



Review Article

Between Recognition and Rejection: Hijra Experiences of Bureaucratic Encounter in Bangladeshi Public Service Delivery

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Abstract

In 2013, the Government of Bangladesh officially recognised hijra people as a third gender, a move that has been called a landmark in South Asia's gender-identity policy. Over ten years later, however, to our knowledge, no study has yet treated the street-level encounters between hijra citizens and the frontline officials who administer health, employment, social protection, and law-enforcement services as a unified administrative phenomenon. Existing scholarship instead treats these different sectors in isolation from one another. The studies mostly cover the years 2009 to 2025 and, with one comparative exception, are based in Bangladesh, mainly in urban areas. This article attempts to fill this gap through a qualitative meta-synthesis of nine peer-reviewed primary studies reporting hijra participants' first-hand accounts following the secondary qualitative research procedure developed by Cheong et al. (2023), which has been adapted here for already-published rather than raw online interview data. Through thematic synthesis, we use Lipsky's (1980/2010) street-level bureaucracy framework alongside Herd and Moynihan's (2018) administrative burden framework, building on previous South Asian usage of the latter framework, applied across health, employment and, comparatively, law enforcement, with cross-sector evidence on registration and identity documentation, rather than to one sector or a single administrative transaction; social protection formed part of the search scope but is not covered by the coded studies. The synthesis points to four cross-cutting themes: symbolic recognition has not been operationalised into administrative categories; hijra citizens bear substantial learning and compliance costs; strategic concealment of identity is interpreted as carrying psychological costs; and frontline discretion is exercised largely beyond formal channels and is mostly unchecked. When taken together, these findings show that hijra citizens experience a distinctive form of administrative burden, one that is generated not by excessive procedures but by the absence of an administrative category that is operationalised for them in the systems they encounter. The present study extends the theory of administrative burden to a group that is recognised in law but not accommodated in administration while providing a cross-sectoral evidence base for inclusive public service redesign in Bangladesh and similar Global South settings.

Keywords

Hijra, Third Gender, Street-Level Bureaucracy, Administrative Burden, Public Service Delivery, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

In 2013, the Government of Bangladesh published a gazette notification recognising hijra people as a "third gender," a decision remarkably similar, although not identical, to developments in Pakistan, India, and Nepal, and widely described as a landmark in South Asian gender-identity policy (Aboim, 2020). More than a decade later, however, formal recognition and lived administrative reality remain starkly apart: hijra citizens report continued exclusion from public hospital services, social protection schemes, formal employment, and fair treatment by law enforcement (Aziz & Azhar, 2019; Sifat & Shafi, 2020). Bangladeshi social science research increasingly documents these disparities, but almost entirely within single-sector silos. Scholarship deals mostly with health access (Hasan et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2009), employment (Fontana, 2020; Lamia et al., 2024), or social exclusion in general (Al-Mamun et al., 2022; Hossain et al., 2024). A comprehensive understanding of the bureaucratic encounter itself is necessary to understand how a hijra citizen engages with the frontline official, whether a health worker, a social welfare desk officer, or a police constable, because it is these officials who translate state policy into lived experience.

Public administration scholarship offers two established frameworks for examining precisely this translation. Lipsky's (1980/2010) concept of street-level bureaucracy holds that policy is not ultimately made in legislatures but in the discretionary, resource-constrained decisions of frontline workers who directly interact with citizens. Herd and Moynihan's (2018) administrative burden framework extends this insight to the learning, compliance, and psychological costs that citizens bear when navigating state systems, and demonstrates that such costs are neither trivial nor equally distributed. Both frameworks were developed primarily from Global North settings, and a growing body of scholarship has begun to interrogate how well they travel to weak-state and postcolonial administrative contexts, where frontline discretion is shaped by resource scarcity, informal privatisation of service delivery, and accountability gaps rather than by well-resourced but rule-bound bureaucracies (Eiró & Lotta, 2024; Peeters & Campos, 2023). This study contributes to that emerging conversation by applying both frameworks jointly to the hijra population of Bangladesh, a population whose situation is analytically distinctive: it is legally recognised by the state, yet not structurally accommodated by the administrative systems meant to serve it.

Administrative burden theory has previously been applied to gender-nonconforming South Asian groups. Nisar (2018, 2020), as part of important ethnographic work, analysed how the Khawaja Sira of Pakistan, a population that, like hijra, is culturally and now legally defined outside the male-female binary, experience administrative burden when obtaining a legal identity document, and how street-level policing curtails their everyday citizenship in public space. Nisar's research illustrates that the theory of administrative burden has some explanatory power for gender-nonconforming populations in South Asia, with the current research conceived explicitly as an extension of this initial work rather than its first application. Where Nisar investigated documentation and identity as a single administrative transaction within one country, this study instead synthesises evidence across health, employment and, comparatively, law enforcement in Bangladesh specifically, together with cross-sector evidence on registration and identity documentation; social protection fell within the search scope but is not represented in the coded studies. This allows us to test two things: first, whether the same pattern of administrative logic recurs across seemingly disconnected sectors; second, whether the burden this generates is best understood in terms of a set of sector-specific frictions or as one structural, cumulative pattern.

The hijra community is often affected by stigma, which poses considerable ethical and logistical challenges for primary data collection; the safety of both researcher and participant cannot always be guaranteed (Chatfield, 2020; James & Platzer, 1999). Primary data collection with this population also requires sustained community access and robust ethical safeguards. Rather than repeating this extractive process, this study adopts a secondary qualitative research design that makes use of rich first-hand hijra testimony already collected and published, in peer-reviewed form, by other researchers. It follows the procedural rigour proposed by Cheong et al. (2023) for secondary qualitative inquiry, adapting it as a qualitative meta-synthesis of published studies rather than raw online interview data, and applies systematic identification, quality assessment, and thematic synthesis to hijra narratives reported across a corpus of peer-reviewed studies drawn from several public service domains.

