Transgender Individuals in Asian Islamic Countries: An Overview of Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Issues in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia

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1   Introduction

Workplaces are an essential part of helping individuals realize their sense of self and social belonging (Vries 2012). In a world where dichotomized gender roles are already askew, transgender individuals face particular challenges that have been hitherto underemphasized in the diversity literature. A transgender person is someone who has a gender identity, physiology, and/or enacts behaviors not traditionally associated with dichotomously categorized birth sex in a particular social context (Kenagy 2005). Although some countries have made preliminary legislative progress in relaxing binary gender categories (e.g., Germany, US, India), in others, especially those where legislation is often defined along religious lines (e.g., Asian Islamic countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan), it can still be illegal to be transgender (Cáceres et al. 2006).

Transgender individuals challenge socially accepted sex classifications (i.e., male versus female) and their associated gender-specific roles (Harrison and Lynch 2005). As a result they are often stigmatized, bullied, and sometimes even persecuted (Stotzer 2009). Transgender individuals, therefore, often face serious repercussion by revealing a gender identity that does not conform to expected gender categories prescribed by a particular context (Looy and Bouma 2005). Research shows that individuals who are unable to express their gender identity often face issues such as stress, depression, and health problems that could impair their performance and satisfaction in the workplace (Neal and Davies 2000). This poses challenges for organizations, both in extracting the value from a diverse

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workforce, as well as providing a space for nurturing individuals' psychological safety needs and sense of belonging (Parkes et al. 2007).

In this chapter, we provide a preliminary account of transgender issues and how they manifest themselves in the context of Asian Islamic countries. We focus particularly on the contexts found in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. These three countries are some of the fastest-growing emerging economies in South and Southeast Asia (Moyeen and West 2014). Since diversity and inclusion policies have been shown to be important for fueling economic growth (Roland and Kahrl 2011), understanding and appropriately dealing with transgender issues are important from an organizational policy and management perspective. Unfortunately, the specific challenges facing transgender individuals in these contexts have barely been addressed in policy discussions; in which religious laws still define socially legitimate gender roles (Abdullah et al. 2012; Khan et al. 2009; Owoyemi and Sabri 2013; Peletz 2002; Sabri et al. 2014).

In the following sections, we first clarify the importance of gender identity in the workforce then discuss the general challenges faced by transgender individuals in organizations. Our discussion then focuses on the Asian Islamic view and the specific challenges faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia. We conclude the chapter with a suggested future research agenda.

2 Importance of Gender Identity in the Workplace

Identifying with a pre-defined sex category is often a standard prerequisite for employment—even if for no other reason than administrative purposes. Thus, transgender individuals are often forced to choose between male or female as an operational basis of gender role expectations. In addition, many jobs tend to be associated, explicitly or implicitly, with specific genders (Gorman 2005) and some job openings (especially low-skilled ones) often specify the sex of the applicant being recruited (Bonoli and Hinrichs 2012). For instance, clerical staff are often female (Gurney 1985), whereas construction workers are often male (Fielden et al. 2000). Thus, to be part of the workplace, transgender individuals have to nominate a "box" which does not necessarily capture their true gender identity. This is further complicated by the fact that, although some transgender individuals identify with a binary sex category, others do not. Such forced gender nominations have significant implications for the ability of transgender individuals to feel part of, and be a productive contributor to, the workplace.

3 Implications of Revealing Transgender Identity in the Workplace

Over the past few decades, the term "coming out" has been commonly used by those studying gender and sexuality issues (Zimman 2009). The term identifies the process an individual goes through when deciding to exhibit himself/herself as a different sex than the one that people have traditionally associated with him/her—in other words, when the individual reveals his/her true and/or desired gender identity (Gagné et al. 1997). Empirical evidence (Gagné et al. 1997) describes coming out as a complex and difficult process. Most research has been primarily focused on the coming out experiences of lesbians and gay men (Zimman 2009), but there is now also an emerging literature concerned with the issues of coming out for transgender individuals.

