

PEACE-BUILDING IN PAKISTAN: *KHWAJA SIRA* ACTIVISM

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The Pakistani khwaja sira community have faced significant oppression and structural violence throughout much of history. Khwaja sira is an umbrella term used for the trans, intersex and gender non-conforming people in South-East Asia; it is being used to replace the word hijra because many people in the community feel as though it has a negative connotation. Historically, they were given honourable and valued social positions, however through colonization they were labelled with a subordinate social class. Until 2009, this community did not have access to civil rights. This essay discusses the activism that resulted in the reversal of the structurally violent policies that oppressed the khwaja sira community.

Pakistan is home to over one and a half million *khwaja sira* people. *Khwaja sira* is an umbrella term for the trans, intersex, and gender non-conforming people of South-East Asia.¹ It is important to note that this term does not include anyone that is biologically female.² It is a term preferred by the community and is used instead of *hijra*, which many feel has a negative connotation; however *hijra* still is often used, even within the community.³ Pre-colonization, the *khwaja sira* community held valuable roles in society; however, because of the imposition of western values that were introduced through colonization, the *khwaja sira* peoples were socially oppressed and their social status declined; and until 2009, they held no civil rights.⁴ This severely marginalized community has been advocating for economic and social justice for many years; and in 2009, the Pakistani *khwaja sira* community

¹Chaudry et al., "The Begging Hijras," 2553.

²Jami and Kamal, "Attitudes Toward Hijras Scale," 151.

³Khan, "Transgender" Activism," 170.

⁴Jami and Kamal, 153.

successfully obtained civil rights.⁵ This increased positive peace by eliminating some of the structural violence that this community faces; further, this sparked a movement of social justice activism in the *khwaja sira* community.⁶

The traditional role of *khwaja sira* peoples was one of honour and respect. They were embraced in society, and often held important roles in their communities. They were considered a third gender rather than transgender or intersex. Their roles included “dancing, singing, and seeking *wadhais* [alms] at the birth of male child[ren] and wedding ceremon[ies] of sons.”⁷ In addition, they were highly trusted to be “caretakers of royal harems...messengers, watchmen and guardians.”⁸ They were also seen as “masters of art and culture.”⁹ In the Islamic religion, it is believed that God blessed intersexed people because of their “sexual deformity” and for this reason intersex individuals, were “blessed with powers.”¹⁰

With the British colonization of India the *khwaja sira* community was labelled “a criminal caste, a classification under which they could be subjected to surveillance and arrest.”¹¹ This was the beginning of the marginalization and ridicule of this community.¹² They have since faced significant of structural and cultural violence in regards to poverty, and social exclusion. Social exclusion is defined by Jo Beall and Laure-Hélène Piron as: “a process or state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power.”¹³ Although there is a lot of diversity in the *khwaja sira* community, for most Pakistani citizens, “the distinction between various categories within the [*khwaja sira*] community does not exist.”¹⁴ Some analysts speculated that the lack of knowledge about *khwaja sira* people is caused by communalism and the imposition of western beliefs about transgender people.¹⁵ These ideologies took away from their respectable third gender identification and placed them in the unfamiliar category of transgender.¹⁶ In many cases, when parents realize their male child is acting feminine, or that their child is intersexed, it is common for them to be kicked out

⁵Chaudry et al., 2553.

⁶Khan, 177.

⁷Jami and Kamal, 153.

⁸Chaudry et al., 2553.

⁹Chaudry et al., 2553.

¹⁰Jami and Kamal, 152.

¹¹Khan, 173.

¹²Jami and Kamal, 153.

¹³Beall and Piron as quoted in: Abdullah et al., "Is social exclusion," 2.

¹⁴Jami and Kamal, 154.

¹⁵Jami and Kamal, 154.

¹⁶Jami and Kamal, 153.

of the home.¹⁷ If the child is granted the privilege of attending school, they are often bullied and ridiculed for their sex or gender.¹⁸ In many cases *khawaja sira* people have been subject to physical violence as well.

