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## Doing Transgender 'Right': Bodies, Eroticism and Spirituality in *Khwajasira* Work

### Abstract

The regulative and oppressive effects of gender norms on bodies of transgender workers have been mostly explored in standard binary gender work settings. We explore the regulative effects of specialized transgender work regimes by posing the following two questions: How do specialized transgendered work regimes regulate transgender work and bodies? How do transgender workers cope with these regimes? Through a case study of *khwajasiras*, a community of male-to-female transgender people in Pakistan, we explain how competing and conflicting body ideals of hyper-eroticism, spirituality, and hybridity set by these regimes, allow *khwajasiras* to transgress the binary gender norms. Ironically, however, these specialized work regimes have their own regulative and oppressive effects on *khwajasiras*' bodies and work. We then demonstrate how *khwajasiras* cope with these regulative effects in three different ways: embracing the body ideals, strategically shifting work and body across the regimes, and relegating body norms as unimportant for being a transgender. We finally argue that these differences in enacting different form of transgenerness is an outcome of a tight coupling or contradiction between audiences, *khwajasira* community and individual workers' own sense of transgender authenticity.

## **Introduction**

The relation between gender, bodies, and work is a subject of immense interest to work, organization and management scholars (Johansson et al, 2017; Bryant and Jaworski, 2011; Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Jack et al., 2019; Gatrell, 2019; Trethewey, 1999). Gender (binary) not only influences the bodies of individuals determining the way they dress, talk, walk or do other bodily performances (Trethewey, 1999), but this influence is naturalized to an extent that its traces have been defaced (Butler, 1990). As a result, conventional wisdom now assumes that sex is a 'given' at the time of birth and all subsequent facets of bodily demeanour are a 'natural' consequence of the given sexed bodies (Butler, 1990; West and Zimmerman, 1987).

The influence of gender on bodies also extends to the kind of work that male or female bodies could or should do (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016; Haynes, 2012; Ajslev et al., 2017). So, gender norms historically defined and naturalized the workplace as an exclusively male space with women expected to belong to the private space of the home or spheres of employment seen as traditionally 'feminine' (Bryant and Jaworski, 2011). Over time, new ideals of masculinity and femininity have emerged in the definition of gendered divisions of labour. For example, capitalism radically altered the original division of labour between genders, allowing women to come into the workspace (Ayaz et al., 2019; Goger, 2013). Yet, far from redefining gender norms, the workplace has proven to reproduce and reinforce heteronormativity (Bryant and Jaworski, 2011; Schilt, 2006).

The influence of gender in the work sphere includes defining the form and shape of bodies that are suitable for work (Brown, 2019, Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles, 2019), and by implication, classifying others as abject (Nyberg, 2012; Martin, 2002; Bryant and Jaworski, 2011; Gatrell, 2019). The 'productive body' (Guéry and Deleule, 2014), the 'healthy, fit and athletic body' (Johansson et al., 2017), the 'masculine body' (Riach and Cutcher, 2014) are defined as

suitable, while pregnant or lactating bodies are classified as abject (Gatrell, 2019). For women to work, or climb up the organizational hierarchy, their bodies must look and act like that of a 'professional' (Trethewey, 1999; Johansson et al., 2017). Bodies of organizational workers are thus a receptacle of gendered norms (Martin, 2002; Nyberg, 2012; Bryant and Jaworski, 2011).

In a field where gender seems to have an independent and primary influence on bodies and work with attendant oppressive effects, researchers have identified instances where workers, often belonging to marginalized gender, have used different strategies, for example, 'downplaying' or 'foregrounding' their gender to negotiate and 'challenge their marginalization' within work organizations (Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Martin, 2002; Nyberg, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles, 2019). Similarly, workers have strategically used alternative regimes, e.g. religion and race, to evade the effect of those gender norms that work to their disadvantage in the workplace (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2019; Adamson and Johansson, 2016; Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). In all these instances of 'resistance', marginalised workers aim at avoiding abjection and secure others' recognition at the workplace and in the process, often reinforce the gender norms that cause their marginalization in the first place (Fotaki, 2011; Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Butler, 2004).

Whereas the transgressive potential of workers belonging to the gender binary appears limited, transgender people<sup>1</sup> are believed to occupy a more interesting place to transgress the gender boundaries. Transgender people are individuals that supposedly transcend the gender binary and because of their unique 'nature', they bring a new dimension to the gender-body-work debate (Muhr et al, 2016; Hines, 2010; Schilt, 2006; Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles, 2019). Born in a sexed body that does not reflect their gender, transgender people expose the socially constructed nature of gender, and offer new possibilities of an ultimate challenge to the

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<sup>1</sup> We use here the term 'transgender' as "an umbrella term that includes transsexuals, transvestites, gender queers, and others who do not conform to the male/female binary" (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016, p. 251)

hegemonic influence of gender on bodies and work. 'Transgenderness' has thus become synonymous with both transgression and emancipation, especially in the work sphere where gender norms are constantly reproduced and reinforced through the discipline of bodies (Schilt, 2006).

However, this conclusion has been challenged by more recent studies arguing that transgenderness does not necessarily mean transgression, thus calling for further investigation of the lived experiences of transgender people (Muhr et al, 2016; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Hines, 2010) and their embodiment (Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007, 1398). Contrary to research which investigates the bodies of workers "in a disembodied way" (Thanem, 2011, 199), this paper investigates how transgender people "use their bodies and gender at work, and how this shapes their interactions, identities and coping strategies" (Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles, 2019, 488). In shedding light on this body/work/gender nexus (ibid), we concern ourselves with the challenges that are peculiar to transgender people, their bodies and their work (O'Shea, 2018). The research extends previous knowledge on this topic (Muhr et al, 2016; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Hines, 2010; Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007) by showing how specialised work occupations of transgender people entail different and at times competing regulative regimes (Butler, 1990) and how these 'work regimes' (Johansson et al, 2017) are, in turn, differently experienced by transgender people (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2019), thus giving us further insights about 'doing transgender' (Connell, 2010; Ekins, 1997; O'Shea, 2018). While each work regime queers the gender binaries, thus offering a distinct possibility of doing transgender, it also offers its own regulative effects, endorsing some transgender body and work norms and condemning others thus allowing us to understand the emancipative as well as oppressive aspects of specialized transgender work regimes. The presence of multiple and contradictory specialized transgender work regimes also opens the possibility of exploring the variegated ways in which transgender workers 'cope' with these regimes, thus allowing us to

further unpack the relationship between the performative effects of these transgender norms and the performance expectations of *khwajasira* community, audience, and co-workers across different specialized work proscenium (Sedgwick, 2002).

