



**ASIAN UNIVERSITY  
FOR WOMEN**

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**The Employment Field for the  
Hijra Community in  
Bangladesh**

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## Abstract

*This paper offers an analysis on the current employment condition for the transgender community in Bangladesh. The transgender community in Bangladesh is highly stigmatized which has resulted in unavailability of jobs for the members of the hijra community. Our study shows that most of the Hijras in Bangladesh are uneducated, which limits the kind of jobs they can apply to. As per our research, most of the Hijras are willing to work and earn their own money, rather than collect money through begging on the streets. But the jobs that they are usually offered pays less than what they can earn through begging. This paper takes into account the position of the social welfare non-government organizations who are working for the welfare of the hijra community. And since social stigma about the hijras is a major issue, we have conducted a qualitative survey on the general public about their experiences and perspectives. The studies conclude that even though most of the participants in our survey reported to be harassed by the hijras at least once in their lifetime, they still disclosed that they would be fine working alongside with a hijra at a formal workplace as long as they behave well. All the social welfare non-government organizations have suggested keeping and strictly maintaining the quota system in the job sector for the hijras.*

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## **Introduction:**

Bangladesh, as a society, very often tends to distance themselves from the transgender or the Hijra Community living in the country. While it is a massive flaw in the **social** structure of the country to have an entire group of people living completely on the outskirts of healthy social niceties, there is also the **financial** matter that we often overlook. At present a negligible number of Hijras in the country are employed at various work stations. Even though a considerable portion of the Bangladeshi community claim to acknowledge the equal rights of the Hijras, most of them are seen to shy away when it comes to offering them a job. As a result, the Hijras are often seen begging on the streets, or even bullying pedestrians for food or money. Our primary goal has been to evaluate the financial condition of the Hijras in the country, and to analyze the main reasons behind their high unemployment rate. We have also focused on finding out the success rate of these NGOs and determining the root reasons behind their shortcomings.

## **Literature Review and Definition:**

Our study of local and national newspaper articles, government policies and past research projects have revealed that the employment rate amongst Hijras in the country is insignificant, and requires special measures. They also discuss vastly about their sub-standard economic condition. Most articles and documents read dealt mainly with the problems of the third gender regarding their financial condition, and social isolation. We have also found that there have been no significant articles written on the right to education of the third gender in Bangladesh. On analyzing the government policies, we have concluded that the transgender community in Bangladesh has for long been socially excluded. This has resulted in most of them being unemployed and in need. They are deprived of even the basic rights as citizen. Reports from different newspapers and documents disclose that in November 2013, the government of Bangladesh had finally recognized Hijras as the third gender officially. However in year 2015, an incident reported that the ministry of social welfare recruited 14 Hijras as low ranking clerks. From the examination it was concluded that 12 of them were male and had a penis except one who had undergone a

surgery to get his penis removed. The ministry then terminated all of them saying that they are all male who impersonated a Hijra. Following the discovery of this report, we shifted our focus to finding the legal definition of the “third gender” that is recognized in Bangladeshi law. From going through law journals and relevant articles, we concluded that there is no definite definition of the “third gender” present. While some consider all transgender to be “Hijra” and a part of the “third gender”, others only consider hermaphrodites to be Hijras. Since no legal definition of the word could be found, it had become apparent that there is a huge confusion surrounding the term “hijra”, but also that most people do not only limit the term to hermaphrodites only. For this paper, we are referring to all transgender as “Hijras” as opposed to just hermaphrodites, and we did not make any distinction while approaching them as subjects.

### **Objective of the Study:**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To evaluate the economic condition of the transgender or Hijra Community in Bangladesh.
2. To analyze the reasons behind the high unemployment rate in that community.
3. To gain practical knowledge about their lifestyle and formulate possible solutions through research.

### **Methodology:**

After conducting out initial literature review, the main research conducted during this project had been the collection of primary data, through face to face and personal interviews. The research process is still ongoing, and is being conducted to compile the two main elements of this research: the research paper, and the documentary. Our method of data collection had been qualitative, and in such research there is no one truth. Therefore, this research had been conducted keeping that in mind.

The participants of this research were members of different Hijra community around the city of Chittagong and Dhaka of Bangladesh, representatives from different social welfare non-government organizations who work for their welfare, or have the ability and responsibility to employ them. Amongst these, we have conducted face to face interview with a transgender from Jhautola, Chittagong named

Kader. Our key informant for this research had been a Hijra from Manda, Dhaka called Katha. Katha is the leader of her clan in Dhaka, and the founder of a welfare organization for Hijras called “Shocheton Shomaj Sheba Hijra Shongho (Hijra Association of Conscious Social Services)”. Other than that we have also reached out to Hijra individuals in Dhaka city from places like Fakirerpool, Bangabandhu Avenue and Najimuddin Road. Amongst other stakeholders, we have conducted interviews with representatives from three Non-Government Organizations: Better Future Bangladesh, a rising community welfare organization, Bondhu, a social welfare society who has dedicated a significant portion of their work to the development of the transgender community in the country and Institute of Wellbeing, an institution that firmly believes in the importance of diversity and equal participation of people from all class, genders, races and religion in the society.

