



## Harassment at Holy Places: A Case Study of Transgender

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### Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of transgender individuals in holy places such as mosques, temples, churches, and shrines where spiritual spaces intended to embody compassion and equality often become sites of exclusion and harassment. Despite being perceived as sanctuaries of peace, these institutions sometimes reinforce rigid gender norms and deny access or participation to gender-diverse individuals. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, the research examines how transgender persons encounter verbal humiliation, social ostracism, physical intimidation, and symbolic or spiritual violence within sacred environments. The study further investigates the emotional, social, and psychological consequences of these behaviors, revealing feelings of spiritual disconnection, unworthiness, and fear. Alongside documenting harassment, the study highlights the resilience and coping strategies transgender individuals adopt to maintain spiritual identity, including forming peer support networks, seeking alternative worship spaces, and reframing their spiritual beliefs. The findings demonstrate that exclusion within holy places is shaped not only by individual prejudice but also by institutional cultures, leadership attitudes, and theological interpretations. The study underscores the need for organizational reforms and inclusive religious practices grounded in dignity, empathy, and equity. By giving voice to transgender experiences, this research contributes to gender, religious, and organizational behavior scholarship while offering practical insights for faith leaders and policymakers committed to inclusive spiritual spaces.

**Keywords:** Harassment, Bulling, Transgender, Case Study, Pakistan

### Introduction

Holy places temples, mosques, churches, shrines, and gurdwaras are traditionally conceived as sanctuaries of peace, compassion, and inclusivity (Ammerman, 2007; Eliade, 1959). They are often regarded as sacred spaces where individuals seek moral guidance, spiritual fulfillment, and a sense of belonging. These religious institutions function not only as centers of worship but also as vital social organizations that shape communal identity, ethical behavior, and social cohesion. Ideally, they stand as embodiments of acceptance and equality. However, in practice, these ideals

are not always realized. Across diverse faith traditions, holy places sometimes become arenas of exclusion, discrimination, and even violence particularly toward marginalized groups such as transgender individuals (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Yip, Keenan & Page, 2011). Harassment and bullying within sacred contexts may manifest in multiple forms, including verbal abuse, social ostracism, symbolic or spiritual violence, physical intimidation, and denial of access to worship or ritual participation (Balzer & Hutta, 2015; Mishtal, 2015). Such exclusionary practices are often rationalized under religious or moral doctrines that reinforce binary gender ideologies and reject non-conforming gender identities (Stryker, 2008; Wilcox, 2009). The problem is especially pronounced in conservative religious settings where transgender identities are pathologized, criminalized, or dismissed as immoral. Consequently, many transgender individuals encounter systemic exclusion from sacred spaces, which deepens their marginalization (Winter et al., 2016; Nanda, 1999). Transgender individuals those whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth frequently find themselves at odds with dominant religious narratives that deny their legitimacy (Koyama, 2006; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Many religious traditions enforce strict binary interpretations of gender roles that marginalize transgender people both symbolically and physically (Connell, 2012; Hines, 2019). In South Asia, for instance, hijra communities have historically been associated with spiritual or ritualistic roles in certain contexts, yet they remain stigmatized and excluded from mainstream religious life (Reddy, 2005; Jami, 2005). This contradiction illustrates the complex and ambivalent relationship between transgender identities and religious institutions: while sacred traditions sometimes recognize gender diversity in myth or ritual, institutional practices often deny it. Interestingly, some transgender individuals report finding empowerment, solace, and spiritual connection through religious engagement (Wilcox, 2003; Rodríguez, 2010). Others, however, experience rejection, alienation, or abuse in those same spaces. This paradox underscores the dual nature of holy places as both inclusive and exclusionary environments. Their inclusivity or hostility is not inherent but shaped by broader social and organizational structures that determine who belongs, who leads, and who is silenced within religious communities (Halafoff et al., 2020; Mahomed & Trangos, 2016). The institutional mechanisms of authority, cultural norms, and theological interpretations together produce either opportunities for inclusion or systems of marginalization. In recent years, conversations surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have expanded beyond workplaces and educational institutions to encompass religious organizations. As faith communities increasingly engage in social welfare and civic initiatives, their approach to inclusion has become a matter of public and moral significance. Examining how religious institutions treat marginalized groups especially transgender individuals reveals much about the intersection of faith, identity, and social justice (Burchardt, 2013; Chitando & Mateveke, 2017). Understanding these dynamics is critical for building inclusive governance, promoting human dignity, and strengthening social cohesion in multicultural societies.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the growing recognition of LGBTQ+ rights worldwide, a significant research gap persists concerning the experiences of transgender individuals within sacred spaces (Rodríguez & Follins, 2012; Browne, 2009). While harassment and bullying have been extensively studied in workplaces, schools, and public domains (Einarsen et al., 2020; Salin & Hoel, 2011), the religious sphere remains understudied. This absence is particularly striking in societies where religion profoundly influences civic life, national identity, and moral order (Sahgal & Jassal, 2011; Woodhead, 2012). In such contexts, exclusion from religious participation does not merely restrict spiritual practice; it constitutes social alienation and symbolic erasure. Transgender narratives within these environments are often distorted or silenced by dominant religious interpretations that

