



PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND QUALITY OF LIFE AMONG INTERSEX INDIVIDUALS IN URBAN LAHORE, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of social support and quality of life among intersex individuals in urban Lahore, Pakistan. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide. A total of 17 participants were interviewed who were selected through snowball sampling. The study aimed to understand the lived experiences of intersex adults in relation to social support and quality of life. Thematic analysis was carried out which revealed three major themes from data: 1) Barriers and Inequalities 2) Stigmatization 3) Social recognition, all of which affect the perceptions of intersex community. The findings indicate the need for interventions, inclusive policies and awareness program to promote respect for people with differences.

Keywords: Intersex, Social support, Quality of life, Stigmatization, Social recognition

Introduction

Intersex refers to individuals born with physical sex characteristics that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2019). Approximately 0.05% and 1.7% of the population are born with intersex traits-also known in medical contexts as intersex conditions (InterAct, 2018). Globally, intersex people experience issues like medicalization, stigma and social isolation which can affect their well-being and quality of life (Jones et al., 2016). Further, they face serious challenges in improving their economic, social and personal rights (OHCHR, 2024). In Pakistan, public understanding and sensitivity of intersex is limited. Cultural context and historical background reveal that these individuals often play important roles in social events, including weddings, birthdays, Eid celebrations, and other major festivities. However, despite these contributions, they are often addressed in derogatory ways, being labeled with terms such as *Murat*, *Hijr*, *Khawaja Sara* and *Khusra*. They are among the most marginalized groups, suffering from external social injustice and lack of acceptance. Due to deep-rooted stereotypes, ignorance and limited opportunities, society often refuses to acknowledge them as equal citizens (Akhtar, 2016).

Social support is defined as the emotional, practical and informational assistance perceived from family, friends and other significant people to cope with challenges (Zimet et al., 1988). The role of social support in collectivist societies is critical, acceptance or rejection from social group shape life outcomes of gender or sex diverse individual (Sahito et al., 2022). However, studies on intersex population highlights the critical role of social support in managing the discrimination related to intersex status and decision making (Jones et al., 2016). High levels of social support can be buffering and reduced the effects of stress. It can also help in managing psychological distress and improve physical health outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985). For marginalized population, social resources and support are important as it mitigates the negative effects of stigma, discrimination, health inequities and societal exclusion, thereby enhancing overall quality of life (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013).



Quality of life is defined as how a person perceives their overall well-being in the context of the culture and value system they live within and how this perception aligns with their personal goals, expectations and standards (Lucas-Carrasco, 2012). According to Gupta and Sharma (2011), the World Health Organization defines quality of life as a broad concept based on individual's perspective, physical health, social connection, self-esteem, spiritual beliefs and relationship with environment. Life satisfaction is closely tied to both social and psychological perceptions. The findings from a study Gilban et al. (2014) connect closely to quality of life concept. The study indicates that intersex adult experience less quality of life across both physical and psychosocial domains. Quality of life is shaped by physical health, psychological state, social relationships and the ability to pursue personal goals.

Methods

This was a qualitative study based on phenomenological model to understand that how social support has impact on the quality of life of intersex individuals and how they give meaning to their social experiences based on social support and quality of life. Creswell describes phenomenology as a process of identifying the shared meanings emerge from the lived experiences of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The sample was consisted of 17 participants who were recruited through snowball sampling.

The research data was obtained using the in-depth interview technique, one of the qualitative methods to explore the perspective and experience of participants. This is one of the most widely used data-collection technique in qualitative research which helps to explore data from the participants' perspective. It serves as a means to understand how individuals perceive their reality (Punch, 2011). Semi-structured interview guide was used as data collection tool. Open-ended questions were asked and each interview was consisted of 40 to 50 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis purpose. Thematic analysis was carried out to analyze the data. During data collection some challenges arose, particularly securing permission from intersex participants living in NGOs. Nevertheless, most participants were cooperative throughout the process.

This research adhered to ethical guidelines such as objectivity, respect for participants, anonymity, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and non-discriminatory behavior. Informed consent, a key ethical principal was applied to explain the purpose and objectives of research, as well as how the findings will be disseminated. It was ensured that all participants' information will be used solely for the research purpose.

Findings

Three sub-themes which align with research were emerged from the data are: 1. Barriers and Inequalities 2. Stigmatization 3. Social Recognition. Each theme reflected that how societal attitude influences both social support and quality of life.

Barriers and Inequalities

In in depth interviews, it was consistently reported by participants prejudice and discrimination significantly affects their lives. Social exclusion and negative societal attitudes such as harassment and poor treatment was reported by many participants. Intersex individuals face discrimination in families, schools, colleges, workplaces, healthcare and other public spaces. Many intersex individuals were expelled from their homes or choose to leave alone due to societal rejection. One respondent stated:

“I was 15 when my sexual orientation became known to my family. My family was upset and I have to leave their home. Even whenever I wish to return, they insist me to stay away. This feeling of rejection and loss is profound.”

Intersex individuals also face harassment or discrimination in educational places. This discrimination often forced them to leave education early. Those who remained in school experienced bullying and negative behavior. A participant stated:

“I had a friend in my school time, but verbal abuse from classmates forced me to leave. I had to leave my school and the loss of education affected my future prospects.”

