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Pathways to sex work amongst transgender and khwaja sira communities on Murree Road, Rawalpindi: A community based qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: *Transgender and Khwaja Sira communities within Pakistan face social stigma and discrimination which can impact on access to education, jobs, health, housing and institutional support. These issues can lead to increased risk of poverty and influence involvement in Sex Work. This study aimed to explore what factors have influenced transgender and Khwaja Sira peoples' involvement in Sex Work including social, economic, family and institutional factors.*

Methods: *A community based exploratory qualitative study was conducted in Rehmanabad, Chandni Chowk and Saddar Rawalpindi. Participants included ten people aged 18 years and above who had either currently or previously been involved in Sex Work. Maximum variation purposive and snowball sampling were used. Semi structured life history interviews were conducted (approx. 60-90 mins) with the inclusion of a life story timeline. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke) was used to analyze the data.*

Results: *Six themes were created including; (1) Gender Identity in Childhood, Family Conflict & Social Isolation; (2) Lack of Education and Employment; (3) Financial Uncertainty & Alternative Livelihoods; (4) Community Support, Guru-Chela Relationship & Livelihoods; (5) Public Visibility, Clients & Working Relationships; and (6) Continuing Sex Work, Financial Management & Changing Circumstances. Findings indicated that involvement in Sex Work was influenced by a combination of family issues, lack of education and employment, financial uncertainty, community relationships and access to clients. This community can offer a sense of belonging and financial support however there is also pressure to pay money and unequal relationships. Participants also reported changes in livelihoods as they got older.*

***Conclusion**: Involvement in Sex Work for transgender and Khwaja Sira peoples' is complex, dynamic and influenced by structural exclusion. While the participants had some level of control over their livelihoods and working relationships, they often had limited choices. Interventions should focus on offering inclusive education, sustainable work, safe housing, accessible healthcare, legal protection and community driven support to improve livelihoods and give them a sense of dignity and safety.*
***Keywords:** Khwaja Sira, transgender, Sex Work, structural exclusion, pathways, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, qualitative, Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

Introduction

There are various reasons as to why individuals may enter sex work. Whilst choice is a deciding factor, relationship factors, barriers, financial issues and the ability to have basic human rights (education, housing, healthcare) will also come into play.

Previous qualitative research has highlighted that some individuals enter sex work due to social exclusion within Rawalpindi and Islamabad (Abdullah et al., 2012). This research was completed over a decade ago so it is important to understand what is currently happening at a local level. Recent literature has indicated that there is a wide variety of genders across Pakistan. The relationship with the police have impacted how khwaja sira have entered sex work in areas such as Lahore.

This study will take place within Rehman Abad, Chandni Chowk and Saddar within Rawalpindi. Along the Murree Road. In depth interviews will be conducted with individuals.

Literature Review

Transgender and khwaja sira face stigma that could cause them to become socially excluded from services such as education, work, and healthcare. This can cause difficulties in being able to earn a living. Social exclusion, lack of education and employment were found to be key factors in khwaja sira becoming involved in sex work in Rawalpindi and Islamabad (Abdullah et al. 2012).

Stigma can cause individuals to become excluded from education. Khwaja sira in Swat have faced high levels of internalized, felt and enacted stigma (Azhar et al., 2024). This could cause difficulties for them being able to earn a living.

Relationships can play a big part in communities. They can provide individuals with a support network, place to live, safety and feeling of belonging but can influence choices. Issues with sexual health and employment were found due to relationships within the community (Bano et al. 2023).

Violence and discrimination from police have also been reported for khwaja sira in Pakistan. They have struggled to get support from institutions (Shah et al., 2018). Sex work must be considered from a wider perspective looking at social, economic and institutional factors.

There is legislation in place to protect transgender people within Pakistan. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act was passed in 2018 that acknowledges transgender identity and includes anti-discrimination policies such as not discriminating in employment, education and health care (Government of Pakistan, 2018). However, in 2023 parts of the act were ruled to be against Islamic injunctions by the Federal Shariat Court. These parts include the right to self-perception of gender and the right to inheritance (Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan, 2023; Azhar et al., 2024). This has been

appealed to the Supreme Court and is still awaiting a decision. This means uncertainty around the legal status of transgender people could cause issues for them accessing education and employment.

