



## Khawaja Saras and A Journey of Resilience

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### Article History

Received  
28-05-2025

Accepted  
10-07-2025

Published  
11-07-2025

### Abstract & Indexing

WORLD of JOURNALS



ACADEMIA



### Abstract

The transgender community in Pakistan, commonly referred to as Khawaja Sara, has only recently begun to gain visibility following legal recognition. Despite constitutional protections, they remain among the most marginalized and socially excluded groups in the country. This study aims to explore the lived experiences, social struggles, and contributions of Khawaja Sara individuals who are actively working as professionals and social activists. It investigates the structural barriers and deeply rooted cultural stigmas that continue to hinder their social acceptance and upward mobility. Using a qualitative research design, this study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with members of the Khawaja Sara community engaged in various sectors. Thematic analysis of the data revealed a range of challenges faced by participants, including discrimination, familial rejection, limited access to education and employment, and social invisibility. Yet, the study also identified significant resilience, coping strategies, and personal motivation that have enabled many Khawaja Sara individuals to redefine their identities and roles in society. The findings highlight how community support, access to education, legal reforms, and personal empowerment initiatives can contribute to the social inclusion and empowerment of Khawaja Sara individuals. This research offers important insights for policymakers, educators, and human rights advocates, calling for the development of inclusive policies, awareness campaigns, and targeted support systems. Ultimately, the study underscores the need to view Khawaja Sara not merely as a vulnerable group, but as active agents of change in the pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable society.

### Keywords:

Khawaja Sara, Transgender Community, Social Inclusion, Legal Recognition, Gender Identity, Pakistan, Human Rights, Marginalization, Empowerment, Qualitative Research, Resilience, Policy Reform.

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## Introduction

The Khawaja Sara community in Pakistan is known as third gender group whose rights and gender identity have become a highly debated public issue (Jaffer, 2022). They used to be labeled as hijra, also known as “*khusra*” in Punjab and “*buggas*” in Balochistan(provinces). This community in Pakistan face significant under-representation and systemic exclusion from society. Historically, an absence of official data collection about a third gender made it difficult to quantify their population across the country. The Lahore High Court's historic decision in 2017 to include the transgender minority in the Government of Pakistan census was a major step toward acknowledging their existence. The magnitude of under-reporting was highlighted by the shockingly low number of transgender people in the nation—just 10,418—found in the 2017 census. However, according to data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics' Sixth Population and Housing Census, there are 21,744 transgender people in the nation, with 55.12% of them living in cities and 44.88% in rural areas. With 12,435 registered transgender people, Punjab has the largest transgender population in the nation, making up 57.11% of the total (Qureshi & Arif, 2024).

In Pakistan, they encounter many challenges that profoundly affect their well-being and social integration. Many of them live in a region that is geographically isolated and less developed areas (Waheed, 2019). This community confronts challenges related to not following traditional gender standards which lead to social stigmatization and pervasive discrimination (Klahoro & Khan, 2023& Majeedulah, 2016)). They additionally have to face social rejection from family, school, work, healthcare, and access to the legal system, even though they are officially recognized as members of the third gender. Their susceptibility is further increased by the ongoing sexual and physical abuse and prejudice they experience in society. Various factors such as gender identity, social standing, and religious beliefs intersect to create complex challenges for these communities within Pakistan’s criminal justice system (Alamgir, 2024& Manzoor et al., 2022). One significant issue faced by this community is the stigma and marginalization they experience in the Pakistani community due to lack of acceptance (Sabir, 2019). Moreover, they face economic exclusion, resulting in limited access to job opportunities (Foundation, 2016). Social rejection, lack of educational background and financial limitations made them vulnerable for further exploitation (Noureen, 2023) such as forced prostitution, dancing and begging and involving in sexual activities which increases their risk of getting HIV/AIDS (Khan, 2017). Due to political isolation, the community has had little opportunity to participate in or be represented in politics (Rashid & Rashid, 2022).

The obstacles Khawaja Sara faced especially in Peshawar and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were their social marginalization, restricted opportunities, homelessness, and mental health issues (Azhar et al., 2024). The pandemic made their circumstances worsening, and this group was among the most affected groups across the nation (Alamgir, 2021) and resulted in increased poverty, and marginalization. Psychological health problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts are common among these individuals (Azhar et al., 2023). Their productivity and overall well-being are sometimes hampered by the stigma and discrimination they encounter (Noureen, 2023). The culmination of these challenges may cause feelings of isolation, diminished self-esteem, and a lack of confidence in oneself (Khattak & Haq, 2017). Although they face many obstacles, through opting different professions like social services, entertainment, and entrepreneurship, they contribute to the economy (Omer et al., 2021).

