Article

Crossing the Trust Divide: Building Inclusive Police-Transgender Relations in Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract: The trust deficit between transgender people and the police in Punjab, Pakistan, jeopardizes the legitimacy of the institution and endangers the lives of the community. Even effective implementation of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 has been poor, and transgender individuals still experience harassment, assaults, and exclusion by the police. Such a lack of trust invalidates the position of police as a source of protection and further marginalizes transgender communities. This study aims to investigate the ways of building trust between police officers and transgender people through analyzing their lived experiences of mistrust, discrimination, and opportunities of change. For this an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used, which was founded on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 15 transgender and 16 police officers in varied districts in Punjab. The participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The local NGOs were involved to make sure that all those who had direct contact with the police would be represented. Findings show some structural barriers to trust building like harassment, verbal abuse, lack of gender sensitivity training, fear of retaliation, weak accountability mechanisms, under-representation in institutions and institutional invisibility. Transgender participants and some police officers pointed out the areas of reform, such as community dialogues, awareness programs, and special officers to communicate with transgender communities. Implementing suggested reforms would not only enhance police legitimacy but also create safer spaces for transgender individuals, contributing to broader social justice and equality in Pakistan.

Keywords: Marginalization; procedural justice; trust-building; gender sensitivity training; transgender community.

Introduction

Trust lies at the heart of effective police-community relations. It is what enables citizens to cooperate, laws to be respected, and public order to feel legitimate rather than imposed. As Tyler (2006) observes, the willingness of people to obey the law rests less on fear of sanction and more on perceptions of fairness and trustworthiness in those enforcing it. Giddens (1990) similarly describes trust as confidence in the reliability of systems and actors, grounded in the expectation that they will act predictably and consistently. For many marginalized groups, however, this confidence has been eroded by long histories of exclusion and negative encounters with state authorities.

The precariousness of this relationship in Punjab was starkly illustrated in 2024, when a group of transgender activists stormed a police station in Gujranwala following repeated incidents of harassment

(Samaa TV, 2024). This act of defiance was not an isolated outburst but a symbolic rupture, demonstrating how the accumulated weight of mistrust can erupt into direct confrontation.

Punjab's transgender community locally known as Khawaja Sira or Hijra, is among the most visible yet marginalized groups in South Asia. Despite the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018, which was intended to secure legal recognition and protections (Oestreich, 2018). Everyday interactions with law enforcement often tell a different story. Reports of verbal abuse, intimidation, and violence remain widespread, deepening the sense that formal rights exist only on paper (Abidin & Husin, 2025; Khalil et al., 2020).

This marginalization is not without precedent. Historically, transgender people occupied positions of respect and influence under the Mughal courts (Nanda, 1999). Yet the colonial Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 marked a decisive shift, criminalizing gender non-conforming identities and casting a long shadow of suspicion that continues to shape police practices today (Reddy, 2005; Hinchy, 2019).

It is against this backdrop of legal reform, historical stigma, and lived exclusion that the present study situates itself. By drawing on the narratives of both police officers and transgender individuals, the research seeks to uncover how trust has been fractured, why mistrust endures, and what concrete steps might help build a more inclusive and respectful relationship between law enforcement and one of Punjab's most marginalized communities.

Literature Review

1. Historical Legacies

The tense relationship between transgender communities and the police in South Asia and especially in Pakistan, is impossible to interpret without taking into consideration its colonial basis. During the Mughal Empire, transgender individuals were commonly referred to as Khawaja Sira or Hijra and were respected members of society serving as advisors to the ruler, cultural leaders and caretakers of royal families (Nanda, 1999). This situation changed radically with the British colonial era, which saw the passing of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 that criminalized the gender non-conforming communities, labeling them as habitual criminals (Reddy, 2005). This jurisprudential construction created a tradition of distrust and policing that continues to haunt modern day policing (Hinchy, 2019). Instead of being perceived as citizens with rights, transgender people became objects of structural violence and surveillance, which was repeated in the same pattern in Pakistan nowadays.