The research question around which the study revolves is: after legal recognition, what forms of administrative burden do hijra citizens face in their bureaucratic interactions with the public service systems of Bangladesh, and how does street-level discretion mediate those experiences across sectors? The study makes three contributions in answering this question. First, it offers, to our knowledge, the first cross-sectoral, meta-synthetic account of the hijra bureaucratic encounter in Bangladesh, moving beyond the single-sector focus of prior work. Second, it extends administrative burden theory, in the manner initiated by Nisar (2018, 2020) for Pakistan, to a Bangladeshi population whose situation exposes an under-theorised variant of the framework, in which the administrative category needed to render a legal right

operable has not been operationalised at the point of service. Third, the current contribution situates itself within the wider effort – the one associated with [Peeters and Campos \(2023\)](#) and [Eiró and Lotta \(2024\)](#) – to build a street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden theory that reflects Global South institutions rather than the well-resourced, rule-governed bureaucracies of high-income states.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Paradox of Recognition*

The literature consistently classifies Bangladesh's third-gender recognition as symbolic rather than substantive. [Aziz and Azhar \(2019\)](#), drawing on fifteen interviews with hijra individuals and five interviews with key informants, found that although hijra are officially recognised, they are largely unable to register under the third-gender category in practice and are consequently excluded from formal employment and healthcare. [Sifat and Shafi \(2020\)](#), conducting four focus groups with twenty-eight hijra respondents in Dhaka, found that legal recognition had no discernible effect on social, economic, cultural, or political participation. [Irfan et al. \(2025\)](#) measured this gap directly: among 298 hijra participants surveyed in Dhaka, 79.2 per cent concealed their hijra identity in everyday life and 82.2 per cent reported experiencing societal discrimination despite legal recognition. These studies establish the discrepancy between recognition and implementation with considerable clarity, but, taken on their own, do not theorise the administrative mechanisms that sustain the gap. Comparable patterns have been documented elsewhere in South Asia. [Aboim's \(2020\)](#) comparative analysis of third-gender markers across Nepal and other Asian contexts argues that legal and institutional recognition can be complicit with continued misrecognition because it reifies identity into a single legal category without altering the underlying norms and administrative practices that govern everyday interactions with the state. This literature motivates the present study's central move: to treat the recognition-implementation gap not as a general social phenomenon but as a specific, theorisable administrative failure.

2.2. *Street-Level Bureaucracy and Administrative Burden Beyond the Global North*

Both frameworks that anchor this study were developed principally from evidence in well-resourced, rule-bound administrative systems. [Lipsky's \(1980/2010\)](#) original account of street-level bureaucracy assumes frontline workers who operate within functioning organisations, however resource-constrained, and [Herd and Moynihan's \(2018\)](#) administrative burden framework was developed largely from United States social policy contexts in which the category of eligibility for a given benefit is already settled and the remaining question is how difficult it is, in practice, for citizens to claim it. A growing body of scholarship argues that these assumptions do not transfer cleanly to weak-state or postcolonial administrative contexts. [Peeters and Campos \(2023\)](#), synthesising the literature on street-level bureaucracy in weak state institutions, identify an "institutional waterbed effect": when the structural preconditions for policy implementation are unresolved at the institutional level, complexity is pushed down to frontline workers, who cope through policy improvisation, informal privatisation of services, or alienated, survival-oriented compliance. [Eiró and Lotta \(2024\)](#) extend this critique on decolonial grounds, arguing that mainstream street-level bureaucracy theory overlooks the depth of social inequality that structures state-citizen relationships in the Global South, and that the state itself often actively reproduces these inequalities rather than merely failing to correct them. Within Bangladesh specifically, [Panday's \(2026\)](#) mixed-methods study of subnational governance and [Mahmud's \(2026\)](#) cross-national analysis of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka both document a citizenry that faces heavy administrative burdens and endemic informality in everyday encounters with local government, even as more diffuse and, per [Mahmud \(2026\)](#), conditionally fragile forms of trust in public institutions persist. This body of work supplies the institutional backdrop against which the hijra bureaucratic encounter should be read: not as an anomaly within an otherwise well-functioning administrative system, but as an especially visible instance of burdens already pervasive in Bangladeshi public administration that fall disproportionately on populations without an established administrative category.

2.3. *Administrative Burden Applied to Gender-Nonconforming Populations*

The clearest precedent for the present study is [Nisar's \(2018\)](#) ethnographic account of how the Khawaja Sira of Pakistan, a population with a comparable cultural and legal status to hijra in Bangladesh, experience administrative burden when attempting to obtain a legal identity document. Nisar shows that third parties, informal administrative behaviour, and social stigma combine to generate learning, compliance, and psychological costs specific to Khawaja Sira applicants, and that these costs are compounded rather than merely added to the burdens already borne by other citizens. In a companion study, [Nisar \(2020\)](#) documents how street-level policing, through selective enforcement, hyper-surveillance, and

moral policing, constrains the everyday citizenship of the Khawaja Sira in public space, independent of what the law formally permits. Related evidence from elsewhere in South Asia reinforces this picture: [Suleman et al. \(2025\)](#), using constructivist grounded theory with twenty-three transgender participants in Pakistan, find that legal protection under the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018 has not translated into lived security, with participants instead relying on informal guru-chela kinship structures for survival, a finding that closely echoes [Fontana's \(2020\)](#) account of informal, guru-mediated workplace inclusion for hijra in Bangladesh discussed in Section 2.4.

The literature on the administrative burden has expanded to encompass the regulation of gender and identity more generally. [Herd and Moynihan \(2025\)](#) coined the term "gendered administrative burden" to refer to the ways in which the state uses coercive power to regulate gendered bodies and identities through the documentation systems that the state has built on a binary understanding of sex. [Nowotny et al. \(2025\)](#) studied the gender-affirming name-change process for transgender adults in the United States. They found that poverty, housing instability, and criminal-legal histories push applicants out of an already onerous administrative pathway before a final decision. The body of literature, taken together, suggests that the theory of administrative burden travels reasonably well to gender-nonconforming peoples from South Asia to North America. Yet, no study to date applies it in cross-sectoral form to hijra citizens in Bangladesh specifically, nor tests whether the burdens documented within a single sector (identity documentation in Nisar's case, name-change proceedings in Nowotny et al.'s case) recur in similar form across the several unconnected sectors in which a single citizen must repeatedly present themselves to the state.

2.4. Sector-Specific Evidence in Bangladesh

Access to healthcare has received the most sustained qualitative scrutiny among the four target service domains. In an early and widely referenced ethnographic study comprising fifty in-depth interviews, twenty key-informant interviews, and ten focus group discussions, [Khan et al. \(2009\)](#), whose fieldwork pre-dates the 2013 recognition, documented hijra individuals' position at the "extreme margin" of social exclusion, directly linked to their non-recognition within the binary gender categories used for service provision. [Hasan et al. \(2025\)](#), using seventy-nine in-depth interviews in Rajshahi, more recently found that public hospitals continue to operate only male- and female-designated facilities, with hijra patients experiencing verbal harassment, being blamed for their own illness, and encountering health providers who lack basic awareness of hijra identity and culture. [Fontana \(2020\)](#) documented how workplace inclusion of hijra individuals relies substantially on informal, relationship-based interventions with gurus, police, and religious leaders rather than on formal institutional accommodation, a pattern that, in our reading, reflects the substitution of informal brokerage for formal institutional provision. A related study by [Lamia et al. \(2024\)](#), drawing on forty-six qualitative interviews alongside survey data, found that legal recognition had not translated into access to formal-sector employment, motivating the researchers to design an alternative digital-platform intervention that worked around, rather than through, existing application processes.

