

Mental Health Disparities and Social Connectedness among Transgender Persons in Kashmir: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Transgender communities experience significantly higher rates of psychological distress than their cisgender counterparts due to stigma, discrimination, and exclusion from mainstream social structures. Social connectedness, defined as an individual's subjective perception of belonging and acceptance in interpersonal relationships and community networks, is critical for emotional well-being. In Kashmir, where familial and community bonds shape identity and social positioning, transgender persons frequently encounter profound social isolation. This review examines the complex relationship between social connectedness and mental health among transgender persons in Kashmir by synthesizing empirical findings from international, national, and regional literature. The review highlights that reduced social connectedness, particularly due to family rejection and limited societal acceptance, heightens risks of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal behaviour. Conversely, peer belonging and supportive community interactions serve as protective factors that foster resilience and well-being. The review identifies an urgent need for culturally responsive, community-based mental health interventions aimed at strengthening social connectedness among transgender individuals in Kashmir.

Keywords: *Transgender Persons, Social Connectedness, Mental Health, Social Exclusion, Kashmir*

Transgender individuals constitute one of the most marginalized social groups worldwide and face substantial psychological and social adversities. These mental health inequities are largely attributed to minority stress including unique, chronic stressors arising from social stigmatization, prejudice, and limited access to supportive systems rather than to transgender identity itself (Puckett et al., 2023). The minority stress framework posits that accumulated exposure to external discrimination and internal self-stigma predisposes transgender persons to elevated risk for mental health disorders. Globally, transgender people exhibit disproportionately high prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and trauma-related symptoms compared to cisgender populations (Pinna et al., 2022).

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Mental Health Disparities and Social Connectedness among Transgender Persons in Kashmir: A Narrative Review

In India, transgender communities have historically been excluded from family structures, educational systems, employment sectors, and public institutions, leading to heightened vulnerability to psychological distress (Bhattacharya, Sur, & Singh, 2020). Despite some legislative advancements, societal attitudes remain largely stigmatizing. In Kashmir, where traditional norms strongly influence community expectations and social identities, transgender individuals frequently encounter misrecognition, social invisibility, and relational disconnection. The loss of family acceptance is particularly damaging due to the centrality of kinship networks in Kashmiri society.

Social connectedness offers a crucial lens to understand how interpersonal bonds influence psychological well-being among transgender individuals. Defined as subjective closeness and belongingness to others and the community (Lee et al., 2001), it has emerged as a key mediator between minority stress and mental health outcomes. When transgender persons experience positive social integration, their emotional resilience increases, internalized stigma reduces, and mental health improves (London-Nadeau et al., 2023).

This review explores existing research to illustrate how social connectedness influences mental health outcomes among transgender persons, with implications for future investigations and interventions in Kashmir.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that transgender individuals experience widespread psychological distress due to stigma and rejection. A systematic review by Pinna et al. (2022) demonstrated that discrimination, violence, and social hostility heightened risks of mood and anxiety disorders and suicidality. Similar outcomes were observed in Indian studies, where transgender populations frequently reported depression, loneliness, and impaired quality of life due to social and economic exclusion (Krishna et al., 2022; Bhattacharya et al., 2020). Internalized transphobia, resulting from prolonged exposure to negative stereotypes, further contributes to emotional dysregulation and reduced self-worth (Yang et al., 2015).

Global research consistently emphasizes the protective role of social connectedness in transgender mental health. Greater family acceptance, peer support, and community engagement correlate with reduced psychological distress and increased life satisfaction (Pflum et al., 2015). For example, a Canadian study found that transgender and nonbinary youth with strong family and school connectedness experienced significantly lower levels of depression and self-harm (London-Nadeau et al., 2023). Similarly, transgender adults with affirming social networks reported enhanced coping skills and lower levels of suicidal ideation ((Puckett et al., 2019).

Studies from the South Asian region further highlight social isolation as a major contributor to emotional suffering. A recent analysis of transgender experiences in India and Pakistan found that social stigma reduced access to education, healthcare, and employment, thereby deepening psychological distress and self-perceived isolation (Suleman et al., 2023). Family rejection remains one of the most consistent predictors of mental health burden.

Available Indian studies reinforce these findings. Research in Chennai indicated that barriers to healthcare access contributed to worsening emotional outcomes among transgender adults, who often avoided hospitals due to discriminatory treatment (Umashankar et al., 2025). Moreover, economic insecurity and lack of community belonging significantly

Mental Health Disparities and Social Connectedness among Transgender Persons in Kashmir: A Narrative Review

correlate with depression and anxiety among hijra and transgender individuals (Raj et al., 2024).

Although Kashmir-specific literature remains extremely limited, regional observations align with national findings regarding social stigma and marginalization among transgender persons (Jahangir, 2023). A study published by Ahmad & Shafi, 2024 found that lower levels of perceived belonging strongly predicted loneliness and depression among transgender persons in Kashmir. This suggests that social connectedness is central to mental health outcomes in this region as well.

Overall, the literature affirms that social connectedness directly shapes mental well-being among transgender persons through mediating pathways of resilience, identity affirmation, and emotional support.

METHOD

This review adopted a narrative research design suitable for synthesizing diverse scholarly literature on social connectedness and mental health among transgender persons. Peer-reviewed articles were sourced from databases including Google Scholar, SCOPUS, and PubMed using keywords such as “transgender mental health,” “social connectedness,” “social support,” “Kashmir,” and “belongingness.” Inclusion criteria were: (a) studies published in English, (b) published between 2000 and 2025, and (c) studies addressing mental health or social connectedness in transgender populations. The review excluded solely biomedical research without psychosocial variables. Data were analyzed thematically to identify key psychological and social patterns.