An important step toward the recognition of the rights of the Khawaja Sara group was taken in 2009, when the Pakistani Supreme Court ruled that no law could deny them their fundamental rights. After a decade, several legislative amendments were brought about by this verdict, and Khawaja Sara was eventually recognized as a third gender on national identity cards (Rashid & Rashid, 2022). In response to community concerns, the Council of Islamic

Ideology (CII) and gender-focused nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) worked together to draft a bill that would protect the rights of the community (Khan, 2021).

The historic "Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act 2018" was approved by the Pakistani parliament on March 7, 2018, and it became operative in May. It was an important step in building a safe and accepting Pakistan for intersex and transgender people. Protecting the fundamental human rights of transgender and intersex individuals, the Act was extremely broad, right-based, and covered everything from the right to education, health, work, voting, holding public office, inheritance, assembly, etc. Pakistan held its general elections in July 2018 just a few months after the Act was passed and at that time, at least 2,000 transgender people were registered to vote, and five of them stood for general elections from various constituencies around the nation. In addition to representing Pakistan in an official delegation at CEDAW 2020, a transgender person joined the Ministry of Human Rights. Moreover, transgender started working in high-paying jobs in the public and private sectors, in corporations, and as university professors. They also get coveted scholarships to study medicine and law at institutions throughout the world. The first challenge against the "Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act 2018" was filed in 2020 before the Federal Shariat Court when they received more than 12 petitions in two years, both in favor of and against the act. Some of the petitions were from transgender individuals who argued that the Act was "incompatible with Islam." As a result, the Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan rendered a decision on May 19, 2023. In a 108-page ruling, the court declared that the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act violated Islamic principles as stated in the Holy Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah. According to the court, the Quran only recognizes the sex designated at birth. In terms of safeguarding Pakistan's minority transgender community, this is undoubtedly a significant backlash and a huge step backward (Sepp, 2024). Although reforms are starting in the right direction, there are still legal obstacles that expose ingrained problems in Pakistan's criminal justice system, such as cisnormativity and transphobia (Alamgir, 2024). By recognizing Khawaja Sara's rights, Pakistan has taken a step toward advancing inclusion and equality (Tarar, 2024). However, legislative changes in recent times have come under fire for failing to sufficiently account for community concerns (Khan, 2021). However, there is currently a lack of implementation of the Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018, which aims to provide equal rights for transgender people (Scott, 2022).

The Khawaja Sara community in Pakistan has been significantly impacted by the Hudood Ordinances, particularly the Offense of Zina Ordinance 1979, which has resulted in their legal, economic, and social marginalization (Azmi, 2015) as this Ordinance's heightened prejudice and mistreatment for them. Advocacy efforts are necessary to address the challenges faced by transgender individuals in the justice system, including discrimination and marginalization. These efforts should focus on mainstreaming gender-variant individuals based on the Constitution of Pakistan and the guidelines of the Supreme Court (Farhat et al., 2020). The Federal Shariat Court (FSC) has been engaged in reviewing legislation to ensure its alignment with Shariah (Islamic Law), potentially impacting the rights of Khawaja Sara individuals (Hafeez, 2023). Nonetheless, additional measures are required to tackle the ongoing abuses of human rights and prejudice they encounter (Saddique et al., 2017&Foundation, 2016).

Before the inception of Pakistan 1947, the Khawaja Sara community, often referred to as Hijras, was subjected to criminalization because of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a British-era law that was upheld in Pakistan. Classifying the community as a "criminal tribe" (Kajiro, 2021). The CTA remained in force until 1952, when Pakistan gained independence (Suhail, 2021). Legal and policy barriers that prevent the Khawaja Sara community in Pakistan from accessing rights and services pose serious problems. The lack of certain legal protections for Khawaja Sara individuals in Pakistani laws is a significant shortcoming (Dall, 2019). They

