

## Gender, Money, and Sexuality: An Exploration into the Relational Work of Pakistani *Khwajasiras*

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### Abstract

This study explores how *khwajasiras*, a community of gender-variant persons in Pakistan, engage in relational work to gain recognition in a heteronormative world. We highlight how these workers negotiate the meanings of their intimate relationships with different forms, frequencies, amounts, and payment media of financial exchanges. We have identified four such relations i.e. romantic relations, spousal relations, taboo relations, and professional relations. Our analysis shows how these relations and associated financial exchanges allow *khwajasiras* to navigate gender norms and negotiate recognition by alternatively and creatively playing the role of the *khwajasira* lover, the *khwajasira* wife, the *khwajasira* survival prostitute, and the *khwajasira* professional sex worker. In enacting these roles, they simultaneously reaffirm, redefine, and challenge dominant gender norms while resisting stable and fixed definitions of transgender sex work(ers). These findings unpack the contingent and situated relationship between gender, sexuality, and sex work and the critical role of financial exchange(s) therein.

### Keywords

financial exchanges, gender, Pakistan, recognition, relational work, transgender sex workers

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## Introduction

Sex work has been traditionally understood through two competing paradigms (Weitzer, 2009). The oppression paradigm uses the word ‘prostitution’ to indicate the exchange of sexual services for money as an immoral activity (Phetherson, 1996; Raymond, 2004) born out of the exploitation and oppression of vulnerable individuals (Farley, 2004), leading to campaigns abolishing prostitution in certain parts of the world (Legg, 2009, 2010; Tambe, 2005). A competing ‘empowering’ paradigm, initiated and galvanised through the efforts of activists, academics, and workers across the globe, highlighted the stigmatising and criminalising effects of equating sex work with oppression (Berg, 2014; Chateauvert, 2014; Kempadoo and Doezema, 2018). This paradigm describes the provision of sexual services as ‘work’, a normal commercial activity, with sex workers presented as liberated and empowered economic agents.

However, a growing literature has pointed out the limitations of these totalising frameworks and has started to problematise narrow and fixed definitions of sex work(ers) (Cabezas, 2004; Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021; Masvawure et al., 2015). These studies argue that sexual relations and financial exchanges intertwine in myriad ways (Rossman, 2014) with shifting social and institutional boundaries defining sex work (Cabezas, 2004; Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021; Kannabiran, 1995; Masvawure et al., 2015). What and who comes to be described as sex work(er) is instead contingent upon the multiple meanings that individuals attach to a variety of ‘intimacy-material exchanges’ (Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021). Understanding the meanings that individuals attach to their intimate relations and the financial exchanges that they consider appropriate for these intimate relations, therefore, becomes a worthwhile theoretical and empirical endeavour.

In line with these prior studies, this article problematises unitary and stable definitions of sex work. It proposes a shift from the prostitution-sex work binary to ‘relational work’ (Zelizer, 2012) to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between intimacy and economic exchanges. The concept of relational work has been introduced by Zelizer (2005) and refers to the work individuals do to ‘match’ intimate relations with economic transactions and payment media to define, differentiate and sustain these relationships (Alacovska, 2018). Despite the theoretical promise of the approach, existing studies have only started to investigate the diversity of relational work experiences (Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021).

The focus of our study is on the forms and features that these relational work experiences acquire in the case of *khwajasiras*, a distinct community of ‘transgender’ sex workers in Pakistan. Current research on transgender sex work has revealed multiple sources of vulnerability for transgender sex workers, their adaptive strategies, and the myriad aspirations they want to achieve through sex work (Nuttbrock, 2018; Weitzer, 2009), including their desire to gain recognition and identity as authentic gendered subjects (Butler, 2005). Our article extends this literature by offering a more nuanced appreciation of transgender identity, sex work, and their intertwined relationship with financial exchanges. To take relational work (Zelizer, 2005) to the gender domain, we draw insights from Butler’s (1997, 2000, 2004, 2011) work on gender, sexuality, and recognition. Relational work points to the nature of intimacy-economic exchanges as fluid and constructed in relationships with others (Fourcade, 2012). Butler defines gender likewise

as ‘performative and fluid rather than innate and static’ (Schilt and Lagos, 2017: 430). Accordingly, we suggest that gender itself is shaped by different and multiple ways in which intimacy and money intertwine allowing us to further unpack the relationship between gender, sexuality, and financial exchanges. Whereas previous studies have already argued that gender identity and norms play a role in intimacy-material exchanges (Brooks, 2021; Hancock et al., 2015; Masvawure et al., 2015), our analysis adds to these studies by showing how nature, amount, and frequency of monetary exchanges define, differentiate and sustain different categories of sexual relations and in the process allow individuals to (re)define their (trans)gender subjectivities to become recognised as viable gendered subjects (Butler, 2005). Our findings reveal how *khwajasiras* ‘longing for recognition (Butler, 2000) weaves together gender and sexuality through the financial in complex ways that resist binary and stable understanding of both gender identity and sexuality. Our analysis not only reveals that there is little correlation between the participants’ gender identity and their sexual orientation but also highlights the dynamism in this relationship (Butler, 2004) and the role of money in animating this dynamic relationship.

