

Education Failure: Untold Tales of Bangladeshi Transgender's Unquenchable Educational Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the undocumented narratives around the persistent desire for education among transgender individuals in Bangladesh, highlighting the challenges they have encountered in their academic pursuits. Through an analysis of the stories provided by eight adult transgender participants, this research identifies noteworthy factors that have led to the disparity observed in the educational aspirations of transgender individuals. In conjunction with in-depth interviews and interpretive phenomenological analysis, a narrative inquiry approach was utilized to acquire a comprehensive comprehension of the participants' viewpoints regarding educational aspirations. The results of the study indicate several significant factors that contribute to the diminished educational aspirations of transgender students. The results of the study indicate several significant factors that contribute to the diminished educational aspirations of transgender students, such as falsified sex identity, social stigmas, bullying, abuse and harassment, teachers' ignorance and unhelpful behavior, economic hardship and poverty, and unfavorable learning environments. The findings have highlighted the need for more open and accepting environments for transgender children and young adults, particularly in family and educational settings.

Keywords: Hijra, Transgender, Education Aspiration, Sex Identity, Social Stigmas, Bullying and Harassment, Inclusivity

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Introduction

This study aims to present hitherto undocumented narratives regarding the strong desire for education among transgender individuals in Bangladesh while also examining the different factors that influence their educational aspirations. In the context of Bangladesh, similar to many other countries, transgender individuals are widely recognized as a highly marginalized

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and excluded demographic within society. They undergo a systematic deprivation of their fundamental rights and face prevalent occurrences of prejudiced behavior (Jebin, 2018). However, during the past few decades, there has been a notable shift in the recognition of the rights of transgender individuals. Bangladesh has ratified two international conventions, specifically the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of Diverse Sexualities. These agreements have prompted Bangladesh to adopt advantageous policies to integrate Hijra individuals into the broader societal framework (Jebin & Farhana, 2010).

In 2018, the Voter List Act of 2009 was amended to incorporate the gender category “Hijra” on the voter registration form, granting transgender individuals the ability to vote (Titir & Ibrahim, 2023). Furthermore, a significant transformation took place in 2014 when the Bangladesh cabinet implemented a policy granting transgender individuals legal gender recognition. This policy established a separate category known as the “third gender” (referred to as “hijra”) specifically for transgender individuals (Aziz & Azhar, 2019). Notwithstanding the legal acknowledgment, transgender individuals persist in experiencing hardship and encountering challenges in asserting their inherent entitlements (Hyder & Rasel, 2019). They experience exclusion from various aspects of their lives, such as families, schools, and communities, due to a sense of powerlessness resulting from stigma, prejudice, and lack of resources (Hossain & Ferdous, 2020). While education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right, irrespective of physical or other obstacles (Jemeli & Fakandu, 2019), transgender individuals in Bangladesh are entirely denied this right (Islam, 2016).

Transgender students encounter various obstacles within educational institutions globally, encompassing instances of verbal and physical harassment, assault, bullying, teasing, and prejudice (Seelman, 2016). These challenges have been found to have detrimental effects on their academic performance and educational aspirations, ultimately leading to their withdrawal from their respective programs (Khan, 2022). In addition to individual characteristics, the educational opportunities, engagement, persistence, and goals of transgender children are contingent upon the level of support provided by their families, society, and the overall school environment (Othman et al., 2013). Transgender individuals have adverse educational experiences, which have a detrimental effect on the well-being of transgender individuals and their families (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). Gender identity in school has been found to increase the susceptibility of individuals to harassment, oppression, and discrimination (Roop, 2014). This vulnerability leads to social exclusion and has adverse effects on their self-perception and sense of self-worth, ultimately resulting in various adverse outcomes such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide (Nadal, 2017).

Thus, due to losing their self-esteem and destroying human dignity, individuals are motivated to engage in a hazardous way of life (Khan et al., 2009). This condition is equally prevalent in Bangladesh. Transgender individuals in Bangladesh face educational deprivation, and their

academic outcomes are unsatisfactory (Islam, 2016). There is limited research that examines the educational aspirations of transgender individuals and the factors contributing to the failure of their academic objectives. Therefore, this study will address this research gap and contribute to the existing body of literature. This study will answer the following research question: What factors influence the educational aspirations of transgender students in Bangladesh?