are deprived of their fundamental rights because of bigotry and exclusion caused by this lack of legal recognition (Tarar, 2024). Human rights and HIV services are not widely available because of the ineffective implementation of current policies (UNDP, 2016). Although the Supreme Court's 2009 decision to recognize these people's fundamental rights was a historic moment, it has not been adequately implemented, leaving the community without adequate protection (Foundation, 2016). Due to a lack of thorough research and statistics, the Khawaja Sara community's experiences, rights, and access to services are little understood. Studies that provide a thorough analysis of the effects of internalized stigma and gender non-conformity on the Khawaja Sara group are lacking in various dimensions (Azhar et al., 2024). To address the barriers that Khawaja Sara people face in obtaining healthcare, government employment, education, and security, more research is needed (Saddique et al., 2017). This community is confronted with a multitude of obstacles and scarce resources, which highlights the need for targeted interventions (Sabir et al., 2019). Further qualitative research is required to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences and contributions of Khawaja Sara members in cultivating an inclusive society by highlighting their struggling and resilient experiences (Pirzada et al., 2022)

### **Statement of the problem**

It is important to understand Khawaja Sara's experiences in Pakistan to highlight their resilience in the context, where they face prejudice and marginalization. Understanding Khawaja Sara's life experiences, resilience struggle within their cultural context is a critical aspect of this study instead of just portraying their status as victims. Moreover, this study illuminated the historical, social, cultural, political, health, economic, and religious factors that affected the lives of Khawaja Sara and their ability to survive in a stigmatized and marginalized society.

### **Objectives**

- To understand the perspectives and challenges facing the Khawaja Sara community.
- To comprehend stories of struggles, resilience, achievements, and contributions of Khawaja Sara as individuals in their community
- To present the alternate narrative in the existing literature by highlighting its contributions

### **Literature Review**

Khawaja Sara and Hijra as a distinct culture group in South Asia, predominately in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, are often characterized as individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms, being perceived as different or strange by others due to actions that go against conventional gender order (Ahmad et al., 2023). The term Khawaja Sara is considered more respectable than Hijra, which is sometimes seen as derogatory in Urdu ("Hijra"). In Pakistani society, Khawaja Sara is believed to possess a feminine soul (ruh) despite their visible male bodies (hazir) (Jaffer, 2022). The word "Khawaj Sara" has its roots in medieval South Asian history, specifically in the Mughal Empire (Khan, 2019). They possess a distinct cultural identity characterized by their unique social circumstances and gender identity (Khattaq & Haq, 2017). In Pakistani culture, they are recognized as a distinct gender identity from men and women (Alamgir et al., 2024). Their communities have a diverse cultural heritage and unique social sphere, practices, and customs (Khan, 2014).

In Western societies, the term transgender means that gender identity may not align with that assigned to them at birth. This term describes individuals who identify with a different gender than what was given at birth based on biological or physical characteristics (Anwar, 2017). These umbrella terms fail to adequately bring justice by being identified as the third gender sex or the marginalized communities in Pakistan or South Asia (GIA, 2021) because local terms like hijra or Khawaja Sara contain distinct social-cultural meanings compared to terms like transgender, transsexual, crossdresser, or transvestite (Sadiq & Bashir, 2022). The



violence inflicted on these individuals in this region has deep-rooted roots that span centuries. The convergence of racial oppression and patriarchy led to the devaluation of certain bodies, categorizing them as expendables. This connection between violence and colonialism is highlighted as a significant factor in understanding the prevalence of such atrocities against them (Sadiq & Bashir, 2022). These individuals are often stigmatized and considered a source of shame in Pakistani society (Sadiq & Bashir, 2022). Socioeconomically, these individuals encounter rejection from their families, have limited access to school and career possibilities, and are typically forced to reside in metropolitan areas. These contributions can lead to internalization of the social stigma associated with comforting discrimination and being subjected to violence because of prejudice (Waheed, 2019), further increasing their marginalization due to having non-conforming gender identities in a dominant gender regime (Kalhoro et al, 2023).

