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Performing Transgender Desire Through Cross Dressing: Socio-Economic Factors and Implications of the Phenomenon in Pakistani Society

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Abstract

Despite being socially disapproved and contradictory to the cultural and religious values, the practice of cross dressing is in vogue in Pakistani society. This qualitative research study aimed at in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of Male-to-Female (MTF) cross dressing as well as its socio-economic implications for the family life of the cross dressers. The study also intended to explore factors consequential to the rising trend of MTF cross dressing in the Pakistani society. The study was conducted in twin cities i.e. Islamabad and Rawalpindi. A sample of twenty (20) MTF cross dressers was selected through purposive sampling technique. Interview guide was used as a tool of data collection. The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings of the study revealed that inspiration & role modeling, peer group influence, amusement & entertainment, non-satisfaction with the gender identity and economic miseries were some major causative factors consequential to the MTF cross dressing. The findings also divulged that dual gender performance has severe socio-economic repercussions including migration, non-acceptance by the family & society, non-availability of favorable work conditions, stigmatization & victimization, facing discriminatory attitude, physical & sexual assault, sense of deprivation regarding rights, social security as well as economic issues. Dual gender performance also has a strong negative influence on the family life of cross dressers. The study recommends that it is the need of the hour to develop a mechanism of registration & certification for the real transgender people so that effective policies based on actual transgender population may be formulated for the welfare of the transgender community as well as to protect & safeguard their fundamental human rights.

Keywords: cross dressing, dual performance, gender identity, gender

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role, male-to-female, society, socio-economic.

Introduction

It is quite difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of cross dressing as scholars trace the phenomenon to ancient times. The phenomenon is seen throughout the recorded history as far back as different ancient tribes. Cross dressing is act of dressing up contrary to the prevailing or expected standards set by the society for one's gender. The term cross dresser covers both males and females. A male cross dresser is an individual with physical characteristics of a male but wears clothes of a female so as to look like a female. Similarly, a female cross dresser is a woman who dresses up like a male to look like a man. Cross dressers come under the umbrella term of transgender. The term transgender generally includes transsexuals, eunuchs, intersex, drag queens and cross dressers/transvestites. Cross dressing is a universal phenomenon and there are various causative factors behind it, based on personal interests as well as socio-economic implications (Sethi, [2024](#)).

In many regions of the world, cross dressing is used as a source of earning a livelihood. Particularly in Asian countries, the male-to-female (MTF) cross dressing is in vogue where a male individual applies make-up, wears female clothes and start earning livelihood by dancing and singing in private parties and other different ceremonies (Rehan et al., [2010](#)). Whereas, those MTF cross dressers who become female by wearing female clothes and applying makeup to look beautiful & attractive to the opposite sex with the objective of sexual activities are called Fetish dressers. Similarly, another category is dragging queens which refers to those males who dress up like women but in an exaggerated way and they act as entertainers. Amongst them, most are homosexuals (Meyer et al., [2002](#)). There are some people who are unable to decide what they are with regards to their gender. It is quite difficult for such people to fix their gender identity believing that binary categories in gender are not enough. Such people are known as gender queer and they might think that they exist between the male and female, or neither (Burdge, [2007](#)).

Some people who are often confused with regard to their gender identity or expression are known as people with confused gender identity. Such people express diverse gender identities on different occasions. Sometimes they express masculine identity but sometimes they adopt feminine orientation while performing different roles in everyday life. Transsexuals

are considered the extreme cases of confused identity who are completely dissatisfied with their naturally assigned sex and they think that they are females born in a male body and vice versa. The people falling in this category take every step starting from cross dressing to hormonal treatment or gender corrective surgeries to attain their desired sex (Dessens, [2005](#)). Inspiration and role modeling has also been considered as a big causative factor behind the promotion of cross dressing. Sometimes young people are inspired by superstars or celebrities such as showbiz stars, political figures or sports stars of opposite sex and they want to look like them with regard to their dressing and style (Pearson, [2012](#)).