Education Aspiration and Transgender

An *aspiration* is a powerful desire, determination, or objective that drives someone to strive for more significant goals or to achieve a specific purpose. It symbolizes the aspiration for personal or collective progress and often drives decisions, actions, and pursuits to attain a goal or desired state (Haller, 1968). An individual's education aspirations encompass the goals, objectives, and desired outcomes that they aim to attain through their educational journey and academic pursuits (Harrison & Waller, 2018). Students' educational aspirations are influenced by various elements, including personal, familial, social, economic, career, and state policy aspects (Boxer et al., 2011). Students' educational aspirations are influenced by family size, socio-economic position, student housing, community characteristics, language, ethnicity, religion, school kinds and programs, financial help, and career prospects (Schneider & Dimito, 2010).

Regarding transgender individuals, some people aim to pursue education for personal development, empowerment, and the establishment of their self-identity, while others aspire to enhance their career opportunities (Goldberg et al., 2021). Many forms of victimization hinder transgender individuals' aspirations in educational institutions perpetrated by both peers and teachers (Feldman et al., 2022). Transgender individuals face a higher likelihood of experiencing suicidal ideation and attempting suicide, as well as having increased rates of unexplained school absences (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). The social stigma and regulatory measures compelled them to abandon their scholastic ambitions (Khan, 2022).

Transgender and their Education in Bangladesh Context

In Bangladesh, transgender individuals are commonly referred to as hijra (Hossain, 2017). The latest 'Population & Housing Census report confirms that the estimated number of Hijra population is 12,629. Of this, 50.25% reside in urban areas, with the highest concentration (4577 individuals, approximately 36.24%) found in the Dhaka Division (BBS, 2022). However, other estimates suggest that the number may exceed 50,000 (Chowdhury, 2020). Although statistics indicate the presence of a transgender community in Bangladesh, this group has been consistently overlooked and disregarded for many years (Shovon, 2018). The hijra people's life is characterized by the pervasive discrimination, harassment, and daily hardships they encounter (Hyder & Rasel, 2019). Despite the equal entitlement of all citizens to receive benefits, transgender individuals continue to experience family, societal, and financial inequalities. The

family, society, and state should ensure that individuals are treated with compassion and that social justice and legal rights are established to integrate them into mainstream society and involve them in the country's overall development (Khan, 2022).

While the Bangladesh government has acknowledged the Hijra community as a third gender, there is a lack of clear guidelines specifying the defining characteristics of the third gender. This has led to widespread confusion on the proper understanding of hijras (Amanullah et al., 2022). The hijra population in Bangladesh faces significant deprivation in terms of education, land ownership, marriage, and other rights due to the pejorative connotation associated with the term "Hijra" in Bangladeshi society (Snigdha, 2021). The education of Hijras in Bangladesh faces substantial barriers, such as entrenched discrimination, restricted access to formal education, and a high prevalence of dropout rates (Al-Mamun et al., 2022). The prevalent societal stigma around their gender identity sometimes obstructs their pursuit of education, resulting in limited chances for intellectual and economic advancement. Their educational advancement and participation in society are hindered by the absence of tailored interventions and inclusive policies, notwithstanding sporadic attempts to improve their educational conditions (Goni & Hoque, 2020).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to examine the main factors that influence transgender individuals' educational aspirations in a more personalized manner. This study utilized a narrative inquiry technique to thoroughly explore the lived experiences of transgender individuals in the context of schooling, as outlined by Kramp (2003). There is a scarcity of studies that focus on educational challenges faced by Hijra individuals in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of research focusing on the texts and narratives of individuals belonging to the Hijra group in Bangladesh. The researchers sought to collect comprehensive information by discussing the participants' experiences and understanding their perspectives to discover the true significance of their encounters. This study involved the participation of eight individuals from the Hijra community. The participants were purposefully selected among the adult members of the transgender community. Each of them is a transgender woman residing in the capital city of Dhaka, belonging to the transgender community.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews to get narrative accounts from individual participants in this study. Before gathering data, researchers explained the research aims to the participants and committed to upholding all ethical procedures, including safeguarding the participants' privacy. Following the acquisition of consent from the participants, researchers proceeded to conduct interviews. Each interview lasted 40-50 minutes and was taped with the participants' consent. Following data collection, the data was classified, encoded, and examined using a thematic method. All researchers in this study adhered strictly to the ethical norms for conducting research.