The transgender literature documents an increased risk of stress, frustration, crime, lack of self-control, and even suicide among transgender individuals who choose to come out (Gagné et al. 1997). Gender role incongruity creates social uncertainty (Himsel and Goldberg 2003) because it violates accepted social gender categories (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). The resulting ostracization affects the ability of transgender individuals to perform at their utmost potential because interdependent others may be reluctant to work with them for fear of negative social contagion (Wiesenfeld et al. 2008). In addition, transgender individuals are less likely to be recipients of organizational rewards and face reduced career opportunities (Elk and Boehmer 2015). In extreme cases this may include abusive supervision, bullying, and even dismissal (Hall 2009). Because of the anticipatory injustice associated with "coming out" (Shapiro and Kirkman 1999; Zimman 2009), transgender individuals face the difficult choice between disclosing their transgender identity for intrapersonal harmony versus the interpersonal backlash from doing so.

Psychological research finds that acts that require willful attempts to deny and conceal one's "true" or desired "self" consume psychological resources (Inzlicht and Gutsell 2007). When psychological resources are depleted beyond a critical point, individuals experience increased stress, frustration, and loss of self-control, which can lead to an inability to perform organizational tasks effectively (Hall et al. 2013; Meyer 1995; Wiesenfeld et al. 2008). Thus, transgender individuals tend to face higher levels of stress; at times two to three times more than cisgenders (Case and Ramachandran 2012). In extreme cases, their stress leads to burnout, substance abuse, criminal acts, or even suicide (Huebner et al. 2004; Kelleher 2009; Rothe 2011). Yet, many transgender individuals engage in self-denial as a psychological coping mechanism and conceal their preferred transgender identity in organizations because of the fear of stigmatization, discrimination, and prejudice. They act out gender roles that do not necessarily reflect their true gender identity in their interactions with others or in performing their daily organizational tasks, thus leaving themselves open to the psychological stresses associated with denial of their true selves.

In spite of the known problems associated with forcing gender stereotyping and the advantages of diversity in the workplace, our understanding of how policy makers and managers deal with diversity and the inclusion of transgender individuals in the workforce is slight. The discussion in this chapter is, therefore, timely.

4   Global Developments in the Acknowledgement of Transgender Identity

Some countries in the West, such as Germany, the UK, and the US, have begun to acknowledge transgender people as a minority group with specific needs. This is important for the wellbeing of transgender individuals and their performance in organizations (Poteat et al. 2013). As one survey reports, transgender individuals have limited (and, in the majority of cases, no) access to employment (Poteat et al. 2013).

As a result of the high levels of prejudice and discrimination, steps to include issues faced by transgender individuals have become part of a broader human rights framework. For instance, Amnesty International suggests that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, should be given equal human rights (O'Flaherty and Fisher 2008). Consistent with this, some countries such as Germany, Ireland, and Australia (Van den Brink et al. 2015), have started to take commendable strides, with progressive gender recognition acts (Agius 2013). In these countries, transgender individuals have a legal framework that acknowledges non-binary (physiological) transgender identity, which can form the basis of support for the expression of their desired gender identity.

Advances in other parts of the world have been much slower, though there are some notable exceptions. For instance, according to the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, in 2000 and 2001 the Women and Family Development Ministry announced its intention to look into the needs of the transsexual community, and to provide as much assistance as they could (Terri Chih-Yin 2008). India has also made strides and has acknowledged a "third sex/gender", granting such people the right to vote since 2009 and putting quotas in place for employment in government jobs and educational institutions (Khaleeli 2014; Lerum 2009).

However, inclusion of transgender individuals in the workforce remains a thorny issue in many Asian countries, where religious norms often serve as concrete scripts of gender roles. Asian Islamic countries, in particular, have barely explored the issue (Abdullah et al. 2012; Khan et al. 2009; Owoyemi and Sabri 2013; Sabri et al. 2014). In Asian Islamic contexts, in fact, daily affairs must be conducted in accordance with Quranic verses and Hadith. The Quran and the Hadith dictate tradition, culture, and norms. Norms of behavior towards gender that are based in religious doctrine and teaching are particularly prominent in countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia (Anzar 2003). Herein lies an opportunity to

highlight key issues and challenges for transgender individuals in organizations in Asian Islamic contexts and allied policy opportunities.

