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Negotiating Marginality: Social Identity and Exclusion among the Hijra Community in Rajshahi, Bangladesh

Puja Rani Nandi, Md. Shafikuzzaman Joarder*

Department of Sociology, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi, Bangladesh
Email: s2012545200@ru.ac.bd, *shafikuzzaman@ru.ac.bd

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Abstract

Using a mixed-methods approach, this research explores the social exclusion and identity negotiation of the Hijra community in the Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh. The study is based on social exclusion theory (Estivill, 2003; Beall & Piron, 2005), social identity theory, and gender performativity, and examines data from 50 respondents (17 urban, 8 semi-urban, and 25 rural) sampled in April and May 2025. The results depict lack of access to education (36% never went to school), occupational exclusion (82% dependent on *hijragiri*—traditional activities such as dancing at ceremonies or collecting money), economic instability (68% of the total earning ≤ 10,000 BDT monthly), discrimination and violence to the full extent (94% of them had been abused), restricted social involvement (26% had not participated in any events), and urban-rural differences, where rural areas present higher rates of exclusion. Stigma, however, continues to be a problem even after the 2013 third-gender recognition and it intersects with class and location (Crenshaw, 1989). The recent research is more focused on the cultural tightness that reinforces binary norms and the paradoxical consequences of legal recognition.

Keywords

Hijra Identity, Social Exclusion, Gender Performativity, Urban-Rural Disparities, Stigma and Violence

1. Introduction

The term "hijra" denotes a culturally specific third-gender identity in South Asia, referring to individuals assigned male at birth who adopt feminine gender expres-

sions and roles, often residing in structured communities led by a "*Guruma*" or elder mentor (Nanda, 1999). Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity posits that Hijra identities are constructed through repeated social acts, such as wearing feminine attire or engaging in *hijragiri* (traditional livelihoods involving performances at births, weddings, or money collection through blessings/*badhai*). However, these acts are constrained by societal norms that penalize non-conformity. In Bangladesh, the 2013 legal recognition of Hijra as a third gender aimed to affirm their status but has been critiqued for reinforcing binary assumptions rather than embracing fluid expressions (Hossain, 2017). The Hijra community often describes their gender non-specificity using phrases such as, "we are neither men nor women" or "two people in one" to navigate their social position. The designation of hijras as a supplier of *protibondhi* (persons with disability) status in post-colonial South Asia aligns with the global trend when it comes to how trans. people are diagnosed or medicalized in order to obtain rights, as in the U.S., by having their condition classified as gender dysphoria under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Dangaran, 2024). It is possible for Hijras to secure some kind of benefit through the use of this framing in both Bangladesh and many other countries. Many other cultures have a similar pattern, whereby other indigenous cultures within the provinces of South Asia have also learned to show similarities to the disability framework through a third-gender identity by being discriminated against through both means of oppression. Research indicates a significant increase in rates of disability among trans. adults (Amin et al., 2022). The definition of social exclusion is described as the progressive development of several dimensions and processes (based on unequal access to rights, resources, and opportunities), including the lack of participation and access by persons in social, economic, and political life of the hijra people of Bangladesh (Estivill, 2003; Beall & Piron, 2005). A strong example of extreme marginalization is described through Khan et al. (2009) when individuals in the hijra community were shown to have only three percent access to education and employment compared with the typical eight percent in all other communities, while a massive ninety percent reside in cashless conditions. Service availability in urban centers such as Rajshahi City, contrasted with the intensified exclusion in rural areas like Chapai Nawabganj rooted in traditional belief systems, highlights significant regional disparities within the Rajshahi Division (Mawa, 2022). While studies such as Hossain (2017) provide valuable insights into national patterns, their urban-focused lens—primarily centered on Dhaka—tends to obscure rural realities, leaving an empirical gap in regional research. This study adopts a sociological perspective to examine the construction of social identity among Hijras, defined as an individual's self-concept shaped by group membership and societal perceptions (Tajfel, 1978), and explores their experiences of exclusion. It analyzes exclusion in education and employment, investigates the urban–rural divide in expressing gender identity and accessing services, and identifies research gaps that call for targeted policy interventions.