Halfway through our research process, it had become apparent that the public perspective of the gender binary and the social stigma around the third gender plays a major role in determining the employment status of the Hijra community in the country. So we also conducted an online survey targeting teenagers and young adults to understand their perspective better.

### **Sample Questions:**

The subjects approached for this research study can be grouped into three separate categories of stakeholders. These are the people from the Hijra Community, representatives from the non-government welfare organizations and the general public.

The questionnaire with which we surveyed the people from the Hijra community included the following questions (in Bangla):

- 1) What is your birth name?
- 2) Do you prefer being addressed by any other name?
- 3) What is your educational qualification?
- 4) Are you employed, or looking for a job? If yes, where are you currently employed?
- 5) Where were you last employed? Why did you leave that job?

- 6) Have you ever been denied employment for your sexual identity?
- 7) Has your gender or sexual identity caused wage discrimination in your job?
- 8) What is your monthly income? What is the source of this income?
- 9) What is your opinion on the word “Hijra”?
- 10) What kind of expectations do you have from the society, the welfare non-government organizations and the government?
- 11) Is there any particular story relevant to our topic that you want to share?

The main objective behind this survey was to understand the barriers that the Hijras face in the face of employment.

There was a separate questionnaire with which we surveyed the representatives from the social welfare non-government organizations. The questions included:

- 1) What is the name of your organization?
- 2) Has your organization worked closely for the welfare of the Hijra community of Bangladesh?
- 3) Please tell us about a few relevant projects of yours.
- 4) What do you think are the main barriers of employment for the Hijra community of Bangladesh?
- 5) How can social welfare non-government organizations and the government as a combined group help in increasing the employment of the Transgender community?
- 6) What do you think is wrong with the present approach of the different welfare societies?
- 7) Why do you think the employment rate is so low in the Hijra community of the country?
- 8) What would your suggestions be for the people as individuals?
- 9) What would your suggestions be for each Hijra looking for a job?
- 10) Is there anything else you want to add?

These questions were asked to the representatives of the social welfare non-government organizations approached during this study. The goal was to make an understanding of the significance of their contributions to the field, their shortcomings and the reasons behind it, and their expert opinions on the duties of the people as an individual stakeholder.



Lastly, a separate questionnaire was sent out to people in general, to find out their stands on having a Hijra person in the workplace. This survey was conducted on social media, and a majority of the participants targeted were students who are expected to be in the employment sector in the near future.

The questions asked were:

- 1) What is your gender?
- 2) What is your age?
- 3) What is your education level?
- 4) Would you be comfortable working alongside/ employing a Hijra at your workplace?
- 5) Have you ever been harassed by a Hijra for money?
- 6) What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you see a Hijra?

The aim of this survey was to find out how the common mass feels about having a Hijra alongside them in the workplace.

### **Findings:**

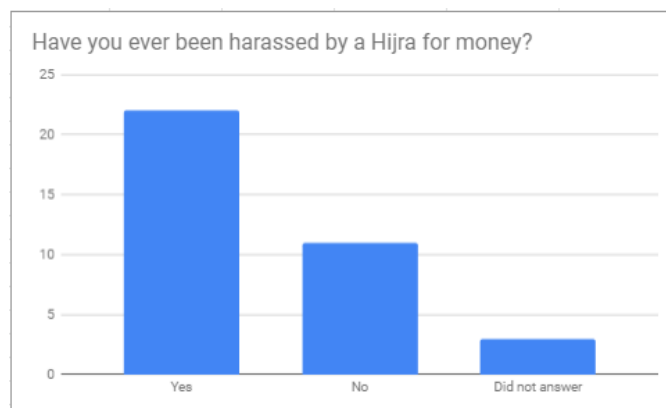
The data collected from the survey had been consistent with the literature review conducted. Respondents have reported that it is indeed difficult for the members of the Hijra community to find jobs, and earn a living. Through our survey, we have come across Hijras who have reported to working in the garments industry, beauty parlors, security services and prostitution. Although only one of our participants admitted to harassing the pedestrians in exchange of money (referred by them as “hijra collection”), a hundred percent of them addressed the huge population of the Hijras who completely rely on Hijra collection as their primary source of income to be a major problem. It is mentionable that even though the tradition of Hijra Collection has been addressed by almost all of our participants as an important problem that needs to be solved, the actual number of Hijra participants who admitted to being a part of it is less than half. It is possible that as a research team we failed to reach the groups of Hijras who participate in Hijra collections, as they do not live under any particular addresses, or it may also be possible that the people who collect money in such a way are reluctant to admit it on record.