Islam advocates for the rights of all human beings' rights regardless of their gender or other factors. The Arabic language describes those who are effeminate or have traits that are considered feminine; this is called "*Mukhannathun*" for Khawaja Sara. Islamic law acknowledges the complexity among human beings as it recognizes four distinct genders: male, female, intersex (Khunsa), and effeminate male (Mukhannathun). The khunsa or khawaja Sara is further divided into two subcategories "*khunsa hair musykil/wadith*" and "*khunsa musykil*" by jurists that clarify the legal rules and obligations for these individuals. Yet, defining sex according to Islam is to find signs of "femaleness" and "maleness" in their external genitalia, which can be observed in early childhood. (Riaz, 2017). The five major Schools of thought in Islamic jurisprudence are *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi i*, *Hanbali*, and *Ja'fari* (Shi'aa). Scholars from both schools unanimously agreed on the fundamental rights of Mukhannathun and Khawaja Sara as human beings. The discussion regarding several Khawaja Sara and Mukhannathun is revealed in prophetic narrations (Riaz, 2017). They are believed to have transcended world desires, making them pure and enabling them to enter the Ka'aba. According to a Mutawali in Kallar Kahar, Hijras are considered pure and 'paak' as they lack worldly desires, like Faqirs and Walis. The Mutawali compared Hijra's purification to that of a peacock, the only animal/bird mentioned in the Quran due to its purity. Hijras are said to have exclusive access to the Roza Paak in Madina, where they clean and maintain the Prophet's Tomb (Abbas& Pir, 2016). In the Surah of the Holy Qur'an, it is mentioned that the gender of a child is subject to Allah's will, as mentioned in Surah Al-Shura, Ayat 49-50 (Riaz, 2017).

During the Mughal era, they used to held significant influence over religious institutions. They were respected due to their sharpness, loyalty, and honesty, which allowed them access to different societal spheres. At that time, in the Islamic religious hierarchy, they held esteemed roles and positions, exceptionally in overseeing holy sites such as Mecca and Medina. Due to their reliable status, they could influence the decisions of states and receive considerable financial rewards for their proximity to the Mughals. Consequently, the Khawaja Sara generally asserted their social standing importance during that period (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

In postcolonial countries, following the independence of Pakistan and India, the concept of gender was perceived as binary due to the historical impact of British colonist rigid policies. During the colonial era, the British imposed strict regulations and laws that influenced societal norms and perceptions, including gender identity. One significant policy that had a lasting effect was the Criminal Tribe Act (CTA), which aimed to control certain communities deemed criminal tribes by imposing restrictions on their movements and activities. After independence, Pakistan inherited its legal framework through British colonial policies. The elements of the Criminal Tribe Act were assimilated into the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), further embedding certain societal norms and attitudes toward gender. These laws and regulations reinforced the traditional roles and identities that marginalize them. Additionally, Muslim reformist work in

British colonization on the subcontinent played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward them in societies in post-colonialism (Alamgir, 2022.). Despite the abolition of CTA (Criminal Tribal Act) in Pakistan and India, Khawaja Sara and Hijra individuals continue to be targeted by discrimination. They are often targeted by law enforcement for various reasons, dressing in a manner that does not conform to the norm of traditional gender-based roles, engaging in same-sex relationships, or taking part in activities such as dancing and playing music in public spaces. Because of these issues, marginalized communities struggle to fit into the rigid framework of the male-female binary prevalent in society (Alamgir, 2022)

In the early postcolonial era of Pakistan, despite gaining independence from the rule of British colonists, discriminatory laws and practices continued, particularly affecting gender minorities. General Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator of Pakistan, enacted the Hudood Ordinance in 1979. These laws have exacerbated the challenges faced by gender minorities in the country. The Khawaja Sara and Hijra, who were members of the transgender community in Pakistan, were unjustly categorized as homosexual due to their relationship with men. This categorization added to the discrimination and marginalization experienced by these marginalized communities in contemporary Pakistan (Alamgir, 2022). Musharraf later amended the ordinance (Alamgir, 2022). The act of transgender was passed in 2018, and it was considered one of the most progressive bills to be passed that banned discrimination against shunned communities in Pakistan, giving them access to necessities (Hafeez, 2023).

Khawaja Sara has experienced substantial social exclusion and persecution in a variety of contexts including schools, families, health care, and religious settings. They frequently confront non-acceptable situations in schools because they deviate from traditional standard masculine gender norms, resulting in significant levels of social rejection. Many are compelled to leave school at an early age owing to familial disapproval and then seek sanctuary in communal houses known as eras, which are overseen by gurus who offer support and protection to them. Khawaja Sara are rejected within their families, which causes them to become homeless and reliant on community-based housing. In religious spaces, harsh attitudes toward homosexuality and gender norms lead to negative and unfavorable perceptions of them. These hurdles, such as lack of social acceptance, can also result in mental and psychological difficulties for individuals. Furthermore, this community faces different challenges in health care settings, such as lack of support, financial limits for availing private healthcare, and a biased attitude of some health care practitioners (Azhar et al., 2024).