The objectives of the review were:

1. To synthesize existing research on the mental health status of transgender persons.
2. To analyze the role of social connectedness in influencing mental health outcomes.
3. To identify gaps and implications for future research in Kashmir.

DISCUSSION

The present review highlights that transgender persons encounter a wide range of psychosocial adversities which directly influence their mental health functioning, and that social connectedness serves as a critical protective factor in this context. The findings clearly support minority stress theory, which emphasizes that experiences such as discrimination, misgendering, rejection, and marginalization accumulate into chronic psychological distress (Puckett et al., 2023). In collectivistic cultures like Kashmir, where self-identity is largely constructed through family and community belongingness, disruptions to social acceptance exert even more intense adverse effects on mental well-being. When transgender individuals lose access to these vital relational structures, they experience diminished self-worth and increased vulnerability to mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Krishna et al., 2022).

A key finding emerging from this review is the central role of the family. Family acceptance is consistently shown to be the strongest predictor of positive mental health among transgender individuals (London-Nadeau et al., 2023). Unfortunately, many transgender persons in Kashmir experience family rejection due to stigma attached to gender non-conformity. This separation from familial support leads to economic hardship, social exclusion, and emotional suffering. The absence of validation within the family forces

Mental Health Disparities and Social Connectedness among Transgender Persons in Kashmir: A Narrative Review

transgender individuals to seek belonging from outside sources, and when this is not adequately accessed, their risk for mental disorders escalates (Suleman et al., 2023).

At the same time, the review shows that peer and community networks can serve as surrogate families. Social connectedness within peer groups provides identity affirmation, counters internalised stigma, and fosters resilience (Pflum et al., 2015). These peer bonds become essential mechanisms for emotional regulation and psychological survival. This suggests that strengthening community support structures can help compensate for the lack of familial acceptance among transgender persons.

However, the review also identifies several structural barriers that interfere with the development of social connectedness. These include discrimination in educational institutions, workplace exclusion, lack of access to gender-affirming healthcare, and harassment in public spaces (Raj et al., 2024; Umashankar et al., 2025). Each of these obstacles reinforces marginalisation and limits opportunities for transgender individuals to form supportive relationships. Healthcare stigma in particular is concerning, as it prevents early identification and treatment of mental health concerns and further reinforces distrust and disconnection (Jahangir, 2023).

Moreover, the findings highlight a significant research gap in Kashmir. While studies from India and other countries consistently report strong associations between social connectedness and mental health outcomes, Kashmir remains largely understudied. Without region-specific data, policy makers and mental health professionals may fail to understand the cultural nuances affecting transgender well-being. Therefore, large-scale empirical research using validated psychological tools is needed to examine the depth of these issues in the Kashmiri context.

The implications of this review for mental health practice are substantial. First, interventions should prioritise family-based sensitisation programs, where caregivers receive guidance on gender affirmation and supportive communication. Second, peer-led community support groups should be formally developed and integrated into mental health services. Third, healthcare professionals must be trained in culturally competent and transgender-affirmative practices to ensure safe and respectful access to services. Lastly, inclusive social policies should be enforced to reduce stigma and expand educational and employment opportunities, thereby improving societal belonging and overall quality of life.

In summary, the discussion underscores that mental health and social connectedness among transgender persons are deeply interlinked. The lack of supportive social ties contributes to psychological vulnerability, while affirming relationships and community inclusion act as powerful protective resources. Strengthening social connectedness at family, community, and institutional levels is essential for advancing mental well-being and social equity for transgender individuals in Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that transgender individuals face substantial mental health challenges primarily due to social exclusion rather than inherent characteristics of their identities. A consistent pattern across global and Indian studies shows that when transgender persons lack supportive interpersonal relationships and meaningful opportunities for social participation, they experience heightened levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and

Mental Health Disparities and Social Connectedness among Transgender Persons in Kashmir: A Narrative Review

suicidal behaviour (Pinna et al., 2022; Krishna et al., 2022). In regions such as Kashmir, where collective identity and familial ties are central to psychological functioning, these consequences are magnified when transgender persons are denied acceptance within their families and communities (Jahangir, 2023).

At the same time, the review highlights that social connectedness acts as a crucial protective resource that can counter minority stress, improve resilience, and promote well-being (Lee et al., 2001; Pflum et al., 2015). Supportive relationships whether from family members, peers, or community groups—offer emotional affirmation and reduce internalized stigma, allowing transgender individuals to experience dignity, belongingness, and psychological security. Thus, strengthening connectedness must be a primary focus of intervention and advocacy in the region.

Future efforts must include culturally sensitive programs that encourage family acceptance, foster peer support networks, and integrate gender-affirming mental health services within healthcare systems. Additionally, targeted research in Kashmir is urgently required to generate empirical insights into the lived experiences of transgender persons, the cultural determinants of belonging, and barriers to care. Such scholarship will be critical in shaping policy reforms, developing inclusive welfare structures, and training professionals in affirming practices.

In conclusion, enhancing social connectedness is not only a protective factor for mental health but also a fundamental human right for transgender individuals. Promoting inclusion, acceptance, and equitable access to social systems has the potential to transform mental health outcomes and improve overall quality of life for transgender persons in Kashmir. The development of supportive, relationship-centered strategies must therefore be prioritized in both research and practice to ensure psychological well-being and social justice for this marginalized community.

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Mental Health Disparities and Social Connectedness among Transgender Persons in Kashmir: A Narrative Review

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Mental Health Disparities and Social Connectedness among Transgender Persons in Kashmir: A Narrative Review

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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