Previous research has focused on social exclusion, stigma and sex work in khwaja sira communities however little research has focused on pathways into sex work along the Murree Road in Rawalpindi. This study aimed to understand the experiences, socio-economic factors and relationships with families, communities and institutions that have had an impact on pathways into sex work for transgender and khwaja sira people. A community based qualitative study was carried out.

Research Questions and Objectives

Main Research Question

How do transgender and khwaja sira individuals with current or previous experience of sex work in Rehmanabad, Chandni Chowk and Saddar describe their pathways into and through and if applicable out of sex work?

Sub-Objectives

- Understand key life events, relationships, opportunities, barriers and turning points within participants life histories.
- Understand relationships with families, education, stable housing, formal/informal employment, peers, community and clients. Also understand the role of state institutions.
- Compare lived experiences between sites and self-identified genders. Understand how personal choice, money, negotiating and coercion were involved.
- Understand how the community provided safe, accessible and meaningful support.

Methods

This was an exploratory qualitative study. Semi structured interviews and life story timelines were used to get an understanding of the participants' experiences. A combination of purposeful and snowball sampling was used to ensure a range of transgender and khwaja sira individuals were included.

Ethical considerations were considered throughout this qualitative research. Informed consent, autonomy, appropriate language, confidentiality, safety and reducing stigma were considered. The participants agreed to participate voluntarily and measures were put into place to ensure their confidentiality. (See Ethical Considerations).

Setting

Three areas of Rawalpindi were used in this study. Rehmanabad, Chandni Chowk and Saddar. Interviews were conducted in a private location of their choice for their safety.

Eligibility Criteria

Participants must be:

18 years and older

A transgender person, khwaja sira or have another gender diverse identity within the local community

Have engaged in sex work (sex in exchange for money, goods, housing or other benefits) currently or in their past

Lived/ worked/ used community networks within Rehmanabad, Chandni Chowk or Saddar

Give voluntary informed consent in a language we can support

Sampling and Recruitment

A maximum variance purposeful sampling technique was used to gather data from 10 participants so that varied perspectives could be gathered. To ensure there was variety within the sample participants were purposefully sampled according to:

Age group

Self-identified gender

Site

Migration history

Where they conduct sex work (street/home/network)

Whether they currently or have previously engaged in sex work.

Participants were also recruited using snowball sampling. Those initially recruited were given the opportunity to refer others who would fit the inclusion criteria and may wish to take part.

Participants were given autonomy, privacy and confidentiality. They had the choice to participate.

Data Collection

Informed consent was obtained and one semi structured interview (lasting 60-90 minutes) completed by a trained interviewer. Participants had the option of completing further interviews. Audio recording required explicit consent. If participants were unwilling to be audio recorded they could still take part.

A Life Story Timeline was developed during the interview that covered:

Early life, family and education and when his/her gender was disclosed.

When he/she first engaged with peers and community networks.

Opportunities for making a living, early earning and housing.

The circumstances, motivation and events that led to his/her first involvement in sex work.

Changes in working conditions, earnings, relationship with clients, personal boundaries and physical safety.

Relationships with health care, legal, state and NGO services.

How he/she maintained safety and what kind of support he/she preferred.

Suggestions for service provision, advocacy and social policy.

No identifying information was sought regarding clients, third party enablers, law enforcement or precise location.

Analysis

Interviews were fully transcribed in the original language (Urdu/local dialects). Reflexive thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This included:

- **Familiarization**– Reading through the transcripts and timelines multiple times.
- **Creating a coding framework**– A mixture of deductive and inductive codes was created. Deductive codes were created from the aims of the study. Inductive codes were created from what the participants said.
- **Consistent coding**– At least 2 analysts coded a selection of transcripts to ensure coding was clearly defined and any discrepancies were resolved.
- **Theme creation**– Codes were turned into themes to compare pathways between different contexts whilst still highlighting differences.

- **Reflexivity**– Notes were made throughout the analysis to reflect on our positionality, socio-cultural assumptions and experiences from the fieldwork.

Findings

Our findings suggest that there are a range of factors that lead transgender individuals and Khwaja Siras in Rawalpindi into sex work including childhood experiences, family issues, lack of schooling, financial difficulties, community support, lack of job opportunities and client interactions. Sex work was seen by participants as part of a larger context of social exclusion.