Encounters with law enforcement are relatively less studied in Bangladesh, but comparative South Asian evidence is illuminating. In a study by [Jain et al. \(2020\)](#), hijra and transgender women in Delhi revealed that their experiences of police violence occurred more during everyday street interactions than in detention. This study also found frontline officers to exercise almost limitless discretion. These officers operate largely without the oversight of courts, formal procedures, and law. This evidence, discussed further as a comparative source in Section 4.4, does not come from Bangladesh itself. [Barua and Khan \(2022\)](#) report, through a secondary review of policy documents and media coverage, that no government institution systematically monitors violence against the transgender community. [Barua and Khan \(2022\)](#) also cite, second-hand, a 2019 Bandhu Social Welfare Society survey ([Bandhu Social Welfare Society, 2019](#), as cited in [Barua & Khan, 2022](#)), according to which most transgender respondents seeking healthcare reported facing mental or sexual harassment, while a large share reported no access to public health services at all. In a cross-sectional survey of 346 hijra participants conducted across five cities, [Amanullah et al. \(2022\)](#) found that 58.5 per cent of respondents reported violations of their political rights, while 73.3 per cent reported violations of their economic rights. Moreover, substantial shares of the sample also reported violations affecting educational status (59.3 per cent), employment (46.4 per cent), health (42.7 per cent), and social or civil rights (34.4 per cent). When read alongside the qualitative evidence, these figures show that rights violations are reported across several domains in the same sample; because the survey reports separate prevalence figures rather than cross-tabulated data, they do not by themselves show that violations co-occur within the same individuals' lives.

2.5. The Gap

The current study is motivated by three shortcomings in the literature. First, almost all previous qualitative work is sector-siloed: health, employment, and law enforcement are studied in isolation, masking the aggregate, cross-sectoral burden an individual hijra citizen may carry over a lifetime of encounters with the Bangladeshi state. Second, much of the existing literature is framed through social exclusion, human rights, or public health, whereas the mechanisms of the bureaucratic encounter itself (discretion, procedural burden, categorical fit within administrative forms) remain underdeveloped relative to its outcomes. Third, while Nisar's (2018, 2020) work has convincingly established that administrative burden theory applies to gender-nonconforming populations in South Asia, that demonstration has, to date, been confined to Pakistan and to a single administrative transaction; no study has yet tested whether the same apparatus, applied cross-sectorally, illuminates a similar or distinct pattern of burden for hijra citizens in Bangladesh. This theoretical question matters because the theory of administrative burden was constructed largely for populations whose eligibility is already settled in principle, so that the question is only one of learning, compliance and psychological cost in claiming it (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). The Bangladeshi hijra case, this study argues, is potentially a more basic version of the theory, whereby the administrative category itself, rather than just the route to it, has not been operationalised across the instruments that citizens encounter. The current research addresses these gaps by taking the sector-specific qualitative literature on hijra citizens in Bangladesh as a secondary data corpus and, through a cross-domain synthesis of street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden theory, applying it to first-hand hijra narratives from the service domains covered.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis design, adapted from the secondary qualitative research process developed by Cheong et al. (2023) for already-published peer-reviewed studies rather than raw online interview data. Meta-synthesis refers to the systematic integration of findings and, where reported, participants' own words across a number of qualitative studies, generating interpretive insight beyond what any single study offers (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The process outlined by Cheong et al. (2023) was designed for unstructured raw online interview and testimony data of uncertain provenance and places heavy emphasis on assessing the credibility of the platform, publisher and interviewer. Because the current corpus consists instead of peer-reviewed, professionally-edited studies, three adaptations were made. The "data-context quality" criteria have been narrowed down from website and publisher credibility to publication venue, peer-review status, and reported sample characteristics (Section 3.3). The "data-content quality" criteria have been retained conceptually but were applied instead to reported findings and quoted material, rather than raw transcripts. No separate translation-quality or transcription-verification step was undertaken, because the published studies have undergone editorial and peer scrutiny, unlike the unverified online text with which Cheong et al. (2023) worked. Peer review does not, however, verify translation: many of the primary studies were probably conducted in Bangla or other local languages and reported in English, so any quoted or paraphrased participant material is mediated by the original authors' translation and interpretation. We acknowledge this as a limitation (Section 6).

This approach was preferred over a raw-online-data approach for two reasons. First, a preliminary search for publicly available, first-person hijra testimony on bureaucratic encounters yielded insufficient volume for rigorous analysis, consistent with the general scarcity of first-hand accounts from highly stigmatised populations noted elsewhere in the secondary-data literature (Chatfield, 2020). Second, a substantial body of peer-reviewed qualitative research already exists containing rich, ethically collected first-hand hijra narratives, obtained by researchers with established community access and ethics approval. Re-using this evidence base, rather than repeating primary data collection, is consistent with the ethical obligation to minimise respondent burden on an already heavily studied and highly vulnerable population (Chatfield, 2020; Heaton, 2008).

3.2. Search Strategy and Corpus Identification

The literature search was implemented through Consensus, an AI-assisted academic search platform whose corpus is drawn from Semantic Scholar, OpenAlex and its own crawl of the scholarly web, using combinations of the terms hijra, third gender, transgender and Bangladesh with sector-specific terms including (but not limited to) health, employment, police, discrimination and public service. The searches were run on 30 May 2026; the queries combined the terms "hijra", "third-gender", "transgender", "public service delivery" and "Bangladesh" with the sector-specific terms above, with

filters limiting results to English- and Bengali-language peer-reviewed articles and book chapters published between 2009 and 2025, and returned 84 records, of which 56 were screened by title and abstract and 27 were read in full. A final verification search was run on 20 August 2026 to capture recent publications. We draw only on two elements of PRISMA (Page et al., 2021): its two-stage logic of identification followed by eligibility screening, and its insistence on stating inclusion criteria expressly. This is not a full PRISMA protocol: we did not pre-register the review, produce an exclusion log or numerical flow diagram, or conduct a one-off search; the search was iterative. ENTREQ (Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the synthesis of Qualitative research; Tong et al., 2012), a standard designed for qualitative evidence synthesis, is the more applicable benchmark for a meta-synthesis such as this, and Appendix A maps this study against the full ENTREQ checklist rather than against PRISMA. The resultant corpus should be understood as purposively rather than exhaustively identified. A more rigorous, formally logged replication, with flow diagram and exact exclusion counts, is a high priority for future research (see Section 6).

3.3. Data Quality Assessment

Cheong et al. (2023) developed two framework dimensions, data-context quality and data-content quality, to structure judgment of qualitative research quality; as described in Section 3.1, these were adapted here to assess published studies rather than raw interviews, supplemented informally by criteria drawn from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative checklist, particularly its attention to the clarity of stated research aims, methodological fit, and the adequacy of reported recruitment and data collection methods. A full scored CASP appraisal is a further improvement for future research. The appraisal was descriptive rather than scored: studies were assessed against the five criteria set out below, and no numerical quality score was computed or used to exclude studies or to weight findings, so appraisal informed the allocation of studies to tiers but not the weighting of themes.