## Gender and sex work

The radical shift from prostitution to sex work in the cultural framing of sexual exchange has become a central theme in studies of work and organisations (Benoit et al., 2017; Ham and Gilmour, 2017; Hardy and Sanders, 2015; Law and Raguparan, 2020; Oselin and Hail-Jares, 2021; Simpson and Smith, 2019). These studies have also unveiled the gendered nature of sex work (Jeffreys, 1997). They explain how sex work is (also) seen as an expression of gender aesthetics, eroticism, and pleasure (Nuttbrock, 2018). The gendered nature of sex work is said to acquire further complexity in the case of transgender people (Weitzer, 2012). Unlike their cis-gender counterparts, transgender sex workers experience double stigma: they are stigmatised because of their work and because of their gender identity. Most studies on transgender sex workers report a similar life story pattern. Transgressing the dominant gender norms comes with a high price for transgender kids, starting from expulsion from the safety of their family homes and ending with harassment, physical violence, and social marginalisation at the hands of broader society (Barton, 2018; Nisar, 2018). They often join communities of peers who experience the same marginalisation. Thus, for many transgender individuals, homelessness functions as a trigger for engaging in sex work (Chakrapani et al., 2018) and as a ‘rite of passage’ (Wolfe, 2018) for entrance into the transgender community. In joining the community, transgender people not only find a sense of belongingness but also access to social and cultural capital; critical resources for sex work (Alacovska, 2018).

Shaped by these wider socio-economic and cultural conditions, sex work comes to acquire a multiplicity of meaning for transgender sex workers. For instance, in their study of *hijras*<sup>1</sup> in India, Chakrapani et al. (2018) explain that sex work can be a means to save money to undergo transition surgeries for some, whereas for others, it is used as a gender affirmation mechanism. Similar observations have also been made in a Brazilian context on transgender sex work by Kulick (1998). The occupational conditions facing transgender sex workers and their strategies to acquire and express different gendered

identities also vary with religion, ethnicity, and rural-urban backgrounds of transgender sex workers across different geographical settings (Engin, 2018; Nemoto et al., 2018). Yet, our understanding of these distinctive experiences is still limited (Nuttbrock, 2018). Barring a few studies mentioned above, sexuality in general has been a neglected topic in the literature on transgender people. More importantly, the role of monetary payments in defining and sustaining these sexual relationships and identities has been mostly overlooked. In addition, existing studies are often based on unquestioned definitions of who is a (transgender) sex worker and what counts as (transgender) sex work (Cabezas, 2004). This linguistic universalisation of transgenderism fails to articulate the multiplicity of gender variances and sexuality found within different non-western locales thus reproducing a colonial logic equating transgenderism with homosexuality (Dutta and Roy, 2014; Pamment, 2019). Similarly, the western term 'sex work' does not fully account for the diversity and fluidity of material-intimacy exchanges that 'transgender' individuals engage in (Cabezas, 2004; Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021).

Thus, we argue that there is a need for a closer examination of how the interaction of sex, money, and gender works (Brewis and Linstead, 2003) within different non-western contexts (Dutta and Roy, 2014). In the next section we propose that relational work provides a more apt and nuanced theoretical perspective to better grasp the complexity of this interaction.

## **A relational work perspective on transgender sex work**

As explained in the introduction, an emerging stream of literature has started to problematise 'hostile worlds arguments' (Zelizer, 2012: 146), which either frame sex work as a corruption of intimate relationships or reduce it to a mere commercial transaction. In this respect, several alternative concepts have been proposed to better account for the complexity of the socio-sexual phenomenon at hand, such as 'transactional sex' (Masvawure et al., 2015), 'intimate economy' (Wilson, 2004), 'intimate-material exchanges' (Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021), and 'intimate labour' (Hancock et al., 2015).

For instance, Masvawure et al. (2015) use the term 'transactional sex' to highlight those sexual relationships that not only entail the exchange of money and gifts but are also driven by non-material factors, such as pleasure and self-expression. Similarly, in Cabeza's (2004) study, Cuban and Dominican participants saw in sexual relationships with tourists 'opportunities for recreation, consumption, travel, migration, and marriage' (Cabezas, 2004: 993).

A key idea proposed by these studies is that defining sex work merely in terms of a commercial transaction fails to account for the complexity of sexual relationships. The concept of intimate labour, for example, captures this complexity by encompassing 'the work required to nurture a close physical, sexual and/or emotional bond within the exchange relationship' (Hancock et al., 2015: 1718). This labour involves complex inter-personal and intra-personal negotiations of meanings (Berg, 2014). In this respect, existing studies show the multiple meanings that intimate partners attach to sex work, which may be at odds with broader societal meanings of sex work(ers). For instance, Cabezas (2004) explains that the participants of the study accepted gifts instead of cash from their sexual partners to avoid being categorised as sex workers, a derogatory label. Also,

calling sexual partners ‘friends’ rather than ‘clients’ helped the participants to avoid undesired labels of what they do and who they are (Cabezas, 2004). Similarly, the ethnically non-Chinese women of Hong Kong interviewed by Ham and Gheorghiu (2021) resisted their classification as sex work(ers) by using a variety of sexual scripts as a resource to re-frame the nature of their intimacy-material exchanges.

Our study builds on this stream of literature by adopting the analytical lens of relational work, which focuses on the economic transactions, which are used to ‘create, define, sustain, and challenge. . . multiple social relations’ (Zelizer, 2005: 167). In other words, Zelizer’s (2005) view calls for an exploration of the reasoning that individuals do when defining and evaluating a ‘fair’ matching of economic transactions, media of exchange, and social ties. In this respect, her work has already inspired interesting analyses of the relationships between intimacy and money (Masvawure et al., 2015). For example, studying various sexual relationships that low-income mothers have with men to support their households, identified a whole range of classifications (absent fathers, live-in boyfriends, and customers for prostitution) that women would maintain alongside the corresponding ‘fair’ financial payments that they would expect to define and sustain the relationship.

