

Exploring the Quality of Life of Transgenders in Kashmir: A Review

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ABSTRACT

This review paper analyses the quality of life (QoL) of transgender individuals in Kashmir from 2015 to 2023, highlighting the severe challenges they face within the region. Despite being part of Kashmiri culture, transgender individuals suffer from significant social stigma, discrimination, economic marginalization, and inadequate healthcare and legal protections. The review synthesizes research from Google Scholar and Web of Science, focusing on factors like social acceptance, health, economic conditions, and legal issues. Findings reveal that transgender individuals in Kashmir experience a much lower QoL compared to their cisgender counterparts, largely due to systemic discrimination and social exclusion. High levels of mental health issues, economic hardship, and inadequate legal protections are prevalent. The review also notes a lack of region-specific studies using standardized QoL assessment tools, underscoring the need for more targeted research. The paper calls for urgent policy interventions, legal reforms, and improved healthcare and socio-economic support to enhance the QoL of the transgender community in Kashmir.

Keywords: *Quality of Life, Transgenders, Kashmir*

The concept of Quality of Life (QoL) encompasses a broad range of factors that contribute to an individual's overall well-being, including physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, and their relationship with their environment (World Health Organization, 1997). For marginalized communities, such as transgender individuals, QoL is often significantly compromised due to systemic discrimination, social stigma, and a lack of access to essential services (Lombardi, 2001; Winter et al., 2016).

Kashmir has a unique cultural and historical context, with a long-standing tradition of recognizing third-gender identities (Reddy, 2005). Despite this, transgender individuals in Kashmir, commonly referred to as "Hijras" or "Khwaja Sira," face significant marginalization and social exclusion. The societal perception of transgender people in Kashmir is often shaped by traditional beliefs and conservative attitudes, which contribute to their systemic discrimination and disenfranchisement (Puri, 2010).

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Transgender individuals in Kashmir experience a range of issues that directly impact their QoL. These include social rejection and violence, economic marginalization, poor access to healthcare, and a lack of legal protections (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The stigma associated with being transgender often leads to social isolation, which negatively affects their mental health and well-being (Nemoto et al., 2011). Economic opportunities are severely limited, as transgender individuals are often excluded from formal employment, forcing many into low-paying, informal jobs (Hossain, 2017). Additionally, the lack of legal recognition and protection leaves them vulnerable to discrimination and abuse, with little recourse for justice (Knight, 2015).

Objective

The primary objective of this review is to analyse and synthesize the existing body of literature on the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir from 2015 to 2023. This period has seen increased global attention to transgender rights and issues, but region-specific studies, particularly in Kashmir, remain limited. By focusing on this timeframe, the review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various factors that influence the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir, including social acceptance, mental and physical health, economic conditions, and the legal context.

The review also seeks to identify gaps in the current literature and propose directions for future research. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the broader discourse on transgender rights and well-being, providing insights that can inform policy development and advocacy efforts in Kashmir.

Significance

The significance of this review lies in its focus on a marginalized and often overlooked population in a highly volatile region. Understanding the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on the lived experiences of a community that faces multiple layers of discrimination and hardship. Secondly, it highlights the intersectionality of transgender identity with factors such as conflict, cultural norms, and socio-economic conditions, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges they face. Thirdly, the findings of this review can inform the development of targeted interventions and policies aimed at improving the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir.

Given the social context of Kashmir, there is an urgent need for research that not only documents the challenges faced by transgender individuals but also explores potential solutions. This review aims to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature, identifying key areas of concern, and suggesting avenues for future research and policy development.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

This review utilized Google Scholar and Web of Science databases to identify relevant studies published between 2015 and 2023. The following search terms were used: "Transgender Quality of Life Kashmir," "LGBTQ+ Kashmir 2015-2023," "Health of Transgenders in Kashmir," "Discrimination against Transgenders in Kashmir," and "Transgender Rights in Kashmir."

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they focused on transgender individuals in Kashmir and discussed aspects of QoL, including social, economic, health, and legal issues. Articles not directly related to transgender QoL or those focused on other regions were excluded.