2. Literature Review

Social exclusion bars the Hijra from participation, keeping poverty and isolation in parallel tracks. Goffman's (1963) stigma theory explains how society devalues "spoiled identities" that differ from binary norms in a typical patriarchal setup like Bangladesh. Intersectionality after Crenshaw (1989) described how gender with class and location intersect to multiply the degree of exclusion, which has hardly ever been brought into focus in studies from Bangladesh but is noticeable when comparing regions, for example, rural-urban divides in Pakistan. The social identity theory above postulates that self-concepts develop or are determined by group memberships. For the Hijra, *Guruma*-led communities foster cohesion amidst rejection (Aziz & Azhar, 2020). Butler's (1990) performativity critiques how Hijra gender enactments are policed, intersecting with Tajfel's framework: while these acts of performance consolidate group identity simultaneously precipitate stigma, hence a tension between authenticity and survival. The 2013 recognition affirms identity but paradoxically reinforces binaries, limiting fluidity (Hossain, 2017; Al-Mamun et al., 2022). Recent studies have been highlighting issues that have not been resolved yet, in particular how certain cultural aspects of "tightness" in Bangladesh, like the binary system, lead to the marginalization of Hijra through isolation (Hossain & Mim, 2024; Barua & Khan, 2023). The most common form of violence affects almost all the members of the community, between 80 - 98 percent, depending on the research (Amanullah et al., 2022; Barua & Khan, 2023), while educational bullying contributes to 85 percent of the school dropouts among them (Siddique & Ahmed, 2023).

Due to occupational exclusion, 90 percent of Hijra are confined to *hijragiri*, even though there are some empowerment initiatives that are only minimally effective (Fontana, 2020; Rahman et al., 2025). The health issues that are prevalent among the community become worse with pandemics and are a reflection of the social injustices towards them (Mukit, 2021; Hossain & Khan, 2020).

Such situations are almost identical in impoverished areas of the world. For example, in Pakistan and India third-gender is viewed as a natural and timeless concept by religious narratives but still, in Pakistan, the legal recognitions (e.g., Pakistan's 2018 Act) are already ahead of Bangladesh's enforcement, which creates a comparative gap between the two countries (Ramay, 2019; Sengupta, 2023). As for the U.S. ADA claim for gender dysphoria as a form of disability, it may provide access but at the same time, it may also entail the risk of pathologization (Dangaran, 2024). Community resilience via *Guruma* counters isolation, aligning with capability approaches (Sen, 1999).

There are still differences: the concentration on the city (for example, Dhaka-centric; Hossain, 2017) which overshadows the rural dynamics, whereas the study of Rajshahi in this case with the sampling and inferential stats being equally distributed. The effects that have been less evaluated and that need to be tested through data (e.g., vs. India's NALSA judgment; Goel, 2016). This limitation of having only a few theories incorporated in the paper has been resolved by making

the connections more critical.

3. Research Questions

This study addresses:

1) What socio-economic factors, particularly in education and occupation, contribute to Hijra social exclusion in Rajshahi Division?

2) How do societal perceptions and institutional practices influence Hijra marginalization, and what urban-rural disparities exist in gender identity expression and access to essential services?

4. Methodology

The study utilizes a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, which combines quantitative breadth with qualitative depth to understand the nuanced experiences of the Hijra community within an interpretive framework (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Purposive sampling was employed to select 50 respondents representing different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds. Out of them, 17 were from the urban Rajshahi City, 8 were from the semi-urban Natore Sadar Upazila, and 25 were from the rural Chapai Nawabganj. Such a distribution makes it possible to compare the urban and rural areas. The data gathered was based on three angles to the issues: 1) Semi-structured questionnaires (n = 50), which combined closed-ended items (e.g., demographics, income) for quantitative analysis and open-ended prompts (e.g., experiences of stigma) for qualitative depth; 2) 20 in-depth interviews, selected from the larger group of 50 questionnaire respondents, led by adaptable protocols to delve into themes such as identity, exclusion, and resilience, held in private places to encourage the disclosure of information; and 3) Three focus group discussions (FGDs, one per area, 8 - 10 participants each, aged 20 - 45), utilizing structured guides to invite collective insights on community dynamics and societal perceptions.