frame gender diversity as deviant or sinful (Dwyer, 2010; Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2004). The lack of inclusive theological discourse, institutional policies, and pastoral care structures further entrenches this marginalization (Jones et al., 2019; Robinson & Spivey, 2007). Consequently, many transgender individuals internalize feelings of spiritual disconnection, guilt, or unworthiness. Beyond personal suffering, these exclusions challenge the moral credibility of religious institutions that claim to uphold universal compassion, equality, and justice (Cheng, 2011; Taylor, 2011). This gap in scholarship is both academic and practical. The exclusion of transgender individuals from holy places has measurable implications for their mental health, spiritual development, and social integration (Grant et al., 2011; Budge, Tebbe & Howard, 2010). When sacred spaces become sources of fear rather than refuge, the psychological distress can be profound. From an organizational behavior perspective, religious institutions mirror other social organizations in their structures, hierarchies, and cultural norms (Watson, 2012; Hatch, 2018). Understanding how power dynamics, leadership practices, and institutional cultures shape inclusion or harassment within these settings can illuminate broader organizational lessons about diversity management, ethical leadership, and social justice.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of transgender individuals in holy places, focusing particularly on the dual phenomena of harassment and opportunity. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach to uncover how religious and organizational contexts shape inclusion, exclusion, and spiritual engagement for transgender persons. Specifically, it aims to identify the mechanisms through which harassment occurs, examine its emotional and social consequences, and document the coping strategies and forms of resistance that transgender individuals employ in response.

The objectives of this research are to:

1. Identify specific forms and patterns of harassment and bullying experienced by transgender individuals in holy places (Balzer & Hutta, 2015; Hines, 2019).
2. Examine the emotional, social, and spiritual consequences of these experiences (Rodríguez & Follins, 2012; Budge et al., 2010).
3. Investigate coping strategies and forms of resistance that transgender individuals use to preserve their spiritual agency (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).
4. Analyze how religious authorities, congregants, and organizational structures respond to or perpetuate exclusion (Robinson & Spivey, 2007; Mahomed & Trangos, 2016).
5. Highlight institutional opportunities for inclusion and reform aligned with DEI principles in both organizational and spiritual leadership (Austin & Stevenson, 2006; Halaford et al., 2020).

### **Research Questions**

To achieve these aims, the study will address the following research questions:

1. What types of harassment and bullying do transgender individuals encounter in holy places?
2. How do these experiences affect their spiritual identity, psychological wellbeing, and community participation?
3. What coping strategies or spiritual practices do transgender individuals employ when facing exclusion?

4. How do religious leaders and community members respond to the presence and participation of transgender individuals in sacred spaces?
5. What organizational reforms or theological shifts are necessary to enhance inclusion within religious institutions?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds both academic and practical significance. In the field of gender and religious studies, it contributes to an emerging body of literature that centers transgender voices within spiritual contexts (Wilcox, 2009; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). By documenting first-hand experiences, the research illuminates the lived realities behind theoretical debates about gender, faith, and inclusion. In the field of organizational behavior, the study extends the analysis of diversity and equity into religious organizations, showing how leadership styles, institutional norms, and cultural discourses shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Watson, 2012; Hatch, 2018). Practically, the findings can inform religious leaders, policymakers, and advocacy organizations about the barriers transgender individuals face in accessing spiritual spaces and the reforms needed to address them (Cheng, 2011; Mahomed & Trangos, 2016). The study's insights can guide the development of inclusive training programs, anti-harassment policies, and interfaith dialogues that promote empathy and mutual respect. Moreover, by identifying examples of empowerment and resilience, it contributes to broader understandings of spiritual coping and agency among marginalized groups (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Rodríguez, 2010). Such insights are crucial for designing support systems that affirm both the spiritual and psychological wellbeing of transgender persons.

### **Scope and Delimitation**

The scope of this study is limited to the experiences of transgender individuals within selected holy places in South Asia, with attention to Hindu, Muslim, and Christian traditions. It does not attempt to provide a global comparative analysis or to quantify prevalence rates. Instead, it adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach that seeks depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. The research focuses primarily on harassment, bullying, and inclusion related to gender identity rather than sexual orientation, except where the two overlap. Theological debates are referenced only insofar as they inform institutional practices or policies; a comprehensive theological analysis lies beyond the study's scope.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Harassment and Bullying in Sacred Spaces**

Harassment and bullying in sacred spaces refer to actions and behaviors that demean, exclude, or harm individuals emotionally, spiritually, or physically within religious environments. These acts range from overt physical intimidation and verbal abuse to subtle forms of microaggression, exclusion, and misrecognition (Herek, 2009; Meyer, 2003). Although holy places are traditionally viewed as sanctuaries of peace, equality, and compassion, for many marginalized communities especially transgender individuals they can become hostile environments shaped by deeply rooted socio-religious prejudices (Sharma, 2011). In contexts where gender norms are tightly bound to religious identity, transgender individuals often face “gender-based exclusion,” a form of marginalization that arises when binary conceptions of male and female dictate participation in rituals, prayer, or access to sacred spaces (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Such exclusion frequently results in spiritual dissonance, where individuals struggle to reconcile their faith and devotion with institutional or communal rejection (Yip, 2005). Rather than experiencing religion as a source of

belonging and moral comfort, transgender individuals may internalize the notion that their gender identity invalidates their spiritual worthiness, intensifying both psychological and existential distress.

