Research Article

The Seclusion of the Hijra Community in Bangladesh: A Theoretical Exploration of Cultural Tightness, Gender Performance and Social Marginalization

Prapti Anandita*

Department of Sociology, University of North Texas, Denton, TX 76203, USA.

*Email: PraptiAnandita@my.unt.edu

Citation: Anandita, P. (2025). The Seclusion of the Hijra Community in Bangladesh: A Theoretical Exploration of Cultural Tightness, Gender Performance and Social Marginalization. *International Social Research Nexus (ISRN)*, 1(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.63539/isrn.2025004

Received: February 5, 2025
Accepted: April 18, 2025
Published: April 26, 2025

Abstract

In the South Asian region, particularly in Bangladesh, a third gender category popularly known as Hijra exists. Their existence lies in a paradox: the symbolic inclusion as the legally recognized third gender, alongside the social and systematic exclusion from all sides of the social sphere. This paper takes a qualitative theory-driven approach to explain the mechanism that drives the seclusion of hijra individuals from mainstream society. Drawing on secondary data such as academic journal articles, NGO reports, media reports, and government policies, the paper engages with three sociological theories- the theory of "tightness & looseness" by Michele Gelfand, "doing gender" by West and Zimmerman, and "outsider- within position" by Patricia Hills Collins. Together, the theoretical analysis sheds light on how Bangladesh, being a 'tight culture,' fosters strong reinforcement of binary gender norms, which results in the seclusion of hijra individuals. Within the hijra community, gendered performances and rituals illustrate the acts of agency, resilience, and means of survival. Moreover, legal recognition as a third gender solidifies marginalized status and pushes the hijra individuals into an "outsider-within" position without full institutional inclusion. The analysis concludes that the symbolic inclusion as a third gender is insufficient to include hijra individuals in the mainstream. Rather, inclusive, sociologically informed policy intervention, increased social awareness, and reimagination of gender inclusivity beyond the rigid gender boundaries are needed to create meaningful inclusion.

Keywords

Hijra Community, Gender Identity, Doing Gender, Cultural Tightness, Third Gender Policy, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

In South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, the term 'hijra' connotes a particular group of people who do not conform to the mainstream gender binary. The word "hijra" originates from the Arabic word "hijr," which means "to leave one's tribe." This etymological term signifies the social and physical departure of hijra individuals from mainstream society and relocation to a communal living space known as the "dera." While the term is widely translated into

the Western concept of "transgender," it holds a distinct meaning in the South Asian context. According to Mount (2020), hijra are male-born individuals who were forced to leave their families during their teenage years and joined a separate community to work and live in communal living spaces with others who are "like them." Often rejected by family members and society, these individuals left their families at a young age and joined the "dera" to live under a structured communal system. Sociological scholars such as Stenqvist and Chakrapani have described hijra as gender non-conformist, as individuals who were 'not men' and preferred to have sex with men, and who conformed to a different set of cross-gender dynamics (Chakrapani, 2010; Stenqvist, 2015). The lack of societal recognition secluded the hijra individuals and otherized them into an abyss. This seclusion created an otherized space that prevented them from getting an education, healthcare, employment, and other social opportunities that binary-gendered individuals had access to.

In Bangladesh, the hijra community represents a socially recognized yet systematically marginalized third-gender group, who, despite having the legal recognition of "third gender" status, continue to experience widespread discrimination, exclusion, and inequality that restrict their access to education, healthcare, and employment. While numerous sociological and non-sociological studies have explored the hijra community in regards to legal rights, policy debates, and public health (Akter & Saha, 2024; Aziz & Azhar, 2019; Khan et al., 2009; Diehl et al., 2017), few studies offer a theoretical sociological investigation into the mechanism of hijra seclusion.

This paper sought to fill that gap by taking a theory-driven framework to analyze and understand the underlying sociocultural and structural processes that created and sustained the seclusion of hijra individuals in Bangladesh. The following research questions guide this paper: How did the cultural structure of Bangladesh contribute to the seclusion of hijra individuals? What did hijra individuals get from their gender performances in their communal living space? How did the legal recognition as the "third gender" impact hijra inclusion into the mainstream binary society? Based on these research questions, this paper aimed to explain the conditions through the lens of the following Sociological theories- Michele Gelfand's theory of "tightness and looseness," West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender," and Patricia Hills Collins's "outsider- within position.". These theoretical frameworks, supported by secondary literature, provided insight into the structural and symbolic mechanisms underlying hijra exclusion in the Bangladeshi context.

2. Literature Review

The recognition of hijra as the third gender in Bangladesh marked a historic shift in policymaking toward minority inclusion. Despite this shift, this inclusion strategy remained symbolic, as substantive socio-economic integration of hijra lies far behind. This literature review first discusses the hijra individuals and explains the process of historical seclusion. Then, it studies contemporary literature and policy reports that describe the legal, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions of hijra seclusion and discrimination in Bangladesh.

2.1. The Hijra and Their Historical Existence & Seclusion

In the Indian subcontinent of South Asia, prominently in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, the term 'hijra' connotes a particular group of people who do not conform to the mainstream gender binary. The following subsections explain how the hijra identity, communal living space, and contemporary secluded status have developed over time.