Each candidate study was assessed against five criteria: source credibility (peer reviewed publication); relevant population (hijra and/or third-gender participants, in Bangladesh or South Asia more broadly for comparative framing); rich data (first-hand quotes or thematically coded findings from in-depth interviews and/or focus groups, rather than survey data alone); sectoral relevance (addressing at least one of the four target service domains, or access to public services across sectors); and transparency (explicit reporting of method and sample size). Based on this, the identified literature was sorted into tiers as shown in the Tier column of Table 1. Tier 1 studies met the five criteria and were thematically coded in Section 4, subject to the qualifications flagged in Table 1 and set out below. Tier 2 comprised supplementary sources that met most criteria but reported quantitative, short-form or secondary-document data, or were identified only in the final verification search; these were used to corroborate patterns rather than being coded thematically. Tier 3 comprised background sources (literature reviews), cited only for context and excluded from both the qualitative and quantitative evidence base.

Table 1

Overview of the Core Synthesis Corpus (k = 9) with Tier Classification

Study	Method	Sample	Location	Primary Sector(s)	Tier
Aziz and Azhar (2019)	In-depth interviews; key-informant interviews	15 hijra individuals; 5 key informants	Bangladesh	Employment, healthcare (cross-sector)	1
Khan et al. (2009)	In-depth interviews; key-informant interviews; focus groups	50 IDIs; 20 KIIs; 10 FGDs	Bangladesh	Healthcare; social exclusion	1 (a)
Sifat and Shafi (2020)	Focus group discussions	4 FGDs; 28 respondents	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Cross-sector social exclusion (social, economic, cultural and political participation)	1
Fontana (2020)	Qualitative case study	19 interviews	Bangladesh	Employment	1
Jain et al. (2020)	Qualitative interviews	Not specified (b)	Delhi, India (comparative)	Law enforcement (comparative evidence; see Section 4.4)	1 (b)
Lamia et al. (2024)	Qualitative interviews; survey	46 interviews	Bangladesh	Employment	1

Hasan et al. (2025)	In-depth interviews	79 IDIs	Rajshahi, Bangladesh	Healthcare	1
Irfan et al. (2025)	Mixed-methods: survey, in-depth interviews, focus groups	298 survey; 20 IDIs; 5 FGDs	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Cross-sector rights	1 (c)
Akter and Saha (2024)	In-depth interviews; key-informant interviews	13 participants	Khulna, Bangladesh	Socio-cultural; healthcare	1

Note. (a) Khan et al. (2009) pre-dates the 2013 recognition and is used as a pre-recognition baseline only. (b) Jain et al. (2020) report a qualitative interview-based design with self-identified hijra and trans women in Delhi but, in the text we reviewed, do not state an exact interview or participant count; the study is therefore an exception to the transparency criterion (Section 3.3). (c) Only the qualitative components of Irfan et al. (2025) were coded thematically. Tier 1 = core synthesis corpus, coded thematically in Section 4 (all nine studies shown here are Tier 1; Tier 2 and Tier 3 sources are listed in Section 3.3 and are not shown in this table because they were not thematically coded).

Source: Compiled by the authors from the nine core-corpus studies listed in the References.

The Tier 1 corpus, as coded in the thematic synthesis presented in Section 4, consists of nine studies: Aziz and Azhar (2019), Khan et al. (2009), Hasan et al. (2025), Irfan et al. (2025), Sifat and Shafi (2020), Lamia et al. (2024), Jain et al. (2020), Fontana (2020), and Akter and Saha (2024). The final item, an exploratory study in Khulna district involving thirteen participants, widens the geographic scope of an otherwise Dhaka- and Rajshahi-concentrated corpus (see Section 6). Jain et al. (2020) is the only Tier 1 work not from Bangladesh. It is kept in this core corpus because there is currently no equivalent documentation of hijra-police encounters in Bangladesh. The comparative status of Jain et al. is stated explicitly in the discussion of Theme 4.4, together with its limitations, so that readers can weigh this evidence accordingly. Jain et al. (2020) also does not report an exact participant count in the text we reviewed, so it does not fully meet the transparency criterion; it is retained as an explicit exception for the reason given above. Khan et al. (2009) pre-dates the 2013 recognition; it is retained in Tier 1 as a pre-recognition baseline against which the later studies are read, and it is not used as evidence of post-recognition implementation failure. Irfan et al. (2025) combines a survey with in-depth interviews and focus groups; only its qualitative components were coded thematically, and its survey figures are reported as quantitative context. Sifat and Shafi (2020) examine social exclusion across social, economic, cultural and political participation and are therefore coded as cross-sector rather than assigned to a single service domain.

Amanullah et al. (2022), a quantitative cross-sectional survey, is Tier 2: it checks patterns in the qualitative corpus against population-level statistics without being thematically coded. Two further sources, Rahman et al. (2025), a qualitative study, and Sony (2025), were identified in the final verification search described in Section 3.2. Because they were identified only after the original search, they were not thematically coded and are placed in Tier 2 as corroborative sources; they are discussed in Sections 4.1 and 5 respectively. The Tier 3 sources include Al-Mamun et al. (2022) and Hossain et al. (2024), which are literature reviews and are reported only for background. Further, a full-text reading confirmed that Barua and Khan (2022) conducted no primary interviews; the authors based their findings on a secondary review of policy documents and media reports. For this reason it is placed in Tier 2 and used only as corroborative evidence, not as evidence from participants.

The coding used for the theoretical framing was restricted to the comparative literature on gender-nonconforming populations elsewhere in South Asia and beyond (Section 2.3).

3.4. Analytical Approach

Findings from the included studies were read in full, with reported findings and any quoted participant material organised thematically in a synthesis matrix structured by public service domain. Following the thematic synthesis method developed by Thomas and Harden (2008), the analysis proceeded through three stages: first, line-by-line coding of extracted findings and, where available, quoted participant material; second, the inductive development of descriptive themes organised within each service domain; and third, the deductive generation of analytical themes that cut across domains, developed through the combined lens of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980/2010) and administrative burden (Herd & Moynihan, 2018) theory, informed by the Global South and gender-nonconforming extensions of that theory discussed in Section 2. The original contribution of the study lies in this cross-sectoral, theory-driven synthesis rather than in the collection of new primary evidence. Coding was carried out manually, without qualitative data analysis software. The first author read each study in full, carried out the line-by-line coding and developed the descriptive themes; the second author reviewed the coded extracts, the theme structure and the cross-domain analytical themes, and

disagreements were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached. No formal inter-coder reliability statistic was calculated.