The article begins by introducing the existing literature on gender, work, and (trans)gender bodies through the analytical lenses informing the analysis. A section on the method follows. We then introduce our qualitative analysis of the biographical accounts of 47 *khwajasiras*, Pakistani male-to-female transgender people<sup>2</sup>, exploring their working lives. A discussion of the findings highlights the (theoretical) implications of our study on the intersectionality of body and gender at work. Potential directions for future studies are then suggested in the conclusion section.

## **1. On gender, work, and (trans)gender bodies**

To investigate the significance that the nexus of work, bodies, and gender acquires for transgender people, we consider that the sedimentation of gender norms produces and reinforces the idea of a 'real' and 'natural' sexuality/gender and, by contrast, the conceptualization of non-binary gender as a fictitious and unnatural construct, a failed copy (Butler, 1994). In the eyes of heteronormativity, transgender bodies are first and foremost unintelligible, unthinkable, and ultimately abject. Transgender workers thus more often decide to conceal their transgender identity at work to avoid abjection and discrimination (Thanem, 2011; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016).

Heteronormativity (im)poses and naturalizes corporeal styles as if they exist exclusively in a binary relationship. Accordingly, only those bodies that 'do gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) by enacting performances that reflect this binary understanding of bodies

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<sup>2</sup> While there are female to male transgenders in Pakistan as well, they are not considered a part of Khwajasira community, which is a focus of our research.

and gender have the possibility of existence and recognition. Bodies thus 'matter' only to the extent that they materialise dominant gender norms (Tyler and Cohen, 2010, Butler, 1993). In their struggle for (self-)recognition, individuals are thus moved by a need to remain intelligible to the others and this becomes possible only to the extent that they repeat and enact sedimented gender norms through their bodies. For instance, to become a 'body that matters' (Butler, 1993), a male-sexed body is expected to engage in stylised repetitions that reflect allegedly 'masculine' characteristics such as authority, control, and power. A female-sexed body, on the contrary, 'does' gender by embodying a different set of 'feminine virtues', such as obedience, loyalty, humility (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Bodies are not intelligible outside this gender binary (Butler, 1990, 1993).

However, feminist research has suggested that the 'fictitious character of the transgender body far from being a 'failed copy' actually opens up new possibilities of gender reality (Butler, 2004). In repeating gender norms differently, bodies can also "displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (Butler, 1990, 148). This displacement has been described as an "undoing" of those bodily performances that are deemed necessary for a body to be enlisted within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2004). The transgressive potential ultimately lies in the body: "body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation" (Butler, 2004, 217).

Accordingly, extant literature has argued that the transgender body epitomises this 'undoing gender' by challenging the ontology and epistemology of gender as exclusively binary. By refusing to enact those bodily performances that are expected from them as (fe)male-sexed bodies, 'transgender bodies' demonstrate the transgressive potential of bodies vis-à-vis heteronormativity. Rather than being 'failed copies' of reality, transgender bodies exceed and rework the norms to make us realize that these gender norms are not carved in stone

(Butler, 2004, 29). However, this interpretation focuses on the transgender body as a “metaphor for the performativity of gender as a whole” (Thanem, 2011, 198) and on the body as an object, thus failing in understanding transgender workers’ experience of embodiment: how they see and experience their bodies through and at work (Trethewey, 1999; Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007; Wolkowitz 2006).

Challenging the possibility of this *undoing*, other studies have argued that the regulatory regime of heteronormativity operates in such a pervasive way that it only allows for ‘redoing gender’, but never undoing (or un-structuring) (West and Zimmerman, 2009). In other words, since there is no intelligibility outside the gender binary, it might be possible to redefine understanding of masculinity and femininity (i.e. redoing gender) but this resignification never dismantles the gender binary (i.e. undoing gender) (Connell, 2010). This conclusion is supported by empirical studies of transgender people’s lived experiences (Schilt and Connell, 2007; Schilt, 2006). Schilt and Connell (2007) have for instance shown how, following their transitioning process, transmen and transwomen are ‘re-enlisted’ by co-workers to fit the gender binary. Female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) who entered the workforce as a woman and transition to become men suddenly find themselves enjoying the ‘male privilege’ (Schilt, 2006), whereas male-to-female transsexuals (MTFs) start experience for the first time, what gender discrimination look like in the workplace (Schilt and Connell, 2007). Despite the ‘enlightenment’ that comes in the process, the transition to the ‘other side’ can actually be a reinforcement of the gender binary. Hierarchy and peer pressure present in the work sphere force transgender people to discipline their bodily performances according to gender binaries, even though the same individuals may display their transgender body as a symbol of transgression in their political activism for gender emancipation (Ekins, 1997; Muhr et al, 2016).

These previous studies have in common a focus on transgender people's transiting from one side of the heterosexual matrix to the other with little focus on non-binary identities (O'Shea, 2018). The transgender is ultimately reduced to binary classifications "whereby the transsexual individual is a male who wants to be female or vice versa" (Ivi, p. 9) and the transgender body is at best understood in terms of 'undoing' and 'redoing' gender with gender typically understood as binary. These approaches that tend to see the transgender body as disembodied have been recently called into question by organizational studies that have highlighted the need of investigating 'doing transgender' as distinctive and unique (Connell, 2010; Ekins, 1997; O'Shea, 2018) and transgenderness in terms of embodiment (Thanem, 2011). These studies have highlighted how transgender people's transgression is "materially, culturally, socially and spatially contingent" (Hines, 2010, 597; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016). Furthermore, they have shown that, while the possibility of gender (re)signification is always limited and constrained in traditional work settings (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016), transgender workers do try to engage in non-binary performances (Connell, 2010; Ekins, 1997).

In their investigation of male-to-female transvestites' work experience, Thanem and Wallenberg (2016) for instance conclude that transgender people "adopt a heterogeneous mixture of gendered and ungendered practices and attributes in subtle and transitory ways" (p. 253).

In this backdrop, the aim of our paper is to further expand this 'situated transgressiveness' (Muhr et al, 2016) by exploring transgender embodiment of work and unveiling multiple ways of *doing* transgender (Connell, 2010). In so doing, our paper aims to go beyond the 'homogeneous theorization of transgender' (Hines, 2006, p. 50) in conventional and singular work environments, by exploring the role of work and bodies vis-à-vis transgenderness (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016).