5 The Asian Islamic View Towards Transgender Individuals

Asian Islamic countries are often governed by theocratic legislation (O'Halloran 2015). "Conservative" interpretations of Islam often claim that transgender individuals are sinners who do not have the right to practice Islam (Ishak and Haneef 2014). Transgender individuals are, therefore, often deprived of religious "inner-peace", which often forms an important dimension of social, family, and legal identity in Asian Islamic contexts. In practice, this further translates into transgender individuals being denied education, housing, and employment, for example in Bangladesh. As a result transgender individuals often end up homeless and need to resort begging and/or crime (Rumbach and Knight 2014).

In the following sections we draw on examples of how policy recommendations are being implemented in three contexts and we identify opportunities for improvement.

5.1 Pakistan

According to *Country Reports, 2010*, Hijra is a name given to "transvestites, eunuchs, and hermaphrodites" in section 8, sub-section 6 of the *Pakistan Penal Code*. Regulators and academics depict this group as eunuchs, transvestites, intersex, emasculated, impotent, transgender, and/or sexually dysfunctional. Some scholars have attempted to categorize transgender individuals as belonging to a distinct third gender (Lal 1999). Others, like Nanda (1986) however, posit that it is hard to understand or describe the gender category of Hijras. A BBC report estimates that 300,000 Hijras live in Pakistan (BBC, 23 December 2009). A human rights group in Pakistan, in turn, estimates that approximately 400,000 men "live as women" in the country (Sayah 2010). Hijras do not have the same privileges and/or rights as those who are identified as exclusively male or female. Hijras are often harassed, face prejudice, are discriminated against and, in the majority of cases, are subjected to violence simply because of their gender identity (Lal 1999). The *Country Reports, 2010* claims that schooling, hospital admission, ability to rent or buy property, and even inheritance are often denied to Hijras. Thus, there is no "equal access" for transgender individuals in Pakistan to education and labor opportunities. When attempting to enroll in schools, transgender individuals experience numerous obstacles, such as forming bonds with peers (Cserni and Talmud 2015).

Given the importance of religious participation in Pakistan, the ability to engage in (collective) worship is important and significant for the social wellbeing of individuals (Tabassum and Jamil 2014). However, transgender individuals are often denied access to mosques. Even during the two most important religious celebrations of the year, Eid-ul-Adha and Eid-ul-Fitr, in the country, transgender individuals confine themselves to their homes instead of joining the celebrations.

A survey conducted on Pakistani Hijras found that, although providing for and protecting a child is the responsibility of the child's family in the Pakistani culture, this provision is barely complied with for transgender children (Tabassum and Jamil 2014). Instead, families often turn their back on transgender children and some parents are even relieved when their transgender offspring leave home (Abdullah et al. 2012). Due to discrimination and lack of acceptance by even their closest relatives, transgender individuals in Pakistan seek acceptance and emotional shelter with other individuals facing similar social hardships (Tabassum and Jamil 2014). Older transgender individuals may teach younger ones who join them how to dance at various celebrations (such as marriage ceremony, births, and carnivals) to gain some form of income.

Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered, in 2009, that Hijras must be allowed to identify themselves as a distinct gender in order to ensure their rights in the society (Abdullah et al. 2012; Tabassum and Jamil 2014). However, this order has yet to be implemented and acknowledged (Abbas et al. 2014). This is because religious law is more highly regarded than is state law. Pakistan still has no effective initiatives in place for transgender individuals' identity, social, and labor rights (Abdullah et al. 2012; Nanda 1986).

5.2 Bangladesh

Bangladeshi state legislation is also grounded in Islam, with the Muslim population comprising over 90 % of the total population (Karim 2004). Given the strong religious culture, there is little room for gender identities other than male–female classifications, and transgender individuals are not readily embraced in mainstream society (Khan et al. 2009). Transgender individuals are even denied a legal identity (Stenqvist 2015). The International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research Bangladesh (ICDDRB) conducted an ethnographic study on Hijras, aiming to comprehend the challenges they face. The study concluded that transgender individuals in Bangladesh are excluded from every aspect of society—including not having the right to vote (ICDDRB 2008). The findings highlighted limited access to employment opportunities, struggle to gain daily commodities, and hurdles to livelihood opportunities in terms of social entertainment, housing, income, land, and working conditions.