3.5. Researcher Positionality

In keeping with reflective practice recommended for secondary qualitative research (Boud et al., 1993; Castles, 2012), the authors recognise their own positions in relation to this research topic. The first author is a disability rights activist and has worked over an extended period within an organisation representing persons with disabilities, through which he has had direct exposure to the hijra community and to shared struggles around social devaluation, public avoidance, and limited access to welfare and government schemes. This is a position of proximity without membership: someone who has witnessed, and in a different domain personally experienced, exclusion within a shared institutional space, but who is not himself a member of the hijra community. This position, rather than an insider claim to hijra identity, is the principal motivation behind the study, informed by a parallel, though not equivalent, experience of marginalisation due to disability within Bangladeshi public service systems. The second author, a graduate researcher without direct community exposure, brings a complementary vantage point, focused principally on strengthening the study's engagement with comparative public administration theory. Neither author claims insider status regarding hijra identity or lived experience; the analysis rests entirely on narratives hijra individuals themselves provided to other researchers, consistent with the ethical principle of autonomy articulated by the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM, 2018).

These IASFM guidelines were designed for forced-migration research, not for research on hijra communities. We take them here to be a transferable statement of good practice for the reason that both contexts involve secondary interpretation of testimony of persons who experience significant stigma and safety risk and who are in an unequal power relation to researchers and state institutions. Furthermore, and as we set out below in Section 3.6, the principle of autonomy of the IASFM is directly relevant to the issue of interpretive distance. We refer here to the situation where the narratives of a population are analysed through a framework which they did not choose.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Because this study relies solely on data already published in peer-reviewed outlets, it involved no direct contact with human participants and did not require approval from an institutional review board. This is consistent with common practice for secondary analyses of already-published literature (Tripathy, 2013).

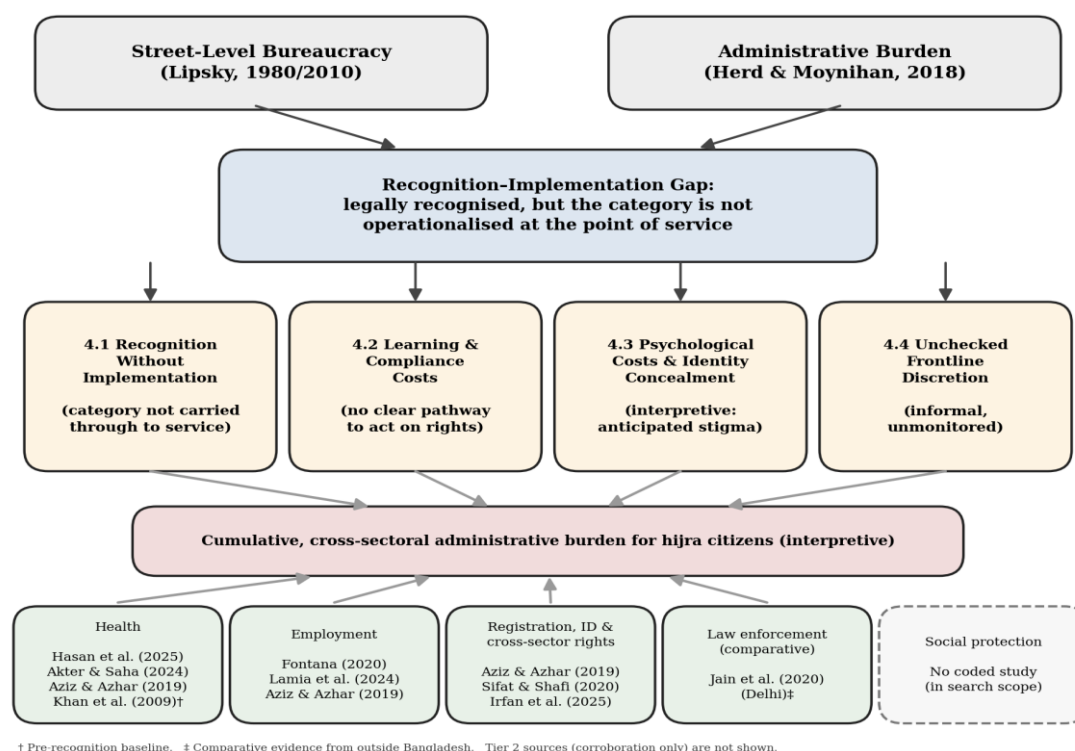
The ethical issue, unlike the exemption above, relates to the way this work interprets the original participants' testimony. According to the source publications, the hijra individuals whose narratives serve as the underlying evidence in this article provided consent to participate in the nine original studies, and to those studies' own stated aims; we relied on the ethics approval and consent procedures reported in those publications and did not independently verify them for each study. They did not, and could not, provide consent to have their words reinterpreted through an administrative burden framework that none of the original researchers employed. This is not a flaw of this study but rather a standing feature of secondary qualitative synthesis. However, in this case it carries particular weight given the stigmatisation of the hijra population and how their accounts might easily be misrepresented by an unfamiliar theoretical vocabulary. We manage this risk in three ways: by relying on the original study findings or quotes and not on ungrounded interpretation; by not reproducing long quotations beyond fair use; and by framing the administrative burden framework as a lens to organise patterns already found in the studies we draw on rather than a claim about how the participants themselves understood their experiences. We do not regard this as a substitute for direct consent to this analytical use, and we note it as an interpretative limitation rather than a resolution (see also Section 6). The research does not re-identify any participant beyond what the original publishing authors acknowledged themselves.

4. Findings

The synthesis of the nine core-corpus studies identified four cross-cutting analytical themes. Each theme shows a type of administrative burden (Herd & Moynihan, 2018) that emerges through street-level bureaucratic encounters (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Further, each recurs across sectors that are otherwise institutionally disconnected in structurally similar form. Figure 1 is a summary of the relationships between the two theoretical frameworks, the four themes and the sectoral evidence base; each element of the figure is developed in the corresponding subsection below. Because the source studies mostly report findings in the original authors' own words rather than as extended verbatim testimony, the findings below draw chiefly on those reported findings, supplemented by short phrases from the source publications; no extended participant testimony is reproduced, which is noted as a limitation in Section 6.

Figure 1

Thematic Map of the Four Cross-Cutting Themes and Their Evidence Base



Note. Arrows indicate the analytical relationship between theoretical frameworks (top), the recognition-implementation gap (centre), the four cross-cutting themes derived from thematic synthesis (Sections 4.1–4.4), and the sectoral evidence base (bottom). Tier 1 studies are shown in the bottom row; Tier 2 sources are used only for corroboration (Section 3.3). Social protection fell within the search scope but is not covered by any coded study.

