



Breaking the Cycle of "Begging and Dancing": Socio-Economic Barriers to Formal Employment for the Transgender Community in Punjab

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>Despite legislative milestones such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, the transgender community in Punjab, Pakistan, remains largely confined to the informal "shadow economy" of begging (mangna) and dancing (nachna). This research article investigates the systemic socio-economic barriers that prevent formal employment for the Khwaja Sira community. Utilizing a qualitative analysis of data from 2020 to 2026, the study identifies a "Triple Barrier" consisting of family rejection, educational exclusion, and workplace transphobia. The paper also analyzes the impact of the 2023 Federal Shariat Court ruling and the 2025 "Pehchan" skills initiative. Findings suggest that while vocational training is increasing, the lack of a legal framework for self-perceived identity and persistent social stigma creates a cycle of poverty. The study concludes with policy recommendations for inclusive hiring and legal protections.</i>
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Introduction

The transgender community in Pakistan, historically known as *Khwaja Sira*, occupies a paradoxical space in the social fabric of Punjab. While once revered as advisors and guardians in the Mughal era, contemporary Khwaja Siras face extreme marginalization (Alamgir, 2022). In the province of Punjab, which houses approximately 65% of the country's transgender population (approx. 6,709 individuals according to official figures, though independent estimates suggest upwards of 500,000), the community is often reduced to visible but excluded figures on the streets (AHSS, 2023).

The "Begging and Dancing" cycle is not a choice but a survival mechanism. For decades, the inability to access formal jobs has forced individuals into *Badhai* (ceremonial blessings), street begging, and stage dancing. Recent data indicates that even with the introduction of the Transgender Persons Act in 2018, formal employment remains an elusive dream for over 90% of the community in Punjab (Fatima et al., 2025). This paper explores why the transition from the "deras" (communal houses) to the "desk" (formal office) has failed to materialize significantly.

Literature Review: Transgender Labor Marginalization (2020–2026)

The transition of the Khwaja Sira community from historical prominence to contemporary socio-economic exclusion is a central theme in South Asian sociological literature. Recent scholarship emphasizes that the "Begging and Dancing" cycle is not merely a cultural tradition but a direct result of institutionalized "cis normativity" in the labor market.

Historical Displacement and the Shadow Economy

Historical analyses suggest that the colonial era initiated the criminalization of the transgender identity, a legacy that persists in the modern informal economy. Alamgir (2022) argues that the post-colonial state has failed to reintegrate the Khwaja Sira into formal structures, leaving them dependent on the *Badhai* and *nachna* systems for survival. Recent studies confirm that despite the 2018 Act, over 90% of the community remains trapped in this shadow economy due to a lack of transition pathways.

Family Rejection as a Precursor to Economic Failure

Current research identifies family ostracization as the primary "shock" that disrupts human capital development. Abdullah et al. (2025) find that 85% of transgender individuals are displaced from their homes before adulthood, which effectively terminates their access to formal education and professional networking. This displacement forces individuals into the *Guru-Chela* system, which, while providing safety, often reinforces a "bounded economy" limited to begging and dancing.

The Documentation and Legal Impasse (2023–2026)

The literature between 2023 and 2026 is dominated by the "Documentation Deadlock" caused by the Federal Shariat Court (FSC) ruling. Scholars argue that the strike-down of "self-perceived identity" has created a bureaucratic vacuum. Social Sciences Review (2025) highlights that without aligned CNICs, transgender individuals are systemically barred from the "fintech" and formal banking sectors necessary for modern employment.

Vocational Training vs. Structural Stigma

While state-led initiatives like the "Pehchan" program (2025) show an increase in technical literacy, the literature notes a "Placement Paradox". Even with IT or hospitality skills, the 12.5%

placement rate suggests that "supply-side" interventions (training) are failing because "demand-side" barriers (workplace transphobia and lack of facilities) remain unaddressed.

The Theoretical Framework: Minority Stress and Social Exclusion

This study employs **Minority Stress Theory** and the **Social Exclusion Framework** to understand the barriers faced by the community. Minority stress posits that marginalized groups experience chronic high levels of stress due to their stigmatized status, which leads to poor mental health outcomes and economic disenfranchisement (Solaiman et al., 2023). In Punjab, social exclusion is multidimensional affecting the political, economic, and cultural spheres (ResearchGate, 2026).

Methodology

This study utilizes a Qualitative Mixed-Methods Approach to explore the complex socio-economic landscape of the transgender community in Punjab. Given the marginalized and "hidden" nature of the population, the methodology was designed to prioritize ethical sensitivity and data depth over simple statistical breadth.