Data Extraction

Data were extracted from selected articles, focusing on study objectives, methodologies, key findings, and conclusions. The data were then synthesized to identify common themes and gaps in the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Transgender Issues in Kashmir

The transgender community in Kashmir, commonly referred to as "Hijras" or "Khwaja Sira," occupies a complex position within the socio-cultural fabric of the region. Historically, this community has been recognized in South Asian culture, often participating in rituals and ceremonies (Nanda, 1999). However, despite this cultural acknowledgment, transgender individuals in Kashmir experience profound marginalization and discrimination (Ahmad, 2019).

Research indicates that the traditional roles once occupied by the transgender community have diminished over time, largely due to shifting societal attitudes and the increasing conservatism influenced by both religious and cultural factors (Khan, 2017). In contemporary Kashmiri society, transgender individuals are often viewed through a lens of stigma and are subject to systemic social exclusion. This exclusion manifests in various forms, including verbal and physical abuse, social ostracism, and limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (Bhat et al., 2020).

Quality of Life Factors

The QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir is influenced by several interrelated factors, including social acceptance, health and mental well-being, economic conditions, and the legal environment. Each of these factors contributes to the overall well-being of transgender individuals and plays a critical role in shaping their lived experiences in the region.

Social Acceptance

Social acceptance is a fundamental determinant of QoL for transgender individuals. In Kashmir, social attitudes towards transgenders are predominantly negative, rooted in deep-seated cultural and religious beliefs that view non-binary gender identities as deviant or immoral (Ahmad, 2019). This widespread social rejection leads to significant psychological distress and contributes to the marginalization of transgender individuals (Khan, 2017).

A study by Khan (2017) highlighted the pervasive stigma and social isolation faced by transgenders in Kashmir. The research found that transgender individuals are often excluded from their families and communities, leading to a profound sense of loneliness and a lack of social support. This social exclusion is compounded by societal norms that enforce rigid gender roles, leaving little room for the acceptance of gender diversity (Bhat et al., 2020).

Social rejection also manifests in more overt forms of discrimination, such as bullying, harassment, and violence. Transgender individuals in Kashmir are frequently subjected to verbal and physical abuse, both in public spaces and within their own homes (Zargar, 2021).

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This constant threat of violence not only undermines their sense of safety and security but also contributes to chronic stress and anxiety, further diminishing their QoL (Khan, 2017).

Health and Mental Well-being

The health and mental well-being of transgender individuals in Kashmir are severely compromised by the lack of access to healthcare services and the ongoing stigma associated with their gender identity (Bhat et al., 2020). Transgender individuals often face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, including discrimination by healthcare providers, a lack of understanding of transgender-specific health needs, and limited availability of gender-affirming medical services (Winter et al., 2016).

Research conducted by Bhat et al. (2020) found that many transgender individuals in Kashmir avoid seeking medical care due to fear of discrimination and mistreatment. Those who do seek care often report negative experiences, such as being refused treatment or subjected to invasive questioning about their gender identity. This avoidance of healthcare services leads to poor health outcomes, as transgender individuals are less likely to receive timely and appropriate care for both general and transgender-specific health issues.

Mental health is another critical aspect of QoL that is adversely affected by the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir. The pervasive social stigma, discrimination, and violence experienced by transgenders contribute to high levels of psychological distress (Bhat et al., 2020). Studies have reported elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among transgender individuals in Kashmir, reflecting the severe impact of social exclusion and marginalization on their mental health (Zargar, 2021).

Economic Conditions

Economic conditions play a significant role in determining the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. The economic marginalization of transgender people is a pervasive issue, with many being excluded from formal employment opportunities due to their gender identity (Ahmad, 2019). As a result, a significant number of transgender individuals are forced into informal, low-paying jobs, such as begging or performing at weddings and other ceremonies (Zargar, 2021).

Ahmad (2019) conducted a study that highlighted the economic challenges faced by transgenders in Kashmir. The study found that the majority of transgender individuals in the region live in poverty, with limited access to stable and secure employment. This economic vulnerability is compounded by the lack of social safety nets and support systems, leaving many transgender individuals without the resources they need to improve their living conditions (Khan, 2017).

Legal Environment

The legal environment in Kashmir is a critical factor that shapes the QoL of transgender individuals. While India has made significant strides in recognizing and protecting transgender rights at the national level, these legal advancements have been slow to take effect in Kashmir (Zargar, 2021).