2.2. Who Are the Hijra?

Rooted in the Arabic word "hijr," which symbolized the act of leaving one's tribe or community, the word 'hijra' is popularly translated as 'transgender,' which Stryker (2018) translates as to move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender. Although the hijra people were denoted as a group of people who did not conform to the gender binary and identified as a different gender other than the one assigned to them at birth, the term does not parallel the Western concept of transgender (Mount, 2020). According to Mount (2020), hijra are male-born individuals who were forced to leave their families during their teenage years and join a separate community of work and live in communal living spaces with others who are "like them."Hijra are identified as people who do not identify as either male or female, but rather identify as a third category of gender that is indigenous to South Asian cultures." (Aziz & Azhar, 2019).

2.3. Historical Seclusion

The hijra people had long existed in South Asian societies. The seclusion and otherizing of the hijra individuals can be dated back to the era of British rule. Before the British colonial rule, hijra individuals held a sacred place in the Indian subcontinent. Hindu hijras traced their origins to the revered epics *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, whereas Muslim hijras claimed an indigenous lineage dating back to khwaja siras (eunuchs) of the royal courts of Muslim rulers of India (Afzal-Khan, 2010; Rehan, Chaudhary, & Shah, 2009). However, the scenario changed after the colonial rule came to power.

In October 1871, the British government enforced the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) that branded many nomadic and tribal communities as criminals, which enabled the local government to notify any tribe, gang, or class of people as outlaws and enforce reformatory settlements (Kulshrestha, 2021). Under this act, hijras were included as dangerous outlaws, stemming from a belief that they were involved in kidnapping and castrating children and that they dressed like women in order to sing and dance in public places (Gupta, 2019). Due to this act, hijra individuals were prohibited from settling elsewhere and were forced to be ghettoized into small communities along the Indian subcontinent. Eventually, the British Empire left the region and gave birth to newly founded countries like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In the postcolonial countries, very few changes were made in the legal area. Most of the laws and regulations in these newly formed countries were reflections of British rule (Banerjee & Connell, 2018). The newly formed democratic states assumed a masculinized dispensation as they struggled with the consolidation of their diverse populations, which had been fragmented and divided under colonial rule (Banerjee & Connell, 2018). Due to this postcolonial continuation, the majority population gained power and access to resources, whereas minority populations such as the hijra continued to be ghettoized and neglected.

2.4. The Socio-Cultural Condition of the Hijra Community

In the Bangladeshi social context, the binary gender identity, either “male” or “female,” is given the utmost value. Traditional norms, religious values, family roles and responsibilities, the concept of honor and dignity, and such aspects of social life are strictly gender categorized. Individuals who do not conform to society's rules and regulations are considered deviants. Heterogeneous marriage is also an essential phase of cultural life in South Asian countries like Bangladesh. Male-to-female marriage is considered the norm and a symbol of status and prosperity. Since families cannot marry off their gender-nonconforming child, they face the loss of honor and status. According to Khan et al. (2009), hijra's sexuality and sexual behavior conflict with heteronormativity, and heteronormativity mismatch with her preferred feminine gender roles. They often experience loneliness and abusive treatment; for example, they are not allowed to share space with classmates, extending from the classroom to the playground (Khan et al., 2009). Ostracized by family and society, such individuals are forced to leave their families and join the hijra community or hijra “*dera*.”

Gender non-binary individuals are prompted to join the hijra community for multifaceted reasons. Woltmann (2020) proposed that the systematic social and cultural marginalization turned the hijra into a subaltern "other" and forced them into an abyss where they are turned into a subject of mockery, ridicule, and taboo (Woltmann, 2020). On the other hand, Mondal et al.(2020) pointed to broader structural factors at play, arguing that "the shared understanding that has emerged reflects that hijras in this part of the world have not been able to come to terms with their inimitable sexual identity because of the subversive pressures from the heteronormative society."

Therefore, marginalized and secluded from conventional society, they seldom had access to social amenities. Deprived of education, healthcare, and legal and social protection, most sought refuge in the *hijra dera* under a community leader or "guru ma." To date, most hijras make a living by dancing and singing at marriage ceremonies; others beg in the street or get involved in crimes like illegal prostitution and extortion (Mondal et al., 2020). Whatever they make in a day, they are obligated to submit it to the community leader at the end of the day, and the whole community shares what they have. The hijra community has strong group ties that protect them from the outside world. In return, they stay committed to community rules and stick to the regulations imposed by their community leader.

2.5. Contemporary Policies on Hijra Inclusion

Legal recognition of hijra individuals as a “third gender” was hailed as a landmark move for the government of Bangladesh in 2013. It created a consensus among the international audience that Bangladesh had taken a step further into gender inclusivity and progress. However, existing policies and literature otherwise suggested that recognition remained largely symbolic due to the lack of tools to translate the policies into realistic lived actions to bring equality. Despite the government’s legal and policy efforts, such as updating identification documents, providing tax incentives, and starting livelihood development programs for hijra individuals, the hijra community and its individuals continued to be secluded and otherized in vital fields such as education, employment, healthcare, and legal services, which result in discrimination and inequality.