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in how they are seen and treated as marginalized communities in Pakistan, mainly within the Khawaja Sara subculture. These advancements have provided hope and development to a marginalized community that has previously endured exclusion, racism, and prejudice. These included the government's addition of a third gender option on identity cards, inclusion in the census, and increasing media presence, for example, transgender models being featured on major magazine covers. The government's acknowledgment of the third gender category identification card and its inclusion in the national census would pave the way for tremendous social inclusiveness, acceptance, and visibility (Anwar, 2017).

Resilience refers to both the development and outcomes of problematic or challenging life situations according to the American Psychological Association (APA). This involves possessing emotional, behavioral, and mental flexibility to various internal and external pressures. According to Dr. Amit Sood, the executive director of the Global Center for Resiliency and Well-being, "You can withstand adversity and bounce back and grow despite life's downturns" (Hurley, 2020). It is principally defined as the "process of, capacity for, or of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (Toomey et al, 2008). The need for acknowledgment is important for Khawaja Sara individuals who live in Pakistan. This recognition goes beyond the simple legal recognition of their identity; it should

also include cultural, social, and economic confirmations as they were recognized by the Supreme Court in 2009 (Nisar, 2016). Despite legal developments such as ID documentation of being a third gender on a national level, voting registration cards, and passports, people still face hurdles to obtaining social acceptance (Azhar et al., 2024). Despite all challenges, some of them emerged as active citizens and played a positive role for the uplifting of their community. Their experiences need to be reported to report alternative narrative which previously only focuses on their vulnerable status and challenges.

### **2.1 Research Questions**

- How do Khawaja Sara individuals perceive their life struggles? What coping mechanisms do they use to overcome these challenges?
- What makes them resilient to engage and work for their communities in Pakistan?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design based on narrative research was used to explore and understand the emotional and social support and acceptance of Khawaja Sara of Pakistan.

The inclusion criteria of the study participants were as follows:

- Identified as Khawaja Sara
- Over the legal age; 18
- Residents of Pakistan
- Active member of the professional or social society

#### **Study respondents**

The participants were selected through purposive sampling. The data were obtained through Khawaja Sara, who was easily accessible and approachable. The purpose was to obtain information regarding social experiences in different spheres and the reasons and hurdles that weaken the societal status of Khawaja Sara in Pakistan. A sample of five Khawaja Sara was collected from various cities of the Punjab. The selected Khawaja Sara has been professionally or socially active in society. The data were collected within 2 months and 17 days by the researcher.

#### **Data Collection**

The participants filled out a demographics form. The nature of the study is qualitative, so the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview was in-depth by the participants.

#### **Procedure**

The purpose of the study was briefly explained to the participants before taking consent. The participant provided verbal consent. After confirmation of verbal consent, the participants shared their demographic information. The semi-structured interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. The 4 interviews were conducted through audio call while 1 was done face to face. The total duration of the interview was approximately one hour and 30 minutes. The interview was then transcribed. Anonymity and confidentiality were also ensured.

#### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The following steps were used to analyze the data using the thematic-analytic research approach guided by Braun & Clarke (2012).

- Rich and detailed information was collected through interviews, ensuring that the data captures participants' perspectives and experiences comprehensively.
- Carefully read and re-read the data to fully understand the context and transcribed content.

- Identify the significant codes in the data, including repeating emotions, ideas, and patterns.
- Develop major themes and subthemes that capture the essence of the narrative by grouping similar identified codes. Themes were reviewed to clarify the data captured.
- Create a table with themes, subthemes, and code.
- Summarize the narratives in a comprehensive way by combining the findings of the different narratives.

**Table 1** Demographic information about the respondents

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Profession	Living Arrangement
1.	Khawaja Sara	24	Intermediate (Continuing)	Social Activist	_____
2.	Khawaja Sara	60	Matric	Founder of a non-profit organization	House
3.	Khawaja Sara	28	Intermediate	Human Rights Activists	Lives Alone
4.	Khawaja Sara	31	M Phil (Business Management)	Founder of a non-governmental organization	Lives independently
5.	Khawaja Sara	28	Graduate	Community counselor in an organization	Apartment

## Results

After transcribing all the interviews, a total of 61 codes appeared, which were categorized into 9 sub-themes while 4 major sub-themes emerged. The major themes were types of challenges, strategies for challenges, influential factors, and their contributions.

