

Being an Effeminate in the Family: Family Experiences of the Transgenders of Pakistan

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Abstract

Being a transgender in Pakistani society is considered as the symbol of shame for whole family because of giving birth to a transgender child. Consequently the transgender becomes victim of critical and discriminatory behavior from the family. So the family experience made transgenders marginalized throughout their life. The present study focused on the family experience of transgenders and their expectations from their families. A qualitative research was designed for this purpose. Among qualitative research, case study method was adopted and interview guide was used as a tool of data collection. Snowball sampling was used from non-probability sampling techniques. Fifteen case studies were collected. The present study found that majority of the participants was considered as a symbol of sham for their families in the response of their family towards their transgender sexual orientation. That was why they were treated negatively. That consequently made their feelings disgraced, along with the feelings of shame, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, at times leading to suicide action.

Key Words: Transgender, Effeminate, Family Experience, Expectations, Pakistani Society.

Introduction

Transgender is a general term applied to a variety of individuals, behaviors and groups involving tendencies to vary from the usual gender roles. Transgender is the state of one's gender identity (Self-Identification as woman, man, neither or both) which does not match ones "assigned sex" (identification by others as male, female or intersex based upon the physical / genetic sex). These various types of transgender include transsexuals,

transvestite, cross-dressers, tom boys, effeminate males, pangender and agender. "Transgender is an umbrella term applicable to a range of individuals who express their gender in non-traditional ways."¹ Body is the reality of nature. When a child, with a particular sex, comes to the world, he/she is identified with that particular sex and assigned various roles regarding his/her gender. Gender is a socio-cultural phenomenon as different societies expect different roles from one gender.² There is a big difference between Sex and Gender. Sex is all about the body, how body is shaped and how it functions. Male and female is the "Sex of brain". Gender is the identification of a person's inside the body.³ It is a boy or it is a girl. The moment when a child is brought into this world, a gender label is placed upon it that will forever shape the course of its world. For many, the dichotomous labels that are placed upon individuals within our contemporary society do not necessarily fit within their personal context of self. People mostly consider effeminacy in transgenders / males an adoptive personality trait and some take it as a psychological or mental disorder, those who accept it and have some idea about the effeminacy are of the view that it's usually a matter of nature, the way one grows-up, it is not a God-granted personality as male, female and eunuchs are. The sexual identities which are deeply felt by individuals (i.e. masculinity/femininity or heterosexuality, homosexuality/ bisexuality) are not privately or merely the product of biology but are created by social and psychological forces. According to Richard Jenkin "identity is our understanding of who we are and of whom other people are and reciprocally other person understands of themselves and of others."⁴ Family members often do not support transgenders. A variety of problems that include verbal and physical abuse, isolation and rejection, denial of family property are faced by transgenders in the family. Society often stigmatizes and discriminates transgender based upon their sexuality or gender identity. Except engaging transgenders as sex workers for their survival they often have no other choice. In Gender

¹ Burdge, BJ. "Bending gender, ending gender: Theoretical foundations for social work practice with the trans gender community". *Social Work*. Vol. 52, no. 3, 2007, pp. 243-250.

² Salani, I., Akbar, A., Mushtaq, M., Nawaz, M., Sharif, M., Rehman, P. & Saroya, S. *An exploratory study of Psycho Social life of Eunuchs in Lahore city*, Un-published master's thesis, university of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. 2005.

³ Ibid

⁴ Jenkin, R. *Social Identity*, London: Routledge. 2003.

Spectrum it is acknowledged that the parents have a very influential role to play in the life of a gender-expansive youth.⁵ For example, Ali Reza, a 24 years old transgender who wears thick make-up, has livid red burn marks on his arm because his father poured boiling water over him in a response of uncontrolled anger over his sexual deviancy. “I have attempted suicide three times.”⁶ he says. Most of the parents have treated their transgender children by employing the following practices at one time or another which are physical or verbal abuse, exclusion from the family activities, blocking access to supportive friends or activities, blaming their children for the discrimination they face, unfair criticism and ridicule, religious and/or faith-based condemnation, distress, denial, shame, silence, secrecy and pressure to enforce gender conformity.⁷ Groundbreaking new research from FAP shows that families and caregivers have a major impact on their LGBT children’s risk and well-being.^{8,9}

A study conducted by Mustafa Bilgihan Ozturk finds that most of the participants hide their sexual orientation from their families and workplace due to fear of abuse or violence. Meanwhile, individuals who did come out and expressed experiencing severe discrimination are often resulting in termination of their jobs.¹⁰ The experiences of transgender individuals highlight the inequalities they face as a result of living in a homophobic culture that marginalizes and discriminates against them. The alienation that transgender individuals experience from their families and communities begins at an early age and most often continues into an adult life in which

⁵ Gender Spectrum, *Parenting and Family*, 2016, <https://www.genderspectrum.org/explore-topics/parenting-and-family/>

⁶Tait, Robert, A Fatwa For Freedom, The Guardian, 2005, <http://gendertree.com/Muslim%20TS.htm>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ryan, C. Helping Families Support Their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Children, Family Acceptance Project, San Francisco State University, 2009 <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>.