2. Contemporary Discrimination

Although the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 was passed, harassment, abuse, and mistreatment are still a regular occurrence during an interaction with the police (Abidin & Husin, 2025). Research indicates that police still verbally abuse, threaten, and physically assault transgender individuals in Pakistan, which makes many of them avoid interaction with police in general (Alamgir, 2024). The transgender population is constantly marginalized by media discourse which tends to stigmatize or sensationalize transgender people, contributing to the development of the societal and institutional prejudice. Another case in point is the Pakistani English newspaper study, which indicated that articles in Dawn and Express Tribune presented transgender persons in stereotypical and limited ways instead of being presented as equal citizens (Khalil et al., 2020). These kinds of discursive practices also validate the othering of the transgender population and, in turn, indirectly justify discriminatory policing.

3. Procedural Justice and Trust

Procedural justice theory suggests that public trust in law enforcement is built on fairness, neutrality, respect, and transparency in police-citizen encounters (Tyler, 2006). When individuals perceive officers as respectful and unbiased, compliance and cooperation with law enforcement increase (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). However, for marginalized groups such as transgender people, these elements are often absent. Instead, discriminatory policing practices, arbitrary arrests, verbal intimidation, and the denial of voice undermine

legitimacy (Stotzer, 2014). In South Asia, these failures are compounded by institutional resistance to accountability, as noted in comparative reviews of police integrity across Asia Pacific, where weak oversight mechanisms often allow discriminatory practices to persist (Khalid et al., 2021). Within Pakistan, the lack of gender sensitivity training among police officers contributes further to mistrust, reinforcing stereotypes and creating a hostile environment for transgender individuals (Lee & Santiago, 2023).

4. Reform Strategies
Although mistrust is deeply rooted, there are pathways to repair. International examples show that community engagement programs, liaison officers, and gender sensitivity training can reduce prejudice and foster cooperation (Miles-Johnson, 2015; Dwyer et al., 2021). However, for Pakistan, reforms must respond directly to local realities of institutional neglect and historical stigma. Scholars and activists emphasize the need for practical accountability mechanisms, mandatory training modules, and the inclusion of transgender voices in policymaking (Yu & Lee, 2023). Equally, media representation plays a pivotal role: positive and accurate portrayals can help challenge stereotypes and reshape public attitudes (Girardi, 2021; Khalil et al., 2020). Incorporating procedural fairness and cultural competence into everyday policing will help Pakistan start restoring trust in the transgender communities and shifting towards a more inclusive justice system.

Methodology

1. Research Design
In this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the ways in which participants make sense of lived experiences within the context where stigma, marginality and emotional depth are prominent (Smith et al., 2009; Larkin et al., 2006; Smith and Osborn, 2015). IPA is particularly appropriate to questions of trust and mistrust between transgender individuals and the police due to its emphasis on the meaning-making of participants and the contexts in which experiences are undertaken. It is powerful in its ability to bring a compassionate and open mind to narratives and allow interpretive richness in vulnerable or secretive populations (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Finlay, 2009). In this project, IPA assisted in recording not just cases of discrimination and mistrust but also the emotional burden, identity negotiations, and reform hopes expressed by participants--congruent with the idiographic and interpretive commitments of IPA.

2. Sampling and Participants
Two groups of information rich people who fulfil the objectives of the research were accessed using a purposive approach:

   i. Transgender individuals (n = 15): They were recruited through snowball sampling through the help of local NGOs in Punjab. Such a strategy is reasonable in a situation where the community is marginalized, inconsistently visible, and there are risks connected with self-identification. The network-based recruitment increases safety and access. To capture heterogeneous experiences of police, contact the participants were identified both in urban and rural areas.

   ii. Police officers (n = 16): Selected in several districts in Punjab (urban and rural police stations). Having officers of varying ranks enhanced diversity in institutional view and provided an opportunity to study how social, cultural, and organizational context influence interaction with transgender communities.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant Group	N	Age Range	Gender Identity / Role	Location (District)
Transgender	15	18–46	Khawaja Sira, Trans Woman	Sargodha, Lahore, Bahawalpur, Rawalpindi
Police Officers	16	25–54	Male (Investigation officers, SHOs, and supervisory officers)	Sargodha, Bhakar, Multan, Rawalpindi, Lahore

The dual-group design permits both divergent and convergent analysis of trust/mistrust across sides of the encounter whilst preserving the idiographic sensitivity of IPA.