As per the policy regarding the third gender, following a cabinet decision in 2013, in January 2014, the Bangladesh Ministry of Social Welfare (2014) published a gazette notification stating that the hijra community "shall be recognized as the ‘Hijra sex/gender’ (‘Hijra lingo)" (Titir, 2019; Ministry of Social Welfare, 2014). Although the policy sounded progressive and ideal, it lacked operational clarity and created confusion in implementation. In the gazette, the term “hijra” was not defined. As a result, government authorities used inconsistent terminologies to carry out third gender identification process, and identity documents such as passports, national ID cards, and voter rolls began using conflicting terms such as “hijra,” “third gender,” “other,” etc. As a result, voter roll integration remained incomplete, identifying as "third gender" in national ID cards became more complex, and overall inclusion in political processes remained minimal (Al-Mamun et al., 2022; Akter & Saha, 2024; The Daily Star, 2024; Titir, 2019). The Department of Social Services in Bangladesh also implemented a few social safety schemes for minority individuals, including programs like "The Livelihood Development Program for Hijra Community” in the year 2012-13 (Department of Social Services, 2024). The programs failed to reach the intended beneficiaries due to limited outreach, lack of gender sensitivity, and poor monitoring (Akter & Saha, 2024; Rashid, 2024). Most hijra individuals remained secluded from formal employment and relied on traditional income methods such as ritual performances, begging, and sex work to support themselves (Al-Mamun et al., 2022).

Besides economic exclusion, hijra individuals continue to face exclusion from legal and public health settings even today. Section 377 of the Bangladesh Penal Code (1860) criminalized homosexuality and gender non-conformity, labeled them as "unnatural offenses,” and provided law enforcement agencies the power to arrest those who fall into this category (Rashid, 2024). As a result, hijra individuals avoid seeking legal protection from police as they fear harassment, bullying, or denial of due legal process (Huda et al., 2025). Hence, due to the lack of public gender awareness and institutional reforms, legal recognition as a “third gender” remains a symbolic concept that has failed to bring meaningful change.

3. Methodology

This paper followed a qualitative approach and used theory-driven secondary analysis to explain the seclusion of hijra individuals in Bangladesh. Rather than collecting first-hand interview-based ethnographic data, this paper analyzed sociological theories and existing peer-reviewed scholarly journals, NGO reports, government policies, and news media sources related to hijra rights and third-gender recognition in Bangladesh. This paper is a case study of Bangladesh only. It applies three sociological theories to explain the current secluded state of hijra individuals in Bangladesh. Hence, it does not analyze or discuss the policies of any other South Asian countries.

Secondary literary sources were selected from online academic research libraries such as ProQuest, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost. Two primary inclusion criteria guided the search: 1) focus on the hijra and third-gender population of Bangladesh, and 2) relevant to Bangladesh’s legal, cultural, and institutional framework. The source pool included peer-reviewed sociological journal articles, policy briefs from human rights and gender rights organizations, government institutional websites, and newspaper coverage of hijra issues in Bangladesh.

Theoretical analysis and theorizing are a vital tool in sociological research. This paper used theory analysis and thematic synthesis as an analytical tool. Theorizing is important for applying existing theory and building insight into the qualitative analysis (Swedberg, 2011). Charmaz (2006) also explained that theory can be constructed from qualitative data without direct interviews or fieldwork and that such an approach is useful in explaining the underlying sociological phenomena. This theoretical approach was essential in this study to understand the structural forces that produced and sustained the seclusion of hijra individuals in Bangladesh.

This paper applied three theoretical frameworks to structure the analysis: the theory of "tightness and looseness" by Michele Gelfand, the theory of "doing gender" by West and Zimmerman, and the "outsider-within position" by Patricia Hill Collins. Each of these theories sheds light on the different facets that created the perfect environment of seclusion for hijra individuals. For example, Michele Gelfand's tightness and looseness theory explained how the tight Bangladeshi culture makes rigid gender roles and expectations that expel anyone who does not fall into the binary category. West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender" explained how gendered performance and rituals of hijra individuals within their communal space help them to build agency, resilience, and means of survival against social exclusion. Lastly, Collins's "outsider-within position" explains how the legalization of hijra as a third gender has put them into a position that solidified their marginalization and seclusion.

This study has several limitations. First, as a theoretical analysis based on secondary data, it does not capture the lived experiences of the hijra individuals. Second, the paper relies on English sources and fails to capture some Bengali perspectives lost in translations. Lastly, it does not compare Bangladesh's policy with other countries; hence, it does not capture the complexity of policy implications in its totality. However, the paper does not include any sensitive information about any minority hijra individuals. No human subjects were involved in its research process. Hence, it is devoid of the ethical imperative found in other empirical qualitative research studies.

4. Results

4.1. Social Seclusion: Result of a Tight Culture

This paper's first theory is Michele Gelfand's theory of "tightness and looseness." In her book *Rule Makers and Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire Around the World*, Michele Gelfand introduced the theory of cultural "tightness-looseness." According to Gelfand (2018), some nations have strict cultural norms; she calls them "tight cultures," such as Singapore and Japan. On the other hand, some nations have flexible norms; Gelfand calls them "loose cultures," for instance, Italy or Brazil. Nations with tight cultures have more control over their citizens and have strict laws that include capital punishment, like the death penalty; people are more religious and have more self-control. As a result, people are more ethnocentric; they have less freedom of speech, and they are resistant to change. On the other hand, although loose cultures have easy-going norms and are more chaotic, they are more outgoing, more open to embracing new ideas and change, and can brainstorm new inventions.