Research Design

The research is grounded in a Phenomenological Study, which seeks to understand the "lived experiences" of transgender individuals in their transition from the informal to the formal economy. The study combines secondary data synthesis with primary qualitative observations collected between January 2023 and February 2026.

Sampling and Participants

A Purposive and Snowball Sampling technique was employed to reach participants across three distinct socio-geographic zones in Punjab:

- Zone A (Urban Center): Lahore and Faisalabad (Focus on corporate and IT sectors).
- Zone B (Industrial Hub): Sialkot and Multan (Focus on manufacturing and vocational training).
- Zone C (Rural/Agrarian): Bhakkar and Layyah (Focus on the traditional Dera system and agricultural labour).

The sample consisted of 450 individuals, including:

- 380 Transgender individuals (Khwaja Siras) engaged in both formal and informal labor.
- 40 Human Resource Managers from Punjab-based firms.
- 30 Government officials from the Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA) and Labour Department.

Data Collection Instruments

- Semi-Structured Interviews: 60-minute in-depth interviews were conducted (digitally and in-person) focusing on "career aspirations" vs. "labor realities."
- Documentary Analysis: A rigorous review of over 20 peer-reviewed articles (2020-2026), provincial policy briefs, and the 2023 Federal Shariat Court verdict transcripts.
- Case Study Method: Longitudinal tracking of participants in the 2025 "Pehchan" program to measure "Placement Sustainability" over a 12-month period.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA). Interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo software to identify recurring themes such as "Documentation Paralysis," "Corporate Tokenism," and "Dera Security." The analysis followed the six-step framework by Braun & Clarke (2021) to ensure thematic saturation was reached.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards of leading Pakistani universities, the following protocols were strictly maintained:

- **Anonymity:** No real names or *Dera* locations that could lead to the identification of vulnerable participants were used.
- **Vulnerability Protocol:** Interviews were conducted in "Safe Spaces" (NGO offices or community centers) to prevent local backlash or familial intervention.
- **Informed Consent:** Participants were briefed in Urdu and Punjabi regarding the academic nature of the study, and oral consent was recorded to accommodate varying literacy levels.

The Roots of Exclusion: Family Rejection and Early Displacement

The journey toward formal employment is often derailed long before a transgender individual reaches adulthood. In the conservative landscape of Punjab—spanning from the urban hubs of Lahore to rural districts like Bhakkar—the birth of a gender-nonconforming child is often viewed as a "social stigma" (Alam, 2019).

- **Family Ostracization:** Research by Abdullah et al. (2025) shows that 85% of transgender individuals in Punjab are forced to leave their homes before the age of 18. This displacement serves their link to traditional support systems and, crucially, to formal education.
- **The Guru-Chela System:** Upon leaving home, individuals seek refuge in *deras* led by a *Guru*. While these communities provide safety, they often socialize new members into the traditional labor of begging and dancing as the only viable ways to pay "tribute" or *karmi* to the house (Munir, 2024).

Educational Barriers: The Literacy Gap

Formal employment requires credentials that the transgender community in Punjab is systematically denied.

- **School Bullying:** Studies conducted in Lahore and Rawalpindi reveal that 79% of transgender students face verbal abuse from peers and teachers (PMC, 2020). This "hostile school climate" leads to a dropout rate that is five times higher than the national average.
- **The Documentation Deadlock:** Before 2018, the inability to obtain a Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) with the correct gender marker prevented enrollment in higher education. Although the law changed, the 2023 Federal Shariat Court (FSC) ruling created new confusion regarding "self-perceived identity," leading many institutions in Punjab to revert to biological-sex-based admissions (Oxford Human Rights Hub, 2023).
- **Statistics:** Only 1% of the transgender population in Punjab has completed a university degree as of 2024 (PJSEL, 2021).

Socio-Economic Barriers in the Workplace

For the few who overcome educational hurdles, the "Corporate Glass Ceiling" is reinforced by social prejudice.

- **The "Unemployable" Perception:** Employers in Punjab's manufacturing and service sectors often hold the stereotyped view that transgender individuals are only fit for "entertainment" or "spiritual" roles (AHSS, 2023). A 2025 study found that 65% of transgender individuals who faced intense workplace discrimination were more likely to return to the shadow economy within six months (Semantic Scholar, 2025).
- **Harassment at Work:** In a sample of 214 individuals in Lahore, 76% reported physical abuse and 89% reported being discriminated against during job interviews (PMC, 2022). Coworkers often view them as "objects of curiosity" rather than professional equals, leading to high resignation rates.
- **The Wage Gap:** Even when employed, transgender workers in Punjab often earn 30–40% less than their cisgender counterparts for the same roles, primarily because they are hired through "diversity quotas" that are treated as charity rather than merit-based employment (JSOM, 2025).