**Table 2**

Main Themes	Connecting Themes	Codes
Challenges	Social Perceptions and Stigmatization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social isolation and rejection from family and community</li> <li>• Common stereotypes and false myths</li> <li>• Usage of derogatory slurs</li> <li>• Public space segregation</li> <li>• Harassment and violence through sexual, physical, and verbal abuse and exploitation</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hate crimes and targeted attacks</li><li>• Biasness in the healthcare system</li><li>• Biasness in the legal system</li><li>• Discrimination in education, job opportunities, and housing</li><li>• Shaming in Public</li></ul>
	Economic Marginalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inadequate employment opportunities</li><li>• Discrimination in hiring practices</li><li>• Lack of professional representation</li><li>• Lack of access to education causes financial strain</li><li>• Forced to employ in stigmatized occupation</li><li>• Lack of economic independence</li><li>• Poverty and lack of financial stability</li></ul>
	Legal and institutional barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack of legal recourses against discrimination</li><li>• Lack of legal policies</li><li>• Lack of current legal policy implementation</li><li>• Harassment by law enforcement</li><li>• Lack of government support centers</li></ul>
	Health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High prevalence of anxiety and depression</li><li>• Effects of social stigma on mental health</li><li>• Lack of mental health and counseling support</li><li>• Vulnerable to HIV/AIDs</li><li>• Discrimination in sexual health access</li><li>• Physical health that is affected by violence and abuse</li></ul>

	Cultural and religious constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pressure to follow traditional roles</li><li>• Exclusion from ceremonies</li><li>• Cultural significance</li><li>• Religious interpretations by people</li><li>• Enforced obedience to cultural roles and practices</li></ul>
Strategies to counter challenges	Personal Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gained education</li><li>• Learned about rights</li><li>• Improving mental and physical health</li><li>• A safe support network was found</li><li>• Asked for legal assistance at different levels</li><li>• Support networks are created</li><li>• Activism</li></ul>
Influential Factors	Personal Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Constant efforts despite problems</li><li>• Mentoring advice and guidance</li><li>• Mobilized community and friends</li><li>• Embracing self-identity</li></ul>
	Peer support network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Receiving emotional support</li><li>• Community support groups</li><li>• Connectivity in the community</li><li>• Build trust between each other</li></ul>
Contribution	Activism for rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social advocacy and public awareness</li><li>• Legal support to individuals</li><li>• Legal identification rights</li><li>• Protested basic legal rights</li></ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialog with political representatives</li> <li>• Campaigns and spreading awareness</li> <li>• Connecting with organization</li> <li>• Founded a non-profit, non-governmental organization for homeless Khawaja Sara</li> <li>• Promote awareness on a media platform</li> <li>• Counseling services</li> </ul>
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### Discussion

The first theme revealed different types of challenges these individuals face and explained by the participants themselves, which were later divided into five subthemes: social perception and stigmatization, economic marginalization, legal and institutional barriers, cultural and religious constraints and health issues. The societal perception and stigmatization encountered by the Khawaja Sara community caused them to encounter pervasive discrimination and violations of their basic rights. This theme indicates the challenges they face in society, both in minor and major forms, in different spheres. Four of the five participants reported rejection of acceptance in the family. The family ostracized them for revealing their identity as it was considered a form of humiliation to be associated with them, which led to emotional and physical abuse for them by the family and community. Sometimes forced to hide their identity by changing their appearance so they are not further discriminated against or face violence. The isolation is such that they are not invited to festivals by their own family and friends, which causes many mental and physical health issues. It can also be observed in the health sector, as these individuals avoid treatment due to discriminatory attitudes, as reported in previous literature (Azhar et al, 2024).

According to the participants, people's opinions were stereotypical based on myths and stories through which we face unsavory situations like being shunned in public and cat-called derogatory names while walking in the streets. One participant even emphasized being refused in a public place to eat because of their gender. Furthermore, it explains how their struggles with hate crimes and attacks targeted them, resulting in mental and physical trauma. One explained the struggle they faced financially. They could not get jobs because their gender was not acceptable in those spaces.