According to Gelfand (2018), there are specific reasons why tight cultures are tight and why loose cultures are loose. One of the fundamental reasons is survival. To survive, groups try to protect themselves from internal and external threats, including starvation, natural disasters, territorial threats, overpopulation, scarcity of natural resources, and pathogens (Gelfand, 2018). These external and internal threats make social groups embrace tight social norms. The lack of threat creates a space for diversity, openness, and innovation, for which a culture becomes loose, and the social norms become very liberal.

Several threats like poverty, food scarcity, natural calamities, lack of natural resources, unemployment, high livelihood expenses, and the refugee crisis beset Bangladesh (Suza et al., 2024). Due to these multilevel threats, as Gelfand's theory suggests, Bangladeshi society has internalized numerous norms to protect itself from unforeseen threats, and gender norms are among the strictest. Men were traditionally considered the family's breadwinners and the 'light' of the family's lineage. On the other hand, women were expected to stay at home, rear children, and nurture the family. Any deviation from this culturally rigid framework was perceived to destabilize social coherence. When a hijra expresses gender non-conformity, they face severe stigmatization from society, such as public humiliation, body shaming, negligence from authorities, etc.

Therefore, gender stigmatization exists due to the cultural tightness that Gelfand explained in her theory. The society, already tightened by threats of poverty, unemployment, high infant mortality rate, high birth rate, natural disasters, and food insecurity, is further threatened by the hijra who defy the rigid gender category and challenge cultural cohesion. As Gelfand explains, "Humans create strong social norms to minimize conflict and organize chaos when they are packed in tight"(Gelfand, 2018). The gender non-conformity of the hijras was seen as disruptive, and their seclusion was rationalized as a way to maintain social stability.

In Bangladesh, an estimated 11,000 people are classified as hijra (Department of Social Services, 2022). Hijra individuals, when they express gender non-conformity, threaten the tight cultural coherence. These individuals began to face discrimination, negligence, and ghettoization at the beginning of their childhood due to this perceived cultural tightness. Mainstream Bangladeshi culture places a high value on close familial relationships, fulfilling gendered expectations of family roles, and performing social duties (Aziz & Azhar, 2019). Most gender non-conforming individuals start to showcase non-conformity in early adolescence while playing with same-age children (Maccoby, 1998). According to Woltman (2020), family members of the hijra individuals bully, punish, and assault them for conforming them to the gender binary behaviors; hence, the stigma of non-conformity starts from the family. When these minority individuals go to educational institutions, they may encounter physical, sexual, emotional violence, neglect, and discrimination, prompting them to drop out of school (Jain, 2018). Hence, as Gelfand's theory explains, due to cultural tightness, the patterns of early-life stigma due to gender non-conformity, rejection, and neglect from family and social institutions create the ground for long-term exclusion for hijra individuals in Bangladesh.

4.2. The Hijra Dera: A Form of Gendered "Doing"

The second theoretical lens applied in this paper is the theory of "doing gender" by West and Zimmerman (1987). According to this theory, gender is not a fixed identity but a performative device. Gender is performed through interaction and behaviors socially recognized as masculine or feminine. Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine natures (West & Zimmerman, 1987). There, gender is done by performing gender roles and scheduling gender displays.

This theory was further illustrated by Garfinkel's (1967) well-known case study of "Agnes," a trans woman who was raised as a boy but later transitioned through sex reassignment surgery. Agnes was born and raised as a male, but she never conformed to the masculine roles and attributes. To her, the penis was a "mistake," and she was always a woman. Garfinkle's discussion of Agnes, her "passing," and conforming to femininity exemplifies how gender is performed, displayed, and "done." Agnes's initial resource was the predisposition of those she encountered to take her appearance as an undoubted appearance of a normal female (West & Zimmerman, 1987). West and Zimmerman further emphasized that doing gender involves the use of discrete, well-defined bundles of behavior that can be plugged into interactional situations to produce recognizable enactments of masculinity and femininity (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In Bangladesh, hijra individuals perform gender within the hijra dera to cope with social exclusion and vulnerability (Mondal et al., 2020). Inside the dera, gender is performed through the disciple's maintenance of the ritual of *hijragiri*, which refers to the ritual conduct of *"badhai"* (conferral of blessings on the newborn after holding a child in their arms as they dance), *"cholla"* (the collection of tolls from within the ritual jurisdiction, or *"birit"* as the *hijra* call it) and mastering the *"Ulti"* or the secret language (Hossain, 2017). Individuals are considered a 'hijra' per their mastery of these cultural dynamics. According to Nanda (1999), to be considered a hijra, an individual has to perform some rites and take oaths in front of the guru (leader) and every other member of the hijra in the community. Through the seal of initiation, a newcomer becomes a formal member of the dera when the guru gives them a new female name and they vow to obey the guru and the community rules (Nanda, 1999). Hence, gender performance plays an important role in the belonging and recognition of hijra individuals within their communal living space.