Zargar (2021) explored the legal and political challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir, emphasizing the lack of legal recognition and protection. The study found that, despite the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2019, which grants transgender individuals certain rights and protections, the implementation of these

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legal provisions in Kashmir has been limited. This lack of legal protection leaves transgender individuals vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and violence, with little recourse for justice (Ahmad, 2019).

Discrimination and Violence

Discrimination and violence are pervasive issues that significantly impact the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. The intersection of their gender identity with the region's different challenges makes them particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence, including physical assault, sexual violence, and emotional abuse (Khan, 2017).

Numerous studies have documented the experiences of discrimination and violence faced by transgenders in Kashmir. These studies highlight the widespread nature of these issues, with transgender individuals reporting frequent incidents of harassment and violence in both public and private spaces (Bhat et al., 2020). The constant threat of violence creates an environment of fear and insecurity, which severely impacts their QoL (Zargar, 2021).

Studies Using WHO-BREF QoL

The WHO-BREF QoL tool is a standardized assessment that measures an individual's overall QoL across several domains, including physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environmental factors (World Health Organization, 1997). While the WHO-BREF QoL tool has been widely used in various populations, its application to the transgender community in Kashmir remains limited (Bhat et al., 2020).

Few studies have specifically utilized the WHO-BREF QoL tool to assess the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. However, those that have used this framework have provided valuable insights into the multidimensional challenges faced by this community (Ahmad, 2019). These studies underscore the importance of comprehensive assessments that capture the full range of factors influencing QoL, particularly in Kashmir.

The limited use of the WHO-BREF QoL tool in this context highlights a significant gap in the literature. There is a need for more region-specific studies that employ standardized QoL assessment tools to better understand the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir. Such studies would provide a more accurate and nuanced understanding of their QoL, which is essential for developing targeted interventions and policies to improve their well-being.

DISCUSSION

Synthesis of Key Findings

This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the literature on the Quality of Life (QoL) of transgender individuals in Kashmir, covering the period from 2015 to 2023. The findings reveal that transgender individuals in Kashmir are among the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in the region. The synthesis highlights the intersection of several critical factors—social rejection, health disparities, economic marginalization, and inadequate legal protections—that collectively contribute to the poor QoL of transgender individuals in this conflict-affected region.

Social Rejection and Isolation

Transgender individuals in Kashmir face significant social rejection and isolation due to entrenched cultural, religious, and societal norms that view non-binary identities with disdain (Khan, 2017). Historically, transgender people played recognized roles in Kashmiri

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society, but those roles have diminished, leaving them marginalized and ostracized by their families and communities (Bhat et al., 2020). This social isolation has profound impacts on their physical and mental health, as well as their economic stability. Social rejection has been shown to correlate with higher rates of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Bhat et al., 2020). In conflict-stricken regions like Kashmir, where social services and community support systems are already strained, transgender individuals are particularly vulnerable to the compounded effects of social exclusion (Ahmad, 2019).

Health Disparities and Access to Care

Health disparities are a critical factor in the diminished quality of life (QoL) for transgender individuals in Kashmir. Barriers to accessing healthcare—such as discrimination by providers, a lack of understanding of transgender-specific health needs, and the absence of gender-affirming care—exacerbate their health challenges (Khan, 2017). The stigma surrounding transgender identities discourages individuals from seeking healthcare, even when it is urgently needed. As a result, transgender individuals experience worse health outcomes, including untreated chronic conditions and higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly HIV (Bhat et al., 2020). Access to mental healthcare is also limited, leaving many transgender individuals to cope with the psychological distress caused by social stigma and discrimination without adequate support. In the absence of culturally competent mental health services, transgender individuals face heightened risks of depression and anxiety (Ahmad, 2019).

Economic Marginalization and Poverty

Economic marginalization is a pervasive issue that severely affects the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. Excluded from formal employment due to their gender identity, many are forced into informal, precarious, and low-paying jobs such as begging or performing at weddings (Bhat et al., 2020). This economic instability is compounded by social marginalization, creating a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. Discrimination in education and employment limits their opportunities for upward mobility (Ahmad, 2019). Even when transgender individuals access education or vocational training, they encounter significant barriers in the job market, where employers are often unwilling to hire them due to their gender identity.