## 2. Research design

### 3.1 *The Historical Context of Khwajasira Work*

This study investigates a peculiar empirical setting: male-to-female transgender communities in Pakistan, called *khawajasiras*. The Persian term *khwajasira* literally means 'superintendent of harem'. In the Mughal period, the title was conferred to some castrated slave individuals that served as servants and guards of the Mughal harem (Hinchy, 2014). They were eunuchs and thus deemed the best candidates to serve as guards of the harem (Hinchy, 2014; Bano, 2008). In addition to the role given to some *khwajasiras* in the Mughal courts, *khwajasiras*' respect was also linked to religious beliefs in Islam and Hinduism that they have a sacred power to curse and to confer blessings on newly married couples to have male children. In a society where male offsprings are highly valued, these beliefs could translate into significant financial rewards for the *khwajasiras*. Through a royal decree from the Mughal court, some of these privileged *khwajasiras* were awarded 'areas', where they had the exclusive right to perform the spiritual dance and collect alms from households, especially at weddings and the birth of male children. They would normally perform their dance in small groups, called *tolis*. The 'right' to an area was passed on as an inheritance from one generation to the next, through a *guru-chela* system. The *guru* (the teacher), traditionally a eunuch would pass on and divide the area between his/her *chelas* (the disciples), who had wholeheartedly served the *guru* throughout their lives. However, *khwajasiras*, outside of the harem, historically known as *hijras* (or *Khusras*, in Punjabi), did not enjoy the same prestige as their counterparts inside the harem. Devoid of any 'areas' with rights to collect alms from people's homes, they would resort to other means of sustenance including begging on the roads, sex work or dancing on local festivals. Over time, the nature of work of the latter group changed, making them financially lucrative, yet dangerous. From a public performance on traditional festivals, dancing, for

example, became a private performance, generally hosted by a group of men for their viewing pleasure. The inebriated audience, all men, would pay a steep price for the dance performance; but at times, subject the dancers to brutal violence. Given their precarious status in society, *khwajasiras* often do not get much support from law enforcement agencies, even when they are subjected to physical violence.

The roots of the suffering, social marginalization, and exclusion of *khwajasiras* can be traced to the British colonial times when the *khwajasira* community was declared as 'deviants'. The independence from the colonial power and the birth of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947 did not alter the status of *khwajasaras* communities, with legal, political and social institutions, all working in tandem to disenfranchise the community. Lately, a decision by the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2009 and the approval of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, recognized a set of rights (i.e. the right to property, the right to inherit, the right to self-perceived gender identity, etc.) for the community. The 2018 Act also allows transgender people to identify their gender "in accordance with their innermost and individual sense of self...that can correspond or not to the sex assigned at birth" (art. 1).

However, these legislative amendments failed to bring any considerable relief to the community mainly because of the conservative and patriarchal values of the society at large. In Pakistani traditional society, when a male-sexed child is born, it is a matter of utmost pride and joy for the entire family, especially for low-income working-class families. A male-sexed person is expected to become a 'son', a 'husband', and a 'father' who would have the physical strengths to earn money and secure the financial needs and 'honour' of the family. Expected to be physically and emotionally weak, a female-sexed body represents the 'honour' in need of protection by the male family members. These gendered responsibilities entail corresponding body and work expectations. If a child is born with ambivalent genitalia, the family fears that he/she will act in a 'deviant' manner thus bringing disrepute to the family. In many cases,

working-class families will give away such babies to *toli* gurus at a very young age. On the other hand, if a child is born with male genitalia but refuses to own up to the heteronormative expectations as he grows up, it is also a matter of utmost shame for the person and the family. In either case, it leads to social marginalization and sanctions for the concerned transgender person.

The severity of social marginalization and stigmatization depends on the line of work and corresponding body display work performed by khwajasiras. Joining a particular line of work is a matter of fate as well as a 'choice'. However, in most cases, khwajasiras make this choice, in individual circumstances, which are not of their own making. Young children with ambivalent sex organs, given away by their parents to *toli* gurus, are destined for *toli* work, at least in their initial working life. On the other hand, some khwajasiras, who struggle to fit into the gender binary as they grow up in their parents' home, may come across and chose a non-*toli* guru, who specialize in dance and sex work. The guru plays an important role in orienting the professional life of young khwajasiras. *Toli* gurus educate their chelas to a spiritual life free from 'sinful' activities. Non-*toli* gurus assess their chelas' aesthetic and erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) before pushing them towards high-end or cheap erotic dance and sex work. For these non-*toli* khwajasiras, there is an established pecking order of work with sex and dance at the top and household work at the bottom. Being relegated to household work means a serious decline in the 'value' of khwajasira in question. If you cannot do a provocative dance, you would always be expected to do household work and serve other 'earning' members of household. As we will see during our empirical analysis, for some khwajasiras, these lines of work are blurred. Whilst sex work and dancing are remunerative work, with the ageing of the body, professional worth becomes an issue of concern for most of our participants. Some khwajasiras thus try to join the *toli* line of business, leaving or combining it with sex and dance work, carefully choosing different time and work proscenium for each line of work. Similarly, some *toli*

workers may leave *toli* work to opt for dance or sex work, only to come back and rejoin the *toli* work, if the *toli* guru permits. Changing or combining the line of work, while not impossible, is facilitated or obstructed by social, cultural, aesthetic and erotic capital of *khwajasiras*; and quite often comes at a cost. A *toli* *khwajasira*, who leaves the *toli* guru for some 'shenanigans', may eventually come back and re-join the *toli* work, but in the process, she may lose the prospect of becoming an heir to the guru.

For most of the society though, at best, *khwajasiras* live a pitiful life, which heightens their spiritual status. At worst, their work is considered outrightly disgraceful and criminal thus furthering their marginalization. Without removing the social stigma that afflicts transgender in each step of their lives, State efforts to provide equal work and education opportunities for transgender people have perpetually failed.

### *3.2 Data collection*

To investigate the working experiences of *khwajasiras*, a review of previous literature on the origins and development of *khwajasira* communities and media documents was first conducted. This review allowed us to gather background information and gain insights into the social context of *khwajasiras*' working experiences. This initial desk research prepared the ground for the subsequent fieldwork. The latter has been undertaken between December 2018 and September 2020.

The closed and secretive nature of the transgender community raises several challenges in collecting the data. The first contact with a few members of the community was made through the social connections of authors. The first round of interviews, consisting of 10 interviews, was not only important in establishing trust between authors and the community members but also paved the way for subsequent interviewees through snowball sampling. The first set of participants referred us to people in their social network. This method is especially useful when contacting 'hidden populations' (Atkinson and Flint, 2001) as their members are considered

deviant and stigmatized, hence they are usually reluctant to participate in research projects. All the interviews took place at the interviewees' homes to make them feel comfortable being interviewed.

As the purpose and implications of the study became clearer to the participants, we were able to enrol representative proportions of khwajasiras belonging to different ages and work strata. The final sample included 47 interviewees aged between 18 and 68 years and with diversified working experiences (see Table I). These participants were not intended to be representative of the Pakistani transgender community, our intent was rather to qualitatively investigate a wide range of challenges that khwajasiras experience vis-à-vis their social and work lives.