3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the main data collection method to gather information from both police officers and transgender people. It is methodologically aligned with IPA since it facilitates rich, first-person narration, provides the opportunity to follow up on emotionally relevant content, and honours the language, cadence, and priorities of participants. This format offers both comparability (through a common guide) and flexibility to investigate individual sense-making (which is essential to the depth-oriented analysis of IPA). The research questions for transgender subjects examined their direct police interactions along with their security concerns and their readiness to file reports. For police officers, questions centred on their experiences during interactions with transgender individuals, the challenges they face in managing such encounters, and their understanding of transgender rights.

4. Data Analysis (IPA)

The data were analysed using the six-step IPA process (Smith et al., 2009), with attention to close and repeated interaction with every account:

i. Read and Re-read: Several close readings to become sensitive to the tone, tensions, silences and emotional cadence and create an immersive understanding of each story.

ii. Initial Noting: Layered noting-descriptive (what is said), linguistic (how it is said), and conceptual (what it may mean), emotional indicators, and cultural allusions (ex: repeated words such as ignored, afraid, not taken seriously).

iii. Creation of Emergent Themes: Themes that are based on lived experience and derived inductively (e.g., mistrust, invisibility, performative respect, resilience), focusing on the meaning or conflict inherent in each theme.

iv. Connections Across Themes: Plotting Relationships between themes to create higher order structures (e.g. emotional safety, symbolic violence, institutional distance) via mind-maps to track overlaps and divergences.

v. Cross-Case Analysis: Comparing patterns among and between groups without losing idiographic information (e.g., "mistrust" was found in both groups, but was variably caused and reasoned).

vi. Synthesis and Writing: The development of interpretive stories that incorporate direct quotes in order to preserve the voice of the participants. Institutional Trust Theory, Procedural Justice and Symbolic Interactionism were used as scaffolds to interpret not to impose theory on data, but to shed light on the wider social meaning of trust, fear, power and hope.

5. Ethical Considerations

The research was in line with institutional ethics and was granted by JEPeM, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Prior to interviews, informed consent was signed. Anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty were guaranteed to the participants. Interviews were done cautiously and with cultural sensitivity due to the marginalized position of the transgender participants and the sensitivity of the police occupational group. In line with the interpretive ethos of IPA, interviews were structured so as to provide a non-judgmental, safe environment in which potentially challenging experiences could be discussed (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Finlay, 2009). All the materials were well kept and utilized only academically.

The Findings

This section includes the experiences of transgender people and police officers in Punjab as reported by their in-depth, interpretative phenomenological analysis. Instead of providing general conclusions, the findings put to the fore the personal meanings that participants give to trust, mistrust, and encounters with institutions. Every theme is the result of a sense-making process based on emotional memory, social location, and daily social interactions that were frequently driven by stigma, fear, or conditional respect. These voices do not echo each other; they remind about the painful disunity, instances of human understanding and unresolved conflicts between two groups of people who are in a precarious relationship with authority and identity.

Overall, the results provide a darker picture of a broken relationship between transgender community and the police in Punjab, characterized by mistrust of the institution, emotional harm, and a feeling of being left behind. Police were not often considered as guardians; they were characterized as the objects of dread, alienation, or abuse. These lived realities are highlighted in the themes below.