Upon obtaining permission, interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed in Bangla, and translated into English for the study. Quantitative data were treated with SPSS v.26, which facilitated the generation of descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages), and inferential tests (Chi-square for associations, e.g., residence-identity, $p < 0.05$; Cramer's V to locate effect sizes). Qualitative data went through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were refined through the iterative process to confirm their strength and also checked against the quantitative trends for the agreement.

Ethical measures were in line with the American Sociological Association (2018) guidelines. Informed consent was given in Bangla. Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms. The Interviews and FGDs were held in secluded, community-trusted places to ensure that the participants were at ease and that there was no discomfort. To mitigate risks of re-traumatization, debriefing sessions were offered post-interview, and referrals to local support services were provided. The study's exploratory nature with a small sample limits generalizability, but it

provides in-depth insights into under-researched *Hijra* community in different contexts.

5. Findings

The findings illuminate the lived realities of the Hijra community in Rajshahi Division, revealing a tapestry of exclusion woven through socio-economic barriers, societal perceptions, and resilient community structures. Drawing from quantitative trends and qualitative narratives, the data portray a group navigating profound marginalization while forging spaces of belonging.

5.1. Socio-Demographic and Identity Profile

Hijra respondents reveal a complex but mainly third-gender identity that not only reflects their cultural background but also indicates an increasing gender fluidity. An impressive 92 percent (n = 46) of the respondents indicated that they consider themselves as a third gender, which is a legally recognized category in Bangladesh since 2013, while the rest 8 percent (n = 4) chose trans. male, female, or other non-binary categories, thus suggesting the change in the perception of the self due to more exposure to the city. When it comes to the location, the identity distribution has been found to be more towards the countryside: 54.3 percent of the third-gender identifiers are from rural areas, 28.3 percent from urban and 17.4 percent from semi-urban (Table 1). Chi-square inferential analysis was used to determine the significance of the urban-rural differences and the results showed that there were statistically significant differences between the urban and the rural areas ($\chi^2 = 6.24$, df = 2, $p = 0.044$) which means that urban settings may allow for a wider range of gender expression due to the relative anonymity and the easy access to the information networks (Mawa, 2022).

Table 1. Social gender identity by residence.

Residence	Third Gender (n = 46) %	Other (n = 4) %
Rural	54.3	0
Urban	28.3	100
Semi-Urban	17.4	0

Living arrangements have shed more light on the identity dynamics. 87 percent (n = 40) of third-gender people were found to be living in Hijra communities or under the guidance of a *Guruma*, whereas only 13 percent (n = 6) were living with their biological families or independently (Table 2; $\chi^2 = 8.15$, df = 1, $p = 0.017$). Those living in the city are more likely to be independent (52.9 percent family/independent vs. 0 percent in rural/semi-urban, where 10 percent are dependent on communities), which is an indication of urban social liberties in contrast to rural familial exclusion.

Table 2. Social gender identity by living arrangement.

Arrangement	Third Gender %	Other %
Community/*Guruma*	87	0
Family/Independent	13	100

The qualitative themes derived from the interviews and FGDs revolve around "rejection and refuge": Participants depicted third-gender identity as the main reason for being ostracized by the family and thus going to the community for support and as a place for living their identity. Md Rokon (32, urban), for example, stated, "Living with my *Guruma* made me brave to be myself, that is, unlike my family who rejected me." In the same manner, Anu (30, rural) said, "My elder sister couldn't get married because of me… I left home and joined the Hijra community." The FGD participants pointed out *Gurumas* as "mothers chosen", who take care of the emotional and economic needs of their children, although this dependence may at times deepen the separation from the mainstream society.