The findings indicated that rejection often begins from family. Intersex individuals together form a community for survival and support. As one participant stated:

I left my family because they did not accept my sexual orientation. It was difficult for me to endure the shame and disassociation from them, So, I joined intersex community for support and peace.”

The central principle of intersex community is relationship with the head of community known as the *Guru* (teacher/mentor) and the *Chela* (disciple) who joined the community for support. The *Guru* is regarded as a parental figure, assumes responsibility for meeting the material needs of *Chelas*. In return, a *chela* offers obedience, respect and earnings to the *Guru*. Through this system, all *Chelas* of the *Guru* form a close knit family bond. In tradition, every intersex individual joins a community under the protection of the *Guru*, who ideally remains their guardian. A *Guru* can be changed but it required some rituals and a formal fee.

A participant shared:

“I was too young and lacked resources when I left my biological family. My *Guru* provided me with food and shelter, and now I give my earnings to him to support him.”

The findings revealed that police violence and harassment are significant challenges. Respondents reported being disrespected, beaten and mocked. A participant shared:

“The police beat us, took our money and bullied us. When we report case of some mishap they ignore us, making us feel we have no rights.”

The findings highlighted the systematic barriers and inequalities faced by intersex community. They suffer from family rejection, educational disruption and bullying, and violence by authorities. However, the support from their community makes them functional in society.

Stigmatization

The findings of the study indicated that intersex individuals face severe stigmatization at every stage of life. It was evident that they faced humiliation even from bureaucratic institutions. A participant described:

“When I went to Nadra office to apply for my national identity card (I.D), I disheartened when the officials began teasing me and asked what I am doing there. So, I rejected the thought of applying I.D card.”

Intersex individuals face derogatory treatment and verbal abuse from family, friends and other people. One respondent recalled:

“In my childhood when I went out in the street and played with girls, some boys started to call me “*baji khusri*”. I really hated this.”

The findings showed that intersex individuals often viewed as sexual object rather than human beings. A participant shared:

“Men see us as a sex image and they want to have sexual relations with us.”

Another participant shared:

“Men touch and hit us whenever they get a chance. Kids throw stone on us. Some male wanted to have physical relations with us and if we decline, they threat us.”

The fear of being harassed, negative treatment and devalued attitude against them is a constant threat for intersex individuals. Instead of finding acceptance in society and families they face stigma and discredited behavior. These experiences negatively impact on their quality of life.

Social Recognition

Social recognition is important for human beings to value them with dignity, respect and rights. However, the findings of the study revealed that intersex individual recognition is denied. A respondent shared that how the absence of social recognition affected their lives:

“Most of the time, educated people respect us but sometimes we face harsh behaviors. As using public toilets in public places could be chaotic. I remembered many times I entered in the female washroom and the expressions of them were not welcoming. Similarly, in male washroom men chuckled or mock us.”

Sometimes, people behavior forced them to use alternative paths in their lives. As a participant shared:

“Not many people recognize or acknowledge us as human. They show cruel and strict behavior, and sometimes children are women afraid of us. This is because it has been inculcating in the minds of people that we are not like them.”

Intersex individuals often face institutional denials such as hospitals, schools and healthcare. A participant shared:

“Whenever I go to the market people stare at me. Once, my Guru told me, “People do not treat us like normal people.”

In 2018 Pakistan introduced **Transgender Persons Act 2018**, which allows individuals the right of self-identity and claim their rights. However there is a gap between social recognition and legal recognition.

Discussion

Intersex individuals face many challenges and have multidimensional struggles in urban Lahore, Pakistan. They face rejection from their families, friends, neighbors and society. Though this rejection is based on difference of biological characteristics not on ideological grounds, are still hurtful. They wish to be accepted by society like normal individuals. However, when intersex individuals receive continuous rejection from society in the form of discrimination, hate, abuse or denial they voluntarily left the mainstream society.

There is an intersex community which offers support to intersex individuals. The unique community has a parent figure like mentor who is known as the *Guru*. The *guru-chela*



relationship is not important in their community but also has emotional bond with *Chela* (disciple). *Guru* takes the responsibility of chela to provide family like tie.

The study has found that institutional discrimination and barriers are disadvantageous for intersex individuals. They have not enough support from peer and teachers or state officials which limit their access to better quality of life. Police violence and institutional stigmatization emerged as major threats. The catcalling from particularly men is particularly societal failure that leaves intersex individuals miserable.

Intersex individuals are not valued in society therefore they have low self-esteem and social recognition. However, state is addressing the issue by making laws such as passing **Transgender Persons Act 2018**, which allows individuals the right of self-identity and claim their rights. However there is a gap between social recognition and legal recognition.

Overall, the lack of social support from biological family, relatives, friends and neighbors undermine the quality of life of intersex individuals in Lahore. quality of life of intersex individuals is not only linked with material gains but also with dignity, self-identity, valued status in society and acceptance from society.

Conclusion

This study delineates the struggle of intersex individuals in urban Lahore, Pakistan. The findings indicate that lack of social support and acceptance from society has adverse effects on the quality of life of intersex individuals. There is a need to recognize them as human beings and treat them with respect. Furthermore, they have limited access to educational and economic institutions due to bullying and harassment. Bureaucratic barriers have shattered their self-confidence and made them feel as they are less than human. This study was conducted in Pakistan, focusing on the urban intersex community; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to intersex individuals in other geographic contexts. It is recommended that future investigation be extended to wider geographic areas to improve generalizability.

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