Our research adds to these previous analyses by specifically focusing on the link between relational work and gender for *khwajasiras* in our case study. To unpack this relationship, we turn here to Butler’s (1997, 2000, 2004, 2011) work. Butler (1990, 2000) argues that gender is something individuals *do* in their encounter with the other to gain recognition, rather than a fixed and natural characteristic that individuals have. This doing gender is in turn highly regulated by dominant heteronormativity. In this regard, Butler (2004) questions the assumed link between gender and sexuality naturalised through the power of heteronormativity. For Butler, there is nothing ‘natural’ about heterosexual desires or relations between individuals falling into gender binaries. Sexual orientations and desires in individuals vary and can mutate over time resulting in Butler’s conclusion that ‘sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization’ (Butler, 2004: 7). It is conditioned but not determined (Butler, 2004: 47). Importantly, Butler (2004) argues that the case of trans people allows us to gain a better understanding of how sexual desires and relations intersect with their efforts to gain recognition for their gender in their encounters with relevant others. Trans experiences thus allow us to interrogate a stable and unidimensional understanding of sexuality and gender (Butler, 2004).

Financial ‘doings’ or actions, a critical tool of relational work, are also an important part of gender norms. In Pakistan, for example, men and women are given different financial action scripts drawn from religious and cultural norms (Masood, 2019a). Such differences signal, reflect and naturalise socio-religious understandings of gender. It is therefore by complying with heteronormativity, by performing gender ‘right’, that individuals gain social and self-recognition (Butler, 1990, 2000, 2010). An individual with male sex assigned at birth who fails to secure the financial needs of the family would be less than a man or not a man at all. By not ‘doing’ financial acts expected of their gender, individuals inevitably face misrecognition and discrimination at the hands of society (Butler, 1997). Their journey into transgenerness is, amongst other things, a perpetual endeavour to gain recognition through enacting different (trans)gender identities, (sexual) relationships, and (financial) actions.

Thus, drawing from Butler and Zelizer's works we are especially interested in exploring the multiple ways in which *khwajasiras*, the participants of our study, engage with, defy, or confirm (financial) scripts of heteronormativity, thus offering important and unique insights into the intertwined relation between gender, sexual intimacy, and economic exchanges.

## Historical context of *khwajasira* community and 'sex work'

The status of *khwajasira* communities in contemporary Pakistan has ancient origins going back to the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) and Mughal courts (1526–1857). The name *khwajasiras* dates to these periods and was a title conferred to eunuchs that served as superintendents of the Mughal harem. This proximity to the emperor earned them economic independence, prestige, and status, which was also reinforced by religious beliefs in both Hinduism and Islam (Khan, 2016; Pamment, 2019). Even those gender-variant persons, who did not belong to the Mughal court,<sup>2</sup> were accorded certain economic favours (Pamment, 2019), including land deeds (*sanads*), direct cash allowances (*varsasans*) and a codified right to beg and collect alms within specific territories (*ilaka*) (Pamment, 2019).

The collapse of the Mughal Empire and the onset of the British Colonial era also marked the beginning of difficult times for the *khwajasira* community (Khan, 2016). They were deprived of the economic privileges and the social legitimation of the pre-colonial time and were forced to find alternative means of living, such as sex work. As a result, *khwajasiras* were seen by the British rulers as a moral problem that needed to be regulated (Legg, 2009). For example, the Indian penal code of 1860 suggested punishments for acts like carnal intercourse against 'the order of nature', 'songs and obscene acts' or cross-dressing.

The independence from colonial rule and the birth of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947 did not bring a change in the fortunes of *khwajasiras* community. Recently, a legislative relief was sought by the Supreme Court of Pakistan leading to the approval of the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018*. The law recognises a set of rights (i.e. the right to property, the right to inherit, the right to self-perceived gender identity, etc.) and prohibits discrimination against *khwajasiras*.

However, the legislative initiatives fail to benefit the community, partially due to existing social structures that marginalise and condemn *khwajasiras* (Nisar, 2018). In addition, the new law suffers from some foundational problems. To begin with, the *khwajasira* community is equated with 'transgender persons' overlooking the fact that not all *khwajasiras* identify themselves as transgender. In addition, the overall legal framework in the country is still hostile to *khwajasiras* and their social/economic activities such as dance and sexual relations with men (Khan, 2016).

## Methodology

Our research journey was dynamic and non-linear with ethical and empirical realisations and theoretical developments along the way. The *khwajasira* community, which is centred on a *guru-chela* relationship (spiritual mentor-disciple) has been the subject of



several insightful studies unveiling their marginalisation (Nisar, 2018, 2022) thus providing us with rich background information. Existing studies had already documented that the social organisation of *khwajasiras* is characterised by different types of financial transactions taking place between the members of the community and outsiders (Nanda, 2010). Our initial interest was in understanding the cultural meanings of these financial transactions, especially between *gurus* and *chelas*. With this research aim in mind, we started approaching the participants of this study. Thanks to local social connections of one of the authors, it was possible to get access to the first group of participants, with further participants recruited through snowballing. To make the participants feel at ease, the interviews were arranged at participants' home, mostly located in neighbourhoods belonging to working-class families. During the first set of visits to participants' homes, the disapproving glares from the neighbours made it clear that our visit to a *khwajasira* home was seen with suspicion. Many participants then shared with us that their neighbours would assume us to be their 'clients' and we must take measures to dispel this image. The significance of sex work for our participants' social life and its marginalising effects became apparent to us in a rather unusual manner right from the outset of our research. It also made us acutely aware of our own position on the gender spectrum and the limitations it posed for us to understand the perspectives of our participants and the care and attention required for this research. Initially, no specific questions about sexual and intimate relations were planned for interviews. However, our personal experience and the data collected in the initial interviews made us realise the significance of sexual relationships and their economic dimension in the *khwajasiras* 'working lives. Therefore, more questions were added to the interview guide, specifically investigating the nature and characteristics of 'sex work' and the meanings and purpose of financial exchanges associated with it.