In Pakistan, just like many other countries, transgender people are considered as neglected, vulnerable and marginalized segment of the society. They have to often face discriminatory, derogatory and disparaging public behaviors in the society. Sometimes they are considered in the society as an inferior creation of God who have been sent to earth just for entertainment. These are some factors responsible for their miserable life. The incidents of violence against transgender people are common in Pakistan. According to the UNDP statistics, in the last few years from 2015 to 2023, more than ninety-one (91) transgender people have been murdered in only one province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), whereas over two hundred (200) cases of violence against transgender people have been reported (United Nation Development Program [UNDP], [2023](#)). It is a common perception that cross dressers are homosexual which is not true. Despite having an urge to be looked like the opposite sex, it is not necessary that cross dressers wear clothes of opposite sex with the intention to get attraction of people of their own sex. Sexual appeal may be one of the reasons for their cross dressing. There are many other factors behind cross dressing including self-satisfaction, self-amusement and earning of livelihood etc. Another misperception prevailed in the Pakistani society is that cross dressers are deprived of reproductive system either by birth or through the process of castration. For that reason, they are unable to engage in marital relationships. However, this is just a misperception which does not have any link with reality. This study reveals that most of the cross dressers are married and have children.

In Pakistan, male-to-female (MTF) cross dressers are prominent on the social horizon as compare to the female-to-male (FTM) cross dressers. This is only because, in Pakistani society male members have more freedom to

perform the gender role of their opposite sex whereas the same is quite difficult for women. Likewise, due to more attraction of female bodies in society, various MTF cross dressers transform themselves into females to earn their livelihood. The numbers regarding the actual population of transgender community published by the government and non-government agencies has remained controversial in Pakistan as well as in the twin cities. The main reason behind this controversy is that a large number of cross dressers have also been included in the transgender communities. As in Pakistan, there is no mechanism to identify and distinguish the actual transgender people, therefore, it seems impossible to count the exact number of transgender people. Resultantly, no exact specific number of transgender people or cross dressers is available.

In Pakistan, the trend of male-to-female (MTF) cross dressing and performative transgenders is rising rapidly. In the twin cities, a large number of transgender people including MTF cross dressers are seen on traffic signals, roads, markets and other prominent places. This rising trend persuaded the researchers to undertake this study to explore the causative factors consequential to the phenomenon. The study also aimed at exploring problems being faced by the MTF cross dressers in society while performing their transgender role. This study is also an endeavor to know whether the dual gender performance has any influence on the family relationships of cross dressers or not.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To explore the socio-economic factors consequential to male-to-female cross dressing and performing as transgenders.
- To find the problems being faced by male-to-female cross dressers in society while performing their transgender role.
- To know the influence of dual gender performance on family relationships of male-to-female cross dressers.

Research Questions

The study has following research questions to be answered:

- What are the socio-economic factors behind male-to-female cross dressing and performative transgenderism?

- Which type of problems are faced by the male-to-female cross dressers in society while performing their transgender role?
- Does dual gender performance influence the family relationships of male-to-female cross dressers?

Significance of the Study

Despite being socially disapproved and contradictory to the cultural and religious values, the practice of cross dressing is in vogue in the society. MTF cross dressers leave their families and join transgender people which are considered as ignored & neglected segment of the society and are often treated in abusive & insulting way. Transgender people have to face numerous issues in their daily routine, such as hatred, discrimination and violence. Hence, little is known so far about the causative factors promoting the practice of MTF cross dressing in the society. This study will explore the major factors consequential to the rising trend of cross dressing practice in our society. Further, the study will encompass the major problems faced by the MTF cross dressers while performing their dual gender role. The study will also explore the influence & implications of dual gender performance on family relationships of MTF cross dressers. The phenomenon of cross dressing has been a little studied dimension of transgender community. The findings of this research study will definitely contribute to the existing knowledge pertaining to the cross dressing while expanding the body of research on the issues of transgender community. Further, the study's findings will provide evidence-based insight that will be quite helpful in formulating policies for the welfare of transgender community.