Economic survival within the community also depends on the enactment of gender roles. Hijra members earn their daily wage- individually or in groups- by performing sex work, cultural performance, or begging (Mondal et al., 2020), and they hand over those earnings to the guru maa. The guru supervises and maintains hierarchical social roles, where the guru usually receives a portion of the chela's income (Aziz & Azhar, 2019). The guru keeps a portion of the income and redistributes the rest among the disciples. In return, the guru is responsible for training and socializing them into the hijra community (Aziz & Azhar, 2019). Hence, by performing the rituals and social norms, hijra individuals embody West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender." The performance of *hijragiri*, the ritual of *badhai*, and the rites of passage of hijra individuals within the dera stand as a performance of gender. By doing these gendered practices, hijra individuals become members of the hijra community, grow their agency, find belonging, and create resilience against the seclusion they face

in mainstream society. This gendered doing not only provides them refuge from societal seclusion but also provides them an alternative space for belonging and recognition.

4.3. Legal Recognition as Third Gender: The Creation of the "Outsider-Within"

Patricia Hills Collins's concept of the "outsider-within" provides a framework for understanding the paradox of recognition faced by hijra individuals. In *Black Feminist Thought (2000)*, Collins describes the moments of the pre-World War II period, when African American women worked in White family homes as nannies, caretakers, and servants. Although these women had access "inside" the houses of the Whites, they were still considered "outsiders." Collins (2000) calls this the "outsider within" position. Their outsider allegiances may militate against their choosing full insider status, and they may be more apt to remain outsiders within (Collins, 2022). Collins, in her later work (2000, 2004), elaborated on this concept as a critical position of the minority individual who suffers from intersecting lenses of inequality and who can neither belong to a particular identity nor claim any identity as their own. This position provides the placeholders with a unique socio-cultural position that falls at the crossroads of racism and sexism.

This framework helps explain the unique yet ambiguous and contradictory nature of "third gender" recognition in Bangladesh. To mitigate the vulnerabilities and to protect the rights of the hijra, in 2019, the Bangladesh government ascribed the third gender status to solve such problems (Day, 2013). Following this announcement, government, educational, and nonprofit organizations launched programs to support hijra individuals. For example, the Ministry of Social Welfare in Bangladesh launched the "Livelihood Development Program for the Hijra Community" (Department of Social Services, 2022), which aims to provide social security, financial stability, and monthly stipends to hijra individuals who seek rehabilitation in the mainstream society. In November 2020, the first Islamic School for hijra individuals, Dawatul Koran Third Sex Madrassa, opened in the capital city of Dhaka, where it provided vocational training and primary education in subjects like Bengali, English, Math, and Islamic theology (Chowdhury, 2020). The Prime Asia University, a private university in Dhaka, promised to give an 80% to 100% discount on tuition fees to marginalized populations such as the hijra (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). Human rights organizations like the Bondhu Social Welfare, the Badhan Hijra Sangha, and many other human rights organizations have launched rehabilitation programs for the hijra individuals. Such initiatives sought to create a safe space for the hijra individuals to transition from their respective communities.

While these initiatives signaled some progress toward undertaking institutional measures for hijra inclusion in mainstream society, they also reinforced structural marginalization. For example, Al-Mamun et al. (2022) observed that those hijra individuals who received government and non-government organizational support continued to face stigma and social seclusion. Instead, the third gender status solidified their marginalization without addressing the underlying problem. Their status has put them in a unique borderland between acceptance and rejection. They are neither fully accepted by the heterosexual binary society nor wholly embraced by the state apparatus. Hence, they remain an outsider within the state-recognized third-gender status.

5. Discussions

5.1. Seclusion, Community Formation and the Reproduction of Marginalization

As reviewed in the results section, as gender non-conformity is embedded into the rigid Bangladeshi socio-cultural structure, the seclusion of the hijra individuals begins early in life and continues throughout their lifespan. Khan et al. (2009) found in their ethnographic study of 20 hijra individuals that most of the individuals in their childhood were not allowed to share space with classmates, extending from the classroom to the playground. Moreover, loneliness and abuse were common to hijra experiences (Khan et al., 2009). Due to their non-masculine attributes, they are taunted by their peers for looking girlish and are emotionally and physically abused by their family to conform to masculine attributes (Moolchaem et al., 2015; Mondal et al., 2020).

Over time, the inability to conform to the normative gender roles puts hijra individuals in a very vulnerable position across their lifespan and results in their exclusion from mainstream society as adults (Alizai et al., 2017). The exclusion

leads to discrimination, abuse, social stigma, and violation of human rights. To escape from such discrimination, harassment, and abuse, hijra individuals often leave their families and join the "hijra dera." The hijra dera provides a safe space for the hijra individuals where they can cooperate and survive the ostracization of the heteronormative society. According to Gelfand (2018), tight cultures tend to organize around shared norms as a survival mechanism against perceived threats. So, the hijra community in Bangladesh was forced to cooperate, build a community, and create their own social norms to fight off the threat of the outside world. As Gelfand stated, "Groups that cooperated have been able to not only survive the toughest environmental conditions but also thrive and spread across the entire planet in ways that no other nonhuman species has done" (Gelfand, 2018). Hence, the mechanism of threat pushed the heterogenic mass to push off and otherize the gender-non-conforming hijra individuals. On the other hand, the hijra individuals who could not withstand the oppression joined the hijra community as a source of protection. This phenomenon represents a vicious cycle that has persisted for years. Hence, cultural tightness enforces exclusion and promotes the formation of the hijra subculture. It has become a loop in which the hijra individuals are trapped and forced to inhabit.