The analysis identified 6 themes that contribute to people entering sex work. (1) Experiences of gender expression as a child and rejection from family members; (2) Not going to school and lack of job opportunities; (3) Financial difficulties and needing alternative income sources; (4) Community support and opportunities to survive; (5) Visibility on the street and client interaction; (6) Developing stable financial relationships. However this should not be seen as a strict pathway everyone will go through. Some individuals may have multiple of these issues occurring at the same time, whilst others may have entered sex work due to different circumstances.

Theme 1: Early Gender Expression, Family Rejection and the Beginning of Social Exclusion

Some described their experiences of marginalization beginning in childhood with a perceived difference in how they expressed their gender. They spoke about how they would express their femininity by dressing and behaving a certain way, making friends with people of the opposite sex and often being punished, embarrassed and forced into acting like a traditional male.

One participant recalled:

"Mujhe bhi larki jaisa mehsoos hota tha. Jab meri saheliyan apne gharon mein hoti thin aur unki ammiyaan bahar chali jati thin, to main unke sath unke kapray pehenti thi."

(I also felt like a girl. When my friends were at their homes and their mothers had gone out, I would wear their clothes with them.)

Another account described the response of male family members:

"Mere abba aur bhai mujhe marte thay aur kehte thay ke mard ban kar raho, larkiyon ki tarah mat chalo."

(My father and brother would beat me and say, "Be a man; do not walk like girls.")

These accounts highlight how being gendered could cause conflict within the home. Some participants felt pressured to hide their gender identity.

Family rejection is an important factor to consider when looking at why someone might enter sex work. Those who experience abuse, rejection and/or separation from their family will have lost out on crucial social and economic support. Although these accounts do not show that all participants entered sex work as a result of this, it is important to consider gender conflict within the family as a possible contributing factor towards the overall process of becoming vulnerable.

Interpretation: Family rejection does not automatically lead to sex work. Its significance lies in the way it can reduce access to resources and increase dependence on alternative social and economic networks.

Theme 2: Educational Exclusion and Restricted Access to Formal Employment

Another key issue raised was the exclusion from education. Participants described how they were often ridiculed and bullied by their peers due to their appearance, speech patterns and mannerisms. This can cause a feeling of discomfort or hostility within the educational institutions.

Being excluded from education can lead to issues when trying to obtain formal employment, vocational training and a stable income. If they are unable to gain much educational qualifications they may struggle to find work due to discrimination within the workplace.

This shows that exclusion from employment is linked to the social context and the struggle for transgender and Khwaja Sira people to be recognised and accepted within their society.

Interpretation: Educational discrimination can contribute to economic vulnerability by limiting qualifications, professional networks and access to employment. It may therefore form part of the longer pathway through which individuals become dependent on informal livelihood opportunities.

Theme 3: Economic Insecurity and the Search for Alternative Livelihoods

Economic insecurity was a key theme raised by participants. They often described struggling to find stable employment and having to engage in unstable income generating activities such as dancing at weddings and entertainment events, begging and prostitution.

One participant explained:

"Hum aksar sex work mein is wajah se aa jate hain kyun ke agar humein group functions ya doosre functions par le kar na jaya jaye aur humein kaam na mile, to phir hamare paas doosre zariye kam reh jate hain."

(We often enter sex work because if we are not taken to group functions or other functions and do not get work, then we have no other means left.)

This shows how irregular work can be. Although there are opportunities to earn money from dancing and entertainment, you may not always get the opportunity. You may struggle to meet your basic needs if you are turned down for invitations or if there is no work available.

Another participant described the pressure associated with poverty:

"Jab pet mein aag lagi ho aur sar par chat na ho, toh insaan majboor ho kar woh sab kuch karne par tayar ho jata hai jo woh apni poori zindigi mein kabhi nahi karna chahta tha."

(When there is fire in the stomach and no roof over the head, a person becomes compelled to do things they never wanted to do in their entire life.)

The account expresses the relationship between material deprivation and constrained decision-making. It suggests that participation in sex work may occur within circumstances in which individuals perceive few viable alternatives.

Importantly, economic pressure should not be equated automatically with coercion. Participants may exercise agency in choosing clients, negotiating prices and organising their work while simultaneously facing structural conditions that limit their livelihood choices. The findings therefore point towards a more complex relationship between agency and constraint.

Theme 4: Community Networks, the Guru-Chela System and Access to Livelihood Opportunities

Community connections were an important aspect of participants' experiences. Individuals may be able to find a place to live, feel included, feel safe and have economic opportunities through community connections if they are unable to rely on their biological family.