⁹ Ryan, C., Huebner, D., Diaz, R. M., & Sanchez, J. *Family rejection as a predictor of negative health outcomes in white and Latino lesbian, gay and bisexual young adults*, 2009. Pediatrics, 123(1), pp. 346-352.

¹⁰ Ozturk, Mustafa Bilgehan, Sexual Orientation Discrimination: Exploring the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Employees in Turkey, *Human Relations*, Vol. 64, 2011, pp. 109–118.

there are often no other viable economic opportunities available aside from various types of sex work.¹¹

Family Acceptance Project found that the families who have some issues and conflicts about their children's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender identity, thought that the only appropriate way for survival of their LGBT children in the society is to help them fit in with their heterosexual peers. For this, these families block the company of LGBT friends and same type of other resources. So when these families block access to their child's LGBT friends and resources, they are acting out of care and concern.¹² Families believe that these types of measurements taken by families for their transgender children will help children to lead a good life. But these actions leave negative impacts on adolescents who like their parents rather than positive. When children observed their parents want to change them forcefully, they learn that their parents don't love them or even hate them. Lack of communication and misunderstanding between parents and their LGBT children causes family conflict and family rejection.¹³

Janee E. Brody indicated that there are some boys who born with an indifference to rough and tumble play and other typical boyhood interests and this indifference made them unfriendly and isolates them from their male peers as well as, often, from their fathers.¹⁴ Dr. Green believes that such boys may grow up with the starvation for male affection, which invokes them to seek love from men in their adolescence and adulthood. Mike Alvear added that whether the ability to walk with a lisp is in-born or learned there is no hesitation saying that most of the nelly boys have no sexual and romantic attractions towards other nelly boys.¹⁵ A study supporting to this viewpoint was published in the American Psychological Association which showed that a large number of men who identified themselves as effeminate men, preferred

¹¹Vakfi,
SeksİscileriveYasalar,Turkiye'deYasalarinSeksİscilerineEtkileriveOneriler,2011.
[http://amargroupistanbul.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/text1.pdf](http://amargigroupistanbul.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/text1.pdf)

I.K.G.

¹²Wilbur, S., Ryan, C., & Marksamer, J. *Best practices guidelines: Serving LGBT youth in out-of-home care*, Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), 2006.

¹³Ibid

¹⁴Brody, Jean, E. Boyhood Effeminacy And Later Homosexuality. 1986, http://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/16/science/boyhood-effeminacy-and-later-homosexuality.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

¹⁵Alvear, Mike, *Is Effeminacy in Gay Men a Function of Nature or Nurture?* The Huffington Post, 2011. www.huffingtonpost.com/

masculine men for their sexual partners. “One-third of their gay male respondents conformed to gender role dictates. Only 3 percent of their heterosexual men deviated from the norm. Physical and verbal harassments caused transgenders to feel worthless.”^{16,17,18} Boys are often homo-social in the United States and gender role performance determines social rank for them.^{19,20} On the other hand gay boys receive the same enculturation but they are less compliant. Harry and Martin Levine concluded that “42 percent of his gay respondents were *sissies* during childhood whereas only 11 percent of his heterosexual samples were gender role nonconformists.”^{21,22} Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith reported that half of their male homosexual subjects, they have studied, practiced gender-inappropriate behavior in their childhood whereas the rate of noncompliance was 25 percent among their heterosexual male subjects.²³

Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted with the following objectives.

- To find out the challenges they have to face being a transgender in the family.
- To find out the expectations they have from their families.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative research method was used to get in-depth insights of different aspects regarding transgender's family life experience. Among qualitative research methods, *case studies* method was employed for gathering detailed information, as it is profitably used for gathering detailed and in-depth information and enables the researcher to take stock of the existing situations. It was hard to find out such unique target population because these kinds of populations are not exactly found in any reliable records as Engin stated that

¹⁶ Saghir & Robins, *Male and female homosexuality: A comprehensive investigation*, Williams & Wilkins. 1973

¹⁷ Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1981.

¹⁸ Harry, *Gay Children Grown Up: Gender, Culture and Gender Deviance*. New York: Praeger, 1982.

¹⁹ Gagnon, J.H. *Human sexualities*, Glenview, Scott Foresman & company, 1997.

²⁰ David, Deborah S. & Brannon, Robert, *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley. 1976.

²¹ Ibid

²² Levine, Martin P. *Gay Macho*. New York: New York University Press. 1998.