5.2. Doing Gender and Performing Belonging in Hijra Communities

Building upon this mechanism of social exclusion, hijra individuals develop certain gendered performances to establish their identity and recognition within their communal living space. The display of femininity in the hijra in Bangladesh is a form of gender performance, which West and Zimmerman (1987) call "doing gender." Following this social constructionist approach, gender can be understood as the management of one's conduct and activities according to roles that are appropriate for one's sex category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The hijra individuals are ostracized from their families and society due to their feminine gender performance and attributes, and they use the same performance of femininity to conform to the dynamics of the hijra community. The gender "doing" inside the dera takes place through the performance of feminine gestures like wearing feminine attire like the Saree, wearing heavy makeup, and presenting the self as a female. The performance of femininity through singing and dancing also stands as a way to beg for money and gather the attention of the heteronormative people. Such performative devices display their gendered "doing" and help the hijra individuals achieve agency, group solidarity, and ownership of their own communal space. Hence, gender "doing" transforms the lives of hijra individuals from a state of marginalization to a source of agency and survival within their communal nest.

5.3. The Outsider-Within: Symbolic Inclusion and Structural Marginalization

Although the gender performance of hijra individuals created a space for agency, survival, and internal solidarity, it did not shield them from institutional seclusion present in mainstream society. The institutional recognition of hijra as a third gender further extends this seclusion. The initiative of the Bangladesh government to legalize the 'third gender' status and to promote voting rights for the hijra were hailed as progress by the international community despite the conservative socio-religious majority. Hossain (2017) explains that in Bangladesh, the legal recognition of the hijra as a third gender has solidified their social stigmatization and marginalization even more, as what was previously a trope of disfigurement based on putative genital status has now been transformed into a discourse of disability. The discourse has put the hijra, who seeks institutional help and informal work, into the position of the "outsider-within."

In this position, the individuals who enter the system of education, employment, or government programs as a "third-gender" face stigmatized practices, including a problematic gender verification process, marginal job placements, and bureaucratic hurdles. Anzaldua describes their unique position as "being within a system while also retaining the knowledge of an outsider who comes from outside the system" (Anzaldua, 1987). Due to this "outsider-within" position, the Hijra individuals can neither belong to the Hijra culture nor entirely become a part of the mainstream heterogeneous population.

The hijra in Bangladesh thus remained symbolically recognized but systematically otherized. This is further demonstrated by the Bangladesh government's insensitive and uninformed decision in 2015. Marking the first anniversary of the recognition of third-gender status, the Bangladesh Ministry of Social Welfare, alongside the Bondhu Social Welfare Society and UNAIDS Bangladesh, held the "Hijra Pride March" in 2014 (Toppa, 2014). Following the Pride march in 2015, the Bangladesh Ministry of Social Welfare decided to recruit 15 Hijra individuals in low-ranking clerical jobs that required

medical tests to confirm the Hijra status (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The initiative failed as the medical examination concluded that all the candidates were, in fact, male and not hijra, as all except one had a penis and scrotum (Hossain, 2017). The lack of gender awareness, lack of knowledge of the definition of the hijra status, and lack of awareness about the hijra community were the reasons behind the failure to execute such an initiative. As a result, the hijra individuals were further otherized into the "outsider-within," where the stakeholders utilized them to devise their gender-progressive initiatives and pushed them into new forms of marginality. Therefore, social initiatives of hijra inclusion and ascription of "third gender" status, in reality, did not create a meaningful difference. Instead, the third gender status has pushed the hijra individuals into a further otherized outsider-within space, where they are pinned into a position of static marginalization.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzed three sociological theories to explain the seclusion and ostracization that hijra individuals in Bangladesh face: - the theory of "tightness and looseness" by Michele Gelfand, the theory of "doing gender" by West and Zimmerman, and the "outsider-within position" by Patricia Hills Collins. These three sociological theories presented in this paper, along with the secondary analysis of sociological literature and government policies, to some extent, explain the unique secluded condition of the hijra individuals of Bangladesh. This framework illustrates that hijra seclusion is reproduced through socio-cultural rigidity, symbolic reform, and bureaucratic hurdles.

Hijra individuals in Bangladesh occupy a distinct socio-cultural position that is marked by systematic inequality, social discrimination, and structural deprivation. The seclusion initiated by British colonial rule has solidified in the social structure, and these individuals continue to suffer from that legacy. In postcolonial Bangladesh, the legacy is continued and sustained through a contemporary social structure that further solidifies the seclusion. Segregation of hijra individuals persists due to tight cultural norms, rigid gender roles, and a lack of proper implementation of policies that are inadequately informed by gender inclusion. Staying inside this cultural tightness, the hijra individuals survive by showcasing their gendered performance or gendered doing. The communally cultivated gendered norms, practices, and rituals provide a space for hijra individuals to showcase agency, develop communal bonding, and create resistance against greater social exclusion.