Inadequate Legal Protections

The legal landscape in Kashmir provides inadequate protection for transgender individuals. Although India passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2019, which was meant to safeguard transgender rights, its implementation in Kashmir has been slow and inconsistent. This lack of legal protection leaves transgender individuals vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and violence, with few avenues for recourse (Zargar, 2021).

Intersectionality of Challenges

Intersectionality plays a crucial role in understanding the layered challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir. Their experiences of discrimination are compounded by factors such as socio-economic status, religious identity, and the ongoing conflict in the region (Ahmad, 2019). The intersection of these identities heightens their vulnerability, as they face exclusion not only because of their gender identity but also due to broader socio-economic and political factors. This intersectionality intensifies their marginalization and makes it harder for transgender individuals to access resources, such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Addressing the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir requires a multi-faceted approach that includes social, economic, health, and legal reforms.

Social Acceptance and Inclusion:

Improving social acceptance is crucial for enhancing the QoL of transgender individuals. Public awareness campaigns, led by influential community and religious leaders, could help challenge negative stereotypes and promote acceptance of gender diversity (Khan, 2017). Educational institutions also play a key role in fostering inclusion, with gender diversity education integrated into school curricula and teacher training (Bhat et al., 2020).

Healthcare Access and Equity:

Targeted interventions are needed to improve healthcare access for transgender individuals. Training healthcare providers on transgender-specific needs and expanding gender-affirming services are essential steps. In regions where healthcare access is limited, mobile clinics and telemedicine services can help bridge gaps (Ahmad, 2019). Additionally, creating safe spaces within healthcare facilities where transgender individuals can receive care without fear of discrimination would improve their health outcomes.

Economic Empowerment and Employment

Economic empowerment programs, such as vocational training and microfinance initiatives, can help transgender individuals secure better job opportunities. Policies that promote equal employment opportunities and protect transgender individuals from workplace discrimination are also critical (Zargar, 2021). Furthermore, social protection programs can provide financial support for those excluded from the job market due to discrimination (Bhat et al., 2020).

Legal Protections and Advocacy

Strengthening legal protections for transgender individuals is essential for safeguarding their rights. Full implementation of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019, alongside region-specific legal frameworks, is necessary to address the unique challenges faced in Kashmir (Zargar, 2021). Legal aid services should be made available to transgender individuals to help them navigate the legal system and seek justice in cases of discrimination or violence.

Recommendations for Future Research

This review identifies several gaps in the current literature and highlights the need for further research on the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. Future research should focus on:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir over time can provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of interventions and policy changes on the lives of transgender individuals.
- **Region-Specific QoL Assessments:** Utilizing standardized QoL assessment tools, such as the WHO-BREF QoL, to conduct region-specific studies that provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing QoL for transgender individuals in Kashmir. These studies should consider the unique social and cultural context of Kashmir and how it impacts the QoL of transgender individuals.

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- **Intersectionality in Research:** Exploring the intersectionality of gender identity with other social categories, such as class, religion, and ethnicity, to better understand the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir. This includes examining how different forms of discrimination and marginalization intersect and exacerbate the challenges faced by transgender individuals.
- **Impact of Legal and Policy Changes:** Investigating the impact of legal and policy changes on the QoL of transgender individuals, particularly in the context of the implementation of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019 in Kashmir. This includes examining how effectively these laws are being implemented and what impact they are having on the lives of transgender individuals.

CONCLUSION

The Quality of Life (QoL) of transgender individuals in Kashmir represents a deeply complex and multifaceted issue, intertwined with the region's socio-cultural, and economic dynamics. The findings of this review, which span from 2015 to 2023, highlight the profound challenges faced by transgender individuals in this region. These challenges include social rejection and isolation, significant health disparities, severe economic marginalization, and inadequate legal protections. Each of these factors alone would be sufficient to negatively impact the QoL of any community, but for transgender individuals in Kashmir, these challenges are compounded by the region's unique social and cultural context.