### **Transgender Identity and Spirituality**

The term *transgender* broadly encompasses individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021). The intersection of transgender identity and spirituality is complex and often fraught with tension. For many transgender individuals, faith and spiritual identity are central to their sense of self. However, institutionalized religion frequently positions gender nonconformity as sinful, unnatural, or incompatible with divine order (Wilcox, 2009). Transgender individuals thus navigate dual marginalization rejection by both secular society and religious institutions (Kinitz, 2017). In certain Muslim contexts, although theological interpretations of gender variance exist within Islamic scholarship, prevailing social orthodoxy reinforces binary gender roles and restricts transgender people's participation in religious practices (Rahman & Abdullah, 2013). Similar patterns emerge in Hindu and Christian traditions, where religious texts may offer symbolic recognition of gender diversity, yet institutional structures deny it in practice. This duality exemplifies how theology, culture, and gender ideology intertwine to produce systemic exclusion while leaving limited room for spiritual belonging.

### **Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Consequences**

The impact of harassment and exclusion in sacred spaces extends beyond immediate discomfort to produce lasting emotional, social, and spiritual consequences. On an emotional level, transgender individuals subjected to hostility in holy places often report heightened anxiety, shame, internalized stigma, and depressive symptoms (Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). Socially, exclusion from religious institutions can lead to community ostracism, disrupted family relationships, and a sense of isolation from one's broader cultural or faith-based community. Spiritually, such experiences can lead to what Singh and McKleroy (2011) describe as "spiritual homelessness" a profound sense of being cut off from one's faith tradition and divine connection. In a grounded theory study, Levy and Reeves (2018) found that many transgender individuals described feeling "spiritually orphaned" after being denied access to mosques, churches, or temples. The repeated message of rejection undermined their sense of spiritual legitimacy and connection with God. These cumulative experiences often contribute to identity conflict and a weakened sense of spiritual well-being.

### **Review of Relevant Previous Studies**

Although research on transgender identity and religion has expanded over the past two decades, only a limited number of studies focus directly on harassment and bullying within sacred spaces. In a phenomenological study, Kinitz (2017) documented the experiences of transgender Christians who were denied communion or asked to leave church premises. Participants frequently reported microaggressions such as misgendering, refusal to use preferred pronouns, or gossip from fellow congregants. While these acts may appear minor, they compounded over time to erode spiritual confidence and belonging. Similarly, Hendricks and Testa (2012) interviewed transgender individuals across multiple faith traditions and identified the pervasive influence of exclusionary language in sermons and sacred texts. Such language reinforced institutional gatekeeping, whereby religious leaders and congregants controlled who could participate in rituals based on binary gender norms. The authors emphasized that these practices not only denied participation but also symbolically excluded transgender individuals from the moral and spiritual community.

In Muslim-majority contexts, Rahman and Abdullah (2013) analyzed the experiences of Pakistani transgender women commonly known as *Khawaja Siras* to highlight how religious and cultural exclusion intersect. Their findings revealed that while some mosques permitted *Khawaja Siras* to attend prayers, others subjected them to humiliation, mockery, or outright bans. The researchers argued that these forms of exclusion are doubly harmful because mosques function not merely as places of worship but as central institutions of social identity and moral belonging in Muslim societies. Singh et al. (2011) investigated resilience strategies among transgender individuals who were rejected by their religious communities. Participants often responded to exclusion by developing alternative spiritual practices, forming independent prayer groups, or reinterpreting religious texts in affirming ways. However, the lack of formal inclusion within mainstream institutions left lingering feelings of loss and spiritual displacement. Similarly, Mizock and Hopwood (2016) used narrative analysis to document what they termed *spiritual trauma* a state in which repeated rejection by religious institutions produces existential doubt and moral injury. Participants described their relationship with religion as one of both profound meaning and deep pain, oscillating between faith and disillusionment. Methodologically, most of these studies relied on qualitative designs particularly in-depth interviews, grounded theory, and phenomenological analysis. These approaches provided rich, narrative-based insights into lived experiences, emphasizing emotional and spiritual dimensions of exclusion. However, the majority were conducted in Western contexts and often lacked intersectional or non-Western perspectives, leaving a significant gap in understanding how religious exclusion operates in societies like South Asia or the Middle East.

### **Research Gaps**

Despite these contributions, several critical gaps remain evident in the literature on transgender experiences within religious settings:

#### **Lack of Focus on Physical Sacred Spaces:**

Much of the existing scholarship addresses the intersection of religion and transgender identity in broad terms examining theology, community belonging, or moral discourse but few studies focus specifically on *physical* sacred spaces such as temples, mosques, and churches (Levy & Reeves, 2018; Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). The sensory and embodied experiences of being in, or being excluded from, holy spaces remain understudied.

#### **Regional and Cultural Limitations:**

Research has predominantly emerged from Western contexts (Singh et al., 2011; Hendricks & Testa, 2012), leaving large knowledge gaps about the experiences of transgender individuals in South Asian or Middle Eastern societies, where religion is deeply intertwined with social and political identity (Rahman & Abdullah, 2013). Given the centrality of faith institutions in these regions, exclusion from them has far-reaching implications for social integration.