The application and analysis of the theoretical lenses not only explain the multi-layered dynamics of hijra exclusion from mainstream society but also highlight the limitations of current institutional efforts undertaken by the state and its counterparts. Initiatives such as the legalization of third-gender status and the initiation of inclusive social programs fall short of creating the utopian inclusion that these organizations imagined. Instead of fostering inclusion, these initiatives further ostracize and pin the hijra individuals into the unique "outsider-within" position. It has offered hijra individuals nothing but symbolic visibility without recognition and belonging.

Meaningful policy reforms should be taken to dismantle this situation and foster meaningful and sustainable inclusion of hijra individuals in the economic, socio-cultural, and legal framework. First, legal reforms are necessary to define gender in official documents using an inclusive definition reflecting the socially constructed and fluid nature of gender. Government and non-government stakeholders should also be informed and educated about the proper definition of gender to avoid inter-institutional confusion and bureaucracy. Secondly, government agencies and NGOs should collaborate on awareness-raising programs and campaigns to promote gender sensitivity across social institutions such as educational institutions, healthcare institutions, and public service sectors. Third, employment programs targeting hijra individuals should include inclusive practices focusing on skill development. The work policies should be realistically designed, centering on the lived experiences of hijra individuals to ensure successful implementation and sustainable change. Finally, future research should include more empirical qualitative studies to reflect the current status of hijra rights and how they negotiate state recognition, social and community norms, and survival. Comparative studies across South Asian countries should also be conducted to explore the intersectionality of hijra experiences.

This study contributes to the understanding of regionalism and globalism in shaping Syria's political landscape. By examining state sovereignty, security dilemmas, and foreign interventions, it expands the discourse on proxy conflicts and international relations theory. The findings reinforce realist perspectives on power politics while also highlighting the role of constructivist approaches in shaping Syria's identity and alliances.

Declarations

Funding

No funding was received for this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Afzal-Khan, F. (2010). Performative interventions in the body politic of Pakistan. *TDR/The Drama Review*, *54*(2), 18–28. https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.2010.54.2.18

Akter, S., & Saha, S. (2024). Impact of legal recognition on the lives of the third gender: A study in Khulna district of Bangladesh. *Heliyon*, 10(7), e28671. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e28671

Al-Mamun, M., Hossain, M. J., Alam, M., Parvez, M. S., Dhar, B. K., & Islam, M. R. (2022). Discrimination and social exclusion of third-gender population (hijra) in Bangladesh: A brief review. *Heliyon, 8*(9), e10840. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e10840

Alizai, A., Doneys, P., & Doane, D. L. (2017). Impact of gender binarism on hijras' life course and their access to fundamental human rights in Pakistan. *Journal of Homosexuality,* 64(9), 1214–1240. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1242337

Anzaldua, G. (1987). *Borderlands - La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Aziz, A., & Azhar, S. (2019). Social exclusion and official recognition for hijra in Bangladesh. *Journal of Research on Women and Gender, 9*(1), 3–19.

Banerjee, P., & Connell, R. (2018). Gender theory as southern theory. In B. J. Risman, C. M. Froyum, & W. J. Scarborough (Eds.). *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. (pp. 57–68). *Springer*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0

Chakrapani, V., Newman, P. A., Shunmugam, M., Logie, C. H., & Samuel, M. (2017). Syndemics of depression, alcohol use, and victimization, and their association with HIV-related sexual risk among men who have sex with men and transgender women in India. *Global Public Health, 12*(2), 250–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2015.1091024

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. SAGE Publications.*

Chowdhury, S. (2020, November 3). Transgender in Bangladesh: First school opens for trans students. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54838305

Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, *33*(6), S14–S32. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1986.33.6.03a00020

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2022). *Intersectionality as critical social theory* (2nd ed.). Duke University Press.

Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. Routledge.

Diehl, A., Vieira, D. L., Zaneti, M. M., Fanganiello, A., Sharan, P., Robles, R., & de Jesus Mari, J. (2017). Social stigma, legal and public health barriers faced by the third gender phenomena in Brazil, India and Mexico: Travestis, hijras and muxes. *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, *63*(5), 389–399. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640177069

Day, A. (2013, November 12). Bangladesh: Third gender Hijra to be recognised in official documents. *Pink News*. https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/11/12/bangladesh-third-gender-hijra-to-be-recognised-in-official-documents/

Department of Social Services. (2022). *Livelihood development program for the Hijra community*. http://www.dss.gov.bd/site/page/e3108b96-8e64-4fb4-be8e-3f2f8e9d27bb/-

Dhaka Tribune. (2021, August 24). Prime Asia University to offer free education for transgenders. *Dhaka Tribune.* https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/08/24/prime-asia-university-to-offer-free-education-for-transgenders

Garfinkel, H. (1967). Passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an intersexed person. *In Studies in ethnomethodology*. (pp. 116–185). Blackwell.