Social and Cultural Dynamics

The review reveals that social rejection and isolation are among the most significant factors negatively impacting the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. The deeply entrenched cultural and religious beliefs in the region contribute to widespread discrimination and stigma against transgender individuals, leading to their social exclusion. This exclusion is not only a source of emotional and psychological distress but also limits their access to essential social networks and resources that are critical for their well-being.

The cultural rejection of transgender identities is deeply rooted in traditional gender norms and roles, which view non-binary identities with suspicion and disdain. This cultural context has led to the erosion of the traditional roles that transgender individuals once occupied in Kashmiri society, further marginalizing them. Addressing this cultural stigma requires sustained efforts to challenge and transform societal attitudes towards gender diversity, promoting greater acceptance and inclusion of transgender individuals.

Health Disparities and Access to Healthcare

Health disparities are another critical issue highlighted in this review. Transgender individuals in Kashmir face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, including discrimination by healthcare providers, a lack of understanding of transgender-specific health needs, and the absence of gender-affirming care. These barriers contribute to poorer health outcomes and a higher prevalence of untreated health conditions among transgender individuals in the region.

Mental health is a particularly pressing concern, with high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation reported among transgender individuals. The chronic stress of living in a socially hostile environment exacerbates these mental health issues. However, the lack of culturally competent mental health services means that many transgender individuals are unable to access the support they need. Addressing these health disparities requires a

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comprehensive approach that includes improving access to gender-affirming healthcare, training healthcare providers in transgender health issues, and expanding mental health services in the region.

Economic Marginalization and Poverty

The economic marginalization of transgender individuals in Kashmir is a significant barrier to improving their QoL. Excluded from most formal employment opportunities due to their gender identity, many transgender individuals are forced into informal and precarious work, which offers little financial stability and exposes them to further social stigma and legal risks. This economic vulnerability is closely linked to their social exclusion which has severely impacted the local economy.

The cycle of poverty experienced by transgender individuals in Kashmir is difficult to escape, as they are often denied access to education, vocational training, and formal employment opportunities. Economic empowerment programs that provide targeted support for transgender individuals are essential for breaking this cycle and improving their QoL. These programs should focus on providing vocational training, microfinance initiatives, and support for transgender-owned businesses, as well as promoting equal employment opportunities and enforcing anti-discrimination laws in the workplace.

Legal Context

The legal context in Kashmir presents additional challenges for transgender individuals. Despite the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2019, the implementation of these legal protections in Kashmir has been limited.

The lack of effective legal protections leaves transgender individuals vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and violence, with little recourse for justice. Strengthening legal protections and ensuring the full implementation of existing laws are critical steps towards improving the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. Legal aid services should be made available to help transgender individuals navigate the legal system, and advocacy efforts should focus on raising awareness of their legal rights and promoting legal reforms that protect their rights.

Intersectionality and Contextual Challenges

The concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding the multifaceted challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir. Their experiences of discrimination and marginalization are not solely based on their gender identity but are also influenced by their socio-economic status, religious identity, and the broader social context of the region.

Addressing the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir requires a nuanced and context-specific approach that takes into account the intersectionality of their experiences. Interventions must be designed to address the multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalization that transgender individuals face, with a focus on improving social acceptance, healthcare access, economic opportunities, and legal protections.

Implications for Policy and Future Research

The findings of this review have significant implications for policy and practice in Kashmir. There is an urgent need for targeted interventions that address the specific challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir. These interventions should focus on improving

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social acceptance, enhancing access to healthcare, promoting economic empowerment, and strengthening legal protections.

Future research should build on the findings of this review to further explore the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir. Longitudinal studies are needed to track changes in QoL over time. Additionally, research should explore the intersectionality of gender identity with other social categories, such as class, religion, and ethnicity, to better understand the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kashmir.

Final Thoughts

The QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir is a deeply complex and multifaceted issue that requires urgent attention. The challenges faced by this community are not only a matter of individual well-being but also reflect broader issues of social justice, human rights, and equality. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and context-specific approach that takes into account the unique socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the region. By addressing the root causes of discrimination and marginalization, and by promoting greater social inclusion and legal protections, it is possible to improve the QoL of transgender individuals in Kashmir and ensure that they can live with dignity and respect in their communities.

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Conflict of Interest

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