman and Laxmi (2019) call for the government to ensure the enforcement of existing laws guaranteeing equal access to healthcare, mental health services and social welfare programs for transgender individuals. In addition, building partnerships with healthcare professionals and transgender advocacy groups is crucial in designing policies and programs that address the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan.

### Religious and Cultural Engagement

Religious and cultural beliefs play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes toward transgender individuals in Pakistan. While the country has taken legal steps toward recognizing transgender rights, cultural and religious perceptions continue to hinder full social acceptance. Haque (2023) argues that meaningful engagement with religious scholars and cultural influencers is essential for fostering a more inclusive society.

Haque (2023) highlights that historically, transgender individuals, particularly the *Khawaja Sira* community, held a recognized social status in South Asian societies, including during the Mughal era. However, colonial-era policies and modern interpretations of religious doctrines have contributed to their marginalization. Haque (2023) suggests that re-examining Islamic teachings with a more inclusive lens could help shift public perceptions. Furthermore, several Islamic scholars have argued that Islam emphasizes human dignity and justice, which should extend to transgender individuals. However, the lack of a unified religious stance on transgender rights continues to fuel societal resistance.

Cultural engagement is another crucial aspect in addressing transgender rights. Haque (2023) points out that, while mainstream media often portrays transgender individuals through stereotypical and sometimes degrading representations, there have been positive shifts in recent years. Increasing the presence of transgender voices in media, literature and public discourse could help challenge deep-seated biases. Traditional community leaders and cultural influencers must also be involved in discussions about transgender rights to promote greater acceptance within society.

Haque (2023) advocates for dialogue between transgender activists, religious scholars and cultural figures to bridge the gap between legal recognition and societal acceptance. Incorporating transgender perspectives into religious and cultural discussions can help dispel misconceptions and create a narrative that aligns transgender rights with ethical and moral values widely accepted in Pakistani society.

### CONCLUSION

Despite legislative progress marked by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, the struggle for transgender rights in Pakistan remains far from complete. The disparity between legal recognition and social acceptance continues to pose significant challenges for transgender individuals, limiting their access to education, employment, healthcare and social inclusion. While laws provide a foundation for protection, their impact is limited unless they are effectively implemented and widely communicated. The deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs about gender identity hinder efforts for inclusivity. However, history demonstrates that the *Khawaja Sira* community historically held a recognized and respected presence in South Asian societies, showing that societal attitudes are not static and can change over time. Meaningful engagement with religious scholars, cultural leaders and legislators is critical for reshaping narratives and increasing acceptance of transgender individuals in Pakistan.

Moving forward, the focus must shift to creating an inclusive society where transgender individuals are not only legally protected but also recognized and valued as equal citizens. Strengthening legal

protections, promoting educational and occupational inclusion and ensuring access to gender-sensitive healthcare services are crucial steps toward bridging the gap between rights and acceptance. Furthermore, families, communities and institutions must take a more active role in supporting transgender individuals rather than excluding them. With ongoing efforts by civil society, government institutions and the media, Pakistan has the potential to move beyond legal recognition and build a society where transgender individuals can live with dignity, security and equal opportunity. True progress will be realized not only by enacting laws but also by changing hearts and minds to create a more equitable and inclusive nation.

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