This can be done through the Guru-Chela system, where a Guru can provide a new member with a place to live, guidance, social connections and a known position within the community. This can be especially

important for people who have moved into an unknown area with no money and unreliable family support.

However, some Gurus may expect a portion of income or have some control over the economic activities of their Chelas.

One participant described this arrangement:

"Guru kehta hai ke tumne jo kuch bhi kamana hai, uska aik khas hissa mujhe dena hoga kyunki maine tumhe paala hai aur naam diya hai."

(The Guru says that whatever you earn, you have to give me a specific share because I raised you and gave you a name.)

The additional interview also described changes in the perceived role of the Guru:

"Purane waqton mein guru ek maa jaisa hota tha jo bacho ki hifazat karta tha, lekin waqt ke sath sath ab yeh system bhi aik karobar ban chuka hai jahan paisa hi sab kuch ban gaya hai."

(In earlier times, the Guru was like a mother who protected children, but over time this system has also become a business where money is everything.)

These accounts demonstrate the dual nature of community networks. They may provide essential support while also creating financial dependency and unequal relationships. They should not be interpreted as evidence that all Guru-Chela relationships are exploitative or that all individuals enter sex work through this system.

The additional interview also highlighted informal referrals and introductions to clients. Established community members may facilitate access to income opportunities, while individuals with fewer connections may find it more difficult to attract clients.

Interpretation: Community networks can function as pathways to economic participation. They may provide information, accommodation and client contacts, but access to these resources can depend on social position and existing relationships.

Theme 5: Street-Based Visibility, Client Contact and the Development of Work Relationships

Key places for social interaction and economic activity were identified by participants, namely Rehmanabad, Chandni Chowk and Saddar on the Murree Road. This provided an opportunity to engage with others, build relationships and participate in informal income generating activities.

This should be seen in the context of limited opportunities for formal employment and public spaces. Engaging in activities on the street can become a key way to build relationships with potential clients and earn an income.

One participant described seasonal changes in activity:

"Garmiyon mein Murree Road ki taraf bohat cases hote hain... Sardi mein koi nahi hota 3-4 baje aane wala."

(In summer there are many cases on Murree Road... In winter there is no one coming at 3–4 o'clock.)

The additional interview highlighted that there are different ways of generating income within the sex industry. This could include regular clients, referrals, negotiated prices, gifts and travelling outside the city. This suggests that there is no one way of generating income in the sex industry. Some individuals may be reliant on direct contact with clients on the streets whereas others may have established relationships with clients or referrals from their personal networks.

There was also competition between members of the community. Jealousy, distrust and arguments could arise if some individuals were gaining more clients or higher amounts of money. Referrals and sharing contact details were also mentioned.

These findings suggest that there may be elements of collaboration and competition within the sex industry. Having personal relationships can help to increase income however there may be an imbalance of power if individuals become reliant on others or established networks.

Theme 6: Continuation in Sex Work, Economic Negotiation and Changing Circumstances

It is important to consider the pathway into sex work and how individuals may continue within this industry. Participant accounts suggest that there was an abundance of clients, negotiating price and having good relationships with clients, financial obligations and not having any other employment opportunities.

In the additional interview, it was noted that there were repeat clients, referrals and varying amounts of money earned. Some people had more money due to having good relationships with clients and being able to negotiate prices. These are just individual claims.

Individuals described how their looks, presentation and attractiveness affected their opportunities. They described how looking good and being presentable can help you gain more recognition in society and attract clients. This can create an informal hierarchy.

Another key issue was ageing. Participants described how older individuals have less opportunities. This is especially true if they do not have any savings, other employment or reliable support from family.

One participant stated:

"Jab woh buchar/boorhay hone lagte hain—maslan 40-50 saal se zyada umar ke—toh unke paas yeh raste band ho jate hain. Phir unke paas sirf begging ka option bachta hai."

(When they grow older—such as over 40–50 years—their paths close. Then they have only begged as an option.)

This account suggests that economic insecurity may continue throughout the life course. Individuals may experience reduced access to clients and entertainment opportunities as they age, while remaining excluded from formal employment and social protection.

Interpretation: Continued involvement in sex work may be influenced by economic responsibilities, established client networks and limited alternatives. The findings also suggest that the risks and opportunities associated with sex work change over time.