Transgender individuals in Bangladesh also have no access to education, health, or legal services. Like the circumstances of transgender individuals in Pakistan,

those in Bangladesh often find they are marginalized and can only find acceptance among other transgender individuals (Khan et al. 2009).

Transgender individuals often face neglect, physical abuse, and there are even documented cases of transgender individuals being chained and kept confined by their own family members (Khan et al. 2009). Such physical and mental tortures eventually force them to flee from home and find shelter in other places. One individual explained the following situation:

> When my father died I did not go to bury him. If I had gone there, the relatives and others would not take part in the burial.
>   (Khan et al. 2009, p. 445).

The challenges in the workplace mirror the hardships faced in society. For instance, transgender individuals are often fired once it is revealed that they are transgender. One particular challenge identified is that of sexual abuse in the workplace. For instance, one transgender individual said:

> I have worked in a garment factory for about a year. I could not even go to the toilet, as I was scared that the boys would go there to see me. They always tried to have sex with me. When there was a night shift, the threat was higher. Once my supervisor forced me to have sex with him, and I had no choice but to do it. But when it became public, I was dismissed from my job, as if it was my fault.
>   (Khan et al. 2009, p. 445)

Due to such adverse experiences in the workplace, transgender individuals earn a living mainly as prostitutes and/or by dancing at marriage ceremonies, celebrations of newly born babies, and/or extortion in local markets (Khan et al. 2009). Voice Bangladesh[1] conducted a survey on 600 transgender individuals in the country. The study reported that 54.3 % of transgender individuals in Bangladesh live with the fear of their gender identity being revealed in the society. The study also revealed that the majority of participants in the survey admitted that they would marry the opposite sex (opposite to their socially recognized sex, e.g., if someone is identified as male in the society, they would marry a female) because of social opposition, religious value judgments, and family pressure. In addition, the research also reported that 56.9 % of survey participants would not change their gender identity even after marriage. To help address some of these issues, some non-profit-organizations, such as Badhan Hijra Sangha and Shustha Jibon, have recently been formed, with the aim of assisting transgender people in terms of health issues and vocational education (ICDDRB 2008).

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[1] Voice Bangladesh is a Bangladesh-based activist, rights based research and advocacy organization working on issues of corporate globalization.

5.3 Malaysia

Activists have estimated that there are around 100,000 transgender individuals in Malaysia (Ng, 19 July 2011). The number of transgender individuals in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, alone is estimated to be 50,000. This estimate translates into more than one out of every 200 individuals being transgender in Malaysia (Lynn 2005). In Malaysia, the term 'transgender' generally refers to those individuals who act inconsistently with their physiological sex (e.g., if a male acts as female) (Teh 2001). The number of female-to-male transgender individuals is smaller than those who are male-to-female transgender (Khairuddin et al. 1987). An apparently increasing number of overt transgender individuals in Malaysia has caught the attention of authorities (Sabri et al. 2014).

A study performed recently, which involved 77 transgender individuals, revealed that, in Malaysia, transgender individuals are severely neglected and discriminated against both at home and in the workplace (Low 2009). Transgender individuals' sexual orientation and identity are widely misunderstood, with claims that such orientations are aberrant and immoral (Owoyemi and Sabri 2013). With minimal levels of acceptance from family members, the majority of transgender individuals are frequently asked to prepare for marriage along with being sent for medical treatment (Teh 2001). Transgender individuals also experience physical abuse and violence—even from authorities—in most places, from educational institutions to local restaurants at which they may be working (Sahri et al. 2014). In addition, conservative religious proponents have claimed that the prevalence of transgender individuals is nothing but the ideological influence of Western thinking and lifestyles (Low 2009).

Some, admittedly controversial, studies concerned with Malaysian samples of transgender individuals emphasize the need to treat transgender issues as a (social-) psychological disorder. For example, Sabri et al. (2014) claim that there are environmental and intrinsic factors which influence the transgender issue and cause transgenderism in society. Intrinsic factors include lack of conquering inbuilt desire, sexual emotion, infant sexual experience, and individual characteristics. Environmental factors include associating with the "wrong crowd", lack of mutual consideration, and distance from religious practices (Owoyemi and Sabri 2013). All these factors, it is claimed can be "cured" through counseling, faith, honesty, trust, advice, enlightenment, and monitoring.