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To develop a deep appreciation of their gender and work, we conducted semi-structured interviews ranging from 1 to 2 hours. Interviews not only help to elicit interviewees' self-perceived gender identity but also broader discourses populating the community to which they belong (MacIntyre 1981). This focus on individual and collective discourses helped us to unpack how our participants' experience, resist, enact (trans)gender norms at work (Butler, 1990). The interviews' guide aimed at stimulating discussion on a variety of themes related to khwajasiras' working experiences such as how they perceive work, how being transgender influences their work, and the reasons driving their working choices. All the interviews were conducted in Urdu and Punjabi and were later translated to English at the time of transcribing. However, we decided to preserve some words in the original language as the use of anglophone signifiers often fail in fully capturing "local expressions of transgender identity" (Dutta and Roy, 2014, 320).

Questions about transgender people's bodies were not initially included in the interviews' guide as the study did not set out to investigate this topic. However, participants' narratives surprisingly revolved around bodily ideals and displays, suggesting that these issues are central in khwajasiras' experience of work. This conclusion was further corroborated by the subsequent data analysis, which we describe below.

### 3.3 Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The subsequent data analysis consisted of an iterative process whereby the empirical material prompted us to turn to current literature and theories and the latter, in turn, shaped our understanding of the data (Johansson et al, 2017; Mavin and Grandy, 2016). As explained above, our interpretation of the data already started during the data collection as we tried to identify patterns in the narratives of our interviewees. Accordingly, an initial open coding of the interviews' transcripts (via Nvivo) sought to isolate recurrent themes concerning the topics covered in the interview's guide. The reading and re-reading of these transcripts gave us a set of themes revolving around gendered embodiment (Bryant and Jaworski, 2011). In other words, we noticed that our participants' accounts of work mainly focused on a set of bodily modifications, characteristics, and appearance - all of which were made sense of by using a gender binary language. Emerging themes included the following: e.g. *firqa* (female attire)/ *khokti* (male attire), *nir-bān* (castrated)/ *akwa* (non-operated), aesthetic work, mannerism, beauty, physical violence, masculinity/femininity.

In a second stage, our subsequent identification and analysis of interviews' excerpts containing passages with these themes revealed that bodies were key not only in participants' determination of work choices and success at work but also in their crafting of a transgender work identity distinctive from female workers. We noticed that khwajasiras' works entail different and at times competing bodily regulative regimes characterized by bodily ideals of

hyper-eroticism, spirituality, and hybridity which allowed khwajasiras' to transgress heteronormative and binary expectations.

Fascinated by this aspect, we turned to the existing literature on the body/work/gender nexus (Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles, 2019) to discover that there is a dearth of research investigating transgender people's embodiment at work. Most of the previous studies were investigating transgender people's experience in a singular work setting, through the lenses of the gender binary and with little insights into how transgender people use their bodies to 'do transgender' (Connell, 2010). The theoretical concepts of doing, undoing, and redoing gender appeared to us as especially apt for enhancing the existing understanding of different ways of doing transgender through and by body and work.

Informed by this scientific and theoretical knowledge, the final stage of analysis thus required us to go beyond and beneath the body and work regimes to ascertain the meanings of (trans)gender behind the different body and work choices, and how these meanings evolved and differed across our participants. This was done through a cross-comparison of participants' narratives. In this way, we could identify three different ways through which khwajasiras tried to cope with these regimes: *embracing the body ideal(s)*, *strategically shifting work and body*, and *relegating the bodies as unimportant*. The following sections illustrate the different and at times competing work regimes regulating transgender bodies and our participants' different ways of doing transgender through work.

### **3. Work regimes regulating (trans)gender bodies**

Our participants were confronted with three types of transgender work regimes, each associated with a set of bodily modifications, displays, ideals, and performances defining the norms according to which (trans)gender bodies become 'bodies that matter' (Butler, 1993; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Every work regime requires a bodily performance regulated by body norms defined and cultivated by the khwajasira community, their 'customers' and broader society.

Failing in meeting these bodily norms and ideals comes at the price of losing recognition. The sections below offer an overview of these work regimes and bodily norms regulating (trans)gender works.

#### *4.1 The erotic dancing work regime: the body ideal of hyper-eroticism*

Erotic dancing represents the first type of work regime that many khwajasiras adopt. In a conservative society with a strong tradition of courtesans and musical performances, dancing is equated with beauty, poise and elegance, all female body virtues. Invariably, acquiring this ideal involves intensive display work (Mears and Connel, 2014) to hone physical beauty and skills that are traditionally associated with femininity. It also requires putting considerable energy and financial resources into the dressing, make-up, and cosmetic treatments. Anjuman (28 years old), for instance, explained how dancing skills and beauty are key for succeeding in the performance:

*Beauty and dance skills are key factors that could lead you to success as a transgender dancer [...]. In beauty, first is the skin color, the dancer has to be fair-skinned. Then shades of pink makeup here and there attract a lot. Yes, beauty can sometimes cover for poor dance skills, but then even good dance skills can cover for average level beauty.*

However, while reinforcing feminine gender body ideals, the body norms characterizing the erotic dance regime regulate bodies of male-sexed individuals in a manner that transgresses heteronormative expectations in several ways. At gurus' homes, young khwajasiras are taught to look beautiful 'like women', ergo internalizing a citational approximation of 'beauty' and 'women'. However, they are also taught to not act like traditional women.

Under the tutelage of an experienced guru, young khwajasiras learn not to act coy but to conduct themselves with a brazen sense of confidence, uncharacteristic of the citational understanding of 'being a woman' in society. While beauty and poise are eastern feminine virtues, but so are modesty and timidity. *When dancing in a function, an astute dancer needs*



*to keep an eye on who can 'throw' the maximum money on her. I would tell my disciples to scan and identify that man. Once identified, you need to go for the kill. I would tell them to go and sit on the man's lap right away,* guru Razia, a 65 years old veteran dancer shared with us. Hair, makeup, and clothing like a woman combined with the bold laughter, animated body language, and a characteristic clap; the erotic dance work regime crafts a work identity and bodily ideals ultimately distinctive from that of female dancing.

Explaining the difference between khwajasiras' dances and female dancing, Rahat, a 35 years old transgender who has only recently stopped dancing for health reasons explains: *women cannot dance like us, they cannot dance as boldly as we do. Khawajasiras dance very boldly and suggestively to attract others. If a woman dances that freely, the men watching them would get uncomfortable.* This quote suggests that performing erotic dancing requires doing gender differently than their female competitors, crafting a bodily performance that ultimately challenges not only masculinity but also feminine body ideals. Bakhtawar (50 years old), for instance, explained: *Female dancers were more in numbers in our times as well. Female dancers used to have a separate show and we used to have our separate show, both running simultaneously. Everyone has different choices, so some people prefer women dancers, some preferred us.* Hyper-eroticism becomes a distinctive characteristic of transgender performances that brings popularity and clients insofar as transgender dancing can satisfy preferences and needs that women cannot.