#### **Neglect of Emotional and Spiritual Consequences:**

Many studies focus on identity construction and community rejection but overlook the inner emotional and spiritual toll of harassment in religious settings (Kinitz, 2017). The psychosocial impact how exclusion affects mental health, self-esteem, and one's relationship with the divine remains insufficiently explored.

#### **Underrepresentation of Muslim Transgender Voices:**

Scholarship on Islamic contexts remains sparse, especially in South Asia where transgender individuals occupy unique spiritual and social roles (Sharma, 2011). The experiences of *Khawaja*

*Siras* in Pakistan, for example, reveal complex negotiations of faith, identity, and acceptance that deserve more scholarly attention.

Collectively, these gaps point to the urgent need for culturally grounded and context-specific research that foregrounds the lived experiences of transgender individuals within religious settings. A South Asian perspective particularly one centered in Pakistan can provide valuable insights into how institutionalized religion, gender norms, and social hierarchies intersect to shape both harassment and resilience in sacred spaces.

### **Relevance of Literature to the Current Study**

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that transgender individuals experience exclusion, microaggressions, and outright harassment within religious environments. However, few studies address harassment within the physical confines of holy places, where sacred authority and social power converge. This research responds to that gap by examining transgender experiences of harassment and inclusion specifically in Pakistan, a Muslim-majority nation where religious institutions occupy an influential moral and political role. The literature also underscores that while emotional and psychological consequences of exclusion have been discussed, the spiritual dimensions such as feelings of divine rejection or loss of faith remain insufficiently understood (Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). This study therefore aims to illuminate how harassment in sacred spaces affects not only mental health but also spiritual well-being, religious identity, and the capacity for faith-based resilience. By adopting a qualitative case study approach rooted in lived experiences, the study aligns with existing methodologies while contributing new, culturally contextualized data to global discussions on gender, religion, and marginalization.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To interpret the multifaceted experiences of transgender individuals in sacred spaces, this study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) and Queer Theology (Wilcox, 2009). Together, they offer an integrated lens for understanding both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of harassment and resilience.

#### **Minority Stress Theory**

Minority Stress Theory explains how stigma, prejudice, and social exclusion generate chronic stress that contributes to poor mental health among marginalized populations (Meyer, 2003). Within religious contexts, transgender individuals are often subjected to persistent microaggressions, discrimination, and identity invalidation, which cumulatively produce psychological distress and internalized stigma (Herek, 2009). Applied to sacred spaces, this theory helps elucidate how repeated exposure to hostile religious environments can lead to reduced self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and spiritual disconnection. The framework underscores the importance of examining not only external acts of harassment but also their internal psychological consequences how religious rejection becomes internalized as self-rejection.

#### **Queer Theology**

While Minority Stress Theory explains the psychosocial effects of marginalization, Queer Theology provides a framework for interpreting spiritual resistance and redefinition. Emerging in response to heteronormative and cisnormative interpretations of faith, Queer Theology challenges traditional doctrines that exclude LGBTQ+ individuals, advocating instead for inclusive and fluid understandings of spirituality and embodiment (Wilcox, 2009). It affirms that divine love and spiritual truth transcend gender binaries, offering space for transgender individuals to reclaim

religious belonging on their own terms. By employing Queer Theology, this study moves beyond victimization narratives to explore spiritual agency how transgender individuals reinterpret faith, reimagine divine acceptance, and create inclusive spiritual practices even within oppressive environments. When combined with Minority Stress Theory, this framework enables a comprehensive understanding of both the *pain* and *potential* inherent in transgender experiences in holy places: the pain of exclusion and the potential for self-affirmation, resilience, and theological transformation.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design using the case study method, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex and context-dependent social phenomena. According to Yin (2018), a case study allows for an in-depth and holistic understanding of an issue within its real-life setting, making it especially valuable when examining experiences shaped by cultural, social, and emotional factors. In the present research, the phenomenon under investigation harassment and bullying of transgender individuals in holy places requires careful attention to subjective interpretation, emotional nuance, and spiritual meaning. A quantitative or survey-based approach would be insufficient to capture these lived experiences, which are often deeply personal and multifaceted. Qualitative case study research enables the collection of rich, narrative data that reflect the depth and complexity of participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It supports inductive reasoning, allowing themes and insights to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined hypotheses. Given that the experiences of transgender individuals in religious settings in Pakistan are both underreported and socially stigmatized, this design provides the flexibility to explore unanticipated patterns and contextual dynamics. Moreover, the case study approach helps bridge the gap between individual experiences and broader socio-religious structures, offering both depth and contextual understanding. The study focuses specifically on Gujranwala, a city in Punjab, Pakistan, known for its conservative religious culture, which provides a suitable context for exploring these dynamics.