One of the participants shared “.... I was in tenth grade when I ran away from home. I still remember that day due to the taunting my brother faced from his friends. He came home angry and started beating me up because of my appearance, I used to hear those things myself, so I knew they used mean words used to describe me.... “. The unacceptance of family and society causes many issues in individuals' lives, but the violence and abuse they further cause anxiety and depression for many. As one of the participants explained, the perception of their community in society causes isolation, which, in turn, led to anxiety and depression, as they did not have anyone to lean on at that time. One explains that being forced into the role of a traditional person whose mental and physical health had not been irrational and depressive for a long period further affected their mental and physical health.

An individual explained their experience “.....when I learned I was HIV positive it somehow not only physically disturbed me but also socially and mentally.....when people

*learned of my condition they started distancing themselves as if I touched them it would transfer I was not allowed in places which played the biggest role in my anxiety and depression... ”*

These individuals usually avoid hospitals or clinics as they know they will be shunned for their identity. As one explains, if we refuse to be sexually involved with them, they violently beat them for refusing them saying how a Khawaja Sara can refuse them. They further explain that it is quite common for many people to shun Khawaja Sara individuals for being sex workers, but no one shuns those who come to them, and if one of them gets HIV or AIDs, they are called names and become more outcast in society, and when someone goes to get treated, they are treated like a criminal. Patients who are denied care and face verbal abuse by medical staff mostly because of the stigma of being or being related to the third gender can lead to issues like harassment, discrimination, delays in treatment, or outright refusal to treat them (Azhar et al., 2024).

According to the participants, they face economic problems due to having no proper job or having fewer opportunities to get jobs without being judged because of their gender. Others explain they had to do odd or tedious jobs to earn money to live or to be able to afford necessities, as most of the time, they were labeled as body sellers. One explained in detail

*“I didn’t know if I be able to afford food or if there were even basic things available for the next day it was a very harsh days of my life knowing if there would be no customer today I would not be able to eat... ..I don’t promote sex work but I had to do it and I am in a place where it all on my own I can’t say it is the cause of my father but I did it to feed myself”.*

The economic struggles explained by the participants were at all different levels, but most experienced difficulties. The legal and institutional barriers are common, and they still go through it all one participant explained their ID card has an “x” in gender provided by NARDRA, and people do not accept, so it’s almost of no use to them because even after legal acceptance, people still reject their identity regardless of whether its organizations or fields are international. As on reencounters their experience legal and hospital staff

*“.....I still remember that day very clearly as I realized we don’t even have importance after death I was going by near a hospital and someone recognized me and told me that there was Khawaja Sara dead boy inside there is no one to accept so can you do ....I went there and asked the hospital staff about it they told me there was no guardian of this person so the body was still there when I saw the body was lying outside a washroom with only a single covering on it on the floor I asked the staff to let me take the body but they said there is a legal procedure for it in the police station so I went there and explained all to them but they said to pay us and I did when I came back to the hospital and asked for the body staff also asked for money which made me sad that even after the legal procedure they weren’t allowing me to take the body.....later with much struggle I was able to bury that individual in the grave....”*

Another reencounter of their trouble after a legal battle

*“I was let go of my job due to legal issues I faced a few years back even though I was justified innocent later on I still didn’t get my job back it was hard knowing it was my of having financial stability due to that I faced many issues even getting a job became a hassle due to the unjustified legal issues I faced”.*

The second theme is based on the strategies used by Khawaja Sara individuals to counter the challenges they face and improve their quality of life. The participants described their ways of going through those challenges as gaining education, which allowed them to understand the power they held in themselves, which in some ways diverted them from the

health challenges they faced. One highlighted the importance of learning about their rights by advocating and demanding legal rights for living dignified lives while also supporting each other in their community.