Literature Review

Transgender people known as *Khawaja Sara* in Pakistan have been part of South Asian societies for centuries. During the Mughal period in the 1500s and 1600s, transgender people had a prestigious position and they enjoyed privilege parallel to the Army Generals, higher ranks managers, and Royal Court's officials. But with the arrival of the British Raj, their prestige and honour began to decline. During the British rule, after promulgation of Criminal Tribes Act (1871), transgender people were required to be registered with the government and a mechanism of strict monitoring was developed for them. With the passage of time, a deep-rooted social stigma was attached with the transgender people which is still associated with them

(Faiz, [2015](#)).

Gradually, with the passage of time, the transgender people are not just involved in the old conventional method of earning livelihood such as dancing, singing, begging or performing as entertainers or sex workers, rather most of them are well educated now and striving to be part of the mainstream by finding reputable job opportunities. A famous name of Pakistani Showbiz Industry, Kami Sid is known as the first transgender model in the Pakistani Showbiz Industry. Kami is of the opinion that issuance of CNICs to the transgender people with third gender identity is a good step but there is still lot to do in this regard. Till achieving the goal of getting equal rights in every sphere of live, the transgender community should continue their efforts (Hassan, [2016](#)).

Nayab Ali is also a well-known name from transgender community who is a prominent social activist and one of the transgenders elected politicians in Pakistan. She is one of the prominent names advocating and striving for transgender people's rights. Nayab Ali like many other transgender people also faced prejudice, discrimination and violence in her life. She is also one of the first Pakistanis from the transgender community who stepped in National Politics and have contested an election (Arslan et al., [2023](#)). Similarly, Babli, the chairperson of Wajood Organization is also a famous transgender rights activist who tried to persuade the transgender people for earning their livelihood in a respectful way. She took an initiative and began a Canteen at National Collage of Arts, Rawalpindi to set an example to motivate other transgender people that they are not inferior to others and can compete in every walk of life (Shafqat, [2015](#)).

The book entitled “Blending Gender, Social aspects of Cross dressing and Sex-changing” edited by Ekins and King ([1996](#)) is comprised of extensive, broad and fruitful discussions pertaining to the phenomenon of cross dressing. The process of femaling has also been discussed widely, asserting that male-to-female (MTF) cross dressing is a worldwide phenomenon which has several reasons and causative factors. Along with many other factors, nurturing and peer group socialization or influence have been coined as big factors consequential to femaling. Femaling is a process which may develop in a male at any stage from childhood to adulthood. Sociologists have consensus that an MTF cross dresser does not adopt female gender identity instantaneously or all of a sudden, rather it is a process which takes place gradually. Generally, the process of femaling is

comprised of three modes i.e. body femaling, erotic femaling and gender femaling (Ekins & King, [1996](#)).

Cross dressing is a phenomenon which refers to adopting clothing and accessories typically and generally associated with the opposite gender in a specific culture or society. This may be ranged from wearing all or any one of these items to look like the opposite sex. Many transgender people are satisfied and comfortable with their naturally assigned sex and they do not wish to change it. Cross dressing has been considered just as a form of gender expression which is not commonly associated with amorous motion. In any society, cross dressing is accepted at different levels for both males and females. In some societies, one gender may have more freedom and liberty than the other, prompting people to wear clothes which are more appropriate for a different gender (Jaffar et al., [2020](#)).

Naturally, all the human beings are different from each other. Tendencies towards the opposite sex are also different among them. Some females, impressed by the liberty, power, influence or any other trait want to look like males and start wearing male dresses. Similarly, some male members of the society want to look like females due to their appearance, popularity & attraction in society or to enjoy more privilege. He conclude his study with the findings that male to female dressing is a matter of self-decision and personal choice. All people have their own likes and dislikes and they must be free to decide their matters according to their personal choice. There should be no bindings by the family or society in this regard. If any male wears female dressing, it does not mean that he has become female. This act does not make a person less masculine (Farooq, [2020](#)).

Marriages in transgender community may be a routine case in Western countries but such cases have been considered unusual and a disapproved practice in Eastern countries especially in Pakistan. In fact, transgender people are not allowed in Pakistani society to announce or arrange such events publically. In such circumstances, a *Fatwa*¹ or religious decree issued by a Lahore based organization namely “Tanzeeem-e-Ithad-e-Umat” in the favour of the transgender community was a good news for them. This *Fatwa*, *inter alia*, conditionally allowed the marriage between two transgender persons having visible signs of male and female. Transgender

¹“Fatwa is referred to a ruling or decision given by a recognized authority under Islamic law”

community welcomed this religious decree and declared it to be an encouraging step for them (“Fatwa allows transgender Marriage”, [2016](#); Zubair, [2016](#)).