5.2. Societal and Familial Perceptions

Perceptions of the Hijra community have been very close to the stigma that is very deep-rooted, and that in turn is influencing the way they are seen by society, as well as the way they view themselves. Views from social perspectives are mostly very mixed or negative (92 percent), and only 8 percent of them are positive; the city population reflects a little more positive attitude (12 percent positive) compared to the village (4 percent). The thinking of families towards the matter is more severe: 70 percent of them are made up of those which reject the idea or deny it, with 58 percent referring to Hijra as "abnormal" or "inauspicious," 12 percent being in total denial, and 30 percent accepting as "normal"—there is a more significant percentage of positive perception in urban families (40 percent vs. 20 percent rural). A chi-square test shows that the difference in significance is based on location ($\chi^2 = 7.89$, df = 2, $p = 0.019$).

By description, the characteristics of "inauspiciousness" and avoidance are the most prominent ones: Mayuri (urban) recounted market rejection, whereas Jhumka (rural) pointed out being left out in transport. FGDs depicted the Hijra as "abnormal" or "cursed," with urban groups talking of acceptation under certain conditions (e.g., during festivals) whereas the rural groups of complete rejection. The ideas have a weakening effect on the self-worth of those people, thereby leading to emotional distress and the creating of bonds with "chosen families" in communities that they can rely on.

5.3. Educational Exclusion

Education emerges as a pivotal arena of exclusion, with stark disparities hindering socio-economic mobility. Overall, 36 percent (n = 18) have no formal education, 12 percent (n = 6) primary level, 36 percent (n = 18) secondary, and 16 percent (n = 8) higher secondary or above (**Table 3**), reflecting systemic barriers.

Table 3. Educational qualifications.

Qualification	N	%
No Education	18	36
Primary	6	12
Secondary	18	36
Higher Secondary+	8	16

Where people live significantly affects the differences that the respondents of the rural areas have reported the percentage of those without education to be as high as 40 percent (n = 10), compared to 29.4 percent (n = 5) of the urban and 37.5 percent (n = 3) of the semi-urban (Table 4; $\chi^2 = 4.82$, df = 2, $p = 0.090$, marginally significant).

Table 4. Educational qualifications by residence.

Residence	No Education % (n)	Educated % (n)
Rural	40 (10)	60 (15)
Urban	29.4 (5)	70.6 (12)
Semi-Urban	37.5 (3)	62.5 (5)

Among the obstacles listed were social stigma/discrimination (38 percent overall, peaking at 47.1 percent urban) and bullying (20 percent, 28 percent rural). The "no response" category, which is equivalent to no qualification, indicates that 36 percent of the people had no education at all (Figure 1).

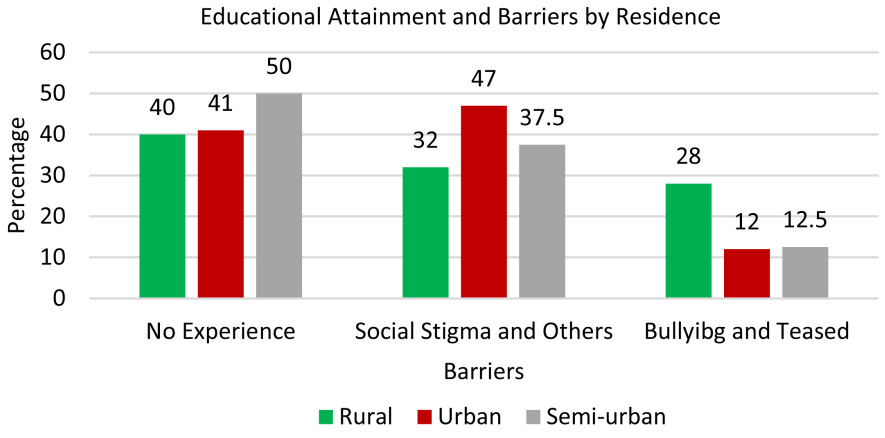

Figure 1. Educational attainment and barriers by residence.

Thematic analysis also identified two primary barriers to educational attainment: "Stigma and Harassment" and "Institutional Insensitivity." These barriers were reported to intensify during secondary education, a period often coinciding with heightened visibility of physical and psychological gender-related changes.