4.1. Recognition Without Implementation

Across the domains examined, the studies converge on the same structural finding: the juridical recognition of hijra as a third gender in 2013 has not been operationalised within the administrative systems tasked with delivering it. Aziz and Azhar (2019) report that hijra individuals still cannot register as third-gender at the local government offices responsible for issuing that registration, a gap that then prevents access to the formal employment and health services that depend on it, despite the official claim of recognition. Hasan et al. (2025) similarly document that public hospitals in Rajshahi have not configured facilities for hijra patients; all administrative provisions remain strictly male or female, with no physical, procedural, or categorical accommodation for a third-gender patient. Sifat and Shafi (2020) likewise conclude that there have been no significant improvements in the social, economic, cultural, or political participation of hijra individuals in Dhaka city following recognition.

The most clear-cut single case of this gap is not qualitative but numerical and it postdates every study in the core corpus. According to Dhaka Tribune (2019), the Bangladesh Election Commission included a “hijra” option in the voter registration form in 2018–2019, and on this basis, third-gender citizens became eligible for smart national identity cards, a complete administrative pathway that has existed for nearly seven years. According to the final electoral roll of the Commission, published on 18 November 2025 in preparation for the next national election of the country, there are 64,814,907 male voters and 62,879,042 female voters, with only 1,234 third-gender voters across the country, out of nearly 127.7 million (The Daily Star, 2025). According to government and rights-group estimates, the number of hijras in Bangladesh is between 10,000 and 100,000 (Mushtaq, 2018). Set against that range, the 1,234 registered third-gender voters equal roughly 1.2 per cent (against 100,000) to 12.3 per cent (against 10,000) of the estimated hijra population. This is not a

clean uptake rate: the estimate is uncertain, it includes people under 18 who are not eligible to vote, and it includes hijra individuals who are registered as male or female rather than as third gender. Even at the most favourable end of the range, however, only about one in eight potential registrants had registered in the third-gender category nearly seven years after the pathway was provided. This statistic provides independent, population-level support for a qualitatively documented pattern across the corpus: a formally available administrative category with limited realised uptake. The qualitative study conducted by [Rahman et al. \(2025\)](#) (Tier 2) in the Barishal district identifies the proximate mechanism for this non-uptake, consistent with the discretion and stigma-avoidance dynamics developed in Sections 4.3 and 4.4. Some hijra individuals hold National Identity Cards that register them as male; because officials demand these cards, when they present them they report being turned away or treated with suspicion, as officials argue that the registered sex does not match their appearance. This, in turn, discourages many hijra individuals from even attempting to proceed with the correction process.

The voter-roll figure and the Barishal finding thus corroborate one another across independent methods, quantitative and qualitative, and across independent points in time, suggesting that the recognition-implementation gap identified in this study is not a historical artefact of the studies' publication dates but a persistent, currently measurable feature of Bangladeshi public administration.

This case refines, rather than contradicts, the argument developed in Section 5. A third-gender option does exist in some administrative instruments: the voter-registration form and, on that basis, the smart national identity card. What the evidence shows is that the category has not been carried through to the point of service. Public hospitals continue to operate male- and female-designated facilities ([Hasan et al., 2025](#)), registration under the third-gender category is reported to be unavailable at local government offices ([Aziz & Azhar, 2019](#)), and identity cards registered as male prompt refusal or suspicion at the counter ([Rahman et al., 2025](#)). By an “unbuilt” or “unoperationalised” category we therefore mean one that has not been built into the forms, facilities and procedures that citizens actually encounter, rather than one that is absent from every instrument; the gap lies in uptake and in recognition at the point of service.

A finding from Khulna district, however, complicates a purely one-dimensional reading of this gap. [Akter and Saha \(2024\)](#) report that legal recognition had, in the socio-cultural domain, measurably enhanced third-gender participants' sense of social participation and personal identity, even as, in the very same interviews, participants reported that recognition had done nothing to change their economic circumstances and that healthcare encounters continued to involve negligence, avoidance, and verbal or sexual abuse. Read alongside the Dhaka- and Rajshahi-based evidence, this suggests the recognition-implementation gap is not uniform across all domains of hijra life: symbolic and socio-cultural recognition appears to have travelled further than administrative and institutional recognition.

In terms of administrative burden, this amounts to a category-fit failure within formal state systems rather than a failure of social recognition as such: the formal administrative forms, facility designs, and service architectures of the state were never modified to fit the category that the state itself created, even as day-to-day social attitudes had begun to change. Frontline workers were left to improvise rather than execute a designed policy. There is an interesting parallel in [Nisar's \(2018\)](#) finding that Khawaja Sira applicants for legal identity documents in Pakistan face burden not because the administrative process for a settled category is difficult, but because the category itself has never really been built into routine administrative infrastructure, a parallel that suggests this may be a feature of third-gender recognition elsewhere in South Asia rather than something particular to Bangladesh, although two country cases cannot establish this.

4.2. Learning and Compliance Costs

The absence of dedicated officers, forms, and procedures imposes learning and compliance costs on hijra citizens. Following [Herd and Moynihan \(2018\)](#), we distinguish learning costs (the effort of finding out whether and how an entitlement or service can be accessed) from compliance costs (the effort of meeting administrative requirements). The evidence for this theme rests on a small number of studies and is thinner than for Themes 1 and 4, so it should be read as provisional. [Irfan et al. \(2025\)](#) found that hijra participants in Dhaka repeatedly experienced difficulty translating rights formally guaranteed to them into administrative action, because the system itself provided no clear pathway for doing so. The title of their paper, “The benefits do not reach us,” conveys the same finding. [Aziz and Azhar \(2019\)](#) similarly report that hijra individuals could not in practice register under the third-gender category at the local government offices responsible for it, which we read as both a learning cost, because the route was unclear, and a compliance cost, because the required registration could not be completed. [Rahman et al. \(2025\)](#), a Tier 2 source, add that identity cards registered as male lead to hijra individuals being turned away or treated with suspicion (Section 4.1). [Lamia et al. \(2024\)](#), combining

interviews and survey data, found that the formal-sector employment application process remained functionally inaccessible to hijra applicants, and that no institutional effort had previously been made to employ hijra individuals through existing processes at all; the researchers' own response, designing a separate digital platform outside the existing application system, may be read, as our interpretation, as indirect evidence of a compliance burden within those processes, although the choice does not itself measure how large that burden was. This pattern is consistent with the broader Global South street-level bureaucracy literature reviewed in Section 2.2, in which the "institutional waterbed effect" identified by [Peeters and Campos \(2023\)](#) pushes unresolved institutional complexity downward onto frontline workers, who cope through improvisation or informal rationing, and, in turn, onto citizens, who ultimately absorb the resulting learning and compliance costs.