Theoretical Perspective

An American Philosopher and gender studies scholar, Judith Butler worked a lot in the field of gender studies. She was specifically interested in analyzing the normative effects of dominating concepts of gender and sex. She is famous for her ground breaking Book “*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*” wherein she coined the term “gender performativity” for the first time in history. In her book, Judith Butler claimed that deciding the gender on the basis of prevailing binary system is an old idea. She introduced a novel concept of gender identification and coined the terms gender and performativity. She elaborated in her book that gender is not what a person is, rather gender is what a person does. It can be taken as a verb not as a noun. It is matter of “doing” rather than “being”. Butler explained the notion in the very first chapter of her book as:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.

Butler further explained that gender role or performance refers to taking a role and then acting in accordance with the same role. While talking about gender performativity, it is understood that it has a series of effects. One’s society decides keeping in view the traditional binary perspectives and customary norms and values regarding what one should or shouldn’t do being a female or male. She also explained that gender is not biological which is permanent, rather gender is socially constructed and gender roles have changed throughout the human history. One’s role performativity determines one’s identity. While discussing the arguments pertaining to the role performativity, she coined a new concept called gender fluidity (Butler, [1990](#)).

During the performativity process, the flexibility in the shape of changing role creates space for queer identity. The cross dressers are also seen as a category of gender queer. Unlike the other members of the society, the cross dressers generally perform dual gender role of male and female all together, and the same difference makes them queer in the society. This concept of the Judith Butler provides theoretical base to this research study to analyze the gender identity and dual role performance of the cross dressers.

Research Methodology

The universe of this qualitative study was comprised of the twin cities i.e. Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Target population of the study was MTF cross dressers living in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. As per the qualitative design of the study, the focus was on in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of male cross dressing, therefore, a sample of twenty (20) respondents/ cross dressers was selected. Normally, it is challenging to identify cross dressers as they are mixed-up with the transgender people and don't reveal their actual identity as cross dressers. So for the purpose, a list of registered transgender people was obtained from the Social Welfare & Bait-ul-Maal Department Rawalpindi as this department has undertaken a registration drive of transgender people in the recent past. During the said drive, the registered transgender people were referred to NADRA (National Database & Registration Authority) for issuance of their CNICs (Computerized National Identity Cards) as transgender. After issuance of their CNICs as Transgender, they were further referred to Election Commission of Pakistan for registration as voters. At the time of registration with NADRA, the cross dressers revealed their actual identity i.e. male and refused to get issued to convert their CNICs as transgenders. The researchers of this study obtained the same list of male cross dressers and considered it as the "sampling frame". Afterwards, the researchers approached different *Gurus*² to find the enlisted cross dressers in the twin cities. After building up a good rapport with "*Gurus*", they referred the researchers to their pupils usually known as "*Chailay*"³. Those who admitted and confirmed that they are cross dressers were taken as respondent, whereas those who did not confirm their identity

²Guru is the term that is used for a person/ transgender who is considered as a leader, mentor (acting as a mother) of Transgender people.

³Term "*Chela*" is used for transgender who is attached with a specific Guru as pupil or child.

or were unwilling to be respondent for the study were excluded. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents for data collection. Those MTF cross dressers who were not currently performing the role of transgender were excluded and only cross dressers were included who were still performing dual gender role. In order to gain the detailed information regarding objectives of the study, the method of in-depth interview by using an interview guide as a tool to collect data was adopted. The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis. For the purpose, three themes i.e. Theme-1: socio-economic factors consequential to MTF cross dressing and performing as transgender, Theme-2: problems being faced by the cross dressers in society while performing transgender role and Theme-3: influence of dual gender performance on family relationships of cross dressers, were developed to have in-depth information pertaining to the phenomenon. Principle of informed consent as well as other ethical considerations were strictly observed while collecting data and conducting this study.