1. Persecuted, Not Protected: Lived Realities of Mistrust

The theme reflects the way in which encounters with the police, rather than providing protection, lead to humiliation, arbitrary detention, and even to exploitation. In the case of most of the transgender participants, dealing with the police only added to their sense of inferiority and vulnerability.

Sheela recalled painfully:
"Words like 'khusra', 'kanjari', 'gashti', the police use when speaking to me and that is why I know they do not consider me a person."

Nimi explained:
"They detained me for theft with no proof. What mattered to them was my gender."

Bella admitted:
"I get scared walking at night, not because of criminals, but because of the police. I feel they are more dangerous than criminals."

Chandani shared a chilling moment of exploitation:
"...he asked me to fulfill his sexual desire, no matter how I was tired."

These accounts indicate how transgender people often feel that policing is demeaning, intimidating, or predatory. Instances that are supposed to ensure safety, become stigmatizing and further mistrust. The recurrent motifs of being humiliated, afraid and receiving unwanted sexual attention create the atmosphere where even a mere encounter is tainted by the feeling of powerlessness. The police uniform did not bring a promise of safety to the participants but a reminder that they were exposed to harm. This theme preconditions the perception of mistrust not as an exceptional event but as a patterned experience, which defines everyday life.

2. They're Not Here to Protect Us: Perceptions of Policing
The second theme focuses on the perception of transgender people of the police as the protectors of safety rather than the source of violence, extortion, or oppression. Corruption and fear were depicted as common elements of the experience of dealing with officers.

> Chandni confessed:
> *"I do not use main roads since I know that there may be a check point."*
>
> Rubi lamented:
> *"They do not want to help someone like me. It depends on how we look. They treat us based on that."*
>
> Reema observed:
> *"Approaching a police station feels like walking into a battlefield where I have already lost. ...they are corrupt."*

These narratives highlight the collapse of legitimacy. The police are not considered a guard but more of a hindrance. In most of the cases, they take advantage of transgender people or discourage them to exercise their rights. The flight, avoidance, or silence are the instinctive reactions, which indicate that the mistrust has been embodied during the course of time and has become nearly automatic. Corruption and prejudice were also recounted by the participants many times as the norm rather than the exception in their interactions with the police. This perception shows that mistrust does not stop at the level of individual officers but continues at the institutional level, and this fact has significant implications for legitimacy and accountability.

3. Systemic Blind Spots and Structural Disconnect
This theme indicates the absence of institutional acknowledgments and policy formulations to deal with transgender matters in policing systems. Even police officers themselves admitted that there are no specific training or programs.

> Kaleem, a police officer, admitted:
> *"Our unit has not developed specific programs to address issues concerning the transgender."*

These reflections not only indicate the flaws in training, but also the institutional blindness to transgender issues. This lack encourages the mistrust and indicates that transgender people are not considered as valid stakeholders in the justice system. The very silence within the institution of the police itself suggests that it is not merely mistrust that is generated in everyday interactions, but that mistrust is instilled in systems of training and policy. To transgender people, this invisibility manifests itself as a feeling that they are not prioritized when it comes to safety and dignity. The descriptions in this section demonstrate that mistrust is not simply interpersonal but also institutional and it questions systemic reform.

.4. Bridging Distances: Possibilities for Reform
This theme indicates the shift in the dominant mistrust. Even in the context of widespread mistrust, there are individuals both among the police and the transgender people who indicated that change is possible through respect, awareness, and inclusion.

> Yasir urged*:*
> *"It will require constantly offering special training and sensitivity programs for officers to maintain this favourable progress."*
>
> Mudassir said:
> *"Transgenders ought to be among us serving the humanity as well as themselves…."*
>
> Reema emphasized empowerment:
> *"We must know our rights and be able to fight for them on our own. As we are told that knowledge is power."*

Huma stressed policy implementation:
"Any such policies have to be effective, not merely documented."