Participant's demographic information

Table 1

The Participants of the Study

Code	Education	Biography and Reflection
AP1	Grade-VIII	AP1 studied up to grade-VIII and then left studying. She earns her livelihood by prostitution. She regrets for leaving school and wishes to continue education if she gets chance. She recommends proper school environment for all.
AP2	Master degree	AP2 was neglected by her family, society, friends, teachers, and neighbors when she was younger. But she realized the value of education which led her to pursue higher degree. She struggled to continue education but did not fail. She recommends providing sufficient opportunities for education of transgender.
AP3	SSC	AP3 completed SSC examination and then left studies. She was called by a female teacher who tried to convince her not to do such unusual feminine behavior as wearing sharees in her childhood. She could not continue education but now she understands the importance of education.
AP4	Undergraduate Degree	AP4 was born near Dhaka city and as a trans women she struggled a lot to complete her primary, secondary, and honors level degree. She did not get any job that forced her to come Dhaka and started begging. She suggests taking 'no discrimination' in education institute.
AP5	LLB degree	AP5 struggled a lot to complete LLB degree but her inner motivation led her to fight. After successfully completed her degree, she practices as a lawyer. She inspires all transgender to take education and become self-employed to establish them in a society with honor.
AP6	Grade-V	AP6 studied up to grade-V and then left studying. She earns her livelihood by begging money from others. She feels that education is essential to lead smooth and respectful life.
AP7	Grade-IX	AP7 studied up to grade-9 and quit. The reason for leaving school was that she didn't love going to school. But now realize the value of education. If she gets the chance again, she wants to continue studies but she wants a school where all people are transgender

Code	Education	Biography and Reflection
AP8	Grade-VIII	AP8 left school when she was in grade-VIII because she felt ashamed of herself for behaving like a girl. AP8 recommends some changes in educational system so that transgender students can learn revealing their identity.

Major Findings of this study

Irony involving a falsified sex identity

The narrative analysis reveals that all participants were considered of another gender in their childhood. Most parents, teachers, and peer groups treat them as other genders rather than their actual genders. Some parents realize their child's actual identity but hide for fear of excluding by society people and not going to make admission to school. In school, when their attitudes were exposed as transgender, they suffered in diverse ways. Most people treated them as untouched human beings and considered them a curse of their parents' misdoing. Teachers' and students' behavior in school made them consider themselves abnormal human beings. They were rejected on the playground, bullied at school, or given negative feedback in the classroom. Family members and relatives questioned AP8 about her gradually changing behavior, to which she couldn't reply. She experienced criticism at school for playing with girls and sitting with girls in the classrooms. Even teachers beat her for sitting with girls. She said,

"I used to sit on the bench with girls in school. I felt comfortable sitting with girls, but teachers did not allow this and punished me for that reason. My classmates also started to laugh at me all the time, which made it difficult for me to continue my studies."

The unfavorable environment and the teachers' and classmates' behavior made her feel ashamed of her behavior and lose interest in studying. Even boys in the school teased her, calling her nasty words. She realized that falsified sex identity made her life miserable. As a result, she left schools and family and moved to the capital for self-living to escape from her false sex identity.

Social stigmas

There are misconceptions and prejudices about transgender in Bangladesh society. Social stigmas hinder transgender education despite family support. The study participants faced barriers at school and in society, forcing some to leave. AP2, AP3, AP4, AP5, and AP7 experienced total support from their families. Family support worked well for AP2, AP4, and AP5, and they continued their education despite social stigma and negligence, but AP3 and AP7 left school due to social stigma and other family reasons. The family of the AP1 encouraged her to go to

school. However, at a very early age, her relatives criticized her, and they accused her family that she had been ruining the respect of her family. For this reason, she started to feel guilty, which forced her to leave school and that society. AP1 stated,

“My uncles and aunts used to say that this child would destroy the value and respect of our family through this feminine behavior; which made me feel guilty, and I decided to leave school and society.”

On the other hand, AP6, AP7, and AP8 did not receive family support to fulfill their education aspirations. AP7 was tortured by her family members when her actual identity was exposed to them. Even her mother started to neglect her, which forced her to leave her family and school. She said,

“When I was a student in grade two, my identity was exposed to everyone. Shockingly, my parents also behaved rudely with me, which made me frustrated, and I decided to leave them.”

Another type of story was explored by AP4, who obtained an honors degree by getting support from family but did not acquire a master’s degree due to a family trauma that was created by social stigma and left society. She said,

“No one was interested in marrying my elder sister as I am a transgender person. Some good proposals came but broke after exposing my identity, which led my sister to make a suicidal attempt. After this incident, I left my house forever.”