Results

With regard to the information concerning socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, the results demonstrated that more than half of the respondents (62%) were quite young between the age group of 20-40 years which clearly indicated that the young boys are more inclined towards cross dressing. All the respondents/ male cross dressers had children. More than half respondents had their monthly income in only Rs. 10000-20000 whereas only one respondent had monthly income between Rs. 30000-40000 which clearly depicts the poor economic conditions of the cross dressers. All the respondent were either illiterate or literate only up to grade-8 (Middle).

Theme-1: Socio-economic Factors Consequential to Cross Dressing

Cross dressing is an international practice that has been in vogue for centuries. There may be different factors and reasons behind the phenomenon in every society/ culture. While exploring the factors and reasons behind the cross dressing and performing transgender role in Pakistani society, the study has revealed several factors including role modeling & inspiration, peer group influence, amusement & entertainment, Non-satisfaction with the gender identity and economic miseries. These reasons vary from individual to individual. Role modeling & inspiration has

been identified as one of the prominent reasons due to which many young males are inclined towards cross dressing. Their role model might be a showbiz star, political figure, sports star or a social celebrity etc. 08 (40%) respondents confirmed that one of the reasons behind choosing cross dressing was role modeling & inspiration. A respondent shared that:

I was fascinated by Indian movies heroines “Sri Devi” and “Madhuri” [both are Indian film actresses] in early childhood and was a big fan of them. I often thought that I could be beautiful and fashionable girl like the both actresses. I used to copy their style and fashion (dressing and make up). At first experience of cross dressing, I used the dress of my younger sister and felt that I was much comfortable with it. After that I frequently used her dresses in the absence of family members. I was much fond of wearing “Sarhi” [a famous Indian dress] but I could not afford it until I became a professional cross dresser when I was 17 years old me.

Another respondent was influenced by the former Prime Minister of Pakistan “Benazir Bhutto”. While sharing his expressions about her, he stated that he was inspired by the charismatic personality as well as charming dressing of Benazir. He shared his feeling that “Benazir possessed such a charming personality and her dressing appealed me too much that I wished to become like her”.

Peer group influence was observed as another major factor behind the cross dressing phenomenon. 05 (25%) respondents shared that they met with some transgender people and gradually became friends with them. They started spending time in their company and were impressed by their life style & fashion. With the passage of time, they felt that they should also be part of their group through cross dressing. A respondent shared his story that

At the age of 20 years, I became friend of a cross dressers and used to visit him regularly at his Daira [the term used for the residence of cross dressers]. I was very interested in becoming a good dancer, but I had never wished to be a cross dresser at that time. I saw his performance in a wedding function. He had amazing skills of dancing. I got his address, met him and expressed my wish to learn the art of dancing from him. Spending some time in the company of cross dressers made my mind to be engaged in cross dressing.

Amusement, entertainment and self-satisfaction was found to be another major factor behind cross dressing. 11 (55%) respondents were of the view that this factor was mainly responsible to bring them in this field as they wished to become dancers or singers. They expressed that by watching movies, stage dramas and *Mujra*⁴ in their childhood, they decided to become dancers but could not find any other way to fulfil their desire. So, they joined transgender groups to make the dreams come true.

Non-satisfaction with the gender identity has also been recorded as a reason behind cross dressing. 03 (15%) respondents shared that they were dissatisfied with their gender identity conforming to their assigned sex, so they converted their gender category in accordance with their own wish & choice through wearing clothes of opposite sex and by applying make-up. They explained that:

The cross dressers are such class of transgender who do not opt for sex reassignment surgery as some other transgender people do. The reason is that cross dressed people have usually no issue with their sexual organs, they only have gender identity issue so they just change their gender category by wearing clothes of opposite sex. However, some cross dressers use injections containing female hormones to develop their breasts and to remove skin hairs in order to adopt a perfect feminine look.

Economic factor was identified as another prominent factor for MTF cross dressing. 13 (65%) respondents confirmed that at that time, they were facing severe economic crisis and were struggling to find opportunities to earn bread for their children. But when they came to know that transgender people are earning a reasonable amount by begging, dancing and taking part in entertainment activities, they decided to join them through cross dressing. They confirmed that they just started cross dressing due to their economic issues but now they are happy and have no plan to quit this profession so far. 07 (35%) respondents shared that their economic miseries drove them to become cross dressers.