Overall, a total of 47 interviewees participated in the research project between December 2018 and September 2020. The interview duration ranged between one to two hours. The community was characterised by a homogenous class background: low-income working-class families, deeply entrenched in conservative socio-religious gender and sexual norms (Khan, 2019; Pamment, 2010). The participants varied in age though, ranging from 18 to 68 years old.

From the accounts of our participants, it quickly became clear that the boundaries of what is commonly described as 'sex work' were blurred within the cultural context of the *khwajasira* community. It was at this stage that we turned to Zelizer's (2005) notion of relational work for analysing these accounts. In line with empirics and our theoretical framework, we specifically focused on four items: distinctive social relations between actors, e.g. lovers, husband-wife, and client-service provider; the nature, frequency, amount, and purpose of financial acts to initiate and sustain these relations; the media in the transactions, e.g. cash, informal acknowledgements of a small debt (IOUs, or I Owe You); and the negotiation of meanings of the financial acts and the relations between actors.

The first round of analysis revealed that the negotiation of their transgender identity was an important consideration for our participants to engage in relational work. Therefore, the second stage of our analysis especially focused on the relationship between relational work and gender. For that, we turned to the work of Judith Butler to interrogate

Zelizer's idea of relational work from a gender perspective. Butler's idea that individuals *do* gender indeed resonated with our findings of *khwajasiras* doing gender through intimacy-economic exchanges. A joint re-reading of the transcripts allowed us to get a sense of how intimate relations, economic exchanges, and gender identity were intertwined. The different cultural backgrounds of the two authors made the analysis more meaningful and reflexive. Intimate relations, the related economic exchanges and gender identity are culturally specific constructs. While the first author, being a native, could relate to them in an unproblematic manner, the questioning of the second author, who did not have personal linkages to the culture, allowed for making the familiar strange and to add a degree of reflexivity, critical for such a study. The third and final stage of our analysis involved the identification of four different ways in which our participants were matching social relations, economic transactions, and gender identity (Butler, 2005). Sexual relationships were thus differently classified as romantic, marital, taboo, and professional and were matched with unique combinations of financial exchange amounts, media, frequency, and forms. In turn, the relational work involved in establishing and maintaining these types of relationships allowed *khwajasiras* to forge different (trans) gender identities for themselves as a transgender lover, transgender wife, transgender survival prostitute, and transgender professional sex worker.

These modes of relational work and corresponding (trans)gender identities are discussed in detail in the following sections. While presenting these findings, pseudonyms are used to conceal the identity of our participants.

## The relational work of *khwajasiras*

*Khwajasiras* often experience their first sexual encounter with older male relatives or acquaintances in their parents' homes at a very young age. Compared with their cisgender counterparts, for our participants, under-age sex carries another stigma: sex between two male members of society is a criminal and morally reprehensible act in Pakistan. Since many *khwajasiras* are assigned a male gender at birth, their sexual attraction towards male acquaintances is viewed as the highest transgression of dominant gender norms. As we should see, for them, however, this attraction is also experienced as a confirmation of their feminine soul.

Their defiance of the established heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) results, in most cases, in a lack of recognition and associated punishment from their immediate families and social circle, including expulsion from their family homes. Condemned and rejected by their families, these children thus join the *khwajasira* community as *chelas* (disciples) of an experienced *guru* (spiritual teacher), who herself was once a *chela*. Once accepted as their disciples, the *gurus* give their *chelas* an elaborate set of skills: mannerism, dancing, and dressing required to spend their lives as *khwajasiras*. It is the *guru* who also assesses the potential of young *khwajasiras* and orients their professional lives.

Under the supervision of a *guru*, *khwajasiras* are thus initiated to high-end or cheap erotic dance and sex work depending on their dancing and seductive skills, physical beauty, and attractiveness. In addition, the *gurus* also teach *chelas* about the financial aspects of sex work:



Yes, I started taking money for sex after I became Guriya's *chela*. She taught me. . .that it doesn't matter whether you like someone or not, they are all there to use you. If you don't get anything in return, then there is not point of all this. (Piyari, 21 years)

### *Romantic relations: The lover and the pleasure exchange*

The stories of our participants reveal that engaging in sex work is not simply about joining the community's way of life, it also provides *khwajasiras* with instant recognition, something they have been longing for years. As Jaafar<sup>3</sup> (55 years) shared with us:

so many people were crazy for me because of my beauty. I saw people with tattoos of my name on their forearms. . . [T]hen I secretly started meeting other men as well. . . I liked it. . . Then I thought 1 or 100, what's the difference?

However, not all sex relations are the same. An important distinction that emerged in our interviews is the difference between having sex with people that *khwajasiras* 'desire' compared with those that they do not. The former category is given a significant price discount. For instance, Piyari explained to us:

some clients look really good, who are very nice, so I lower my price to even 500, for them. . . Feelings are natural; when I feel attracted to someone, I naturally want to kiss them and have sex with them, so then I find it easy to lower the price. It's all about whom my heart likes. (Piyari, 21 years)

The encounter with an *attractive* client reframes the exchange in terms of 'enjoyment', wherein pleasure more than money is at stake. Haider, for example, explains that young clients, below 30 years, usually cannot afford to pay a high price, as they do not have good incomes. In her words: 'Good money can only be expected from [older] clients. Younger ones cannot pay a higher price, so with younger ones I only have sex when I find them physically attractive' (Haider, 19 years). Similarly, Naghma (39 years) would willingly exclude money as medium of exchange to spend time with a good-looking client: 'sometimes when the man would be good-looking, I would even lower the price or at times even do it for free just to be with him for some time'.