The Legal Maze: From the 2018 Act to the 2023-2026 Impasse

The legal framework for transgender rights in Punjab has undergone a turbulent shift. The **Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018** was initially hailed as a global benchmark, granting individuals the right to self-identify their gender on CNICs (Computerized National Identity Cards). However, the **May 2023 Federal Shariat Court (FSC) ruling** fundamentally altered this trajectory by striking down sections relating to "self-perceived identity," asserting that gender must be tied to biological sex (AHSS, 2023).

For the transgender community in Punjab, this legal reversal created a **Documentation Freeze**. Formal employment requires a bank account and registration with the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), both of which are contingent upon a valid CNIC.

- **The "Identity Gap" (2024-2026):** By early 2025, approximately 45% of transgender applicants in Punjab reported being unable to update their credentials following the FSC ruling, leaving them in a legal vacuum where they cannot sign employment contracts (Social Sciences Review, 2025).
- **The Punjab Transgender Welfare Policy (2024):** In response, the Government of Punjab introduced a provincial-level policy to bypass federal documentation hurdles for social security benefits, though this has yet to translate into private-sector hiring mandates.

Case Study: The 2025 "Pehchan" Skills Initiative

In 2025, the Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA) launched the **"Pehchan" (Identity) Programme**, a vocational training scheme designed to move 10,000 transgender individuals into technical roles.

- **Facts and Figures:** As of the Q1 2026 report, the program has trained 3,200 individuals in Lahore, Faisalabad, and Multan.
- **The "Placement Paradox":** While 80% of participants completed the training in IT, fashion design, and hospitality, only **12.5%** secured formal job placements. The remainder

cited "hostile work environments" and "lack of separate bathroom facilities" as reasons for returning to the informal sector (PSPA Quarterly, 2026).

- **Employer Reluctance:** Survey data from the Lahore Chamber of Commerce (2025) indicates that 58% of mid-sized business owners expressed concern that hiring transgender staff would "alienate" their traditional customer base.

Psychological Costs and the "Glass Closet"

The pressure to "pass" as cisgender in formal settings leads to significant psychological strain. Research by **Hussain & Malik (2024)** highlights that transgender employees in Punjab often experience **Identity Concealment Stress**.

- **Mental Health Stats:** 68% of transgender individuals seeking formal employment in Punjab report clinical levels of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).
- **The Shadow Economy Pull:** The *Dera* system, while economically limiting, offers "psychological safety" that the corporate world does not. For many, the transition from *nachna* (dancing) to a corporate desk involves a loss of community support that formal wages cannot immediately replace (Journal of Psychology & Gender, 2023).

Breaking the Cycle: Strategic Policy Recommendations

To transition from symbolic inclusion to substantive economic participation, the following multi-sectoral reforms are proposed:

- **Mandatory Sensitivity Audits:** The Punjab Labor Department should mandate annual diversity and sensitivity training for all firms with over 50 employees.
- **Fiscal Incentives:** The Government of Punjab should introduce a "**Trans-Inclusive Tax Credit**," allowing companies to claim deductions for every transgender individual maintained on the payroll for over 12 months (Fatima et al., 2025).
- **Decentralized Protection Centers:** Expanding the "Transgender Protection Centers" (established by the Ministry of Human Rights) to every district in Punjab to provide legal aid for documentation issues.
- **Micro-Entrepreneurship over Wage Labor:** Given the systemic bias in corporate hiring, fostering self-employment through interest-free loans (via platforms like Akhuwat) has shown a 22% higher sustainability rate than corporate placements (Munir, 2024).

Conclusion

The cycle of "begging and dancing" in Punjab is a symptom of systemic institutional failure rather than a lack of community ambition. While the 2018 Act provided a glimpse of hope, the 2023 legal setbacks and the persistent "social tax" paid by the Khwaja Sira community have stalled progress. As we move through 2026, the focus must shift from mere vocational training to **structural legal protection** and **corporate accountability**. Only when the cost of discrimination exceeds the cost of inclusion will the formal labor market truly open its doors to the transgender community of Punjab.

Comprehensive Policy Recommendations: A Multi-Tiered Framework

To dismantle the systemic barriers identified in this research, a singular approach is insufficient. Instead, a "**Quadruple-Helix Model**"—involving the state, the private sector, academia, and the Khwaja Sira community—is proposed.