Participant narratives provided vivid illustrations of these challenges. Md Rokon (aged 32, urban) described persistent harassment by teachers, which ultimately led to his dropout at age 14: "They called me unnatural." Similarly, Sathi (aged 28, rural) recounted being expelled from school for refusing to conform to male dress codes. In Focus Group Discussion 1 (urban; 10 participants aged 20 - 40), participants highlighted peer avoidance, noting: "Classmates refused to sit next to us."

Focus Group Discussion 3 (rural) emphasized a broader lack of awareness and sensitivity within educational institutions. These experiences align with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital deprivation, whereby systemic rejection and exclusion limit access to the social and symbolic resources necessary for educational success, with particularly severe consequences in rural contexts where alternative support structures are scarce.

5.4. Occupational Exclusion

Occupationally, the vast majority of respondents—82% (n = 41)—rely on *hijragiri* as their primary livelihood, with limited diversification into other sectors: 6% (n = 3) engaged in NGO work, 4% (n = 2) in small-scale business, 2% (n = 1) in private employment, and 6% (n = 3) unemployed (**Figure 2**). Geographic disparities are pronounced, with rural participants almost exclusively dependent on *hijragiri* (92%) compared to 52.9% in urban areas ($\chi^2 = 12.34$, df = 2, $p = 0.006$). While urban settings appear to offer marginally greater access to alternative opportunities, systemic exclusion from mainstream employment remains evident across contexts (Aziz & Azhar, 2020).

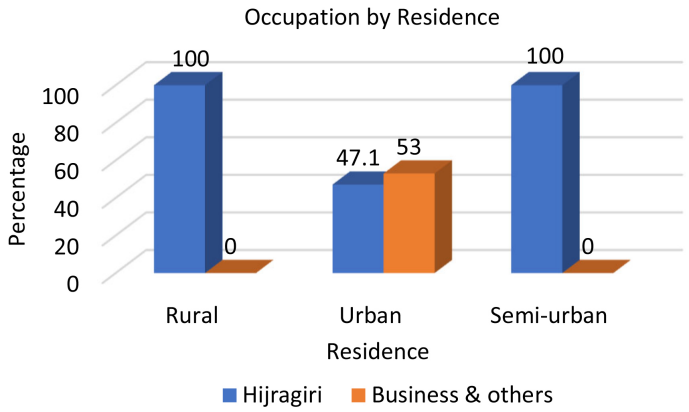

Figure 2. Occupation by residence.

According to the qualitative findings, a dominant theme of "constrained choices" rooted in widespread discrimination. Jui (aged 25, urban) explained: "No one hires us for normal jobs." Participants in Focus Group Discussion 3 similarly described repeated rejection when seeking formal sector employment, underscoring how stigma continues to restrict occupational mobility despite individual aspirations for greater economic independence.

5.5. Income Distribution

Monthly income levels underscore the economic vulnerability of the Hijra community: 34% (n = 17) earn ≤ 5000 BDT, another 34% (n = 17) fall within 5001 - 10,000 BDT, and 28% (n = 14) between 10,001 - 20,000 BDT. Only a small minority—4% (n = 2)—earn more than 20,000 BDT, while 2% (n = 1) remain unemployed and reliant on community support (**Figure 3**). Rural respondents tend to cluster at the lower end of the income spectrum compared to their semi-urban and urban counterparts. For example, 56% (n = 14) of rural participants earn 5001 - 10,000 BDT, and in semi-urban areas, 87.5% (n = 7) report incomes below 5000 BDT. In contrast, urban respondents are more likely to exceed 10,001 BDT (χ^2 = 9.87, df = 3, p = 0.020), highlighting pronounced disparities in economic opportunities across geographic contexts (Mawa, 2022).