The mode of payment from lovers would also vary. For example, *khwajasiras* would, at times, accept 'gifts' from their lovers, which reflect both a sentimental as well as commercial value (Mauss, 2002 [1925]). As Muskarahat (45 years) explained to us:

I did not take money for sex from him. He had become my friend, not a customer for sex. That's why I made demands and asked him to buy me [gifts] whenever I desired. . . but never specifically asked him to pay for sex.

From a relational work perspective, the matching of the money with the attractiveness of the 'lovers' makes this a relationship of love and pleasure for our participants. In the case of Piyari above, her standard price for one sexual encounter is Rs 5000, so when she drops her price to Rs 500 it is a deep discount. To put things in context, as per the World Bank, the minimum basic income required to sustain oneself in Pakistan is Rs 400 per

day with a state minimum wage of a worker at Rs 600 per day. A discount of Rs 4500 is a significant amount, an acknowledgement of the pleasure they receive from their lovers; a testament to their newly discovered sexual and transgender identity, and a price for being desired and recognised (Butler, 2005). For instance, Jabbar explained: 'I feel that whoever I met, they loved me like they found something uniquely wonderful about me. Their love made me forget everything: my body and soul. It only made me want men more and more'. As in the previous quotes, Jabbar's words testify how a longing to be the subject of the other's desire is a key to *khwajasiras*' recognition as viable gendered subjects (Butler, 2004). However, as Butler (2004) suggests, this sexual encounter with others is always regulated by pre-existing norms of gender recognition and desire with money helping in defining and sustaining the relationship between desire and sexuality.

### *Spousal relations: The wife and the 'marital' exchange*

As discussed in the previous section, several participants explained that they are selective in choosing their clients who need to be good-looking and sexually attractive thus transforming sex work into an exchange 'where both are happy' (Naghma, 39 years) with money acting as a function of pleasure and love received by *khwajasiras* as much as a consideration received for the exchange of sexual services.

The nature of the relationship with some of these attractive lovers at times transforms into something more permanent and enduring, which is reflected in different forms of financial exchange. When a *chela* likes a man, she can decide to take him as *pakka yaar* (permanent lover) and *giryā* (quasi-husband) (Sultana and Kalyani, 2012). This is a 'marriage' relationship between a *khwajasira* and her male lover (*giryā*). As Butler (2004: 94) explains, a 'cultural matrix of meanings' is always at play when identifying with sex in a gender binary resulting in cultural advantages for *khwajasiras* to enact the role of 'wife' in a marriage institution. However, as we will see, the gendered roles do not necessarily exhaust or pre-determine their desires and sexuality. Thus, *khwajasiras* appropriate this institution but also queer it, depending on their desire for identification and their experienced sexuality.

Under the heterosexual marriage conventions in the country, the 'marriage' requires 'blessings' of the elders who act as 'parents' of the 'bride', in this case, the *guru*. It is the *guru* who 'officialises' the marriage during a ritual where the *pakka yaar* is introduced to the *khwajasira* community. On this occasion, the *pakka yaar* brings clothes, shoes, and jewellery for the bride and her family, mimicking a traditional hetero marriage with gifts fostering the feelings of fondness between the *yaar* and his bride and in-laws (Maus, 2002 [1925]).

Being in a 'marriage' relationship with a man is an ultimate affirmation of the 'hetero-femininity' for some *khwajasiras*, hence several economic traditions of hetero marriages are invoked to mark the beginning of a new relationship. To begin with, the nature of financial exchange transforms the relationship from one of compensation to that of entitlement. The *giryā* bears the financial burden of his wife's monthly expenditures in exchange for a promise of devotion and faithfulness. In the words of our participants, 'he [the *giryā*] becomes like a husband' (Haider, 19 years) and his economic responsibility allows the *giryā* to set a series of social restrictions on the transgender wife: 'Mostly it's

like whom you can or cannot meet . . . It is up to him, whether he wants to live with her or separately and visits her for a few hours every day or whatever he prefers' (Haider). The type of economic transaction and the medium of the exchange are thus matched to build a relationship whose norms reflect the dominant gender norms of heterosexual marriage. This clearly emerges when looking at how our participants describe the gendered aspect of this relation: 'When you meet my expectations and fulfil my needs, okay, then I can consider being there for your needs as well and serve you and respect you well as a woman should be with her man' (Shafqat, 68 years). For many transgender people, finding a *girya* is a life-changing event relieving them from the burden of survival sex:

In those times, I used to get 50 or 100 rupees for doing *pun*. Then I got a *girya* in my life. I had never seen a 1000 rupees bill in my life before. With him, I was getting and spending in 1000s. He was giving me 7000 rupees per month for my expenses. (Shafqat, 68 years)

However, the *girya* relationship is experienced differently by different *khwajasiras* as their desire for recognition through sexuality exceeds and displaces heteronormativity (Butler, 2004). This experience finds expression in different ways of matching intimacy with money. For some *khwajasiras*, getting into a 'marriage' relationship does not entail the same kind of financial obligations on the part of *giryas* as are expected of husbands in a hetero marriage. For example, Naghma explained to us that she did not expect a *girya* to take care of all her financial needs: 'With *giryas* . . . our relationship is not driven by money. I only asked them to occasionally buy me gifts. . . or things that I fancy' (Naghma, 39 years). Things fancied by *khwajasiras* could be buying 'a new phone, or sometimes just ask them to take us for shopping' (Guriya, 21 years).

