

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GENDER-AFFIRMATIVE THERAPY IN ENHANCING SELF ESTEEM AND WELL-BEING AMONG TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS

Noshaba Razaq^{1*}, Rashid Qayyum², Muhammad Naveed Khan³, Hafa Shaukat,⁴ Zunaira Naveed⁵, Arifa Batool⁶

- ¹. PhD Scholar at University of Haripur
- ². Professor of Psychiatry at Fazaia Medical College
- ³. Master Scholar in Public Health at International Jilin University China
- ⁴. MBBS CMH Lahore medical College Lahore
- ⁵. Assistant professor of Behavioral Sciences Department, Wah Medical College Texila (NUMS)
- ⁶. M.Phil Student at University of Haripur

[Corresponding author: noshabarazaq123@gmail.com](mailto:noshabarazaq123@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

Background: Transgender individuals in Pakistan face significant socio-economic and educational challenges, which may impact their mental health and overall well-being.

Objective: The primary objectives is to evaluate the impact of gender-affirmative therapy on self-esteem and psychological well-being, and provide recommendations for improving support systems and informing policy.

Methods: The study involved 120 transgender participants, including transgender women, transgender men, and non-binary/genderqueer individuals. Data on demographics, educational levels, and employment status were collected. The effectiveness of gender-affirmative therapy was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) through pretest and posttest measures.

Results: The majority of participants were young, with 75% under the age of 35, and faced significant socio-economic challenges, including high illiteracy rates and limited formal employment opportunities. Post-therapy results showed a significant increase in self-esteem (mean

difference = 6.2, $t = 5.89$, $p < 0.001$) and a notable decrease in psychological distress (mean difference = -5.2, $t = -4.73$, $p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Gender-affirmative therapy significantly improves self-esteem and psychological well-being among transgender individuals. However, systemic barriers to education and employment persist. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive mental health services and policy changes to address these challenges and support transgender individuals in Pakistan.

Keywords: Transgender, Gender-Affirmative Therapy, Self-Esteem, Psychological Well-Being, Socio-Economic Challenges, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Transgender individuals, those whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth, often face significant societal challenges, including discrimination, stigma, and lack of access to appropriate healthcare (1-3). These challenges can lead to adverse mental health outcomes, highlighting the importance of targeted therapeutic interventions (4).

Self-esteem and psychological well-being are critical components of mental health. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth or personal value. High self-esteem is associated with positive mental health outcomes, whereas low self-esteem can lead to various psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (5). Psychological well-being encompasses several aspects, including emotional balance, life satisfaction, and a sense of purpose. It is a broader concept that reflects an individual's overall mental health and capacity to manage life's challenges (6). For transgender individuals, factors such as acceptance, social support, and access to affirming care significantly influence both self-esteem and psychological well-being (7).

Transgender individuals in Pakistan face numerous challenges, including societal discrimination, lack of legal protections, and limited access to appropriate healthcare services (8). These factors can severely impact their mental health, leading to issues such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (9). Given the profound impact of these challenges on their psychological

well-being, there is a critical need for effective therapeutic interventions tailored specifically to the needs of transgender individuals.

Gender-affirmative therapy (GAT) is a therapeutic approach designed to support transgender individuals in exploring and affirming their gender identity. This type of therapy acknowledges the individual's gender experiences and provides a supportive environment for them to express and navigate their gender identity. GAT focuses on reducing the distress associated with gender dysphoria and promoting overall mental health (10). Research has shown that gender-affirmative interventions can have a profound impact on the mental health of transgender individuals. These interventions often include counseling, hormone therapy, and other medical procedures that align an individual's physical appearance with their gender identity (11). By addressing the specific needs and challenges of transgender individuals, GAT aims to enhance self-esteem, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and improve overall psychological well-being (12).

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-affirmative therapy in enhancing self-esteem and psychological well-being among transgender individuals in Pakistan. By focusing on these variables, the research seeks to provide empirical evidence on the benefits of GAT, contributing to the development of more inclusive and effective mental health care practices for transgender populations. Through this research, we hope to highlight the importance of tailored therapeutic interventions in improving the mental health outcomes for transgender individuals

The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of gender-affirmative therapy on enhancing self-esteem and psychological well-being among transgender individuals.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-affirmative therapy in enhancing self-esteem and psychological well-being among transgender individuals in Pakistan. A pretest-posttest group design will be used, focusing on measuring changes in self-esteem and psychological well-being before and after the intervention. Participants will include transgender individuals aged 18 and above, recruited from various communities and

support groups across Pakistan, who self-identify as transgender and provide informed consent. The intervention will consist of gender-affirmative therapy, which includes individual therapy sessions to explore and affirm gender identity, manage gender dysphoria, and address mental health issues related to stigma and discrimination, as well as group therapy sessions for peer support and psychoeducation on gender identity and coping strategies. The therapy will be administered over 12 weeks, with weekly sessions conducted by trained therapists familiar with gender-affirmative approaches and cultural sensitivities relevant to the Pakistani context. Self-esteem and psychological well-being will be assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), respectively, administered at three points: baseline (pre-intervention), immediately post-intervention, and at a three-month follow-up to assess the sustainability of the intervention effects. Data will be collected through self-administered questionnaires, and informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Statistical analyses will be conducted using SPSS software, with paired t-tests used to assess within-group changes over time and t-test employed to evaluate differences between the pretest and posttest scores, controlling for baseline scores. The study will adhere to ethical guidelines, including obtaining ethical approval from a relevant institutional review board, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and informing participants of their right to withdraw at any time.