The lack of opportunity provided for the *khawaja sira* community has resulted in extreme poverty for this group. This has resulted in widespread homelessness, and many *khawaja sira* peoples are forced to beg for money just to fulfill their basic human needs.¹⁹ The poverty this community faces demonstrates the war system implemented in Pakistan's society and politics. There seem to be only two types of professions available to *khawaja sira* peoples: entertainment and sex work.²⁰ Prostitution is thought to be one of the oldest jobs in the world, but it has proven to be very dangerous for this community. A study conducted in 2004 found that 69.5% of *khawaja sira* sex workers never used a condom. Further, the study revealed that "60.2% [*khawaja siras*] in Karachi and 35.9% in Lahore were suffering from Syphilis, whereas 0.5% of [*khawaja siras*] in Lahore and 1.5% in Karachi were HIV positive."²¹ The lack of prophylactic use can be attributed to many factors including: a lack of knowledge about prophylactic amongst the Pakistani public, social and religious stigma surrounding condom use, and the opposition of condom use from sex clients.²²

In 2009, the Pakistani Supreme Court ruled in favour of giving civil rights to the *khawaja sira* community. Two of the three Supreme Court judges ruled in favour of this petition, one being Iftikhar Chaudry.²³ This petition sparked when a group of *khawaja siras* were brutally raped by several police officers just a few months prior.²⁴ The ruling ordered the issuing of identity cards to proclaim their "third-gender" standing.²⁵ Within six months of this notable decision, "the court ordered the provision of security, inheritance, and voting rights, educational and job opportunities, and access to government-sponsored welfare programs for *khawaja siras*."²⁶ This was shocking considering the official stance of the Pakistani government: they are an Islamic Republic²⁷ with a 96.4% Muslim population.²⁸

¹⁷Pamment, "Hijraism," 30.

¹⁸Pamment, 30.

¹⁹Chaudry et al., 2553.

²⁰Jami and Kamal, 153.

²¹Abdullah et al., "Is social exclusion," 2.

²²Casterline, Sathar, and Haque, "Obstacles," 99.

²³Chaudry et al., 2553.

²⁴Jami and Kamal, 153.

²⁵Jami and Kamal, 153.

²⁶Khan, 173-174.

²⁷Khan, 173-174.

²⁸"Population of Pakistan (2017)," Population of the World, , accessed November 13, 2017, <https://www.livepopulation.com/country/pakistan.html>.

Because it is often perceived to be against the Islamic religion, homosexuality has been outlawed since Pakistan formed.²⁹ Many upset citizens threatened the life of Iftikhar Chaudhry, chief justice of Pakistan, because they felt as though he was supporting anti-Islamic “gay behaviour.” However, he defended his decision stating that it was not anti-Islamic, and that *khawaja siras* should have access to the same rights all Pakistanis do.³⁰

Khawaja sira activism gained a lot of momentum after the Supreme Court ruling, however, many members of the community have been advocating for equal rights for a long time. Mohammed Aslam is a popular member of the *khawaja sira* community in Abbottabad, Pakistan. In 1990, Aslam ran for state office as an independent candidate.³¹ Because he was not physically intersexed and held a job as a server in which he presented as a man, he was not subject to the limitations typically placed on his community.³² However, he was required to strip down in court to prove that he was not intersexed.³³ Although Aslam ultimately lost the election, their efforts sparked political momentum amongst the *khawaja sira* community.³⁴

The Leader of the All Pakistan Hijra Association³⁵, Almas Bobby, has worked hard for economic and social equality for *khawaja siras*. Throughout her lifetime, Bobby has organized many rallies for education, health, welfare and protective policing for the *khawaja sira* community. Her ultimate goal is for *khawaja sira* people to be “recognized as humans”.³⁶ In 1997, Bobby attempted to press the national government regarding the poverty *khawaja siras* face through her own party, *Terik-e-Tahfuz Tesri Nasal* (Movement for the Protection of Hijras). Unfortunately, her complaint was ultimately denied by the election committee.³⁷ Nonetheless, this has not stopped her activism: she often visits government and police buildings in disguise to expose their corruption, money laundering and lack of a commitment to social justice.³⁸

Perhaps the most prominent member of the Pakistani *khawaja sira* community is famous talk show host, Ali Saleem, who also goes by the name Begum Nawazish Ali. Along with concerns exclusively facing *khawaja siras*, Saleem discusses many

²⁹Khan, 172.

