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Transgender Inclusion at Work: Contemporary Challenges and Strategies in Pakistan and Beyond*

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Abstract

This article explores the contemporary realities and structural barriers faced by transgender individuals in workplaces in Pakistan and globally. It draws on recent research, legal updates, and development initiatives. Although legal reforms have improved formal recognition of transgender individuals in Pakistan, persistent discrimination, economic exclusion, and limited institutional accountability continue to undermine their full inclusion. The article presents a multilevel strategy—individual, organizational, and societal—for managing transgender diversity in the workplace and advancing social justice, offering a framework that can inform both policy and leadership practice in emerging and global contexts.

Introduction

Transgender individuals globally continue to face significant disparities in employment, healthcare, and social inclusion. These disparities are especially acute in South Asia, where entrenched social norms and institutional inertia hinder meaningful inclusion. In Pakistan, despite the existence of protective laws such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018), the transgender population remains among the most marginalized groups in the country. Globally, transgender individuals face persistent workplace discrimination and underrepresentation, with only a small percentage feeling safe to disclose their identities at work (Baboolall et al., 2021). This article seeks to explore these challenges in light of recent data and offer a practical framework for inclusion, particularly for policy makers and practitioners in Pakistan.

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Key Definitions

- Intersex: their biological sex characteristics are not entirely male or female.
- Nonbinary: an umbrella term adopted by many people whose gender identities are not exclusively masculine or feminine. Nonbinary or 'gender fluid' people may also change their identities over time or depending on context.
- 'Transgender' or 'Trans' refers to someone whose identity does not match their sex characteristics assigned at birth.

The Transgender Population in Pakistan: Between Recognition and Rejection

The 2023 census of Pakistan reported 21,744 transgender individuals, nearly double the number recorded in 2017 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Of these, 55.12%—equivalent to 12,002 individuals—reside in urban areas, while 44.88%, or 9,772 individuals, live in rural areas. Punjab recorded the highest number of transgender individuals, with 12,435 people, making up 57.11% of the national total. Sindh ranked second with 5,954 individuals, comprising 27.34% of the total. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa registered 1,999 transgender persons, accounting for 9.18% of the national figure. Balochistan reported 780 individuals, while KP's merged districts documented 326 transgender persons. The Islamabad Capital Territory recorded a transgender population of 280.

However, these figures remain a gross undercount. Experts argue that widespread stigma, familial rejection, and fear of social persecution compel many transgender individuals to remain invisible (UNDP Pakistan, 2024a).

Most transgender people in Pakistan lack access to education and secure employment, and many are pushed into informal or exploitative work environments such as begging or sex work (Fatima et al., 2025).

In the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone, over 2,000 transgender individuals reported physical or sexual assault between 2015 and 2023, and 90 were killed in targeted attacks (UNDP Pakistan, 2024b). Despite legal recognition, access to justice and safety remains minimal, as law enforcement and healthcare institutions often lack the training and will to support transgender individuals (Ali et al., 2025).

Issues Facing Transgender Persons

Transgender individuals in Pakistan face a complex web of multilevel challenges that intersect across social, legal, economic, and institutional dimensions. Social exclusion remains a deeply entrenched issue, with many individuals shunned by their own families and marginalized within their communities. This social ostracization often leads to economic marginalization, where members of the transgender community are denied access to stable employment and are frequently forced to rely on begging or sex work for survival. A critical barrier is the lack of legal recognition and protection, which makes them vulnerable to systemic abuse and exploitation. Many transgender individuals struggle with identity documentation that fails to reflect their gender identity, resulting in limited access to services and rights.

Widespread societal stereotyping and discrimination further compound their difficulties, as transgender people are frequently perceived as "abnormal" or "different." This stigma often leads to both physical and psychological violence, harassment, and abuse. The absence of trans-specific policies across education, employment, and healthcare structures exacerbates their exclusion. Inadequate access to transgender-friendly clinics and mental

health support systems leaves many without essential care. Discrimination is also evident in practical areas of life, such as being denied rental housing or employment opportunities.

Educational institutions often lack inclusive environments, with transgender students experiencing disrespect and marginalization in high schools and universities. Furthermore, the community faces heightened risks of sexual exploitation and coercion, particularly among youth, who may experience peer pressure to enter the sex trade. This, in turn, increases their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and other health risks. Finally, the lack of strong personal and institutional support mechanisms erodes self-respect and resilience, making it even more difficult for transgender individuals to navigate their lives with dignity and security.

Similar issues are evident in other contexts. For example, in the United States, transgender individuals continue to face widespread systemic challenges across legal, economic, and social domains. A key concern is the lack of comprehensive legal protection. Although progress has been made in some jurisdictions, transgender people frequently find themselves unprotected under anti-discrimination laws based on gender identity, especially in employment, housing, and healthcare contexts (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2023). This legal gap exposes them to significant vulnerabilities in everyday life.

Poverty is another pressing issue, with trans individuals—particularly trans people of color—experiencing disproportionately high rates of economic hardship. Approximately 29% of transgender adults live in poverty. This figure rises to 39% for Black trans adults, 48% for Latinx trans adults, and 35% for Alaska Native, Asian, Native American, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander trans adults (HRC, 2023). Such disparities often stem from intersectional discrimination and cumulative disadvantage across the lifespan.