²³ Ibid

Quantitative researches on hidden populations are difficult to obtain since these populations are not included in large datasets.²⁴ The Snow ball sampling method was adopted from non-probability sampling techniques. Total Fifteen case studies were collected for this research study from Gujranwala and Sialkot districts. Further Interview guide was used as the tool of data collection and information was collected through face to face interviews by adopting research ethics and consent of the participants. Major Themes were drawn from the case studies. Frequency of occurrence was noted. Thematic analysis from the qualitative data analysis techniques was further used to analyze the gathered information. In the last stage, the interpretations and explanations of the themes were done for gaining major findings of the study.

Thematic Analysis²⁵

Theme 1: Challenges in Family

As per the knowledge about the sexual orientation of transgender in the family, majority of the participants replied that their family including parents, brothers and sisters know about their transgender sexual orientation whereas some of the participants were not sure whether their family know about their sexual orientation or not. Rather some of the participants denied about the knowledge regarding their sexual orientation as transgender in the family. Like, *Bindiya* confirmed that his family knows about his sexual orientation as transgender stating “all of my family members including my parents, my siblings and my cousins, all of them know that I am a transgender. They also know that it is by nature, I did not adopt this.” But *Titli*, a 32 years old transgender, was not sure whether anybody in his family knows about his sexual orientation or not, as he told to the researcher that “I don’t know whether anyone in my family knows about my sexual orientation or not because nobody ever talked to me regarding this. But one of my close friends knows about my transgender orientation.” The participants told that whether their families know or don’t know about their transgender sexualities yet none of them talked to them directly about this. And in spite of their knowledge

²⁴ Engin, C. LGBT in Turkey: Policies and Experiences, *Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, 2015, pp. 838-858. doi:10.3390/socsci4030838

²⁵ Note: All the Names of the participants are fictitious suggested by themselves.

about their transgenderism they have to hide themselves for whoever they are and act like male child in daily life.

As per the knowledge on the part of the family about the company of their transgender friends, an overwhelming majority of the participants acknowledged that their families know about the company of their transgender friends whereas some of the participants denied regarding it as they were not sure whether their family know about their transgender friends or not as nobody in their family talk about it.

When it was asked from the participants about the response and behavior of the family about their transgender sexual orientation, most of them told that their family response was shameful as society laughs at them for giving birth to a transgender. Whereas some of them added that their family (mostly parents) is anxious for them because of their survival in the society. And others expressed aggressive family response about their transgender sexual orientation. Surprisingly, only one participant responded that the response and behavior of his family about transgender sexual orientation was normal / favorable. That transgender is *Mansha*, a 56 years old transgender. He told that “My brothers always kept an eye on my activities because all the members of my family know that I am a transgender and the life of a transgender is a source of enjoyment and amusement in our society whereas my parents’ attitude towards me and my activities was rather polite. Though they sometime got disappointed and/ or sad about me yet they always gave me favor.”

Majority of the participants prioritized their childhood experiences as ridiculous, and faced critics (by parents/ sister/ brother/ friends), in addition, some of them indicated their childhood experiences as discouraging. Like, *Bindiya* narrated his childhood experiences that people took him as a laughing stock. He recalled one of his childhood experiences as “My school teacher knew that I have feminine touch into my personality. He often called me “Oay! Zanany(O! Girlish boy) come here... or...etc.” He used calling four and even more than four times a day for nothing but for laughing at me.” Whereas *Mano* told about one of the criticisms he had faced that “Sometimes some of family members taunts and hoots which is disappointing for us. We can bear all unfavorable conditions from outside of family but it is much disappointing

that even our family doesn't understand us? Once, one of my elder brothers asked me to open water-pump; I tried but couldn't open it. He annoyed me that "you know very well how to put make up and Mehndi designs but don't know how to open a machine... you don't know how men work."

Shamo added his childhood experiences as discouraging as he told that "I used to round the chadar (veil) around my shoulders and/or wear burka (a black long gown rationally used as religious veil in Muslim societies) of my mother. I always tried to hide my activities from my family especially from my brother because whenever he saw me playing with dolls, he broke my dolls. And I kept crying for hours and days after that."

Theme 2: Expectations from Family

As per the expectations of transgenders from their families, all of the participants unanimously and primarily expected that their family should have faith in whosoever we are is God given. An overwhelming majority expected acceptance from their families and wanted that their families don't take them as symbol of sham, whereas some of them expected encouragement for their confidence building and self-respect from their families. The families of effeminate in our society do not express their trust and confidence to their children. They are always in rush to find out any way so that their child's effeminacy disappear within no time. Because it is not the child but the family is at stake in the society. Consequently their conduct with transgender child became harsh, inhuman sometime and discouraging. For example, *Paro*, his parents were fixed that he is mentally ill and need some psychiatric treatment. Because they prior than this had tried to beat him and lock him in room for several days so that he may refrain from all the feminine habits but all in vain. Then the psychiatric treatment was the stage of only electric shocks for him. *Paro* exposed the treatment of family with him as "those were the most crucial days of my life. I kept telling my family that I am alright. I am not sick but they were worried about their respect in the society they have because I became a symbol of sham for my family. Life was becoming harder and harder for me day after day and I was helpless... I couldn't do anything for saving my life." *Shamo* expressed his expectations from his family in these words "as far as myself is concerned I always pray to Allah Almighty to erase

all the negativity my family have for me. I am not a curse for them. I am also human being."