These voices speak of seeds of change and strength. They emphasize the significance of institutional accountability as well as community empowerment in the creation of ways to trust. What stands out is the emphasis on respect and recognition as the first step to change. For police officers, awareness and training were seen as missing but fixable elements, while transgender participants called for stronger rights advocacy and policy enforcement. This theme prepares the ground for discussing how trust can be rebuilt through reform strategies that are both top-down (institutional policy) and bottom-up (community empowerment).

Discussion
This section discusses the findings in relation to research questions and existing scholarships. The aim is to highlight how lived experiences of transgender individuals and police officers in Punjab both confirm international patterns of discrimination and contribute new insights into the Pakistani context.

1. Transgender Individuals Mistrust on Police
Mistrust in law enforcement among transgender individuals is deeply rooted in systemic discrimination, historical prejudice, and ongoing institutional failures. Participant narratives consistently described police as "persecutors, not protectors." This confirms international scholarship that transgender and gender-diverse individuals experience disproportionately high levels of harassment compared to their cisgender counterparts (Stenersen et al., 2022; Serpe & Nadal, 2017) but it also contributes new evidence from Punjab, where mistrust is fuelled by legacies of colonial criminalization and contemporary failures of law enforcement (Abidin & Husin, 2025)."

Sheela's account of being dehumanized through language and Bella's fear of police presence illustrate how mistrust is not only about physical violence but also about symbolic harm. As Bourdieu (1991) reminds us, language itself can be a tool of domination, stripping marginalized groups of dignity. These insights highlight that in Pakistan, mistrust is sustained both by discriminatory practices and by everyday symbolic violence embedded in police–community interactions.

2. Fear of Retaliation Shaping Transgender Interactions with Police
The fear of reprisal was also common, and most participants did not report crimes or seek help. This dynamic is observed in the testimony of Bella when she avoids reporting crime out of the expected police violence. This is a pattern of avoidance that has been reported elsewhere (Walters et al., 2020), but in Pakistan, it leads to patterns of unacknowledged victimization and increases the sense of being left out.

This research contributes some new information in the way that fear is not only situational but habitual internalized as a survival mechanism. This can be described as structural violence proposed by Galtung (1990) that mistrust and avoidance are not mere responses to individual policemen, but consequences of systemic neglect that instills fear into the practices of the marginalized communities.

3. Institutional Gaps Contributing to Mistrust
A lack of training in gender sensitivity was consistently highlighted as a driver of discriminatory practices. Officer Asad's admission that "these issues exceed our training capabilities" reflects the absence of structured preparation to engage with transgender individuals fairly. While international literature shows that gender sensitivity training improves police-community relations (Cordner, 2017), this study demonstrates that such training is virtually absent in Punjab, a finding that resonates with recent evidence showing that many Pakistani police officers hold negative or stereotypical views about transgender individuals, further undermining trust-building (Arslan et al., 2024).

By documenting both police and transgender voices, this study highlights how inadequate training is not only a barrier to trust but also a missed opportunity for building legitimacy. The finding expands existing

knowledge by showing that officers themselves recognize these deficits, signaling a potential opening for reform.

4. Lack of Accountability Affecting Transgender-Police Relations

The findings reveal that discriminatory practices persist largely because of weak accountability mechanisms. Waqas and Javed both acknowledged that officers who mistreat transgender individuals rarely face consequences. This echoes previous research by Walters et al. (2020) and Rosentel et al. (2021) but adds a Pakistani aspect to it, where institutional indifference becomes the norm.

This lack of responsibility creates legal alienation where the transgender individuals are not attached to the institutions that are supposed to guard them. The example of Pakistan demonstrates that despite the existence of policies like the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018, their implementation lacks any credibility, which increases mistrust and marginalization.

5. Opportunities for Rebuilding Trust

In spite of the systemic difficulties, participants cited reform strategies. Police officers such as Yasir demanded respect and active removal of barriers, whereas transgender participants such as Reema focused on self-empowerment and promotion of rights. These explanations are reminiscent of the international experience of cultural competency training (Dwyer et al., 2021) yet grounded in local realities where the invisibility of institutions is acute.