RESULTS

Table-I; Demographic characteristics of the patients (n=200).

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group		
18-25	40	33.3%
26-35	50	41.7%
36-45	20	16.7%
46 and above	10	8.3%
Gender Identity		
Transgender Women	70	58.3%
Transgender Men	30	25.0%

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Non-binary/Genderqueer	20	16.7%
Educational Level		
Illiterate	90	75.0%
Primary Education	20	16.7%
Graduate	5	4.2%
Professional Degree	5	4.2%
Employment Status		
Beggars	100	83.3%
Professional Dancers	10	8.3%
Employed	10	8.3%
Unemployed	0	0.0%

The demographic characteristics table provides an overview of the 120 transgender participants in the study, highlighting key aspects such as age, gender identity, educational level, and employment status. The participants are predominantly in the younger age brackets, with 75% under the age of 35, suggesting a relatively young cohort. This age distribution may reflect the demographic makeup of the transgender population in Pakistan or the recruitment sources. In terms of gender identity, the majority of participants identify as transgender women (58.3%), followed by transgender men (25.0%) and non-binary/genderqueer individuals (16.7%). This distribution offers insight into the diversity within the transgender community represented in this study.

Table-II; comparing self-esteem and psychological wellbeing among transgender before and after gender affirmative therapeutic intervention (n=200).

Measure	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Self-Esteem	15.2 (3.1)	21.4 (2.8)	6.2	5.89	< 0.001
Psychological Well-Being	19.7 (4.2)	14.5 (3.7)	-5.2	-4.73	< 0.001

A significant portion of the participants (75%) are illiterate, highlighting a potential barrier to accessing education for transgender individuals in Pakistan. A smaller percentage have primary education (16.7%), with only 8.4% having reached graduate or professional levels, indicating limited educational attainment within this group. The employment data show a concerning trend,

with the majority of participants (83.3%) engaged in begging. Only a small fraction are professional dancers (8.3%), employed (8.3%), or unemployed (0%), underscoring the socio-economic challenges faced by transgender individuals, including limited access to formal employment opportunities.

DISCUSSION

The demographic characteristics of the 120 transgender participants in this study provide a revealing snapshot of the socio-economic and educational landscape faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan. Notably, the participants skew younger, with 75% under the age of 35. This predominance of younger participants may reflect a trend within the transgender population in Pakistan, where younger individuals might be more likely to seek gender-affirmative therapy or be more visible in the community (13). The gender identity distribution shows that transgender women constitute the largest group (58.3%), followed by transgender men (25.0%) and non-binary/genderqueer individuals (16.7%). This diversity aligns with existing literature that highlights a range of gender identities within the transgender community, underscoring the importance of inclusive healthcare and social services (14).

Educational attainment among the participants is notably low, with 75% reported as illiterate. This statistic points to significant barriers in accessing education for transgender individuals in Pakistan, a finding consistent with previous research indicating systemic discrimination and exclusion from educational institutions (15). The low levels of educational attainment further exacerbate socio-economic challenges, as evidenced by the employment data. The majority of participants (83.3%) are engaged in begging, a stark indicator of the socio-economic marginalization faced by transgender individuals. This aligns with existing literature that lack of formal employment opportunities, with only 8.3% employed and another 8.3% working as professional dancers, highlights the pervasive nature of discrimination in the labor market (16).

The study's results on the effectiveness of gender-affirmative therapy reveal significant improvements in both self-esteem and psychological well-being among participants. The mean self-esteem score, measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), increased from 15.2

(pretest) to 21.4 (posttest), with a mean difference of 6.2. This improvement is statistically significant ($t = 5.89$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that gender-affirmative therapy positively impacts participants' self-esteem. The findings are consistent with other studies that suggest therapeutic intervention can help individuals develop a more positive self-view by affirming their gender identity and providing a supportive therapeutic environment (17).

Similarly, the psychological well-being of participants, assessed using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), showed significant improvement. The mean score decreased from 19.7 (pretest) to 14.5 (posttest), with a mean difference of -5.2, indicating reduced psychological distress. This reduction is statistically significant ($t = -4.73$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that participants experienced less anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction following the therapy. These findings align with research that highlights the benefits of gender-affirmative therapy in reducing psychological distress among transgender individuals (18).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals significant socio-economic and educational challenges faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan, such as high illiteracy rates and limited employment opportunities. The findings show that gender-affirmative therapy significantly improves self-esteem and psychological well-being, as demonstrated by increases in Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale scores and decreases in General Health Questionnaire scores. These results underscore the need for culturally sensitive mental health services and support systems tailored to the unique needs of transgender individuals. By addressing these challenges and providing inclusive care, we can improve the quality of life and overall well-being of transgender communities in Pakistan.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE STUDY

The study has limitations, including a relatively small and predominantly young sample, which may not fully represent the diversity of the transgender community in Pakistan. Additionally, focusing on a specific region may limit the generalizability of the findings. The absence of longitudinal data also restricts the assessment of long-term effects of gender-affirmative therapy.

on self-esteem and psychological well-being. Moreover, reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias.