#### *4.2 The Toli work regime: the body ideal of spirituality*

Another important work regime is the *toli* work. Widely believed to be eunuchs by birth, the lack of male genitals makes the bodies of *toli* workers look 'like women'. In addition to the feminist looks, their higher spiritual status is linked with the purity of their souls, which is unadulterated with carnal desires (Pamment, 2010).

In the eyes of the audience, the spiritual embodiment of transgenerness is critically linked with one body modification, *nir-bān* or castration. The literal meaning of *nir-bān* is salvation. In the Khwajasira community that performs *Toli* work, undergoing *nir-bān* is associated with a mystical experience where khwajasiras become 'beautiful' and spiritually elevated but they must endure great pain for this beauty and prestige (Hamzić 2019). The audience of *Toli* work believes that a *nir-bān* person ultimately acquires a physical status of 'neither male nor female', thus transcending (sexual) desires, a key condition for reaching spiritual heights. Such spiritually elevated persons get their prayers answered instantly. When the *nir-bān* khwajasiras pray that a couple is blessed with a 'male' child, a desire of many in the hetero-normative Pakistani society, these prayers are granted by God. In the religiously conservative society of Pakistan, khwajasiras who chose the *Toli* work gain a form of recognition that is not given to other works transgender do. The bodily expression of this inner purity and femininity is cultivated and celebrated in the *Toli* work by undergoing a full castration (both penis and testes) to become 'like women'.

The bodily ideal of being 'like a woman' also finds its expression in the stereotypically feminine 'sense of modesty' reflected in their dance performance, which stands in stark contrast to the erotic dancers, performed by 'other' khwajasiras . Sarhadi, 50 years old, who has spent her whole life with Toli people explains the difference between spiritual dances and erotic dances:

*Zenanay dance [erotic dancers] on hi-fi sound system, we sing live and play traditional instruments dholki, baja, chimta live, and dance to that. For dance functions, Zenanay tend to wear sexy clothes, but we go to homes, dance for families, we cannot wear such clothes. They wear long neck-line dresses with half or no sleeves, but we wear full-sleeves, because, otherwise, families won't allow us in.*

While khwajasiras' bodies performing the spiritual dancing must reflect virtues that are socially associated with femininity, the body ideal regulating the Toli work is not exclusively feminine. A participant, Muskarahat, a 45 years old khwajasira who underwent castration when she was 30 years old to join the *Toli* workers, explained to us that *of course, we don't become complete women biologically even after undergoing surgery*. The *toli* work regime thus expects bodies to be like women, yet distinct from them, thereby distinguishing transgender work identity from that of "*the real women*".

The bodily performances of spiritual dance must evoke a sense of charity and benevolence in the audience. This requires a dance performance with eastern instruments typically associated with mystic music. Besides, the dance performance reflects serious labour, not delicacy, associated with female dance. For this reason, *toli khwajasiras* wear very heavy anklet bells while dancing: *Zenanay don't wear ghungru (anklet bells), we dance with ghungrus. Zenanay don't even know how to dance with ghungru, they just know how to dance on erotic songs. Our dance is a lot more laborious* (Sarhadi, 50 years old).

#### 4.3 The sex work regime: the body ideal of hybridity

The third specialized work regime khwajasiras are confronted with is the sex work regime. Like the other two work regimes, this regime is stereotypically feminine. Long hair, flawless skin with no body or facial hair, khwajasiras are expected to 'look just like a woman' to attract their male customers. The work is supposed to be in line with the 'feminine' soul of khwajasiras with implications on how it is supposed to be performed. Jaafer (55 years old), for instance, explains transgender sexuality in the following terms: *A moorat<sup>3</sup> has a feminine soul, she does not need to penetrate others. When she likes someone and the person makes love to her, she automatically gets 'discharged'*.

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<sup>3</sup> Literal meaning 'an image'. The term is used to refer to *zenanas*, transgender people who are not in *toli* work.

However, performing sex as a 'transgender sex worker' requires a set of distinctive bodily displays, modifications and performances. Of particular importance in this regard is the role of the penis. When explaining their difference from female sex workers, khwajasiras emphasize the distinctiveness of transgender sex work. Guriya (21 years old), for instance, explained to us: *In Pakistan, if you have your 'dick' removed, then you have no scope in sex working. In my experience, the main reason is that 90 out of 100 men, pure men, want 'dick'. That's why they prefer us, shemales – our upperparts are female and then we also have 'dick' in our lower body, so that works for them.* Similarly, Haider, a 19 years old sex worker, explains that, contrary to female sex-workers, transgender sex workers have the availability of a wide spectrum of bodily options that make them distinctive and highly sought after workers in the erotic market: *I don't think there is any competition between female sex workers and trans sex workers. I have never felt there is any such competition. It's about clients' preferences only. Those who prefer us, they come to us, and there are many who want to be with us.*

To satisfy the demands of 'straight' and 'gay' clients. Transgender people should combine their male genitalia with cross-dressing. The first type prefers them and pay them more when they cross-dress like women, but the second type expects male sexuality from them. Saif clarifies: *[the straight men] sees us as female and they want us to be 'female-like' during sex. So, it's usually only us doing oral for them. A gay client wants us for our body and hence, wants us to be proper males during sex. That's why it's both ways with them.* In this respect, having a female attire is not merely the bodily expression of a feminine soul but also responds to market demand. Shabina, another 33 years old sex worker among our participants, explains how exhibiting a female attire attracts more clients: *When you are in firqa [female attire], you can meet more customers. This has been my experience. Before coming into firqa, I did get customers, but when I started doing firqa, more and more people started approaching me for sex. Doing firqa also means that they can and must ask for a higher price because of makeup*

*and other things cost too* (Haider, 19 years old). Like in dancing, in sex work, transgender people are ultimately expected to regulate their bodies and bodily performances according to a new bodily ideal of hybridity and versatility that places their work identity beyond the gender binary.

#### **4. Doing transgender through body and work**

In line with our theoretical leaning, our analysis also focused on transgender embodiment of the above-described specialized transgender work regimes. We identified three different ways in which our participants relate to these work regimes thus crafting distinctive ways of doing transgender: *embracing the body ideals*, *strategically shifting work and body*, and *relegating the body norms as unimportant*.