The main findings of the survey report many important things about the social lives of the Hijras. We have found that 75% of the Hijras have changed their name after a certain age, to suit their preference. We can also report through our survey that almost all subjects interviewed dropped out of their educational institutions at one point or another after facing harassment from their teachers and peers. While one particular hijra took pride in completing her education till Higher Secondary level, another claimed that finding one that pays sufficiently had been difficult owing to the lack of a proper educational degree. In relation to this, there was also a third participant in our survey who did not believe that their educational degree or lack thereof determined their skills in the employment field at all. Another most important finding of this research was how significantly high the income was for Hijras doing “Hijra collection” or “Baby collection”, over Hijras doing a formal job. (It is notable that many communities in the country consider the blessings of Hijras to be sacred, and rarely refuse to give them money when they ask for it. That is how the tradition of baby collection, or collection of funds from households with new born babies came into being). We have come to know through our surveys that Hijras have mixed feeling about the term “Hijra” itself, between being fine with it since it is their identity, and being disgusted over it. From the general conversation that we had with our subjects about this term, we understand that the Hijras mainly have a problem with this term if it is used in a derogatory tone. One of the most important findings of our research is the collection of the different suggestion we got from the participants regarding a remedy to the situation of their unemployment. Most of the Hijras thought that the government should create more opportunities targeting them, while some specified a system of quota. One notable suggestion amongst this was the request to set up special schools for Hijras, which we understand was made owing to the harassment faced by them during school years. One participant mentioned that the government does not need to play any special role in creating jobs for them, if the general public treated them with respect and gave them jobs that they deserved. Overall, our questionnaire revealed some deeply saddening stories about their lives, giving us an idea of the difficult lives that they live on a daily basis.

From our second survey targeting representatives from the welfare organisation, we report that in the present day, it has become difficult for employers to provide jobs for the Hijras owing to the ignorance of

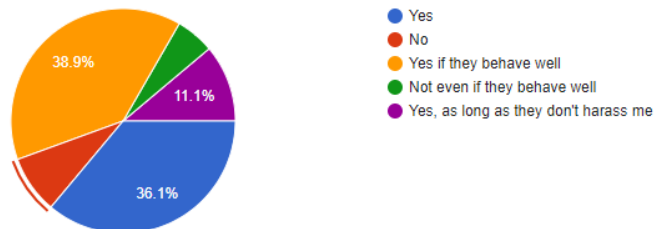
the common mass. Najia from Bondhu Bangladesh has claimed that the orthodox public needs to come out of the comfort zone of the gender binary and embrace reality, while Piyal from Better Future Bangladesh has talked about the difficult financial situation that they are constantly in. In doing so, both representatives have reported the needs of quota system in the job market, provision of vocational training and relevant government policies. Debra Efroymsen, founder of Institute of Wellbeing, disclosed during our interview that this is a problem that can be handled by encouraging big non-government organizations to hire more transgender people in the workplace. Debra thinks that having a quota in the government is not the only solution here, these opportunities need to be enforced keeping in mind that it is not only the hermaphrodites who are being outcast, but all gender non-conforming people in general. She also compared the gender conformity of the transgender to daily practices of the common mass to show that their lifestyle is no different from any other individuals.

On analyzing the reason behind the rejection of Hijra community by the common mass, and to understand the issues at its root, an online survey targeting with an outreach of 36 respondents has revealed that whilst most people would be comfortable having a Hijra colleague or employer, they have an active fear of being publicly harassed. The majority of them reported to have been harassed at least once in their life for money by the Hijras. Some of these respondents shared that an appearance of Hijras create a feeling of fear of being harassed in them, even making them want to “run” or “escape”, while a majority of them reported that even though they have been harassed, they would not mind working alongside a Hijra in a formal workplace as long as they behave well. Statistics of this report are shown below.



Would you be comfortable working alongside/employing a Hijra at your work place? 

36 responses



### **Discussion:**

While all three surveys and face to face interviews revealed the answers to the questions we were asking, the open ended style of our interviews revealed a lot more. From our interviews with several of our respondents we have learned that it often happens that a lot of the Hijras are not allowed to take jobs in a formal workplace by their clan leaders since income through Hijra collection pays a lot more. Another important conclusion we have drawn from this research is that it is not just the common mass that have a reservation regarding their identity. Being brought up in a society that is not usually outspoken about sexual identity outside the gender binary, we have noticed reluctance or even inconsistencies amongst many of our respondents regarding their sexual identity. While some of them struggled with the idea of being in between the gender binary, some others have clearly expressed that they wished they were born either as a male or a female. Another pattern that we have noticed through our research was that Hijras with proper support from their families have been seen to be more successful as opposed to those who have been detached. We understand through this, and the numerous other results of our survey that beside infrastructural developments made for their benefit, steps taken for their acceptance into the society is extremely important. This process, as pointed out by Debra Efroymsom of the Institute of Wellbeing,

needs to be dynamic from both ways. Not only should the government be willing to develop and enforce quota systems, steps need to be taken for training the Hijras in terms of social and professional skills. Such steps targeting their acceptance into the society are the first step of inclusion. Once that has been achieved, increasing employment rate in the community is going to be easier and more realistic.

### **Conclusion**

The evaluation of the financial condition of the hijras in Bangladesh reveals that social stigma is one of the major reasons for less participation of hijras in the economy. Proper laws, education and a quota on jobs must be provided for them, alongside training opportunities developing their social and professional skills, in order to target a higher rate of social inclusion. The most important realization in this case is to understand that in order to include them in the economy; they will have to be included in the society first. Only then can we achieve a higher rate of employment for our third gender.