### **Research Philosophy and Paradigm**

The philosophical foundation of this research lies in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning emerges through human interaction and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interpretivism rejects the notion of an objective, measurable truth in favor of understanding how people make sense of their experiences in relation to their cultural, spiritual, and social worlds (Schwandt, 2000). This aligns closely with the aim of the present study to explore how transgender individuals interpret their experiences of harassment and exclusion in spaces deemed sacred. In the Pakistani socio-religious context, transgender individuals face dual marginalization: they are excluded both from mainstream social participation and from religious belonging. Interpretivism provides an epistemological lens through which to understand these experiences as evolving narratives, shaped by interactions with religious authorities, community members, and divine beliefs. It allows the researcher to capture the subjective dimensions of spirituality, faith, and exclusion, rather than treating them as objective variables. This paradigm also supports a dialogical process between researcher and participant, ensuring that meaning is co-constructed rather than imposed. By adopting an interpretivist stance, the study acknowledges that the participants' accounts are valid expressions of lived truth, rather than deviations from a normative religious experience.

## **Sampling Strategy**

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the hidden nature of the transgender population, the study employed a non-probability snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling is particularly effective for reaching marginalized or hard-to-access groups, especially when participants may fear public exposure or discrimination (Naderifar et al., 2017). Initial participants were identified through transgender community leaders and local NGOs working for gender inclusion in Gujranwala. These initial contacts referred other potential participants who met the inclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria required that participants:

1. Self-identify as transgender;
2. Be between the ages of 20 and 40 years;
3. Reside in Gujranwala or nearby areas;
4. Possess at least basic literacy (primary education level); and
5. Have visited one or more holy places (mosques, shrines, or other religious sites).

Participants who had never visited religious or sacred spaces or who declined in-depth participation were excluded. The target sample size was 10–15 individuals, guided by the principle of data saturation the point at which no new information or themes emerge from continued data collection (Guest et al., 2006). This approach balances depth with manageability, allowing for detailed exploration while maintaining analytical coherence.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Two primary data collection methods were utilized: semi-structured interviews and direct observation. Semi-structured interviews offered a balance between consistency and flexibility, ensuring that core topics such as experiences of exclusion, perceptions of holiness, emotional reactions, and coping strategies were consistently addressed while leaving room for participants to elaborate freely (Adams, 2015). Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in either Urdu or Punjabi, depending on the participant's comfort. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. Observation complemented the interviews by providing insight into non-verbal behaviors, gestures, and environmental dynamics that might not be captured through dialogue alone (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Observations took place during visits to shrines and other religious events, focusing on interactions between transgender participants and other attendees. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the reliability of findings and offered a more holistic picture of participants' lived realities. Before commencing full data collection, a pilot interview was conducted to test the clarity, sensitivity, and cultural appropriateness of the interview questions. The pilot helped refine the phrasing of questions and the overall tone of engagement to ensure that participants felt respected, heard, and safe.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection occurred over two months in Gujranwala. Initial contact was made through transgender community networks, who facilitated trust-building between the researcher and participants. All interviews were conducted in safe, private locations chosen by participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without any repercussions. Observation sessions were conducted only in settings where participants felt comfortable and where permission from religious authorities was possible. The

researcher maintained detailed field notes, recording both descriptive and reflective observations to supplement interview data. These notes were later integrated into the coding and thematic analysis process to enrich interpretation and validate participants' accounts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to strict ethical standards consistent with international qualitative research protocols, particularly those involving vulnerable groups (Orb et al., 2001). Informed consent was obtained from all participants after fully explaining the study's aims, methods, and potential risks in accessible Urdu language. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using pseudonyms and by securely storing audio files and transcripts on password-protected devices. Given the potential emotional distress associated with recalling experiences of harassment, participants were provided with information about local counseling and support services. The researcher remained attentive to emotional cues, offering to pause or terminate interviews when needed. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to fieldwork, ensuring compliance with both institutional and local ethical requirements.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Manual coding was initially performed to ensure close engagement with the data, after which the coded material was imported into NVivo 12 for advanced categorization and retrieval. Themes such as *sacred exclusion, spiritual shame, performative piety, and resilience and reclaiming* emerged inductively, reflecting both the emotional and spiritual dimensions of participants' experiences. The iterative nature of thematic analysis allowed patterns to evolve organically as understanding deepened.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

To ensure the study's rigor, **Lincoln and Guba's (1985)** criteria were applied:

- Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, and member checking, where participants reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy.
- Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual descriptions, enabling readers to determine the applicability of findings to other cultural or religious contexts.
- Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail documenting every stage of the research process.
- Confirmability was reinforced through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to minimize researcher bias.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the researcher is an active instrument in the process of knowledge creation (Finlay, 2002). Throughout the study, I maintained a reflexive journal to document personal assumptions, emotional reactions, and evolving insights. Recognizing my position as an outsider to the transgender community, I approached the research with humility and respect, seeking guidance from community leaders and ensuring participants' narratives remained at the forefront. This reflexive stance not only enhanced ethical sensitivity but also deepened interpretive authenticity. It allowed for an awareness of the inherent power dynamics in researcher-participant

relationships and ensured that the study served as a platform for amplifying marginalized voices rather than appropriating them.

## Results

### Findings and Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of interview and observation data revealed a layered and emotionally charged account of transgender individuals' encounters with harassment and bullying in holy places. Through close engagement with participants' lived experiences, four dominant themes emerged. Each theme reflects how social hierarchies, religious norms, and emotional struggles intersect within sacred spaces, shaping the participants' spiritual and psychological realities.