Social stigma and institutional discrimination also remain pervasive. Public opinion has shifted in recent years, with support for trans rights increasing from around 25% to 62% by 2019. However, this progress has not fully translated into institutional inclusion. For instance, only 30% of women's shelters in the United States are willing to house transgender women, severely limiting access to safe spaces for those experiencing domestic violence or homelessness (HRC, 2023). Moreover, 27% of transgender individuals report having been fired, denied a job, or refused promotion due to their gender identity.

Violence against transgender people is alarmingly high. More than half (54%) of all transgender individuals have experienced intimate partner violence, and 47% have been sexually assaulted during their lifetime. Nearly one in ten were physically assaulted within a single year between 2014 and 2015 (HRC, 2023). These statistics underscore a public safety crisis that disproportionately impacts transgender communities, particularly trans women of color.

In addition, access to healthcare remains a major barrier. An analysis by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation revealed that 22% of transgender people lack any form of health insurance, a figure that rises to 32% among trans people of color. This lack of coverage leads to deferred or denied care, compounding health disparities and contributing to higher rates of physical and mental illness (HRC, 2023).

Contextual challenges facing transgender individuals in Pakistan are shaped by deeply ingrained social prejudices and institutional neglect. A widely reported case from August 2016 exemplifies the life-threatening consequences of such exclusion. A transgender woman, critically injured after being shot while resisting abduction and attempted rape, was denied medical treatment by a district hospital on the grounds that the facility only had male and female wards. Despite the urgency of her condition, the hospital's refusal to accommodate her resulted in her death while she waited outside (Dawn, 2016a). This incident starkly

illustrates how rigid gender binaries in healthcare infrastructure can prove fatal for transgender individuals. Beyond national borders, systemic discrimination extends to religious domains as well. In November 2016, Saudi Arabia implemented a policy prohibiting transgender individuals from obtaining visas for the religious pilgrimage to Mecca, thereby denying them access to one of the central spiritual obligations for Muslims (Dawn, 2016a). These cases reflect a broader pattern of marginalization in both civic and religious institutions, where transgender individuals are frequently rendered invisible, excluded, or actively discriminated against due to their non-conforming gender identity.

Economic Exclusion and Labor Market Discrimination

Fewer than 7% of transgender individuals in Pakistan are employed in the formal sector (Fatima et al., 2025). A mixed-methods study by Fatima and colleagues (2024) revealed that trans individuals experience workplace exclusion at all stages—hiring, retention, and promotion. Even where legal protections exist, implementation is weak, and transgender applicants often find that their CNIC (national identity card) does not match employer expectations, creating both legal and procedural hurdles.

Initiatives such as vocational training centers, microfinance support, and targeted employment programs have begun to emerge. For instance, the Lahore-based culinary school run by the Gender Guardian Foundation offers professional chef training to transgender youth, aiming for both national and international job placements (Associated Press, 2025). Similarly, NGOs such as Sub Rang Society have launched trans-led beauty salons in Karachi, providing both livelihood and social dignity (Iqbal, 2019).

Healthcare Access and Structural Discrimination

Healthcare inequality remains a significant challenge. A 2025 investigation by The Guardian revealed that transgender individuals are often denied treatment at public hospitals or subjected to discriminatory attitudes by staff (Boone, 2025). In Rawalpindi, a community TB screening program found that a disproportionately high number of transgender individuals were infected due to lack of early detection and stigma in mainstream facilities. Although Pakistan's 2018 law guarantees healthcare access, transgender patients frequently encounter institutional neglect and have limited recourse (Ali et al., 2025).

Moreover, social and psychological factors also contribute to mental distress and subsequent social problems among transgender individuals. At the foundational level, negative or hostile interactions—whether within the family, educational settings, or broader society—serve as key stressors that precipitate mental distress. Simultaneously, internal challenges such as navigating a dual gender self-concept, managing dual gender presentation, and performing different gender roles in varied social contexts further intensify psychological strain. This mental distress can manifest in critical identity-related decisions or experiences, including gender reassignment procedures, anonymity surrounding gender identity, and prolonged social isolation. As these experiences accumulate and remain unsupported by inclusive policies or mental health frameworks, they often result in severe social consequences such as addiction, suicidal ideation, and engagement in behaviors labeled as deviant. There is thus an urgent need for supportive familial, educational, and societal environments, as well as affirming mental health services to break this cycle and promote the dignity and well-being of transgender individuals.

Political and Civic Participation

Despite court rulings affirming their right to vote and stand in elections, transgender candidates in Pakistan face formidable barriers, including verbal abuse, administrative rejection, and lack of financial resources (UNDP Pakistan, 2024b). The 2024 general elections saw at least six transgender individuals file candidacy papers, yet only one made it onto the ballot. UNDP's journey mapping exercise highlights how civic participation remains aspirational for most transgender citizens due to deep-rooted structural inequalities.