Similarly, *giryas'* expectation of exclusivity in sexual relations is also something that is not subscribed to by some transgender 'wives' who believe in maintaining the two relationships side-by-side. What is seen as sexual promiscuity by *giryas* is seen by many *khwajasiras* as a hallmark of their identity. For instance, Guriya shared with us 'problems started when he kept insisting that I should quit sex work and I knew I couldn't do that'. Several participants highlighted that they do not want to lose the freedom, economic independence, and pleasure that come from other types of intimacy-material exchanges when entering a *girya* relationship. The latter is thus shaped in a way that transgresses traditional expectations of gender roles in the hetero-normative institution of marriage, thus queering this institution and its symbolic order (Butler, 2004).

### *Taboo relations: The prostitute and the sacred-profane exchange*

In Pakistani society, sex work is disapproved of on religious, cultural, and legal grounds (Pamment, 2010). All kinds of sex outside marriage are proscribed by law, and men who have sex with men are seen as sinners and criminals. While some of our participants experience sex work as an expression and acceptance of their 'female soul', others see it as a 'bad deed', a necessary evil to take care of their primary material needs. Rafaqat (19 years), for instance, explained to us her reasons for doing sex work in the following terms: 'However, later at the age of 17, I started noticing that this is what we "have to do"

in this field to make money. . . but I also understood that it was a bad deed so I tried to keep it to the minimum.’

As explained in the previous sections, the transition from occasional sex with men to sex work usually occurs when joining the community. They are taught that sex work is ‘what they “have to do”’ to live (Pamment, 2010: 34). Framing sex work as an inevitable fate of *khwajasiras* allows some of them to cope with the guilt associated with the ‘sin’.

Experiencing sex work as a sin has several implications on how our participants determine the nature, frequency, and purpose of the ‘fair’ financial exchanges that accompany this work (Zelizer, 2012). For instance, Shabina (33 years) explains that she only did sex work to cover her basic needs:

I did not take more clients . . . because I never had sex for the sake of sex, I always did it for money. . . The money that I make by doing it 4, or 5 times a month is enough for me. I rely on [other means] and want to avoid doing this sin. There is a life hereafter too. On the day of judgment, Allah will ask me what have you brought for me? What would I say that all I did was *dhandra* (the work) . . . sex work . . . is a sin.

The above quote implies a condemnation of sex work and at the same time, distinguishing ‘survival sex work’ from sex work done because of ‘greed’. Regretting the follies of her past, Shafqat (68 years) for example, commented: ‘it became a routine for me to do [anal sex] and get something in return. The need for money and greed made me do it’.

As for Shafqat and several other participants, aging seems to play a role in the framing of sex work as a sinful act. Whereas young *khwajasiras* among our participants are more likely to define their intimacy-material exchanges in terms of pleasure, many older *khwajasiras* redefine these exchanges as sinful. In the religiously conservative Pakistani society, age generally awakens people’s religious sentiments. As the certainty of death draws near, many people turn more and more religious, realising the temporariness of this life and the permanence of the life hereafter, promised in the religion. Religion also starts to affect *khwajasiras* as they age, becoming a salient identity control regime. Roughly by the age of 40, and often much before, *khwajasiras*’ demand as sex workers starts to experience a steep decline. This is also the time when they usually turn to God. At this point, some of them decide to go for *umrah*, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, and once back they try to change their working life and regret their past working ‘choices’.

The ideological aspect of sex work brings another distinction to the fore in the accounts of our participants. While sex outside marriage is prohibited in Islam, gay sex is considered even more taboo than sex between opposite genders. In this respect, our participants explained that they usually have two different types of clients: straight clients and gay clients. Straight clients usually want *khwajasiras* to ‘cross-dress’, put on female attire, and act like a woman in their sexual relations. On the contrary, gay clients prefer *khwajasiras* to keep a male attire and ‘do not just want to be on top but want to be bottom as well’ (Haider, 19 years). This goes against the gender and religious identities of many *khwajasiras*, so they refuse it with obvious financial implications. Jaafar (55 years), for instance, explained the reasons for refusing gay clients in the following terms:

Lots of people used to come and wanted me to be on ‘top’ and ‘do’ them. They even offered a lot more money for that like 3000 or 5000. This is two decades ago. 3000 used to be a lot of

money back then. But I always refused. I never agreed to be on ‘top’. A *khwajasira* has a feminine soul, she does not need to penetrate others. When she likes someone and loves it when they do them, she automatically gets ‘discharged’.

In considering what is a ‘fair’ matching of economic transactions, media of exchange, and social ties, *khwajasiras* also forge a specific gender identity and sexuality for themselves. In the above quote, Jaafar (55 years) is explaining that accepting that money would define the relationship as a homosexual relationship, which is something Jaafar does not desire. In refusing this match, Jaafar also avoids a conflation of homosexuality with *khwajasiras*’ sexuality, a common perception in Pakistan (Pamment, 2019).