##### *5.1 Embracing the body ideals*

Our analysis reveals that some participants experience these work regimes as constitutive of their gender identity, thus embracing these bodily ideals wholeheartedly. Any other form of embodied existence, for them, is unthinkable, almost blasphemous. This is for instance the case of Masooma, a 53 years old *toli guru*, who believes that the castrated body is the hallmark of transgender authenticity, which endows them with spiritual prowess. Narrating a story of a man who had beaten her with a stick, Masooma shared: *I didn't even curse him...still a few months down, his wife gave birth to a eunuch baby. I went to him and told him that he needs to give this baby to me now.*

Embracing the body ideals that come with specialized work regimes also means a “passionate preoccupation” (Johansson et al, 2017, 1142) with their bodies. Muskarahat (45 years old), for instance, who underwent castration when she was 30 years old explains this bodily transformation in the following terms: *My face had experienced a change. Bodily hair was gone. I looked a lot more beautiful. Body's shape changed. Proper beautiful chests!* For

these participants the need for further aesthetic labour (Nickson et al., 2001) to render a feminine look goes down, as they embody authentic transgenerness. For instance, Jyoti (42 years old) explained to us: *We are Khusray. Even if we don't put on lipstick, we can sit with women and dance in families and ask for wadhai. We are like women.*

Similarly, in the erotic dance work regime, many khwajasiras see dance as a bodily performance that can fully turn their female souls inside out. Nageena (24 years old), for example, sees dancing not simply as a livelihood but also as an expression of transgenerness: *When I turned 18, I was sure by then that I am a transgender. I loved dancing from very early on [...] I realized that I am a transgender and these habits are natural in me.* Nageena also brings up the *natural habit* of dancing as evidence of the femininity of their souls. Erotic dancing is thus seen as an embodied idol that reflects their feminine spirit. They revere and idealize these bodies. Mano, a 22 years old dancer, for instance, explained *I learned to dance by watching Neeli Rana on youtube. I idealize her, I try to follow her footsteps in all manners. She is my ideal.*

Like dancing, sex work transforms the social condemnation of the 'abject body' into acceptance, pleasure, and recognition. Some khwajasiras thus see sex work as another stage where their embodied identity is finally free to play and legitimize its sexuality. Khoobsorat, a 19 years old sex-worker, for instance, explained: *I really like doing pun, I enjoy it. [...] I got customers on the street, people liked me, gave me there number or sometimes took my number, and then contacted me later. I was very beautiful looking at that time, I was just 12, 13 years old and my face looked very beautiful, very fair.* Similarly, Jabbar, a 48 years old sex worker explained to us that performing sex work is a natural inclination of transgender people: *my nature, our nature is like this, we cannot resist; even when we are 100 years old and someone makes us an offer, we won't hold back [...] this is not just me, I am not talking about just myself, this is how ... khawajasiras tend to be.*

*Strategically shifting work and body*

For other participants, doing transgender means an ability to shift between different work forms, situationally and strategically, exhibiting multiple bodily performances and displays. For instance, not all *toli* khwajasiras decide to regulate their bodies according to the *toli* body ideal, yet they perform *toli* work. For them, castration is not an essential condition to ascend to a higher level of spirituality. In fact, some believe that castration is like defying the will of God, something that can never lead to an elevated spiritual status. After all, if God wanted them to be eunuchs, they would have been born eunuchs. However, this belief in a different body ideal does not correspond with the transgender body ideal held by the audience of the *toli* work. The mismatch in the body ideals between the worker and their audience leads to important work and body choices by khwajasiras. For some, it means choosing a different work, which is not so visible to the audience. As the literal meaning implies, *toli* is a group work. Some members of the group go to people's homes, perform the dance, and collect alms, while others stay at the guru's home, and do household chores, like cleaning and cooking. Even if they grow a mustache, it is fine, as they are not expected to perform before their clients. For those who chose to perform their work in front of the audience without castration, they have to strategically conceal their body. Male genitals produce visual effects, like facial hair, which should not be seen by the audience, who believes the khwajasiras to be eunuchs. Such *toli* workers need to engage in intensive 'display work' (Mears and Connel, 2007) to erase the signs of masculinity visible to the audience.

Like castration, for some of the khwajasiras, who engage in *toli* work, the notion of spirituality is also less bounding and performative. They strategically embrace eroticism and spirituality on distinct work proscenium. For instance, Jyoti, a 42 years old khawajasira, strategically combines the *Toli* work with the work of *zenanas* (erotic dancers): *I have remained very active on both sides [...] I have participated in all matters on each side.* This

working choice is driven by their desire to benefit from working in both regimes. Geeta explained to us that, whereas dancing at night functions and sex work is more remunerative, the Toli work brings more respect. So, for Jyoti, the two work-identities simply satisfy different types of needs. As another participant, Naghma (39 years old), pointed out: *I have done Toli, Dance and Pun (sex) – all three. Pun has a lot more money. Those who are after money would go to pun. But if a person wants to be respected, they should go with the Tolis. The income from Toli is full of blessings (barkat).*

These participants do not experience the hyper-eroticism of dancers and sex workers and the spirituality of the Toli workers as contradictory and irreconcilable body ideals. However, they are very cognizant of transgender bodily ideals held by the audience of separate work performances. They resolve this tension by performing in different spaces and times; for instance, by joining the Toli during the daytime and then performing erotic dance and sex work in the night-time in other areas of the city. Jyoti explained to us how she managed to keep these jobs separated: *Area where we go for wadhai during day, we cannot do night functions in that territory. Otherwise, if we have danced there at night and then the next day we go for wadhai, then we won't be respected there.*

For some of these transgender people, there are body ideals that they aspire for, but they are distinct from work. For instance, some sex workers, aspire for a female body but do not see its correspondence with their work. Guriya, for instance, explained to us that she wishes to do a vaginoplasty to eventually become a woman. However, keeping male genitals is more remunerative hence she had decided to defer this bodily modification: *I am not going to get vaginoplasty right now, I want to make money. I can make more money with my current body status. So I will get vaginoplasty after I have saved enough money.* Similarly, for many other participants, the choice of having a male or female attire in sex work is not driven by a desire to be authentic to the self but rather driven by material needs.



### 5.3. *Relegating body norms as unimportant*

The third group of participants downplays the salience of body norms vis-à-vis their gender identity. This shifting the focus from bodily performance and appearance, for instance, emerged in the interview with Naghma (39 years old), one of our participants, who also shifts across all three khawajasiras' lines of work. Naghma feels that bodily display is somehow irrelevant vis-à-vis gender identity: *Becoming a moorat has nothing to do with being in firqa (female attire) or being in khotki (male attire). Firqa or Khotki is your choice – whichever you want, whichever makes you happier.* The same sentiment was echoed by Anjuman (28 years old): *People may see me as a boy or a girl, but that's irrelevant for me. Personally, I focus on how I see myself and I don't understand myself through my body, I understand myself through what's in my heart, what my soul is.*

Some transgender people, who relegate the importance of complying with body norms, do perform body modification to suit a particular line of work. However, it is not because of their belief that only a *nir bān* or castrated body is an authentic khwajasira body. In fact, they do not see the femininity, spirituality or eroticism of transgender bodies as necessary conditions of being a khwajasira. For them, a transgender body can wear both eroticism and spirituality, or for that matter, any other embodiment, depending on their audience. The link between work and bodies, for them, is therefore contingent. Instead, they draw their transgender identity from the community. It is for the approval of the community that they undergo castration. For example, Reema decided to undergo surgery (castration) so that *I can be a chela in both.* Reema describes 'transgenderness' in terms of belonging to the community. In Reema's view, this belonging is where the gender identity lies no matter how their bodies look like: *Whether a zenana or a khusra, we cannot live without khawajasiras because this is where we belong; it is an internal desire to be with the ones whom we are like.* Reema thus has an understanding

of her transgenerness, which is driven by the internal relations of the community than the relationship between a khwajasira and their audience (Sedgwick, 2002).