The participants explained their counterstrategies differently yet all strong in their form. Two participants explained that education played an important role in helping them move forward from many issues they faced in routine, which allowed them to raise voices for themselves as they knew what their rights were and whom they should they verbalize their issues to. Another explained how a safe space was formed for them in the community by gaining help around them and through getting to counsel they were able to solve issues that were difficult for them. One explains

*“I raised my voice by protesting for my rights even though it was a hard process, but I was protesting for my rights it was a long process but with the help of my community we were able to do something for ourselves.....”.*

Strategies for the challenges may vary, but they are interconnected. The Khawaja Sara, in their pursuit of advocating, have emphasized the need for ‘izzat’ as being legally identified, its literal meaning being interpreted as respect which a plea for dignity as legally being identified (Waheed, 2019)

The third theme highlights influential factors that are further divided into two subthemes: personal resilience and peer support networks. The participants explained the factors that play an important role in their lives. The participants explained that there was a struggle to accept who they were, which was the biggest step in their life. Acceptance of oneself is the toughest and most time-consuming process as the individual must accept that they are different. Studies even show that many individuals have feelings of deep shame and embarrassment about their own identity, which causes them to hide it (Azhar et al., 2024), so acceptance takes time even if it is for their own self. As one explains

*“To accept who I was it took time I didn’t know what this all was I knew I was different from others, and it took time for me to accept I was different for a long time I was ashamed of myself.....”*

Community and peers also play a part in influential factors in individuals as the participant explained that our community is mostly connected, they help each other in time of need, community connectivity has its platform if they stand together, they can do things allowing them to compete with challenges, issues, or hindrances they face. As one reencounter

*“Our community is quite simple even if we fight, we will stand with each other at the end of the day like if we share living space with someone and one of two falls sick the other will pay all treatment saying you will get better soon that much selfless they are.....”*

The trust and sense of safety between them provide practical and financial help that strengthens them, allowing them to prosper in different spheres.

The fourth theme highlights the contribution of Khawaja Sara individuals in society. Their contribution is the fight for rights and advocacy in different ways to combat challenges and help others in their community. Although challenges persist, achieved advancement highlights collective efforts and dedication to their rights, this serves as a source of inspiration for not only Pakistan but also an attainable positive transformation even amid issues and struggles (Tarar, 2024). As a participant reencounter *“....I made this shelter cause we are homeless we have no home families don’t accept us, people don’t accept us, and society shuns us so I wanted to make a haven for those who could stay here they don’t have to beg, dance or*



*sell themselves.....” While another explains “...there was a time I didn’t have any certificate, but I guided people even then so now I help them through here my job by counseling them helping them....” The participants played major roles in shaping society’s mindset, whether at micro or macro level, helping their communities raise awareness through different platforms. Their contribution was the reason people learned and were aware of many issues and challenges of Khawaja Sara and they are playing their role in supporting this group. They still faced hurdles, but due to their resilience, they kept going as participants explained that the issues they face will take time, maybe a very long time, but people are seeing their efforts. One added*

*“.....it’s not easy but I do it because these are my rights I have to raise my voice and protest so people can hear my voice.... we are not living but surviving in this world, so we have to stand for selves....”*

Raising awareness was one of the most repeated words of participants, and legal and general authorities must accept them as living beings, rights are the main aspect of life.

*“.... judgement is everywhere and we can’t end it at once but we are challenging it creating an organization that is run by us is not easy because cause people with even changes still don’t fully accept us, so we are challenging it....”*

The already made societal prejudice is hard but challenging it is worse so when people challenge it there are always drawbacks for as one of participant explained the injustices they faced due to protesting illegally arrested but as they said whole community stood up for them showing the connection and trust in their community.

## **Conclusion**

The Khawaja Sara community is a marginalized community of Pakistan. They face significant challenges because of societal discrimination, perception, and stigmatization. Despite these challenges, they developed strategies to counter them, such as gaining education, building support networks, and raising awareness through different platforms. Their advocacy efforts and creation of safe spaces demonstrate their dedication to bringing positive changes in the lives of their community.

## **Limitation**

There is a lack of data and verification of Khawaja Sara residents at the local level, making it difficult to approach the respondents. Because the number of respondents in this study was limited to five, the data cannot be generalized to the entire community. Due to financial constraints and the sensitivity attached to this topic, the respondents’ selection was limited to one province.

## **Recommendation**

Government and human rights activities should take the following steps:

- To create policies to enhance the status of the Khawaja Sara community and design such policies to ensure the provision of education, health, and income-generating facilities to them.
- To ensure the implementation of laws and policies/ behavior, which can end discrimination against the Khawaja Sara community, which can pose significant impacts and threats to the potential and abilities of the Khawaja Sara community. Spread awareness through campaigns for behavioral modification of the public to provide an environment where transgender can live dignified lives

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