#### 1. Sacred Exclusion: Denial of Spiritual Belonging

The first major theme to emerge from the data was *sacred exclusion*, highlighting the consistent experiences of being denied access, respect, or participation in religious practices. Many participants described mosques and shrines as spaces that physically and symbolically reject them, turning sacred sites of peace into arenas of humiliation. Such exclusion was often expressed through verbal harassment, mocking, or subtle gestures of avoidance by others in the congregation.

One participant recounted:

"I went to the mosque during Ramadan just to pray quietly, but the imam told me to leave because people were uncomfortable. I felt as if God's house had no place for me."

This statement encapsulates the profound contradiction between the universal message of divine mercy and the conditional acceptance practiced in reality. The exclusion was not only institutional but also social: participants often reported that even fellow worshippers avoided standing near them, whispering comments that reinforced a sense of impurity or deviance.

This pattern of exclusion illustrates how gender binaries embedded in religious practice translate into moral policing of transgender identities. The denial of belonging within these spaces becomes both a social and spiritual rejection, leading many participants to internalize a sense of being unworthy of God's love. As one participant shared, "They say Allah made everyone equal, but in the mosque, they act like we don't exist." This sense of spiritual dislocation reinforces the findings of previous literature that sacred spaces can become mechanisms of control rather than compassion for marginalized groups.

#### 2. Performative Piety and Social Policing

The second emergent theme *performative piety* captures how religious devotion is used by others to justify discriminatory behavior. Participants consistently highlighted how some individuals in sacred places perform piety outwardly while simultaneously engaging in acts of humiliation or exclusion toward transgender worshippers. This paradox created a painful cognitive dissonance: participants witnessed devotion expressed through hostility.

For example, one participant observed:

"People who pray the longest are often the first to call us names. They tell us to repent before entering, as if we are sinners by birth."

Such narratives reflect how performative religiosity often masks deep-seated social prejudice. The enforcement of gender norms such as dictating dress, voice, or posture served as a form of religiously sanctioned bullying. Participants were often instructed to “pray at home” or “visit shrines instead of mosques,” implicitly demarcating where their presence was acceptable. This social policing, under the guise of protecting sacredness, positioned transgender individuals as spiritual outsiders.

Observation data corroborated these experiences: during shrine visits, participants were frequently stared at or laughed at by other devotees. One field note described a shrine caretaker refusing to accept a participant’s offering, saying, “This place is not for people like you.” These small yet repeated moments of rejection accumulated into a collective narrative of alienation, illustrating how sacred spaces become sites where hierarchy is publicly performed and reinforced.

The theme also underscores how religious authority symbolized by clerics, caretakers, and devout attendees acts as a gatekeeping mechanism. Such authority determines who is “pure” enough to enter the sacred domain. In many cases, this gatekeeping was internalized by transgender individuals themselves, who began to self-censor their participation in worship to avoid humiliation. As one participant put it: “I stopped going. Not because I lost faith, but because faith became painful.”

### **3. Spiritual Shame and Emotional Displacement**

The third theme, *spiritual shame*, captures the deep emotional and psychological consequences of repeated harassment in holy places. Participants reported feelings of humiliation, guilt, and confusion emotions that extended beyond the immediate experience of bullying to their broader relationship with faith and self-worth. The internal conflict between believing in a merciful God and being rejected by His followers produced what one participant called a “spiritual wound.”

A participant expressed this conflict poignantly:

“When they insult me inside the mosque, I cry not because of them, but because I start to doubt whether God also rejects me.”

This emotional displacement where social exclusion translates into theological doubt was a recurring pattern. Many participants described feeling “unholy,” “dirty,” or “unfit for prayer.” These narratives align with Meyer’s (2003) concept of *minority stress*, where chronic social rejection manifests as psychological distress. However, in this religious context, the stress also becomes *spiritual*, as faith ordinarily a source of comfort turns into a reminder of exclusion.

The interviews also revealed a cyclical pattern: experiences of harassment often led to withdrawal from religious spaces, which in turn intensified feelings of isolation and guilt. One participant summarized this paradox: “If I go, they hurt me; if I stay away, I hurt myself.” Emotional consequences extended into social life as well, where rejection in sacred spaces echoed through family and community interactions. This multi-level alienation demonstrates how spiritual trauma intersects with social stigma, leaving transgender individuals suspended between faith and fear.

### **4. Resistance, Reclaiming, and the Search for Divine Connection**

Despite enduring rejection, participants also demonstrated resilience and spiritual agency. The final theme, *resistance and reclaiming*, highlights how many transgender individuals actively

reinterpret spirituality outside institutional frameworks. Instead of abandoning faith, they sought alternative expressions of devotion through personal prayer, visits to inclusive shrines, or forming small prayer circles within their communities.

One participant described this adaptive spirituality:

“I stopped going to the mosque, but I still pray every night. I believe God listens to hearts, not genders.”

This redefinition of sacredness represents a form of spiritual resistance—challenging the authority of institutions that marginalize them. Participants articulated a belief in a compassionate God who transcends human prejudice. This theological reimagining aligns with *Queer Theology*, which asserts that divine love encompasses all identities and that marginalized believers can reinterpret scripture through lived experience.