³⁰Khan, 172.

³¹Pamment, 35-36.

³²Pamment, 36.

³³Pamment, 36.

³⁴Pamment, 36.

³⁵Pamment, 36.

³⁶Bobby as quoted in: Pamment, 36.

³⁷Pamment, 36.

³⁸Pamment, 36.

controversial political and social topics on their talk show including: governmental corruption, class and economic inequality, and misogyny.³⁹ Further, Saleem presents her feminine identity, Begum Nawazish Ali, as representing “modern, progressive Pakistan” and as projecting a “softer image” for Pakistan.⁴⁰ Creating a more inclusive movement increases the chances of widespread public participation. Saleem is doing this through her talk shows by associating *khwaja siras* with issues most Pakistanis face.

This ruling is an obvious victory for the *khwaja sira* community in principle, but it has not contributed to the improvement of their daily lives.⁴¹ Because the violence this group faces is so deeply embedded into Pakistani society, cultural change will be critical in order for them to experience positive peace. Several Non-Governmental Organizations have reached out to the *khwaja sira* community to help them obtain social justice.⁴² In addition, many *khwaja sira* peoples have begun their own organizations; however, many of these have failed because of a lack of funding and education.⁴³ Additionally, because of their subordinate social class and lack of access to education, much of the activism done by *khwaja siras* has not been extensively documented.⁴⁴ There is only one government registered organization in Pakistan that advocates for *khwaja sira* rights. We were unable to find the name of it, because several articles used pseudonyms in order to protect the organization and those running it. Faris A. Khan referred to it as the “Gender Solidarity Society,”⁴⁵ so we will use this title as well. The Gender Solidarity Society is run entirely by *khwaja siras*.⁴⁶ They often collaborate with various feminist organizations in Pakistan. They attempt to educate the public by participating in radio shows and television.⁴⁷ The representatives try to avoid explicitly talking about sex, because many Pakistani citizens believe that talking about sex publicly is against Islam.⁴⁸ The Gender Solidarity Society also worked on HIV/AIDS prevention. Many of the existing campaigns were ascribing the disease to an “immoral and unnatural lifestyle.” After attending a workshop held by various Non-Governmental Organizations, the Gender Solidarity Society began educating people in their movement about HIV risk rather than shaming those

³⁹Pamment, 40.

⁴⁰“Pakistan Female TV Show Host is Actually a Man,” YouTube Video, 4: 02, posted by AP Archive, July 30, 2015. Accessed November 13, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1whsROPUZ0Q>

⁴¹Pamment, 40.

⁴²Khan, 175.

⁴³Khan, 175.

⁴⁴Khan, 175.

⁴⁵Khan, 178.

⁴⁶Khan, 178.

⁴⁷Khan, “Khwaja Sira Activism,” 7.

⁴⁸Khan, 7.

dealing with the illness.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, they have to avoid high profile activism in order to protect themselves from physical violence.⁵⁰

The *khwaja sira* rights movement is far from over. Although this community has earned access to civil rights, much more needs to be done in order for them to overcome the violent oppression they have faced for generations. In order to obtain social and economic justice, the government will have to help the *khwaja sira* community. This can begin through the implementation of a job quota for *khwaja siras* in order to make it possible for them to climb over the poverty line.⁵¹ In addition, having public service messages in the media for people to be encouraged to respect *khwaja siras* will help with the stigma around this minority group.⁵²

Khwaja siras have been subject to physical, cultural and structural violence since India's colonization. Their access to civil rights was necessary to the reversal of this violence and with, optimism, will lead to positive peace for this community.

⁴⁹Khan, 9.

⁵⁰Khan, 9.

⁵¹Chaudry et al., 2555.

⁵²Chaudry et al., 2555.

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