Gelfand, M. J. (2018). Rule makers, rule breakers: How tight and loose cultures wire our world. Scribner.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Social Welfare. (2014). *Recognition of Hijras as third gender in Bangladesh* [[Circular No. MoSW/'Kormo'-1/Sha/Hijra-15/2013-40].]. *Bangladesh Gazette. https://www.dpp.gov.bd/upload_file/gazettes/6851_39605.pdf*

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. (1860). *The Penal Code, 1860* (Act No. XLV of 1860), Section 377. http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-11/section-3233.html

Gupta, A. (2019). Trans-lating Hijra identity: Performance culture as politics. *Theatre Research International, 44*(1), 71–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883318000925

Hossain, A. (2017). The paradox of recognition: Hijra, third gender and sexual rights in Bangladesh. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 1*9(12), 1418–1431. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2017.1318263

Huda, N., Sumi, S., & Rahman, N. (2025). Discrimination against hijras in Bangladesh: A sociological study on human rights and social justice in Rajshahi District. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Engineering Development, 8*(2), 44–58. https://www.ijsred.com/volume8/issue2/IJSRED-V8I2P6.pdf

Human Rights Watch. (2016). *"I want to live with my head held high": Abuses in Bangladesh's legal recognition of Hijras*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/12/23/i-want-live-my-head-held-high/abuses-bangladeshs-legal-recognition-hijras

Islam, M. T., Ferdous, M. Z., & Karim, M. R. (2022). Legal recognition of third gender in Bangladesh: Progress and remaining challenges. *PLOS ONE, 17*(2), e0263594. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0263594

Irani, B. (2019, April 19). Members of the third gender can vote as 'Hijra.' *Dhaka Tribune.* https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/special/2019/04/19/members-of-the-third-gender-can-vote-as-hijra

Jain, R. (2018). Education for the hijras: Transgender persons of India. *Knowledge Cultures, 6*(1), 51–60.

Khan, S. I., Hussain, M. I., Parveen, S., Bhuiyan, M. I., Gourab, G., Sarker, G. F., Arafat, S. M., & Sikder, J. (2009). Living on the extreme margin: Social exclusion of the transgender population (Hijra) in Bangladesh. *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition, 27*(4), 441–451.

Kulshrestha, P. (2021, August 31). Criminal act repealed 69 years ago, but communities continue to be looked upon suspiciously by society. *The Times of India. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/criminal-act-repealed-69-years-ago-but-communities-continue-to-be-looked-upon-suspiciously-by-society/articleshow/85781106.cms*

Maccoby, E. E. (1998). The two sexes: Growing up apart, coming together (Vol. 4). *Harvard University Press*. https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674914827

Ministry of Social Welfare. (2015). *Livelihood development project for Hijra community*. http://www.msw.gov.bd/

Mondal, B., Das, S., Ray, D., & Banerjee, D. (2020). Their untold stories: Lived experiences of being a transgender (Hijra), a qualitative study from India. *Journal of Psychosexual Health, 2*(2), 165–173. https://doi.org/10.1177/26318318209369

Moolchaem, P., Liamputtong, P., O'Halloran, P., & Muhamad, R. (2015). The lived experiences of transgender persons: A meta-synthesis. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, *27*(2), 143–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2015.1021983

Mount, L. (2020). 'I am not a Hijra': Class, respectability, and the emergence of the 'new' transgender woman in India. *Gender & Society, 34*(4), 620–647. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243220932275

Nanda, S. (1999). *Neither man nor woman: The Hijras of India*. (2nd ed.). Wadsworth.

Rashid, S. (2024, July 4). The illusion of inclusion: Empty policies and promises for Bangladesh's hijra community. *The Daily Star.* https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/the-illusion-inclusion-empty-policies-and-promises-bangladeshs-hijra-community-3647996

Rehan, N., Chaudhary, I., & Shah, S. K. (2009). Socio-sexual behavior of Hijras of Lahore. *JPMA: Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association, 59*(6), 380–384.

Stenqvist, T. (2015). *Communication for Development* (Master's thesis). Malmö University.

Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender history*. Seal Press.

Suza, M., Warner, J., & Van Dijk, H. (2024). Climate, food (in)security and conflict in the Bangladesh delta: Myths and puzzles. *Environment and Security*, *2*(4), 525–547. https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796241244544

Swedberg, R. (2012). Theorizing in sociology and social science: Turning to the context of discovery. *Theory and Society, 41*(1), 1–40. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-011-9161-5

The Daily Star. (2024, January 15). *Hijra rights still not a reality*. https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/hijra-rights-still-not-reality-3527606

Toppa, S. (2014, November 6). In photos: Bangladesh's Trans Pride Parade was massive and fabulous. Vice. https://www.vice.com/en/article/wjy95q/in-photos-bangladeshs-trans-pride-parade-was-massive-and-fabulous

Titir, A. (2019). *From recognition to realising rights: Legal protection of gender identity in Bangladesh law* [Policy brief]. Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST). https://www.blast.org.bd/publications/others/220-from-recognition-to-realising-rights

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society, 1(*2), 125–151. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002

Woltmann, S. (2020). Third gender politics: Hijra identity construction in India and beyond. *South Asian Review, 41*(1), 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2019.1692275