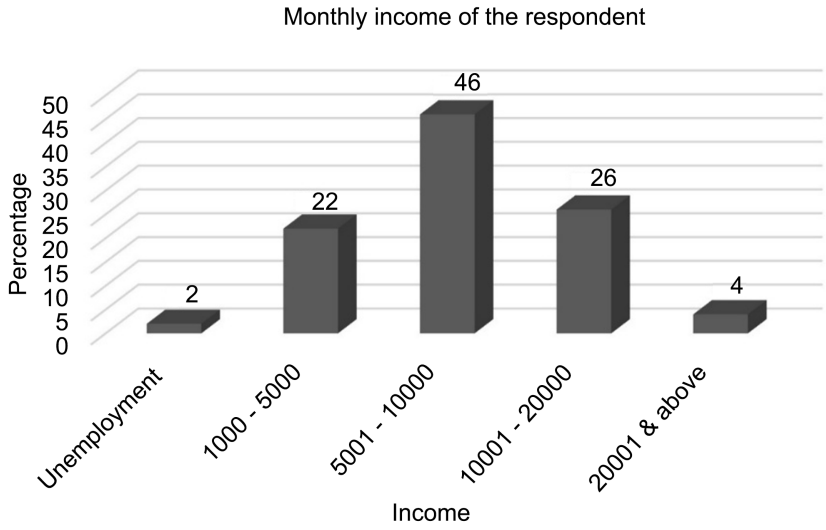

Figure 3. Monthly income distribution by residence.

Qualitative insights reveal the precarious and irregular nature of these earnings. Payal (aged 28, semi-urban) explained: "Money is used for group activities; I only have 2000 BDT left… during festivals, we do not get anything." Participants in Focus Group Discussion 2 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing shared yet unstable incomes that fall well below the thresholds necessary for basic capabilities, as conceptualized by Sen (1999).

5.6. Forms of Social Exclusion and Participation

Social exclusion profoundly shapes the daily experiences of the Hijra community, with 94% of respondents reporting a sense of not being treated as full citizens—52% attributing this to their gender identity and 42% to pervasive stigma. Social participation remains severely constrained: 26% do not engage in community events at all, while 38% report minimal or no interaction with broader society. Urban respondents exhibit somewhat higher levels of social activity, with 80% participating in events compared to 68% in rural areas (χ^2 = 5.67, p = 0.059).

Thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed a dominant theme of "isolation and withdrawal" driven by stigma. Participants in the focus group discussions described deliberately avoiding public spaces to evade discrimination, while simultaneously relying on strong mutual support within their "chosen families" as a critical mechanism for emotional sustenance and belonging.

5.7. Violence and Discrimination

Experiences of violence were reported by nearly all participants (94%), including verbal abuse (98%), physical abuse (82%), and psychological abuse (80%). These incidents frequently originated in familial or educational settings, with rural respondents reporting higher rates across all forms of violence (96%) compared to their urban counterparts (76%; $\chi^2 = 6.45$, df = unknown, $p = 0.040$).

Qualitative data illuminated the early onset and lasting impact of such violence. For instance, Rita (aged 30, semi-urban) recounted: "Familial beatings started early." Participants in Focus Group Discussion 1 similarly highlighted the role of school-based abuse in precipitating educational dropout. Thematic analysis identified "pervasive abuse" as a fundamental driver of social exclusion, consistent with documented human rights violations against the Hijra community (Amanullah et al., 2022).

6. Discussion

The research of this study highlights the long-standing socio-economic and identity-based discrimination the Hijra community has been experiencing in Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh. It also brings to light their perseverance in *Guruma*-led communities. In spite of the third-gender recognition in 2013, most of the respondents (92 percent) still identify themselves as the third gender, but 8 percent of them have changed their gender identities which indicates that gender fluidity is limited due to the existence of binary norms and the fact that the legal recognition is pathologizing (Hossain, 2017). The term "culturally tight" refers to societies that have very strict norms, where deviation is heavily sanctioned and conformity is strongly enforced (Gelfand et al., 2011), and in this case, it is the exclusion which, due to the enforcement of social seclusion, is getting worse (Hossain & Mim, 2024).

Those who live in urban areas have more freedom, as it is reported that 52.9 percent of the respondents live on their own, but the stigma is still present and it reveals itself through the barrier of education (47.1 percent), thus breaking the assumption of urban inclusiveness. On the other hand, in the countryside, the levels of exclusion are very high as all (100 percent) of the people are dependent on Hijra communities, which indicates that marginalization is at the intersection of gender, class, and location (Crenshaw, 1989; Mawa, 2022). The designation of Hijra as *protibondhi* to secure rights presents a critical trade-off: while it enables access to benefits and quotas, it risks further pathologization by framing gender non-conformity as a medical defect, potentially reinforcing stigma and limiting self-determination (Dangaran, 2024).