Discussion

The present research study focused on the family experiences of the transgenders and their expectations from their families. Before going to discuss the family experiences of transgenders, it seems important to have a brief view about the personality traits and self-concept of this unique community. For this, the study of Ansari, Yasmeen and Alvi found that all of the participants of their study had women like self-concept about themselves and had same attraction feelings (romantic and sexual feelings) towards men.²⁶ Moreover transgenders had to perform multiple gender roles simultaneously within the family and in the society they move. The target population of the current study had same characteristics regarding the self-concept, attraction feelings and gender role performing as it was found in the study of Ansari and colleagues.²⁷ The current study is also in lines with the results of the Ansari and colleagues²⁸ regarding the similarities between the transgenders and the women, as both genders had to perform same feminine gender roles (washing clothes/cooking/ makeup) in the family by following same patterns of mannerism and they both are shy-natured almost always. Regarding the choice of gender roles, all of the participants at once replied that they would prefer doing feminine gender roles rather than masculine gender roles. About the comfortably and satisfaction with gender role playing, all of the participants responded for the female gender role playing but all of the participants of the current study were practicing both gender roles as it is a struggle to balance their inner and outer self for their selves and for minimizing the disrespect of their family in society too. They think that this is the only appropriate way to live in the society for both (for own selves and for society).

A study conducted by the National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)²⁹ in February

²⁶ Ansari, A. M., Yasmeen, B. & Alvi, A.S. "The Self-Concept: A Transgender Perspective". The Explorer Islamabad: Journal of Social Science. vol. 3, no. 2, 2018, pp. 59-65

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. 2011. http://transequality.org/PDFs/NTDS_Report.pdf

2011 found that 57% of transgender people experienced some level of family rejection, 45% responded their family is as strong now as it was before they came out, and 43% maintained most of their family bonds. On the other hand, relatives of transgenders do not like to spend their time with them as it was found in a study that 40% said one or more relatives “chose not to speak or spend time with me” due to their gender identity/expression. 19% had experienced domestic violence because of their gender identity or expression, 48% of those who experienced domestic violence also experienced homelessness.³⁰ For having the knowledge about the sexual orientation of transgenders in the family, the study found that majority of the participants replied that their family including parents, brothers and sisters know about their transgender sexual orientation whereas some of them were not sure whether their family know about their sexual orientation or not whereas some of the participants denied about the knowledge regarding their sexual orientation as transgender in the family. Whereas an overwhelming majority of the participants acknowledged that their family knows about the company of their transgender friends but some of the participants denied regarding it as they were not sure whether their family know about their transgender friends or not as nobody in their family talk about it.

Family reactions affect an LGBT adolescent’s health and mental health.³¹ FAP shows that family rejection has a serious impact on LGBT young people’s health and mental health. LGBT young people who were rejected by their families because of their identity have much lower self-esteem and have fewer people they can turn to for help. They are also more isolated and have less support than those who were accepted by their families.³² The study found the response and behavior of the family about their transgender sexual orientation was shameful as society laughs at them for giving birth to a transgender, whereas some of them added that their family (mostly parents) is anxious for them because of their survival in the society. Others expressed aggressive family response about their transgender sexual

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ryan, C. Supportive families, healthy children: Helping families with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children. San Francisco, CA: Marian Wright Edelman Institute, San Francisco State University. 2009

³² Ibid

orientation. Surprisingly, only one participant responded that the response and behavior of his family about transgender sexual orientation was normal / favorable. Majority of the participants prioritized their childhood experiences as ridiculous, and faced critics (by parents/sister/brother/friends), whereas some of them indicated their childhood experiences as discouraging.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the family including parents , sisters and brothers of the participants knew about their transgender sexual orientation whereas majority of them confirmed that their family also knew about their company of transgender friends but some of them were not sure whether their family knew or not. Furthermore, majority of them were considered as a symbol of sham for their families in the response of their family towards their transgender sexual orientation. Due to the reason they had to face many challenges in the family including acceptance and worth. For this, they are treated negatively. That consequently made their feelings disgraced, along with the feelings of shame, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, at times leading to suicide action. Furthermore, emotional and mental distress show the red signals to higher extent when transgender identity intersected with race and ethnicity.