Some transgender people, who relegate the importance of body norms, do not join any specialized work regime. Vicky (19 years old), for instance, who works as a tailor and keeps a male attire explains that their job choice and associated (lack of) bodily modifications reflect their willingness to remain faithful to the self. In their words: *it has never attracted me [dancing at function], I want to stay true to myself. ...These people have to do a lot of makeup, do a lot of things to be liked by others (so they could get money), they even change their names, I don't want all that. I want to be real, not to put on a fake identity.* This quote shows how Vicky rejects other khawajasiras' bodywork and draws their gender identity by distancing themselves from transgender bodily performance and appearance. Like Vicky, some of our other participants also find it difficult to comply with any transgener's body ideal associated with a specialized work regime. This is the case with participants who opt for other 'feminine' work settings, such as tailoring, cooking or cleaning. These jobs require participants to keep a male attire (khotki) in public life, i.e. wear male clothes and keeping short hair. Doing *firqa* is experienced as a secret, a pleasure that belongs to the private sphere.

These types of jobs indeed relieve them from the "passionate preoccupation with the body" (Johansson et al, 2017, 1142), like their fellow community members in the specialized work regimes. Bodily modifications such as castration and aesthetic labour is experienced by these participants as a futile vanity exercise to artificially dress up an otherwise authentic gender identity. Akbar who is a teacher at a university and keeps a male attire in the class explained that they decided to not undergo surgery because they finally accepted soul and body as they are: *I am a trans person. My soul is what it is and body is what it is. It took me 6 years to accept that.*

## 5. Discussion

Studies that analyse the materiality of gender performativity as it unfolds in the lived experience of non-normative individuals are scarce (Riach et al., 2014; Thanem, 2011; Rumens, 2013). Addressing this gap, our analysis focused on transgender body norms (Muhr et al, 2016; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Hines, 2010), as they are played out on different work proscenium (Johansson et al, 2017; Bryant and Jaworski, 2011; Marvin and Grandy, 2016; Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Jack et al., 2019; Gatrell, 2019; Trethewey, 1999). It advances Connell (2010) and Thanem and Wallenberg (2016)'s concept of 'doing transgender' to understand how specialized transgender work regimes come to define transgender bodies (Ajslev et al, 2017; Johansson et al, 2017; Nyberg, 2012) and how the bodily norms characterizing these regimes were in turn experienced by our participants (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2019). Our analysis provides theoretical insights on both accounts.

With regard to defining the gendered body norms, our analysis highlights the importance of studying 'specialized' transgender work regimes, which are highly stylized and distinct from conventional work. Unlike most studies, where (trans)gender experiences are studied in a singular and conventional work environment (Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Ajslev et al, 2017), we are studying specialized work of transgender people e.g. erotic dance, spiritual dance, sex work. This is a niche work that has been carved by the Pakistani transgender community for itself over centuries. While the work is not independent of the influence of gender binaries, the nature of work performance, and the co-performers belonging to the transgender community, allow us to understand their work as "less a single kind of act than a heterogenous system, an ecological field whose intensive and defining relationality is internal as much as is directed towards the norms it may challenge" (Sedgwick, 2002, 9).

In our case, all the specialized transgender work occupations function as regulative regimes (Butler, 1990) providing the bodily norms that define (trans)gender bodies as 'bodies that

matter' (Butler, 1993). In the first instance, these work regimes enforce bodily norms that can be better understood in terms of a 'redoing gender' (West and Zimmerman 2009). Our participants indeed combine their bodies' undoing of masculinity with doing femininity, the latter postulated as causally linked with their 'feminine soul'. For instance, our participants explained that because of their 'feminine soul', their working choices are inevitably limited to stereotypically feminine jobs, such as dancing, sex work, tailoring, cooking or cleaning work. However, beyond that, each work regime has acquired its own 'transgender' character which redoes, undoes, and underdoes feminine and masculine bodily norms towards hyper-eroticism, hybridity, and spirituality. Work thus allows khwajasiras to 'queer' the gender binary norms (Pullen et al 2016) by defining transgenerness in terms of body norms which truly go "beyond male and female gender roles and identities" (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016, 253).

Our analysis also highlights the importance of going beyond transgender body norms to understand who is defining these norms? In our case, these norms are defined by both the audience of transgender people's work performance as well as members of the community. For example, for *toli gurus*, being *nir-bān* is equated with gaining beauty and spiritual elevation against the pain that the person has to endure. This eternal pain and spiritual prestige go hand in hand in defining a khwajasira. Many transgender people who would not believe in the spirituality of the *toli* work as a hallmark of transgenerness, for example, would not castrate their bodies and would still act as *toli* workers by concealing their masculine body markers from their audience. However, for some, recognition in the eyes of other community members was more important. In this case, transgender workers would still opt for castration, even though they did not relate the spirituality of *toli* work with their self-recognition. In this respect, the analysis reveals how the different work regimes ascribed different meanings to the process of undergoing *nir-bān*, and how, in turn, our participants differently perceived and experienced it. Some perceived this bodily modification as a medium to materialise hyper-eroticism or

spirituality, i.e. as a hallmark of transgenerness. Others detached this body modification from its symbolic meaning, i.e. as a body marker of gender identity, and ascribed a mere commercial/ceremonial value to it.

Our analysis also brings to light the performative and oppressive effects of transgender norms by highlighting the material and psychic implications of failing to "demonstrate 'authentic' non-heterosexual identities" (Einarsdóttir et al., 2016, 492). Contrary to prior research, which equates transgenerness with emancipation, our research suggests that transgender norms regulating khwajasaras' works are as performative and arguably, as oppressive as heteronormativity. The audience of their work performance and influential members of the community require the transgender people to do their non-binary gender 'right' (Stenger and Roulet, 2018) to gain recognition or else, pay the price. We heard 'stories' from many participants about hosts forcibly taking off the trousers of visiting toli members and brutally beating them once they found out about their 'anatomical reality'. The veracity of such stories was unimportant in determining their oppression potential. These insights open the avenue for future research on the performativity and oppression of transgender norms in different work settings.