On the theoretical level, the current findings bridge the gap between social exclusion (Estivill, 2003; Beall & Piron, 2005), social identity (Tajfel, 1978), and gender performativity (Butler, 1990) models, providing a comprehensive explanation of how the demonstrated gender expressions trigger the almost universal stigma which only 6 percent of respondents report not to have experienced. This limitation of social interaction profoundly cuts the social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and capabilities (Sen, 1999) of the community and thus leads to its continuous systemic marginalization. Affected by cultural resistance and the enforcement that is not very effective, the Yogyakarta Principles (2007), especially Principles 12 (work) and 19 (violence), are in a very different situation from Pakistan, where legal changes occur step by step (Ramay, 2019). Indeed, there are similarities in terms of patterns in Mohammadpur (Barua & Khan, 2023) and Khulna (Khan et al., 2009) when compared to Rajshahi, however, the rural context of Rajshahi is much more severe as 94 percent of people state that they are not recognized as citizens which is a criticism of urban-biased scholarship (Khan et al., 2009).

Whilst the use of the internet can be a good way to include (Barua & Khan, 2023), the rural economic instability makes the access difficult. The sharing of income, as one can see in the case of the *Guruma*-led communities, is a very positive aspect of their resilience but unfortunately, as the exploitation analysis indicates, there is a risk of them becoming internal hierarchies that foster dependencies and power imbalances, where gurus may exert control over earnings and decisions, potentially mirroring external patriarchal structures (Rahman, 2024). Such findings call for the necessity of policy directives finely tuned with the Gender and Reduced Inequalities goals of the Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10 respectively.

Among the recommendations are: firmly pushing the 2013 acknowledgment through the anti-discrimination laws, with specific timelines for enforcement and monitoring by independent bodies; renewing education through the introduction of quotas (e.g., 5% reservation in public schools) and anti-bullying programs tailored to rural contexts; providing vocational training which will widen the future-market possibilities for the youth and place reliance beyond the resourceful moral method, such as subsidized skill development in IT or handicrafts with startup grants of 50,000 BDT; and organizing campaigns by and for the community members who engage cultural and religious leaders for the purpose of breaking down prejudices, including community-led workshops costing approximately 100,000 BDT per district annually.

Strategies specifically for rural areas are very important in order to tackle the issue of cultural conservatism. It is important not to wrongly apply urban-centric models. This research by pointing out the limited enforcement of international human rights instruments such as the Yogyakarta Principles and at the same time bringing Hijra resilience to the forefront, becomes a part of the global trans. rights conversation. Next research undertakings should use bigger, stratified samples for

better generalizability and also study the isolated Hijra groups to make sure policies are a true reflection of the different experiences of life.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a self-reinforcing cycle of marginalization within the Hijra community in Rajshahi Division, whereby barriers to education limit occupational opportunities, confining most participants to stigmatized and precarious livelihoods such as hijragiri. This economic instability, in turn, exacerbates social isolation and vulnerability, notwithstanding the formal legal recognition of third-gender status in 2013.

Drawing on the theoretical lenses of social exclusion (Estivill, 2003), social identity (Tajfel, 1978), and gender performativity (Butler, 1990), the analysis demonstrates how a patriarchal and culturally tight societal structure (Hossain & Mim, 2024) continues to constrain authentic gender expression. Both community members and institutional actors often perceive the 2013 recognition as constrained by binary frameworks, thereby undermining its emancipatory potential.

To address these entrenched inequalities, targeted interventions are essential, including the enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation, the introduction of educational quotas and anti-bullying initiatives, skill-development programs, and community-led awareness campaigns aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). By illuminating persistent urban-rural disparities and the limited practical implementation of international standards such as the Yogyakarta Principles (2007), this research contributes to broader scholarly and policy discussions on trans. rights.

Future studies would benefit from larger, stratified samples and greater engagement with more isolated Hijra subgroups to enhance the generalizability of findings and better inform context-specific policy policies.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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