Theme-2: Problems Being Faced by Cross Dressers in the Society

Migration from hometown to other areas was found as one of the major problems of cross dressing. As cross dressing is usually unacceptable in the

⁴ A traditional women dance form that originated in the Mughal era.

native areas, therefore, they have to move towards other cities where people don't know them. In other cities, they are free to live their lives in a way they think suitable for them. All the respondents of the study (100%) had migrated from different areas to the twin cities. One of the respondents told:

The repute of my family was at stake due to my cross dressing. I and my family were facing social pressure by the relatives and neighborhood. My family was exerting pressure on me to leave the company of cross dressers but I was quite comfortable with my identity being a cross dresser. So I left my hometown and came to this city.

Un-availability of favorable and friendly work conditions was also found as another factor contributing to the migration of respondents from their native cities. 08 (40%) respondents revealed that perhaps due to low literacy rate and lack of awareness, especially in the small towns and rural areas, people treat transgender people in discriminatory ways and force them to be engaged in sexual relationship. In case of denial, people use abusive & insulting language and sometimes commit violence against the transgender people. So, in such circumstances, cross dressers prefer to migrate to big cities where they find not only a safe working environment but they have better earning opportunities.

All the respondents (100%) confirmed that stigmatization & victimization are major issues faced by them in the society while performing their transgender role. They stated that different discriminatory titles are assigned to them like *Hijra* and *Khusra*, *Khusri*⁵ etc. They have to face discriminatory attitude and behavior from people while moving in the society. People demand sexual relationship with them and whenever they deny, they often face sexual & physical violence. 03 (15%) respondents shared that they were physically and sexually assaulted.

09 (45%) respondents conveyed their grave concerns over government policies concerning cross dressers and transgender community. They were saddened that government did nothing for the welfare of cross dressers and transgender people. They were also of the opinion that Government and Civil Society Organizations have completely failed to give true identity to the transgender people as well as protecting their basic civil rights such as

⁵The words *Hijra*, *Khusra* and *Khusri* are commonly used for transgender people in Pakistani society.

living with dignity & self-respect in the society like the general public. An old respondent explained that:

The government policies are not based on equality. Cross dressers people are ill-treated in society and are considered as low creation of God. The government should ensure the equal access of cross dressers to health and education. Government organizations should arrange jobs for cross dressers according to their qualification and abilities. In my opinion, government should establish vocational training centers for cross dressers and provide vocational skills to them.

12 (60%) respondents also shared severe reservations regarding non availability of any social security system for transgender community and coined it as one of the major problems faced by them. They were of the view that cross dressers and transgender community have not been provided any social security benefits by the state.

Theme-3: Influence of dual gender performance on family relationships

In Pakistani society, cross dressing or dual gender role is considered as a deviant behavior and a peculiar practice. People having dual gender identity are marginalized because they do not adhere to the strict binary gender categorization. The data revealed that dual gender performance has strong negative influence on the family life of cross dressers. Non-acceptance by the family is a major issue faced by them.

14 (70%) respondents disclosed that according to the demand of their profession, they have to wear female clothes at work place but while being with family, they have to be very careful & conscious to look and act like a male. The respondents claimed that performing dual gender role is not easy rather it is an art and only some special people having extraordinary capabilities can do it. The adjustment with family, especially with wives and children, was very much difficult for majority of the respondents, however, some respondents told that gradually with the passage of time, the issues were settled and their family members compromised. An old respondent was of the view that:

In the start it was much difficult for my wife to accept me and live as a wife of a cross dresser. After long discussions I was successful to assure her that cross dressing is just a demand of my profession

and I am not indulge in any sort of immoral activities and in this way I convinced her. I fulfill all her marital rights and other necessities of life. Similarly, whenever I am at home I pay full attention to my wife and children and try to prove myself a responsible husband and a responsible father as well. By keeping in view my caring attitude she compromises on my dual gender identity and my absence from home as I live out of the city most of the time with my cross dressed friends.