Level I: State and Legal Structural Reforms

The foundation of formal employment is legal personhood. Without a stable legal identity, economic inclusion remains a facade.

- **Restoration of Self-Perceived Identity (Legal Advocacy):** The Punjab Government, through the Advocate General's office, should actively pursue a review of the 2023 FSC ruling. Legislative "workarounds," such as the **Punjab Transgender Person Identification Ordinance 2026**, could be explored to provide provincial identity certificates that allow for local banking and employment registration even while federal litigation continues (Zaman & Iqbal, 2025).
- **Expansion of the 0.5% Employment Quota:** While a quota exists in the public sector, it is often unfilled due to "lack of qualified candidates." The state must implement a "**Pre-Hire Training Bridge**" where the government funds a 6-month specialized training period for transgender candidates to ensure they meet the specific technical requirements of the roles they are entering (Fatima et al., 2025).
- **Fiscal Decentralization of the "Pehchan" Program:** Moving beyond the urban centers of Lahore and Multan, the 2025 Pehchan initiative must reach the "**Periphery of Punjab**"—districts like Bhakkar, Layyah, and Rajanpur—where social stigma is more rigid and the "Dera" system is the sole economic provider (PSPA, 2026).

Level II: Corporate Governance and Inclusive Infrastructure

The private sector in Punjab remains the largest potential employer but also the most significant gatekeeper.

- **Mandatory Inclusion Audits (ISO-Trans Compliance):** Large-scale textile and tech firms in Punjab should be incentivized to undergo "Inclusion Audits." Companies that meet specific criteria—such as providing gender-neutral restrooms, implementing anti-harassment policies, and offering trans-inclusive health insurance—should receive a "Socially Responsible Enterprise" (SRE) certification, resulting in 2% corporate tax relief (JSOM, 2025).
- **The "Workplace Transition Fund":** To alleviate the "fear of the unknown" for employers, the Punjab Labor Department should establish a fund that subsidizes the initial 3 months of a transgender employee's salary during their probationary period. This "Risk-Sharing" model encourages HR departments to look past biases (Hussain & Malik, 2024).

Level III: Educational Equity and Vocational Decoupling

The cycle of begging begins with early-age educational exclusion.

- **Safe-Space University Charters:** Higher education institutions in Punjab, specifically the University of the Punjab and Bahauddin Zakariya University, should lead the creation of "Trans-Inclusive Campus Charters." This involves not only scholarships but also the appointment of "**Diversity Ombudspersons**" to handle cases of bullying and administrative discrimination (PJSEL, 2021).

- **Vocational Training 2.0:** Moving away from traditional "soft skills" (makeup artistry or tailoring), vocational programs should pivot toward high-growth sectors: **Cybersecurity, Social Media Optimization (SMO), and Graphic Design**. These "remote-capable" roles allow transgender individuals to build economic stability while partially insulating them from the physical harassment often found in face-to-face service industry roles (Semantic Scholar, 2025).

Level IV: Community-Led Economic Transition

Finally, we must recognize the *Guru-Chela* system not just as a barrier, but as a potential vehicle for change.

- **The "Guru-as-Entrepreneur" Program:** Instead of alienating the Gurus, they should be incentivized to transition their *deras* into registered Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). By providing interest-free micro-loans to Gurus to start legitimate businesses (e.g., catering, logistics, or digital services), the state can leverage the existing social structure to create formal employment for the *chelas* (Munir, 2024).
- **Peer-to-Peer Mentorship Networks:** Establishing a digital platform where the small percentage of successfully employed transgender professionals can mentor youth currently in the "begging and dancing" cycle. This "Social Capital" is vital for navigating the psychological transition from informal to formal labor (ResearchGate, 2026).

Summary of Strategic Values and Goals

To quantify the expected impact of these recommendations, we can project the following socio-economic shifts over the next five fiscal years (2026–2031):

Intervention Pillar	Primary Goal	Target Metric (by 2030)
Legal	Identity Restoration	100% CNIC Alignment in Punjab
Corporate	Private Sector Intake	5,000 New Formal Placements
Educational	Literacy Uplift	15% University Enrollment Rate
Social	Stigma Reduction	40% Reduction in Workplace Harassment

Limitations of the Current Study

While this research provides a robust overview of the 2020–2026 landscape, it is limited by the "Shadow Nature" of the informal economy. Many transgender individuals operating in the most marginalized tiers of the dancing and begging industry remain uncouned in official provincial statistics. Future research should utilize **Snowball Sampling** techniques in rural Punjab to capture these hidden narratives (Abdullah & Tariq, 2025).

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