Observation data further supported this reclaiming process. During group prayers held informally at a participant’s home, there was a sense of peace and collective dignity absent in mainstream religious venues. Participants reported that these gatherings allowed them to “feel God without fear.” Such spaces of inclusion provided emotional healing and reaffirmed the possibility of faith beyond exclusion.

Yet, this reclaiming was not without struggle. Several participants voiced sadness at being forced to create “separate spiritual homes.” One noted: “It is not easy to find peace in isolation. I still long to pray in the mosque like everyone else.” These accounts reflect both the strength and vulnerability inherent in resistance affirming faith while mourning its conditional accessibility. The duality of hope and pain encapsulates the spiritual resilience that defines the transgender community’s relationship with the sacred.

### **Interconnections Among Themes**

The four themes are interwoven, forming a continuum that reflects the complex relationship between exclusion and reclamation. Sacred exclusion sets the stage for performative piety, where religious norms justify harassment. These experiences then internalize as spiritual shame, generating deep emotional wounds. Yet, within this cycle of rejection, resistance emerges as a counterforce, offering new modes of connection with the divine. This thematic interrelation demonstrates that the experiences of transgender individuals in holy places cannot be reduced to victimization alone. Instead, they reflect a dynamic negotiation of faith, dignity, and belonging. Harassment operates not only as a social act but also as a theological statement communicating who is seen as deserving of divine proximity. Conversely, transgender believers’ acts of spiritual reclamation challenge and expand the meaning of holiness itself.

### **Interpretive Synthesis**

From an interpretive standpoint, these findings reveal that harassment and bullying in sacred spaces are not isolated behaviors but systemic expressions of religiously sanctioned exclusion. The narratives highlight a dissonance between the inclusive ideals of faith and the exclusionary practices of its followers. Participants’ emotional and spiritual journeys underscore how deeply intertwined religion is with identity formation in the Pakistani context, where the mosque or shrine is both a communal and moral center. Applying Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), the recurring exposure to discrimination within sacred settings can be understood as a chronic stressor,

resulting in emotional exhaustion and spiritual alienation. However, Queer Theology (Wilcox, 2009) provides an interpretive lens for understanding participants' acts of resistance—not as rejection of faith but as theological reinterpretation. Through this lens, transgender believers emerge not as spiritual outcasts but as agents redefining divine connection on their own terms.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Summary of Central Themes and Patterns**

This study reveals the complex, multilayered experiences of transgender individuals navigating religious exclusion, spiritual resilience, and emergent theologies within Pakistan's sacred spaces. Through thematic analysis of fifteen semi-structured interviews, six interrelated themes surfaced, each illuminating the intersection between gender nonconformity, faith, and institutional power. Spatial and Symbolic Exclusion emerged as the most pervasive form of marginalization. Participants recounted instances of being denied entry to mosques, barred from niyaz at shrines, and prevented from leading or even participating in recitations. Such practices signify not only physical exclusion but also symbolic erasure where spiritual agency is denied through ritual gatekeeping and gendered spatial norms.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Harassment constituted another dominant theme. Participants described being subjected to derogatory language, public mockery, and invasive scrutiny. Non-verbal cues such as hostile stares, deliberate avoidance, or congregants shifting seats reinforced a persistent sense of otherness. Collectively, these behaviors created an atmosphere of hostility incompatible with the professed sanctity of these spaces. Despite this, participants articulated profound spiritual dissonance and resilience. Many distinguished between institutional religion and divine faith, expressing continued devotion to Allah even while being rejected by His representatives. This reflects what Rodríguez (2010) and Singh and McKleroy (2011) term the maintenance of personal faith amid institutional betrayal a process of reconfiguring spiritual identity in opposition to exclusion. Acts of resistance and reclamation further illustrated agency within oppression. Participants described performing private dhikr, participating in trans-led religious circles, and reinterpreting scripture through affirming lenses. These practices constituted not merely coping mechanisms but forms of "sacred resistance," through which participants reclaimed divine intimacy denied by mainstream structures. The analysis also revealed institutional complicity and silence, as most religious authorities either perpetuated or ignored discriminatory practices. The absence of clerical acknowledgment normalized exclusion, reinforcing structural hierarchies within religious life. Yet amid this adversity, participants identified opportunities for reform, rooted in Islamic principles of mercy, compassion, and justice. Calls for inclusive khutbahs, gender-neutral access, and theological reeducation suggest a potential for transformation grounded in Islamic ethics rather than Western liberal frameworks. Together, these themes trace not only patterns of harassment but also the emergence of spiritual resilience and agency. They highlight transgender believers as active interpreters of faith who navigate and redefine sacred belonging under conditions of exclusion.

### **Significance in Relation to Research Questions**

The findings respond directly to the core research questions by identifying specific mechanisms of harassment spatial exclusion, verbal degradation, and systemic silencing and by illustrating how sacred spaces are weaponized against transgender bodies under the guise of religious morality. Contrary to the notion of mosques and shrines as universal sanctuaries, these findings position them as contested sites where inclusion and exclusion are continuously negotiated (Balzer & Hutta,

2015). Participants' testimonies revealed an emotional schism between personal spirituality and institutional rejection. This aligns with Mizock and Hopwood's (2016) concept of **spiritual trauma**, in which marginalization by religious authorities produces profound psychological and theological rupture. Yet, participants also demonstrated adaptive spirituality, sustaining faith through individualized worship and community solidarity. These practices underscore the theological agency of transgender believers, who actively reconstruct religious meaning beyond the confines of orthodoxy. Institutional silence further entrenched exclusion. The lack of theological discourse on gender diversity reinforced congregational policing and spiritual gatekeeping. These patterns substantiate the need for explicit theological reform and policy intervention, echoing recommendations by Wilcox (2009) and Mahomed and Trangos (2016) for inclusive frameworks of sacred citizenship.