18 (90%) respondents briefed that though the society tolerates them but never accepts them as valued & respected members like other citizens. Revelation of their cross dressing is always shocking and unacceptable for their families, community and society. They shared that family members, despite being intimate blood relations, never accept their cross dressing. They all have experienced family pressure to quit cross dressing. Many of them have been scolded and even beaten up by elders many times. Family members strictly warned them not to engage in cross dressing in future.

09 (45%) respondents shared that engaging in marital relationship was a bitter experience for them and they had to face numerous problems due to the marital bindings. After marriage, they had lots of responsibilities which was impossible for them to fulfil. They also confirmed that the marital relation of most cross dressers ends with separation or divorce. While justifying the reason, they told that after performing feminine role for a long time, it is much difficult to fulfil responsibilities as a husband or father. While sharing another reason, they told that cross dressers have to keep their dual gender identity in secret from their wives and children. Whenever this secret discloses to the wives, problems start. In response to a question, 06 (30%) respondents told that their secret about cross dressing was disclosed to their wives by their friends, relatives and neighbors which affected their marital relation seriously. A respondent shared his story that:

After about four years of my marriage, my wife came to know about my profession. The harsh and inflexible attitude of my wife ultimately resulted in divorce. She blamed me that I was not a responsible husband and father. At the time of divorce we had two children that have grown young now. I visit them at the home of their grandmother. They know about my cross dressing as my ex-wife informed them about it but they never discussed it with me perhaps they feel shy to discuss such topic with their father.

Discussion

The demographic characteristics of the study clearly depicted that young boys are more inclined towards cross dressing. It is also evident from the results that in Pakistani society, transgender people are deprived of some basic rights. Non-acceptance by the society has been identified as the biggest reason behind the phenomenon. Practice of cross dressing is seen as contradictory to the cultural as well as Islamic values in Pakistan. A study conducted in Pakistan also revealed that about 40 percent Pakistani think that cross dressing is increasing in Pakistan because people are becoming open minded whereas about 60 percent Pakistanis think that it is because of forgetting the values and teachings of Islam (Farooq, [2020](#)).

While exploring the major responsible socio-economic factors behind the rising trend of MTF cross dressing in the society, the findings revealed that role modeling & inspiration, peer group influence, amusement & entertainment, non-satisfaction with the gender identity and economic miseries were major factors consequential to cross dressing. These factors vary from individual to individual. Hub Pages ([2024](#)) also reported similar factors responsible for the rising trend of cross dressing including fascination, being good at dancing, acting or a somewhat feminine appearance, cultural pressures such as watching videos, films or internet and peer group influences (Hub Pages, [2024](#)).

Whereas, while exploring the Socio-economic problems faced by the MTF cross dressers because of their dual gender performance, the results of the study revealed that dual gender performance has severe socio-economic repercussions. Migration from hometowns, non-acceptance by the family as well as society, Non availability of favorable work conditions, stigmatization & victimization, facing discriminatory attitude, physical and sexual assault, sense of deprivation regarding their rights, social security and economic issues were coined as some of the major problems faced by the cross dressers while performing their role as transgenders in the society. It is evident from the findings that as the respondents i.e. male cross dressers faced these problems while performing their role as transgenders, therefore, the other transgender people were also facing the same problems in the society. The results of the study were quite in line with the previous studies. A well reputed organization, Aurat Foundation declared in its research study ([2016](#)) that cross dressing is widely seen as a taboo and immoral act in Pakistani society based on traditional Islamic morality, hence it is not

acceptable (Aurat Foundation, [2016](#)). Non-acceptance of transgender community is not only an issue existing in the developing countries like Pakistan but the developed countries have also been facing the issue. A study conducted in USA also exposed that according to 36% Americans, the American society hasn't gone far in acceptance of transgender people (Parker et al., [2022](#)). Similarly, a report of Human Rights Campaign revealed that transgender people in USA face discrimination and live in acute poverty. Transgender people are being discriminated against by colour and race. According to the report, about 29% of transgender adults including 39% of Black, 48% of Latine and 35% of Alaska Native, Asian and Native Americans transgender adults live in poverty (HRC Foundation, [2024](#)). The findings regarding discrimination, violence and physical & sexual assault of the transgender community were also in line with the results of the studies conducted in USA. HRC Foundation confirmed that in USA, transgender people experience violence at a rate far greater than the common people. More than half of the transgender people (54%) have experienced some form of violence of close partner, slightly less than half of the respondents (47%) faced sexual assault in life and almost 10% were physically assaulted in between the years 2014 to 2015 (HRC Foundation, [2024](#)).