While Malaysian scholars debate whether transgenderism is natural or ideological, the government of Malaysia has been reluctant to give transgenderism social and legal recognition. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Abdul Razak, warns against the encroachment on freedom and heterogeneity in favor of transgenderism in Malaysia and hints at the government's position to fight against the "scourge" (Malaysiakini 2012). The Prime Minister also strongly opposed transgender identity and rights inclusion in the ASEAN[2] declaration of human rights (Zulfakar

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[2] Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

2012). He pointed out that Malaysia rejects transgenderism because of moral values and norms, but, he argues, this does not necessarily mean that the country has a weak human rights standard.

In contrast to the situation in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Malaysia at least provides some means for transgender individuals to earn an income. However, in the majority of the cases, transgender individuals are strongly silenced at the organizational level, they have little job security and fewer opportunities to achieve promotions.

6 Discussion and Future Research Agenda

Our overview shows that Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia tend to marginalize the transgender community within their societies, and that they do so for many reasons, particularly because of religious beliefs. We believe this topic is important and needs to be addressed, both for the better functioning of organizations, and for the sense of identity of individuals within those organizations. Debates in the diversity management literature revolve prominently around "male versus female" issues in the quest for equity in organizations (Faulkner 2000). Transgender individuals represent "shades of gray" in gender identity that are still poorly understood. Because the needs of transgender individuals remain largely unaddressed, such individuals are left with no appropriate channels through which to address issues impacting upon them, leaving them marginalized, underrepresented, and misunderstood. The anecdotal evidence on transgender individuals in institutions seems to contradict the notion that organizations increasingly embrace different forms of diversity (Lopuch and Davis 2014). This is despite best-practice recommendations that encourage organizations to enable individuals to express their gender identity freely (Riccò and Guerci 2014) because doing so enriches the organization's human capital and, ultimately, work performance (Murrell et al. 2008). In line with such recommendations, we propose that managers in Asian Islamic countries should de-emphasize the sex/gender criteria when recruiting, as well as in day-to-day operations.

The transgender conversation is, though controversial, attracting the attention of academic scholars, media, politicians, and corporations. Many commentators and scholars argue the case for comprehensive empirical and theoretically-informed research in Asian countries. The negative attitudes of the general public and religious proscription highlight the urgency of this line of research. We suggest future research should be conducted from three different dimensions: (a) multi-theory assumptions on the transgender issue; (b) multi-level empirical analysis, in order to examine the effect of social views towards transgender individuals; and (c) social and organizational performance of transgender identity in relation to coming out and not coming out.

6.1   Multi-theory Assumptions

Despite the dearth of research on transgender issues in the context of Asian nations, most empirical and conceptual writing on Western economies is developed on a single theory assumption. Many scholars have been drawn on stigma theory to examine the transgender issue (Inzlicht and Gutsell 2007; Inzlicht et al. 2006). However, we suggest further research should include social identity theory and apply multi-theoretical perspectives to examine whether Westernized theory is consistent and applicable to a similar extent in the Asian Islamic context. Multi-theory approaches may help identify the theoretical distinctions between Western and Asian contexts.

6.2   Multi-level Analysis

The majority of empirical studies on transgender issues mostly build upon single loop statistical analysis (Kelleher 2009), in which scholars only examine the implications of negative attitudes from certain cisgender populations towards transgender persons. However, since transgender individuals are part of a society where organizations play a significant role in changing the environment, we suggest conducting a multi-level analysis in order to examine the effects of multilevel variables. For example organizations, educational institutions (both conventional and religious) and political leaders (especially government policy makers) are nested in society; each may have different views towards transgender issues. Therefore, the different views of all these nested variables could be examined by using a multi-level analysis in relation to transgender issues.

6.3   Social and Organizational Performance

Both theoretical and empirical studies on transgender issues predominantly focus either on the phenomenon of different trans-identities conceptually, or they analyze health effects of discrimination. There is a paucity of empirical research with relation to social and organizational performance of transgender individuals. Thus, we suggest future research to include to what extent transgender individuals contribute to society and organizations, and how significant that contribution can be in conjunction with that of cisgender in both Western and Asian Islamic contexts. A better understanding can help Asian Islamic countries tap into this underemphasized element of their potential human capital.

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