To overcome these limitations, future research should include a more diverse and representative sample, incorporate longitudinal designs, and use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. There is also a need for policy initiatives and advocacy to improve education and employment access for transgender individuals, reduce discrimination, and promote inclusive policies. Training for healthcare providers in culturally sensitive care and public awareness programs can further support the well-being and integration of transgender individuals into society.

REFERENCES:

1. Davidson M. Seeking refuge under the umbrella: Inclusion, exclusion, and organizing within the category transgender. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*. 2007;4(4):60–80. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1525/srsp.2007.4.4.60>
2. Valentine D. *Imagining transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Duke University Press; 2020 Dec 31. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822390213>
3. Verbeek MJ, Hommes MA, Stutterheim SE, van Lankveld JJ, Bos AE. Experiences with stigmatization among transgender individuals after transition: A qualitative study in the Netherlands. *International journal of transgender health*. 2020 Apr 2;21(2):220-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2020.1750529>
4. Suleman D, Kashif A, Gul S, Hamid S, Yunus A. Navigating shadows: the impact of social stigma on the mental health of the transgender community in South Asia. *Migration Letters*. 2024;21(1):167-81. DOI:10.59670/ml.v21i1.5171
5. Auttama N, Seangpraw K, Ong-Arborirak P, Tonchoy P. Factors associated with self-esteem, resilience, mental health, and psychological self-care among university students in Northern Thailand. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*. 2021 May 27:1213-21. <https://doi.org/10.2147/JMDH.S308076>
6. Diener E, Wirtz D, Biswas-Diener R, Tov W, Kim-Prieto C, Choi DW, Oishi S. New measures of well-being. *Assessing well-being: The collected works of Ed Diener*. 2009:247-66. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-90-481-2354-4_12
7. Velasco RA, Slusser K, Coats H. Stigma and healthcare access among transgender and gender-diverse people: A qualitative meta-synthesis. *Journal of advanced nursing*. 2022 Oct; 78(10):3083-100. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jan.15323>
8. Azhar S, Ahmad I, Herrera MM, Tariq N, Lerner R. “I would prefer to be dead than to live this way”: Lived experiences of stigma and discrimination against khwaja sira in Swat, Pakistan. *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*. 2024 Jan;11:e60. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2024.53>

9. Akhtar M, Bilour N. State of mental health among transgender individuals in Pakistan: Psychological resilience and self-esteem. *Community mental health journal*. 2020 May;56(4):626-34. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10597-019-00522-5>
10. Bracey N. *Mapping gender affirming therapy experiences with transgender clients in Aotearoa* (Doctoral dissertation, Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington).
11. Usta Sağlam NG, Zengin K, Osmanlı Shirolu S, Sulu C, Kırpınar MM, Turan Ş. Disordered eating behaviors in gender-affirmative treatment seeking transgender people. *Eating Disorders*. 2024 Apr 3:1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10640266.2024.2336277>
12. Van Der Miesen AI, Steensma TD, de Vries AL, Bos H, Popma A. Psychological functioning in transgender adolescents before and after gender-affirmative care compared with cisgender general population peers. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2020 Jun 1;66(6):699-704. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.12.018>
13. Spencer KG, Berg DR, Bradford NJ, Vencill JA, Tellawi G, Rider G. The gender-affirmative life span approach: A developmental model for clinical work with transgender and gender-diverse children, adolescents, and adults. *Psychotherapy*. 2021 Mar;58(1):37. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2021-35621-001>
14. Velasco RA, Slusser K, Coats H. Stigma and healthcare access among transgender and gender-diverse people: A qualitative meta-synthesis. *Journal of advanced nursing*. 2022 Oct;78(10):3083-100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15323>
15. Sultan S, Mehmood B, Ahmed Z, Tahira K, Rahim M, Farhan F. HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL ISSUES OF TRANSGENDER (KHAWAJA-SIRAS) IN PAKISTAN. *Journal of Khyber College of Dentistry*. 2020 Dec 31;10(04):67-71. <https://journalofkcd.com/kcd/article/view/195>
16. Waqar A, Waqar Z, Jamal MN. Unequal Employment Opportunities for Transgenders: Empirical Study on Employees of Pakistan. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Review*. 2022;4(2):181-97. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/jobreview/issue/71457/1129491>
17. Özgen MH, De Vos CM, Yağmur Ö, Sevelius J. Online Group Psychotherapy to Increase Self-acceptance and Reduce Shame Among Transgender Migrants: An Observational Report. *Turkish Journal of Psychiatry*. 2024;35(1):8. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC11003373/>
18. Glynn TR, Gamarel KE, Kahler CW, Iwamoto M, Operario D, Nemoto T. The role of gender affirmation in psychological well-being among transgender women. *Psychology of sexual orientation and gender diversity*. 2016 Sep;3(3):336.