Matching their gender identity and sexual orientation, the frequency of sex work and financial exchange is also linked with bodily modifications by some *khwajasiras*. Several participants indeed distinguish *akwa moorat* (*khwajasiras* who have not undertaken surgery) from *nirban moorat* (*khwajasiras* who have undergone castration). Castration is one aspect of the relational work that *khwajasiras* do to define their relationship with clients and distinguish themselves from other sex workers. For instance, Naghma explained to us:

After we become *nirban*, we are a lot closer to being like women, so we develop a sense of shame as well. *Akwa* on the other hand would not have such shame. . .will even take Rs 500 and do 3 *puns* to make 1500 a day easily. But a *nirban* would only want someone she likes; she would feel ashamed of lying on bed before anybody who pays them money. (Naghma, 39 years)

This quote is interesting insofar as it once again reinforces rather than challenges gender stereotypes of women as naturally inclined to modesty and sexual restraint (Masood, 2019b). ‘Being like women’, *khwajasiras* would refuse to offer sexual services that are deemed morally inappropriate for their experienced gender identity. Thus, excluding the service of ‘doing clients’ from the menu of transactions redefines the relationship with the clients within the norms of the heterosexual matrix and relieves the *khwajasiras* of the social and religious stigma associated with homosexual relationships. Importantly, this gender identity and sexuality that *khwajasiras* crave requires constant relational work as, in every encounter with others, the gender identification of *khwajasiras* recommences and has to be reorchestrated as ‘a credible fantasy, one that compels belief’ (Butler, 2004: 142).

### *Professional relations: The sex worker and the transactional exchange*

Several participants experience sex work in professional terms, a market exchange, yet encumbered by gender identity and sexuality. In a conservative society, where female sex workers are not easily available, *khwajasiras* are seen by many clients as an ‘inferior’ but cheaper and easily available ‘alternative’ and *khwajasiras* are acutely aware of this (Pamment, 2010). When it comes to pricing, there is a pecking order of sex workers, which does not favour them. The ‘real women’ are not only an inspiration for many *khwajasiras* but also their competition, and they must work hard to improve their prices in the face of this tough competition. Akbar (28 years), for instance, explains how she has been able to grow professionally by cultivating ‘skills’ that allow her to charge more money in

a market where the existing order works against her. In her words: 'I got professional in my approach, and I started to understand how to deal with customers. . . I also acquired other skills like doing massage. . . so I also started charging more money'. Akbar sees sex work as a more complex endeavour wherein bodily services are important but there are other areas where she can gain an advantage: 'Since I am a student of communications, by the time a client comes to me the third time, he trusts me enough and our conversation reaches a very personalised level' (Akbar, 28 years). Akbar is very aware of the market dynamics and aims at offering something that her competition probably will not: listening skills and communication. Other *khwajasiras* spend money and effort to look 'just like women' and thus charge better prices. For example, Guriya told us: 'I have had proper breast implants, and I am in a proper female look so I [also] deserve higher paying clients. I would never take a client who pays a small amount like 2, 3, or 4 thousand only.'

The determination of the 'right' transaction price is something that *khwajasiras* learn over time under the guidance and advice of their more seasoned mentors. All our participants were deeply aware that 'it is not that easy to seduce a rich man' (Shabina, 33 years) and that physical beauty plays an important role in this task. To further enhance their physical profile, our participants shared the use of different strategies, including the use of social media apps to increase their market appeal. Others, like Khoobsurat, believe that the clients found on the street pay more because they 'see us for real' (Khoobsurat, 19 years), thus increasing *khwajasiras*' power to 'close the deal'.

However, physicality only takes them so far. The attitude of the service provider counts as much, if not more. For example, a very important strategy that our participants described is 'to play hard to get to maintain high value' (Reema, 28 years). Quoting a seemingly high(er) price and exuding an air of aloofness and indifference play an important role in establishing intimate relationships of economic advantage to *khwajasiras*. However, as Piyari observed, 'playing hard to get' must be a carefully orchestrated move and *khwajasiras* must be careful not to overplay their hand; 'The client knows he has many other options as well, so I have to show some flexibility and negotiate the price. If I get stubborn at 10,000, my client will start going to someone else' (Piyari, 21 years).

While some *khwajasiras* see themselves at a distinct disadvantage vis-a-vis 'real women', others see their transgeneriness as a competitive advantage. They can act as a man or a woman depending on the client's needs. For instance, Haider explains how her decision to cross-dress or not is a function of clients' preferences and the costs involved. This emerges clearly in the following:

When I do sex work in female dressing, I get paid even more. Yes, being in a female dress, clean shaved, proper makeup brings more money for me in sex work. A straight client prefers us more when we cross-dress. They pay better when we cross-dress too. But a gay client wants us in male attire. They pay better when we are being males for them [. . .] But when I cross-dress, I charge more money because makeup and other things cost too and I have to put in so much effort in getting ready for the client as well. So, I charge more when a client wants me to cross-dress. (Haider, 19 years)

The determination of a 'fair' exchange value of sex work by *khwajasiras* is partially a function of what market norms recognise as valuable. *Khwajasiras*, like expert business



professionals, intuitively keep an eye on the costs, assess the psychology of the clients, and closely monitor the ‘competition’. However, our participants’ accounts suggest that the determination of ‘fair’ exchange value in establishing intimate relations goes much beyond the business dynamics. It is deeply linked with a different understanding of *khwajasiras* about their (trans)gender identities with heteronormativity structures often working in the background. Some *khwajasiras* see ‘real’ women as the gold standard of sex work and always adjust their prices accordingly to build intimate relations, which are inherently inferior to intimate relations between ‘real’ men and ‘women’. They have to compensate for this inherent inferiority with other services, for example, better communication and marketing skills. Others see themselves not just as women but a bit more. As a result, they can offer sexual experiences, which cannot be matched by just ‘women’, hence they must price their services above the price of women sex workers. As in the cases analysed in the previous section, the desire for recognition complicates pre-existing and historical norms of value in the market domain.