Bullying, abuse, and harassment

Every participant in this research experienced bullying and negative comments (Hijra, Maigna, Half Ladies, etc.) in school, family, and society. All the participants admitted that they were humiliated by their teachers, peers, and neighbors, which demotivated them sometimes to continue their education and confined them in the darkest corner of the house. AP6 suffered a lot in school from her peers and was sexually harassed by her teacher, which compelled her to quit her education. She said, “

«When my identity was disclosed to everyone, a teacher at my school touched my body badly, which made me afraid, but I could not express it to anyone. I was traumatized to continue my education, which led me to drop out of education.»

AP3 got support and encouragement from her family even after knowing about her biological changes. However, in high school, her classmates teased her all the time. No one mixed with her and diversely harassed her. She said.

“I did not continue my education after taking the SSC exam to escape bullying and harassment from my classmates. It is tough for any transgender to keep education aspiration if education institutions cannot prevent bullying and harassment of transgender.”

AP8 shared her experiences with great sorrow and stated,

“When my classmates made lousy comments about my body and showed different obscene gestures that were very painful in that adulthood age. They called me ‘Maijna’ and ‘Half Ladies,’ so I felt insulted and decided not to go to school.”

AP3 was the victim of a violent act by her male classmates while using school toilets. AP3 disclosed her bad experiences with classmates. She said,

“When tiffin time (break time) was given, many times, school boys would offer me to have sex with them. I would hold on many times when I went to the bathroom. They touched my body in an abusive manner. I ran to escape but did not get the courage to protest against their abusive behavior.”

Teachers’ ignorance and unhelpful behavior

There are detrimental effects on transgender children’s academic achievement and general well-being when teachers act unethically or negligently toward them. Most teachers did not intervene with the issue appropriately when a transgender child was being bullied or harassed by classmates because of their gender identity. Due to their gender identity, transgender students were not allowed to participate in co-curricular activities or events. Teachers disregarded their rights to inclusion, thus isolating them from the educational community. Moreover, most teachers showed negative attitudes towards the participants and even joined with bullies sometimes, which discouraged them from participating in the classrooms. If a transgender student raised their voice against bullies, they were punished by the teachers. AP2 shared her bad experience with school teachers who used to punish her for any silly matter. She said with a sorrowful tone,

“My teachers were not role models for me. Most of them were not supportive and humiliated me in different ways. I was not allowed to ask any queries. If I asked questions, teachers used to insult me. But I had a passion for study, so I tolerated all negligence and misdeeds by my teachers.”

Economic hardship and poverty

The narrative of this study reveals that the lower economic background of families plays a role as a challenge to continuing studies. The poverty of families often puts an end to transgender individuals achieving their goals of getting educated. Financial limitations prevent people from accessing resources like books, tuition, and transportation, which stifle dreams of personal development and academic advancement. AP7 faced different life experiences due to her father's death. She had to stop studying due to having no earning members in her family after her father's death and find an earning source to support her family.

"I got a chance to study when my father was alive. However, I stopped when he died. I have three sisters and no brother. I had to be the earning member to support my family, so I started to beg despite my studies. I dreamed of being a government employee after completing my education. However, poverty destroyed all of my dreams."

Unfavorable learning environment

This study finding indicates that the whole environment in educational institutions is not accessible and safe for transgender. Almost all of the participants did not use the washroom safely. They faced challenges while trying to use common rooms. In the playground, they faced hostile behavior from their peers, and no one wanted to accept them. In the classroom, they did not have the right place to sit. There is no seating arrangement for them, and the boys and girls do not want to sit with them. If a teacher asks a question to them, the whole class laughs, pointing at her. Transgender students did not find a place in the school where they could share their emotions and feelings or receive guidance and proper information. There is no appreciative learning environment in schools for transgender students. AP2 shared her experience with grief. Everyone used to laugh at her when she stood in the class to answer a question. Even when she could solve a problem in the class that others couldn't, they would insult her by saying that she was a "girl." When she entered the class or went to give a name in sports, teachers also criticized saying, "*My daughter is coming.*" These situations made her isolated from classmates and teachers, increased her anxiety and depression, and impact negatively on her academic results.

AP5 demanded a proper learning environment in school for appropriate social inclusion of transgender. She said,

"We also want to walk with dignity, like other individuals. We also want to be able to stand by ourselves. The government should take strict policies to ensure a proper learning environment in schools for transgender people. If we get proper education without bullying and harassment in school, we can contribute to this nation as a human resource."