While exploring the influence of dual gender performance on family relationships of MTF cross dressers, the findings revealed that dual gender performance has strong negative influence on the family life of MTF cross dressers. Their gender identity as cross dressers is hardly accepted by their families and community. For some of the respondents, engaging in marital relationship was a bitter experience for them as they had to face numerous problems due to their marital bindings. After performing feminine role for a long time, it was quite difficult to fulfil responsibilities as a husband or father. A report of Khan ([2022](#)) authenticates the findings of the study by reporting that in Pakistan, transgender people are a marginalized community who often experience family rejection and homelessness in adolescence. Along with many other fears, economic insecurity is a big fear for transgender community in Pakistan. Saeed ([2023](#)) also reported that in Pakistan, a big ratio of transgenders i.e. about 90 percent are abandoned by their families and they have migrated from their native towns to other cities where they live with community members.

The findings of the study also explored that majority of the respondents

were annoyed by Civil Society Organizations, working for the welfare of transgender community. They were of the view that CSOs even working with the slogan of transgender welfare were also striving merely for their own benefits. Such organizations use the name of transgender community to grab monetary benefits but in actuality do nothing for the welfare of the transgender people. Earning a livelihood was reported by the respondents as a challenge for MTF cross dressers as some of them never went to school and others were literate maximum to grade-8 (Middle). No respondent had technical education or any expertise in any technical skill at all. Resultantly, they were not engaged in any employment or small business etc. According to the respondents, dancing and begging were the major sources of their income. Respondents were of the view that each MTF cross dresser chooses his source of income in accordance with his age, expertise, interest and skill etc. It is also pertinent to mention that review of existing literature regarding transgender community revealed that some transgender people & cross dressers are engaged in immoral sexual activities & prostitution and they are responsible for spreading sexually transmitted diseases. However, while collecting data for the study, no respondent admitted that he was/is involved in such immoral activities or prostitution in any way. But some of the young respondents confirmed that they received such offers many times. Some respondents endorsed that they know about some transgender people and cross dressers who are involved in prostitution and they earn their livelihood from this source.

Conclusions & Recommendation

In Pakistan, cross dressing is seen as a socially disapproved practice, contradictory to the cultural as well as Islamic values. Male-to-female cross dressers have to face many hardships, prejudice, and discrimination by the family as well as society. Inspiration & role modeling, peer group influence, amusement & entertainment, non-satisfaction with the gender identity and economic miseries were some major causative factors consequential to the MTF cross dressing. Dual gender performance has severe socio-economic repercussions including migration, non-acceptance by the family & society, Non availability of favorable work conditions, stigmatization & victimization, facing discriminatory attitude, physical & sexual assault, sense of deprivation regarding rights, social security as well as economic issues. Dual gender performance also has strong negative influence on the family life of cross dressers. At present, there is no mechanism in Pakistan

to identify and distinguish actual transgenders, therefore, cross dressers are also considered as transgenders. Due to the reason, numbers of transgender community looks higher than the actual. It is a need of the hour to develop a mechanism of improved civil registration & certification of real transgender people so that effective policies based on actual transgender population may be formulated for the welfare of transgender community as well as to protect their fundamental human rights. Moreover, meaningful livelihood opportunities may be provided to the transgender people so that they could live with dignity and be free from exploitation. Civil Society Organizations should also come forward to protect and safeguard the rights of transgender community.

Author Contribution

Ibad Ullah Sajid: Raja Imran Sajid: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, writing –Original Draft Preparation, writing – Review & Editing **Adeela Rehman:** Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Software, Writing – Review & Editing, **Abubakar Nazeer Chaudhary:** Validation, Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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