Global Comparisons

Globally, the transgender population faces similar exclusion. A 2023 report by McKinsey and LRN found that only 28% of transgender individuals in corporate sectors feel their workplace culture supports them, and most are either underemployed or clustered in low-wage roles (Baboolall et al., 2021). Moreover, transgender employees—especially those of color—face significantly higher levels of poverty, harassment, and health insurance denial (HRC, 2023).

Initiatives

Several important initiatives over the past decade have sought to advance the legal and social recognition of transgender individuals in Pakistan. A landmark development occurred in 2009 when the Supreme Court of Pakistan directed the issuance of national identity cards to transgender citizens, formally recognizing them as a third gender in official documentation. This legal recognition marked a foundational shift in acknowledging the existence and rights of transgender individuals within the national legal framework. Building on this progress, 2018 saw the establishment of “The Gender Guardian,” Pakistan’s first school dedicated specifically to the transgender community. Located in Lahore, the institution provides both primary and college-level education, offering transgender students a safe and inclusive space to pursue academic aspirations often denied to them in mainstream schools. In the realm of religious inclusion, a notable step came when a religious organization issued a fatwa declaring that marriage involving transgender individuals is permissible under Islamic law. The fatwa clarified that a transgender person who exhibits “visible signs of female” may marry a male, and vice versa, thereby affirming the legitimacy of transgender unions within a religious context (Dawn, 2016b). These initiatives, though limited in scale, represent significant efforts toward inclusion and dignity for a marginalized community.

In 2018, Pakistan marked a milestone in advancing the rights of transgender individuals with the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act. This legislation, approved by the Senate, explicitly prohibits all forms of discrimination and harassment against transgender persons and safeguards their rights to healthcare, education, and access to public spaces. A progressive aspect of the law is its recognition of self-identification, allowing individuals to determine their own gender identity without requiring medical or legal approval. The Act mandates equal treatment of transgender people by employers, educational institutions, and healthcare providers, and grants them the right to obtain essential identification documents such as driving licenses and passports in alignment with their self-declared gender. Building on this legislative progress, the federal government under Prime Minister Imran Khan launched a healthcare access program in 2019 that formally included transgender citizens, thereby extending basic health services to a community historically marginalized from public health initiatives (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

A Multilevel Approach

At the individual level, employees must be empowered to act as allies and educated to understand the nuances of gender identity and expression. Peer mentorship, psychological safety, and leadership development opportunities are vital. Studies show that mentoring by transgender professionals enhances the confidence and retention of trans employees in corporate environments (Fatima et al., 2025).

At the organizational level, inclusive HR policies are essential. These include affirmative hiring, provision of gender-neutral restrooms, healthcare coverage for gender-affirming treatment, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Organizational DEI strategies may include measurable targets for trans inclusion, aligned with global benchmarks such as UNDP's LGBTI Inclusion Index (UNDP, 2024c).

At the societal level, partnerships between the private sector, NGOs, and government can amplify inclusion. For example, organizations may partner with UN Women and UNDP to develop a gender-sensitive standard operating procedure for engagement with transgender individuals. Similar models can be scaled across provinces to promote wider institutional accountability.

The way forward in ensuring transgender inclusion requires a comprehensive, multilevel approach that spans legal, institutional, and societal domains. First and foremost, the voices and lived experiences of transgender individuals must be meaningfully included in policy-making processes. Without their direct participation, laws and policies risk reinforcing exclusion or misunderstanding. Parallel to this, there is a pressing need for increased awareness-raising and advocacy efforts to promote the visibility and legitimacy of transgender communities. These initiatives play a critical role in challenging entrenched stereotypes and cultivating a more informed and empathetic public discourse.

Equally vital is the robust enforcement of laws designed to prevent violence, harassment, and discrimination against transgender individuals. While legislative frameworks such as Pakistan's Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act exist, their impact is limited without effective implementation and accountability mechanisms. Additionally, the ability for individuals to legally change their gender on official documents is a foundational right that must be upheld to ensure congruence between legal identity and self-identified gender.

It is also essential to identify and eliminate institutional policies and practices that discriminate against transgender individuals, whether overtly or through systemic bias. Lastly, educational institutions and workplaces must adopt reforms that actively include and support transgender identities, ensuring equitable access to learning and employment opportunities. Together, these interconnected strategies provide a foundation for genuine inclusion and social justice for transgender communities.

Conclusion

While legal recognition of transgender individuals has improved in Pakistan, the social, economic, and institutional barriers they face remain formidable. From employment discrimination to healthcare denial and civic exclusion, the transgender community continues to be one of the most vulnerable groups in society. For executives and senior leaders, transgender inclusion is not simply a matter of compliance but a test of ethical leadership and strategic foresight. Adopting a multilevel approach—individual, organizational, and societal—is essential for fostering equity and unleashing the human potential of all citizens.

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Indicative Discussion Questions

1. Why is a multilevel perspective important to understand issues and challenges facing transgender individuals at work?
2. What are the risks for Pakistani firms that exclude transgender individuals from formal employment?
3. How can business leaders move beyond legal compliance to foster real workplace inclusion for transgender employees?
4. In what ways can cultural or religious values in Pakistan support, rather than hinder, transgender inclusion at work?