Discussion

This study focuses on identifying the factors that influence the education aspiration of transgender people in Bangladesh. The participants in this study have been affected by discrimination at home, school, and society, which has made them lower their educational expectations and sense of school belonging, similar to Sansone (2019). This present study indicates that parents hide their transgender children's actual identities for fear of exclusion by society people and not to make the admission in school, which impacts transgender students' minds. Falsifying their identity leads them to think of themselves as abnormal human beings, which is supported by the study of Reddy-Best and Olson (2020).

This present study explored the fact that parents' roles are crucial for transgender education aspirations. Some parents also contained negative perceptions about their transgender child like other society people and destroyed their transgender child's education aspirations in Bangladesh. In contrast, most of the parents in this study were supportive of their transgender child. They tried to contribute to fulfilling their children's education aspirations, supported by the findings of Buchmann & Dalton (2002), who explored the parents' role in shaping transgender students' educational aspirations. This study finds that social stigma is responsible for destroying transgender education aspirations despite family support. The study participants faced barriers at school and in society, forcing some to leave. Chandra (2017) also find that due to the practice and dominance of brassbound culture, transgender are not regarded as unstrained human beings, and society cannot see them in a positive light, which makes them incapable of participating and adjusting to educational settings properly.

Bullying in school is one of the major problems faced by transgender students (Khan, 2022). This present study finds that every transgender participant in this study experienced bullying, negative comments, abuse, victimization, and insults by peers at school due to their unusual gender expression, which humiliated them and caused them to lose their interest in studying. Besides bullying, transgender students also suffer sexual harassment by their classmates, even by the teachers, which is also a crucial factor in losing their education aspiration. Similar findings were also disclosed by the Norris and Orchowski (2020) study. All of the participants were verbally abused by their peers, who called them 'Maijna' and 'Half Ladies'. They also experienced different types of humiliation in the playground, classrooms, and other areas of the school. Similar findings have also been explored in the study of Rahaman & et.al, (2020). For them, all transgender students did not find a safe and secure space at school, and as a result, most of them were hesitant to continue their education, which was aligned with the Khan et al. (2009) study findings.

This study finds that most of the teachers showed negligence towards transgender students. Teachers hardly intervene with bullying or harassment issues by the peers of transgender students. Teachers rarely permitted transgender students to participate in co-curricular or extra-

curricular activities in the schools, which were also explored in the study of Silveria and Goff (2016). Some teachers also engaged in humiliating transgender students in diverse ways, which made the school environment unsafe and unfavorable for the education of transgender which is the opposite of Ullman's (2017) suggestion, where he suggested creating a positive school climate for fulfilling the educational aspirations of transgender. This present study showed that the negative consequences of victimization include depression, school absenteeism and dropout, suicidal ideation, and disruption of the personal development process, which was also explored in the study of Ortiz-Luis (2014).

This study reveals that the lower economic background of families hinders transgender students' education aspirations. Due to financial constraints, some participants could not bear their education costs and were compelled to stop the study, which was also explored by Alam (2018). All of the factors above are significant concerns that lose the education aspirations of the transgender community and make them more marginalized in society. Government and school authorities should take effective social inclusion policies to ensure the right to education for the transgender community.

Implication

This study highlights the critical need for inclusive policies and extensive support networks to meet the educational goals of transgender people living in Bangladesh. It emphasizes how crucial it is to create safe and welcoming educational environments and train teachers on transgender issues. The results also emphasize the need for focused interventions to address the social stigma, bullying, and financial obstacles that prevent transgender students from pursuing education.

Conclusion

Though the findings could not be generalized due to its limited sample size and its cross-sectional design, it explores few significant underlying causes of education failure including exclusionary practices for a disadvantaged section of peoples in Bangladesh. It is clearly reflected their aspirations to be educated like others. However, their gender identity has become a great barrier (Rahaman & et.al, 2020). The narratives surrounding transgender individuals in Bangladesh bring to light a harsh truth characterized by unrealized educational ambitions that are hindered by cultural bias, institutional disregard, and financial adversity. Notwithstanding legal acknowledgment and policy revisions, transgender students persistently encounter substantial obstacles in obtaining education and achieving their full potential. This study highlights the necessity of implementing systemic modifications to establish inclusive and supportive settings that enable transgender individuals to pursue their educational aspirations actively. To achieve educational equity and justice for all transgender individuals, society can

take significant measures by tackling societal stigmas, improving teacher training, and offering specialized support services.

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