Discussion

This study looks at how transgender and Khwaja Sira people in Rawalpindi enter the sex trade. It has been found that there were many factors that lead to entering the sex trade including being rejected by their families, not being able to go to school, lack of job opportunities, financial issues, stigma and community resources. Many people had faced gender discrimination from a young age, this caused them barriers in accessing support from their family, education, housing and jobs, leading them to have less options for work. Sex work may have been an option for them to earn money but they have shown that there was often a balance between their own autonomy and the barriers they faced.

Financial issues played a large role in how they earned their living. Some people used dancing, entertainment at weddings, begging or other informal methods to earn money however this was not

always reliable or enough to cover their basic needs. Sex work seemed to be a way for them to survive financially but they had strategies to help them earn money, build relationships with clients, protect themselves and adapt to different environments.

The community resources available to them included the Guru-Chela system, this could provide them with housing, a sense of belonging, support and opportunities for work. However, there was often pressure to pay money, imbalance of power, rivalry and reliance. Relationships with other members of the community included helping each other but also distrust. This shows that the transgender and Khwaja Sira community is not always a positive support network for them and we must consider how they differ due to their age, identity, financial situation and status.

Sex work was organized along Murree Road. Areas such as Rehmanabad, Chandni Chowk and Saddar provided a place for them to be seen and interact with clients. Social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp provided a way for them to communicate and refer clients. They often had a contradiction between being rejected by others in public but having demand for their services. This reflects how people in society have negative views towards them.

Discrimination from institutions can also cause issues. Many people had bad experiences with the police, health professionals and other institutions causing them not to want to ask for help. Whilst it is important to have legal recognition, this does not guarantee they will be included if they do not have proper implementation, accessible services and protection from discrimination. Ageing was also an important factor. As they rely on their looks, movement and demand from clients to earn money they may have less opportunities to earn as they get older. This could mean they rely more on begging and little social support.

Overall, this study has shown that there are many factors that influence how people enter into sex work. This includes economic factors, family, institutional and community factors. This supports the idea that we need to provide more than just short-term welfare. Providing accessible education, jobs, safe housing, nondiscriminatory health care, legal support and income support will help provide more opportunities for them to earn a living. All of this should be designed in collaboration with transgender and Khwaja Sira people and we should not assume everyone has the same experiences. This study has focused on the participants experiences and has helped provide a better understanding of how sex work is a way of earning a living but also how they have autonomy.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

Prior to any interviews taking place participants were informed about the purpose of the study, what would happen during participation, how the information would be used and kept safe. They were asked directly for their consent. No third party, guru, head of household, employer or partner could give consent on behalf of adults. As literacy levels varied consent could be given in written form or verbally through audio. Consent was an ongoing process. Participants could choose to skip questions, pause the interview or withdraw from the study at anytime without any reason.

Confidentiality

All information given by participants was kept confidential. Interviews were conducted in private locations of their choice. Transcripts and audio files were stored securely on encrypted cloud servers.

Only members of the research team had access. The master linkage key was stored on a password protected 256-bit encrypted drive, completely separate from the raw data. Only the Principal Investigator had access to this and would be permanently deleted once data had been collected and verified.

Anonymity

Each participant was given a unique alphanumeric code. Any personal information such as names, specific addresses and unusual occupation details was removed or generalized. No identifying information was asked about other people such as clients or third-party facilitators. All publications will use pseudonyms or composite stories so nobody can be identified. No details about locations, meetings or routes will be included.

Limitations

Due to this being a qualitative protocol no statistical data could be gathered to show how common sex work and transgender identities are in Rawalpindi. The sample size was small therefore findings cannot be generalized to all khwaja sira and transgender individuals. Due to purposive and snowball sampling being used within personal networks socially excluded individuals and those who chose not to disclose may not have been represented. Life histories rely on memories so there will likely be some recall bias.

Strengths

Maximum variation sampling ensured a variety of pathways could be described. Life history interviews with timelines provided an insight into how individuals moved into, through and out of sex work. Consent was only obtained from individuals. Data was de-identified. Double coding and reflexivity were used.

Sample Size Justification

10 participants were recruited and interviewed. Data saturation was reached meaning that no new codes, themes or information was gained from the later interviews. This was due to the specific aim, sample and in-depth life history interviews (Malterud et al., 2016). This is supported by previous research showing that most themes can be identified within the first 12 interviews if the sample is relatively homogenous (Guest et al., 2006). Maximum variation sampling was used to ensure a variety of ages, genders, sites, migration history and sex work locations. Therefore, data saturation occurred due to a variety of experiences.

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