4.3. Psychological Costs and Identity Concealment

This is the most interpretive of the four themes: the corpus provides survey evidence on concealment and discrimination, and interpretive statements by some source authors, but little first-hand evidence of psychological outcomes, so we treat concealment as an indicator of anticipated psychological cost rather than as a measured outcome. [Irfan et al. \(2025\)](#) discovered that in everyday life most participants hide their hijra identity, with the majority hiding it from family specifically, and the large majority reporting gender-based discrimination overall. According to [Amanullah et al. \(2022\)](#), a majority of the participants reported violations of their political and economic rights, which the authors of the present synthesis read as linked to pre-emptive avoidance of state institutions. The survey statistics are reported in Section 2.4. [Khan et al. \(2009\)](#), whose fieldwork pre-dates the 2013 recognition and is used here only as a pre-recognition baseline, documented hijra people's position at the "extreme margin" of exclusion. The further suggestion that the psychological cost of approaching a mainstream institution may outweigh the likely gain of an entitlement is our own interpretation, not a finding of that study. On this interpretation, hiding acts as a rational, albeit corrosive, coping strategy: citizens prefer distance from the state to suffering the psychological cost of being seen. This is consistent with [Herd and Moynihan's \(2025\)](#) theorisation of gendered administrative burden as a state mechanism for exercising control over gendered identity, and with [Nowotny et al.'s \(2025\)](#) finding – in a different national context – that structurally marginalised applicants for gender-affirming documentation are systematically pushed out of onerous administrative pathways before a final decision.

4.4. Unchecked Frontline Discretion

Whether in health, employment, or (on comparative evidence) law enforcement, outcomes for hijra citizens depend less on formal policy than on the disposition of whichever frontline official they encounter, compounded by the almost total absence of institutional mechanisms for recording or overseeing that discretion. According to [Hasan et al. \(2025\)](#), healthcare providers lack awareness of hijra identity and culture, which, in hospitals with no hijra-specific provision (Section 4.1), leaves the quality of care to individual providers' awareness and attitudes. [Fontana \(2020\)](#) argues that workplace-inclusion outcomes rely more on informal negotiation with community leaders, police and religious figures than on codified institutional accommodation. As there is currently no comparably detailed qualitative account of hijra-police encounters within Bangladesh itself, this pattern of discretion in law enforcement is illustrated with comparative evidence from Delhi rather than directly with Bangladeshi data. [Jain et al. \(2020\)](#) find that police violence against hijra and transgender women occurs more frequently in everyday street encounters than in custodial settings and is exercised with functional impunity, largely independent of the formal legal provisions that nominally govern it. In their review of policy documents and media reports, [Barua and Khan \(2022\)](#), a Tier 2 corroborative source, report that no government agency has a system to monitor violence against the transgender community in Bangladesh. This means that, effectively, the conduct of frontline officials in this area does not have institutional oversight. However, while this Bangladeshi evidence speaks to the lack of oversight, the Delhi evidence speaks to the very exercise of discretion. Put together, these four themes indicate that the hijra population of Bangladesh suffers from a particular type of administrative burden: learning and compliance costs are accompanied by a largely under-recognised psychological cost rooted in anticipated stigma, a combination that we interpret as compounding, although no study in the corpus tests an interaction between these costs, and this burden persists since the categorical recognition of the state has not been translated into the procedural infrastructure, forms, facilities design, staff training and oversight of discretion, which would make it administratively real.

5. Discussion

These findings extend administrative burden theory to a context for which it was not originally developed: a legally entitled but structurally unaccommodated population, where the eligibility-determination system, rather than merely the

pathway toward it, is not equipped to process the relevant category of application. [Herd and Moynihan's \(2018\)](#) framework was constructed for cases in which eligibility for a benefit is already settled, with access constrained by learning, compliance, and psychological costs layered on an otherwise functioning categorical structure.

In this sense, the Bangladeshi hijra case is more fundamental: the very category of eligibility for which the forms, facility designs, and frontline training that would make the 2013 recognition administratively operable were not constructed or operationalised at the point of service. Some instruments, such as the voter-registration form, do include a third-gender option (Section 4.1); the gap lies in the failure to carry the category through to the forms, facilities and procedures that citizens actually encounter. We refer to this as the recognition-implementation gap, which is distinct from, but generative of, the learning, compliance and psychological burdens documented in Section 4. This distinction matters for policy and possibly for research. The administrative burden literature has generally recommended strategies within existing categorical structures to reduce burdens. Examples include simplifying forms, broadening outreach, and training frontline staff ([Herd & Moynihan, 2018](#)). The Bangladeshi case shows that such measures are necessary but not sufficient where the categorical structure itself excludes. In Bangladesh, hijra patients face barriers not only from health-system paperwork but also from systems that were never designed to acknowledge them as a category at all, as [Hasan et al. \(2025\)](#) show, with [Khan et al. \(2009\)](#) providing a pre-recognition baseline. The underlying policy problem is thus redefined. The goal now is not to facilitate access to an existing pathway, but to first construct the administrative category through which access will happen.

This finding directly extends, while also qualifying, [Nisar's \(2018, 2020\)](#) foundational demonstration that administrative burden theory applies to South Asian gender-nonconforming populations. Where Nisar documents this dynamic within a single administrative transaction in a single country, the cross-sectoral synthesis presented here shows that a closely similar dynamic, categorical non-construction rather than mere categorical difficulty, recurs across health and employment directly, and, on comparative Delhi evidence discussed with appropriate caution in Section 4.4, in policing as well. This consistency across otherwise disconnected sectors is itself theoretically important: it suggests that the recognition-implementation gap is not an artefact of any single sector's institutional idiosyncrasies, but a structural feature of how the Bangladeshi state has approached third-gender recognition as a symbolic, rather than administratively operationalised, act. This pattern is also consistent with [Peeters and Campos's \(2023\)](#) account of the institutional waterbed effect in weak-state bureaucracies: because the structural work of building an administrative category for hijra citizens has not occurred at the institutional level, that unresolved complexity is pushed downward onto frontline workers, who cope through improvisation, informal negotiation, and, in policing, functionally unchecked discretion.

The consistency of the discretion theme (Section 4.4) across health, employment, and, on comparative grounds, law enforcement deserves comment in relation to the Global South street-level bureaucracy literature discussed in Section 2.2. For [Lipsky \(1980/2010\)](#), street-level discretion is a structural feature of frontline work generally. The evidence assembled here suggests that, in the specific absence of institutional guidance on how to treat hijra citizens, individual officials' personal attitudes, whether sympathetic or hostile, come to constitute policy in practice. This is consistent with [Eiró and Lotta's \(2024\)](#) decolonial critique of mainstream street-level bureaucracy theory, which argues that social inequality is actively reproduced through the state's own administrative choices in the Global South, including the choice not to build a category, and with [Jain et al.'s \(2020\)](#) finding that police violence toward hijra and transgender individuals in the comparable Delhi context operates largely independently of formal law. Read together, this evidence suggests that closing the recognition-implementation gap in Bangladesh will require more than the incremental burden-reduction measures typically recommended within the administrative burden literature; it will require the deliberate administrative construction of the hijra category within forms, facilities, training curricula, and oversight mechanisms that were not originally built to include it.