### **New Insights and Theoretical Contributions**

This study introduces three interrelated conceptual insights. First, it articulates the notion of "spiritual orphanhood" within South Asian Islam, wherein transgender individuals experience estrangement not from faith itself but from the religious community (ummah). This sense of orphanhood unlike Western secular analogues—occurs in a deeply religious society where spiritual belonging equates to social legitimacy, thereby compounding alienation (Levy & Reeves, 2018). Second, the study identifies the dual nature of sacred spaces. The same mosque or shrine may function alternately as a site of humiliation and a refuge, contingent on context and leadership. This fluidity challenges binary distinctions of "safe" and "unsafe" religious environments, suggesting that spatial politics mediate access as much as doctrine. Third, the emergence of translated theological interpretation constitutes a nascent yet transformative phenomenon. Several participants engaged with Islamic scripture, prophetic traditions, and divine attributes particularly Ya Saboor and Ya Wadood to craft affirming theological frameworks. This development indicates the rise of grassroots queer theology within Pakistan, an area rarely examined in existing scholarship.

### **Contradictions and Comparative Observations**

Unexpected findings complicate dominant narratives. Sufi shrines, though operating under the same theological framework as mosques, were often described as more welcoming. This disparity underscores that exclusion stems less from doctrine than from sociocultural and administrative norms. Furthermore, while prior studies associate religious rejection with spiritual disengagement (Herek, 2009; Meyer, 2003), participants here reported heightened spirituality post-exclusion, interpreting adversity as a test of faith. This paradox suggests that rejection can catalyze deeper divine connection when believers differentiate between God and religious intermediaries. Instances of compassion from the margins—particularly from elderly women and lower-status religious actors highlighted the possibility of "liminal allyship." Such allies, though peripheral within religious hierarchies, perform critical acts of inclusion that contest institutional rigidity. Comparatively, these findings resonate with Hendricks and Testa (2012), who documented gender-based exclusion in worship spaces, and with Kinitz (2017), who identified ritual denial among Christian transgender believers. Yet, this study extends those analyses by embedding them within a distinctly Pakistani socioecological milieu, incorporating local idioms like *na paak* and *fitna* to illustrate culturally specific rationalizations of exclusion. Similarly, while Rahman and Abdullah (2013) documented mosque exclusion, the present study expands upon their work by interrogating emotional and theological consequences.

## Theoretical Implications

This study affirms and extends existing theoretical models. Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) is validated through participants' accounts of chronic microaggressions, but the findings also challenge its linear assumption that stress solely produces distress. Here, exclusion precipitated not only trauma but also spiritual growth a process of transformative resilience. Empirically, the study grounds Queer Theology (Wilcox, 2009) within a Global South context. Participants' reinterpretation of divine attributes demonstrates that marginalized believers generate theological insight precisely through their marginality. Similarly, the concept of Sacred Citizenship (Mahomed & Trangos, 2016) finds reinforcement: exclusion from mosques equated symbolically to exclusion from religious and national identity, revealing how sacred belonging structures broader social inclusion. Consequently, these results advocate expanding Minority Stress Theory to encompass spiritual dimensions and extending Queer Theology to include culturally situated, community-driven forms of faith reconstruction.

## Limitations and Future Directions

The study's interpretive scope is bounded by several limitations. Snowball sampling within Gujranwala constrains generalizability; perspectives from other regions may reveal divergent dynamics. Researcher positionality as an outsider, though reflexively acknowledged, may also shape interpretive framing. Furthermore, limited access to certain religious sites restricted opportunities for direct ethnographic observation. Future research should explore the intersection of caste, class, and gender identity within spiritual contexts, conduct comparative interfaith analyses across South Asia, and evaluate trans-affirming religious initiatives to assess long-term impacts on inclusion and faith retention.

## Conclusion

This study exposes the paradox of sacred spaces that, while grounded in divine mercy, often function as instruments of exclusion. Transgender Muslims in Pakistan face systemic harassment in mosques and shrines, yet their faith endures transformed but unbroken. Their narratives of trauma, endurance, and spiritual innovation reveal both the failures and the unrealized potential of religious life in contemporary Pakistan. By documenting how marginalized believers continue to pray, reinterpret scripture, and forge sacred belonging amid rejection, this study reframes faith as a site not merely of conformity but of profound resistance. It challenges religious authorities to reconcile doctrine with compassion, urges policymakers to institutionalize inclusion, and invites theologians to recognize trans believers as co-creators of living theology. Ultimately, the research affirms that true sanctity lies not in exclusionary ritual but in the radical hospitality of the divine a vision in which every soul, regardless of gender identity, finds space within the sacred.

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