Joining the community and opting for one or more of the specialized work regimes, the transgender people have to 'cope' with body norms associated with individual work performances to become 'bodies that matter' (Butler, 1993; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). All specialized work regimes allow khwajasiras to at least partially transgress the heterosexual matrix. However, beyond that, all work regimes have different and contradictory work norms. Yet all of them are equally strict and ruthless to those who do not comply. The transgender body is thus simultaneously and situationally abject and desirable across different work proscenium. How transgender individuals engage with these body norms is a function of their own understanding of their gender (Tyler and Cohen, 2010) as it relates with the expectations

of others: how the performance compulsions of a work proscenium meet the performativity of transgenerness. To the extent that khwajasiras' self-understanding of their transgenerness and its body implications is completely in line with the norms of the work regime, the latter acquires a hegemonic status. In this case, certain body ideals are unequivocally accepted, celebrated, almost worshipped. A contradiction in their self-understanding of body norms and those of the work regimes will result in transgender people either strategically shifting the work and bodies or relegating the importance of body norms as markers of their transgender identity.

We thus identified the coping strategies followed by different transgender people to evade the performativity effects of transgender body norms. Ironically, these are the same transgender norms which saved the transgender people from the performative and oppressive effects of the gender binary. We thus extend Muhr et al (2016, 66)'s reflection that "transgressive possibilities shift across different contexts" by suggesting that performative and oppressive possibilities associated with transgression also shift across the gender and work terrain.

## **6. Conclusions**

When transgender people join standard work environment, they are surrounded by people and body norms drawn almost exclusively from the gender binary (Schilt and Connell, 2007). They are thus faced with a perpetual challenge of 'doing transgender' (Connell, 2010; Ekins, 1997; O'Shea, 2018) in the face of an all-encompassing environment of heteronormative body and work norms. Such a work environment allows us to understand the upper limits of the performative or oppressive effects of heteronormative norms or the minimum deterrence of transgender workers to transgress these limits (Schilt, 2006). Investigating the experience of transgender people who join one or more of the many transgeners' specialized work regimes offer a completely new knowledge. We believe that the findings of this research significantly extend previous understanding of 'doing transgender'(Connell, 2010; Ekins, 1997; O'Shea, 2018; Muhr et al, 2016; Schilt and Connell; Hines, 2010) and of the body/work/gender nexus

(Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles, 2019; Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007; Johansson et al, 2017; Bryant and Jaworski, 2011; Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Jack et al., 2019; Gatrell, 2019; Trethewey, 1999).

Our research also opens interesting avenues for future research on specialized transgender work regimes and the embodiment experience of transgender people joining these regimes. For example, while religion is believed to be an important source of norms that bestows recognition to bodies and sexuality and the resulting exclusion and marginalization faced by the transgender community, existing literature also suggests that religion and spirituality within the community encourages “a pro-social engagement and interconnectedness with (each) other” (Halkitis et al., 2009; p250). In our case, members of the most spiritually ‘elevated’ work regime i.e. the *toli* work gurus and khwajasiras who have completely embraced the *toli* work are most unwilling to recognize the bodies and sexualities of khwajasiras working in non-*toli* work regimes. This provides us with an interesting opportunity to further explore the meaning of religion and spirituality, as it intersects with multiple work regimes to shape the relationship between members of the transgender community and between the community and the broader society.

Similarly, the role of emotions in shaping the embodiment experience of the transgender community, as they intersect with broader discourses such as markets and religion is another interesting area for future research. One discourse equates *khwajasira* body with a niche object capable of attracting a premium price, while other equates it with profanity. Further research on the attendant emotions such as shame, fear, guilt and pride, and how they suture the fissure between body norms dictated by external discourses and embodiment experience in myriad ways will allow us to better understand the dynamics of embodiment and work choices made by transgender community members within a horizon of undecidability (Derrida, 1978).

Lastly, our research specifically focused on the specialised work of khwajasaras to explain the embodiment experience of the Pakistani transgender community. However, this community represents only a fraction of the broader invisible sexual and gender minority population who struggles to find its place in the Pakistani society. Future studies may further extend our analysis to explore other working regimes and related gender dynamics that make the lives of transgender people less liveable than others (Butler, 1993).

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Table I. List of interviewees

<b>Interview n.</b>	<b>Name (Pseudoname)</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Age</b>
1	Aabgeena	Work at a parlor, erotic dancing and sex work	18
2	Mishi Khan	Erotic dancing and sex work	18
3	Shabbir	Work at hotel, erotic dancing and sex work	18
4	Vicky	Tailor	19
5	Khoobsurat	Sex worker	19
6	Haider	Work as merchandiser, erotic dancing and sex work	19
7	Rafaqat	Work at a shop, Toli and sex work	19
8	Chambeli	Work as barber, erotic dancing and sex work	21
9	Piyari	Sex work	21
10	Guriya	Sex work	21
11	Mano	Erotic dancing and begging	22
12	Gul pari	Work as chef, sex work	22
13	Milli	Erotic dancing and sex work	23
14	Samina (Neeli)	Work at coke studio, erotic dancing and sex work	24
15	Tamkeen	Work at university, erotic dancing and sex work	24

16	Nageena	Work at a factory, erotic dancing	24
17	Munawwar	Erotic dancing	27
18	Reema	Work at an NGO for transgender people, sex work	28
19	Anjuman	Work at a bakery, erotic dancing	28
20	Akbar	Work at university, sex work	28
21	Samarqand	Work at an NGO for transgender people, sex work	29
22	Dolly	Erotic dancing and sex work	29
23	Dolly khan	Erotic dancing	30
24	Minni	Erotic dancing	30
25	Shabina	Erotic dancing and sex work	33
26	RahateJaan	Erotic dancing, begging	35
27	Naghma	Erotic dancing, sex work, Toli	39
28	Shabnam	Erotic dancing, Toli, begging	40
29	Jyoti	Erotic dancing and Toli	42
30	Huma Aapi	Dancer first, worked for an NGO,	44
31	Muskarahat	Toli, dancing and sex work	45
32	Huma Butt	Toli, dance, NGO worker	45
33	Shabana Gul	Erotic dancing, Toli	45

34	Jabbar	Work as a tailor, erotic dancing and sex work	48
35	Guru Armana	Toli	50
36	Sonum Doll	Erotic dancing, begging	50
37	Bakhtawar	Work as cooker, erotic dancing	50
38	Sarhadi	Toli	50
39	Muhammad Shoaib aka saanwali	Work at a cloth bank	50
40	Musarrat	Erotic dancing, begging	50
41	Masooma	Toli	53
42	Jaafar/Cheeti	Sex work and dancing, then regular work	55
43	Sadia Farzana Kashmiri	Work in cotton ginning factory, begging	58
44	Tarana/Munni	Actress	60
45	Razia Sultana	Erotic dancing, Toli	65
46	Chanda/Izhar	Erotic dancing	65
47	Shafqat	Erotic dancing and sex work	68