Translating this diagnosis into practice suggests three concrete administrative priorities and one research priority for Bangladeshi public administration. First, ministries responsible for health, social welfare, and employment could audit their standard intake forms, facility designs, and information systems for binary-only sex or gender fields, replacing them with a functioning third-gender option wherever the 2013 gazette already confers eligibility; this is low-cost and high-leverage precisely because it targets category construction rather than downstream service delivery. Second, mandatory, sector-specific frontline training on hijra identity, comparable to the government-officer sensitisation intervention piloted for transgender identity documentation in Peru ([Reisner et al., 2024](#)), could directly target the discretion problem documented in Section 4.4. Third, a designated reporting mechanism for hijra-related service refusals or mistreatment, modelled on existing grievance-redress channels in Bangladeshi local government, would begin to close the accountability gap that [Barua and Khan \(2022\)](#) show is currently near-total in policing. Finally, as a research rather than an administrative priority, targeted primary research on rural hijra experiences and social-protection encounters, the two areas

most thinly covered by the present corpus, would allow future work to test whether the recognition-implementation gap identified here generalises beyond the urban, health- and employment-heavy evidence base examined.

The recognition-implementation gap identified here also appears to travel beyond South Asia, strengthening the claim that it reflects a general administrative logic rather than a Bangladesh-specific cultural artefact. In a recent comparative study, [Sony \(2025\)](#) examines gender-diverse labour-market exclusion in Hungary and Bangladesh side by side and finds that, despite the two countries' starkly different legal trajectories, symbolic recognition in Bangladesh and legal rollback in Hungary both produce what the study terms "bureaucratic exclusion." That an entirely independent comparative study converges on a mechanism functionally equivalent to the gap identified here is a notable point of external corroboration, and suggests a refinement for future research: what may matter most for administrative burden is not whether legal recognition is expanding or contracting, but whether administrative infrastructure has been deliberately built or rebuilt to match the current legal position. Bangladesh's own political context adds urgency here. Writing in the aftermath of the July 2024 uprising and the change of government that followed, [Hossain \(2025\)](#) argues that the resulting institutional flux opens a genuine, if uncertain, window for reimagining transgender-inclusive public administration in Bangladesh; whether that window narrows or widens the gap identified in this study is an empirical question beyond this synthesis's 2009–2025 corpus, but one that makes continued monitoring of indicators such as third-gender voter registration, health-facility accommodation, and formal-sector employment a policy-relevant priority in the years ahead.

6. Limitations

The main limitation of this study has to do with its method. Since it is a meta-synthesis of qualitative research that already exists, the findings are limited by whatever the original researchers chose to ask, sample, and report. No new primary data were collected, and the synthesis cannot independently validate any of the claims made in the studies from which data is drawn. The corpus is drawn primarily from Dhaka and a few other cities, severely constraining the understanding of rural hijra experiences, which may substantially differ since they tend to have much more limited administrative infrastructure than the urban settings recorded in the corpus ([Panday, 2026](#)). As noted in Section 4.4, the corpus is also better developed on health and employment than on law enforcement, and no coded study addresses social protection; for policing, it holds more detailed qualitative evidence from India than from Bangladesh. The search, as noted in Section 3.2, was selective and iterative rather than a fully reproducible, pre-registered systematic review, which limits any claim to exhaustiveness; formal registration of a replication is a priority for future work. Owing to the time frame of the included studies (2009–2025) and the nature of the independent research questions around which they were designed, cross-study compatibility is imperfect, and the synthesis prioritises thematic pattern over statistical generalisability. The findings of the source studies have been reinterpreted through an administrative burden framework that the original authors did not use. This is a legitimate interpretation given the evidence. However, it is an interpretation that reflects the theoretical lens used here and not that of the original authors or participants' own words. This interpretive distance raises ethical considerations which are engaged with directly in Section 3.6.

A further set of limitations concerns the evidence base and the way it was handled. First, Section 4 does not reproduce extended participant quotations: it draws chiefly on the source authors' reported findings and on short phrases from the source publications, so readers cannot judge the synthesis against participants' own words. Second, many of the source studies were probably conducted in local languages and reported in English, and we did not verify the translations, so all participant material is mediated by the original authors' translation and interpretation. Third, coding was manual and carried out by the authors without a formal inter-coder reliability check, and the quality appraisal was descriptive rather than scored. Fourth, we relied on the ethics approval and consent procedures reported in the source publications and did not verify them independently. Fifth, one core study ([Khan et al., 2009](#)) pre-dates the 2013 recognition and serves only as a baseline, and the tier classification involves documented exceptions: Jain et al. (2020) reports no participant count and is not from Bangladesh, [Irfan et al. \(2025\)](#) is partly survey-based, and [Sifat and Shafi \(2020\)](#) is cross-sector. The Tier 1 label therefore denotes a core corpus rather than uniform conformity with all five criteria. Finally, Themes 2 and 3 rest on a small number of studies and on the authors' interpretation, and the proposed compounding of costs is not tested by any study in the corpus.

7. Conclusion

More than a decade after hijra individuals were formally recognised as third-gender citizens in Bangladesh, this meta-synthesis of previously published qualitative studies demonstrates that recognition has not been matched by the administrative infrastructure needed to make it operable in citizens' day-to-day encounters with the state. By applying a combined street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden framework, building on and extending [Nisar's \(2018, 2020\)](#)

foundational application of that theory to South Asian gender-nonconforming populations, this study identifies a distinctive pattern in which basic categorical exclusion is associated with steep learning and compliance costs, substantial psychological costs tied to strategic identity concealment, and largely unchecked frontline discretion across health and employment and, on comparative evidence, law enforcement; social protection, although within the search scope, is not covered by the coded studies. This pattern offers a broader lesson for public administration scholarship: administrative burden does not arise only from excessive procedural complexity, but also from the absence, or incomplete operationalisation, of procedure for a recognised category. In practical terms, this points to redesigning the instruments through which the state serves hijra citizens, rather than only easing access to them. Future primary research, particularly research directed at frontline officials themselves and focused on the rural and social-protection contexts underrepresented in the current literature, would further extend and test the patterns identified here, as would a formally logged, fully reproducible systematic search capable of establishing the boundaries of the evidence base with greater precision.

Declarations

Author Contributions

S. J. Hossain: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft. **H. M. A. Zidan:** Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were generated or analysed in this study. The secondary sources synthesised are listed in the References section and are publicly available through their respective publishers.

Ethical Approval and Justification for Exemption

This study is a meta-synthesis of previously published, peer-reviewed qualitative research and did not involve direct contact with human participants. Ethical approval was therefore not sought, consistent with standard practice for secondary analyses of already-published literature (Tripathy, 2013). No new personal or identifying data were collected, and the study avoids reproducing verbatim extracts beyond fair use or fair dealing limits. The ethics of secondary interpretation of this population's testimony are discussed directly in Section 3.6.

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