## Discussion and conclusions

Exploring the variegated mingling of intimacy and financial exchange offers a deeper account of the complex socio-sexual phenomenon, which has been historically labelled as either prostitution or sex work (Cabezas, 2004; Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021; Masvawure et al., 2015). Intimacy overflows with meanings, creating a need for constant negotiation of these meanings (Hancock et al., 2015). Our investigation of *khwajasiras*’ relational work reveals the role of financial exchanges in negotiating the meanings of their sexual relations and transgender identities. The four types of relationships that we identified, i.e. romantic relations, spousal relations, taboo relations, and professional relations, entailed unique combinations of economic transaction amounts, frequencies, modes, and media of exchanges as well as transgender identities, i.e. the *khwajasira* lover, the *khwajasira* wife, the *khwajasira* survival prostitute, and the *khwajasira* professional sex worker. While we identified these four overarching modes of relational work and gender identities, each of our participants had their personalised ways of enacting them, making each intimacy-money exchange quite unique.

Our analysis thus critically interrogates the role of money vis-a-vis gender and sexuality in the case of gender-diverse communities such as *khwajasiras*. Reflecting on diverse sexual inclinations and desires of individuals belonging to the same gender, Butler (2004) questioned the assumed correlation between gender and sexuality concluding that gender is not ‘merely instrumental to sexuality’ (p. 143). Expanding the reflection offered by Butler (2004), our analysis of *khwajasiras*’ accounts suggests that the financial exchanges not only define their gender but also the contours of their sexual desires in their encounter with relevant other. For some *khwajasiras* this desire is experienced in a heterosexual form (Dutta and Roy, 2014; Pamment, 2019), reflecting the grip of gender binaries on their cognitive imagination. As a result, ‘real women’ seem to be lurking behind every financial exchange that they indulge in to form and sustain an intimate relationship. For example, putting a lower price on their sexual services compared with ‘real woman’ is an acknowledgement that they are not ‘real’ women and thus must price their sexual services accordingly.

Similarly, for some *khwajasiras*, charging a hefty price for rendering sexual services for gay clients is a financial wrongdoing and a morally reprehensible relationship thus revealing the influence of religion and culture in their interiorisation of transgender identity and sexuality. By declining lucrative potential financial exchanges, *khwajasiras* endorse these cultural and religious conditions, which equate femininity with specific sexual orientations and relations. While the interiorisation of religious norms and their effects on gender and sexual relations varied across *khwajasiras*, it generally becomes more pronounced as *khwajasiras* age thus highlighting the significance of age in shaping the interaction of intimacy, gender, and money.

On the contrary, sexuality is experienced by other *khwajasiras* as eminently queer, and this reflects in the type of relational work they engage in with their clients. Their ability to act like a woman and a man by 'doing' gay clients entitles them to charge a price above ordinary female sex workers thus establishing their gender identity of being a *khwajasira*, a 'female soul with a penis'. Similarly, while some *khwajasira* wives' financial relationship with their *giryas* mimics financial norms of hetero marriages wherein the 'husband' is liable to provide for living expenses against an expectation of devotion and sexual exclusivity, others adapt the 'marriage' relationship by relieving the *giryas* of their full financial responsibilities and in exchange, preserve a financial, gender and sexual space for themselves to maintain intimate relations with other men. By altering the financial relations, *khwajasiras* (re)define the institution of marriage in line with their (trans)gender identity, which does not consider monogamy or heterosexuality to be a cornerstone of an enduring love relationship.

Our analysis thus adds to previous studies on the mingling of intimacy and economy (Brooks, 2021; Cabezas, 2004; Ham and Gheorghiu, 2021; Sanders and Campbell, 2007) by highlighting an emic perspective on monetary payments and their role in (re)defining sexual relationships and gender identities within a transgender community in Pakistan (Butler, 2005). Our analysis not only challenges the hegemonic understanding of a supposed correlation between *khwajasiras*' gender identity and sexuality but also highlights the dynamism in the relationship (Butler, 2004) between gender, sexuality and associated financial exchanges. For example, the influence of religion causes many *khwajasiras* to look back on their lives and redefine yesterday's good match as in fact a 'bad match': an indiscretion of youth. A changed definition turns a professional relationship into a relationship of sin and a fair market consideration for services rendered into forbidden fruits of vice. Quite often, this causes *khwajasiras* to indulge in a repair (relational) work with a change in the associated frequency and purpose of financial exchanges, for example, reluctantly accepting only a few clients every month for economic survival.

Through the analysis of accounts of *khwajasiras*, our study challenges conventional and universal meanings of the term transgender sex work(ers) by unpacking the contingent and situated relationship between gender, sexuality, money, and sex work. Future studies can delve deeper into how members of this transgender community engage in relational work with several third parties, such as their biological families, law enforcement agencies, and other members of the community. While doing sex work is often an entrepreneurial activity, it is also an organised endeavour. In the case of our participants, *khwajasiras* belonging to a community play a role in the way intimacy-material exchanges are organised and valued. Thus, more insights into the organising of these

exchanges can shed further light on the distinctive experiences of these marginalised communities. Finally, this study focused on the working lives of Pakistani *khwajasiras* and, as such, did not take into account their ethnic or geographical backgrounds. Further research within different national cultural settings should be more attentive to the ethnic or geographic backgrounds of transgender workers to get a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between gender, money, and intimate labour.

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## Notes

1. A community of gender variant persons in the Indian Sub-Continent. Please, note that *hijra* is often seen as a derogatory term (Khan, 2016).
2. Gender-variant persons who were not attached to the Mughal harem were historically called *hijras* instead of the more noble term *khwajasiras*. Over time, *hijra* became a derogatory term, so members of the community generally prefer to be called *khwajasiras* (Khan, 2016). We therefore also use this term in the rest of the analysis.
3. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to conceal the identity of our participants.

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