Another area that reform was identified to be critical was media representation. The thoughts of Rubi and Azar coincide with Khalil et al. (2020), who discovered that the Pakistani newspapers tend to represent transgender individuals in a negative way, which supports the stereotypes. The contribution of this study is to demonstrate that the same portrayals not only contribute to the attitudes of society but also contribute to the perceptions of the police in an indirect way maintaining mistrust. The combination of these findings implies that trust can be restored only with the help of multi-level approaches: institutional reform, community empowerment and media accountability.

7. Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the knowledge in many ways at both national and international levels. Although the phenomenon of police mistreatment of transgender communities has been studied by global researchers like Stenersen et al. (2022) and Jenness and Rowland (2024) but little to no research has been conducted in Pakistan, hearing both transgender members of the community and police officers. Through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study centers experiences that are frequently ignored in policy or statistical descriptions.

Second, the results contribute to the current body of knowledge by discovering institutional invisibility as the main characteristic of mistrust in Punjab. Although literature has focused on abuse or harassment, this research will focus on the lack of proactive programs, training, and recognition in the policing institutions as a factor that is just as harmful to trust.

Third, the research broadens theoretical knowledge by connecting symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) and structural violence (Galtung, 1990) to day-to-day police encounters in Pakistan and shows how mistrust is not sporadic but rather systematic. These understandings can be used to inform higher order discussions of procedural justice and legitimacy, demonstrating how historical legacies, poor accountability, and adverse media portrayals interact to influence transgender-police relations in South Asia.

Collectively, these contributions place the study at the forefront of being among the first to present a detailed, empirically informed study of transgender-police relations in Punjab, with implications that can guide the local reforms and comparative study of policing marginalized populations.

7. Implications for Policy & Practice

The findings carry several actionable implications for Pakistan's justice system:

i. Mandatory Gender Sensitivity Training: The police academies ought to institutionalize units on gender diversity, respectful interaction, and transgender rights.

ii. Accountability Mechanisms: There should be independent oversight mechanisms that make sure that the complaints of harassment and abuse are pursued and punished.
iii. Community Outreach: Police liaison officers to transgender populations be nominated to enhance dialog and visibility.
iv. Media Reform: Promote responsible media reporting that is not stigmatizing towards transgender people, both in the society and within institutions.

By embedding these reforms, law enforcement in Punjab can transition out of symbolic exclusion and tap into the inclusive policing, which can acknowledge the transgender people as equal citizens.

Conclusion

This study shows that transgender people in Punjab have extreme distrust in the police, a factor that is anchored in systematic discrimination, abuse, and institutional indifference. Testimonies in the first person identified patterns of harassment, fear of reprisal, insufficient protection, and the absence of institutional recognition that shows that mistrust is not an individual but a structural characteristic. On their part, police officers recognized the lack of training and proactive programs and thus, the perception of being out of touch. Collectively, these results indicate a broken relationship where police are seldom perceived as protectors and rather are perceived to be a source of stigma, fear, and exclusion.

The general implication of this research is huge. The priority policy changes should include compulsory gender sensitivity training in police academies, the development of robust accountability systems to address misconduct and the development of community outreach programs to encourage dialogue and inclusion. The media institutions are also expected to shift the stereotypical images and encourage positive, decent portrayal of transgender individuals because the attitude of the society is the direct reflection of the behavior of the institutions. These reforms can assist in moving law enforcement in Pakistan towards activities that reflect fairness, transparency, and respect thus restoring institutional legitimacy.

At the same time, this research opens pathways for future research. Larger-scale studies are needed to examine the breadth of transgender-police relations across Pakistan and South Asia, while longitudinal research could track whether reforms and training efforts lead to lasting changes in attitudes and practices. Comparative studies of different regions or between urban and rural policing could also shed light on how context shapes trust and mistrust. By pursuing these directions, future scholarships can build on this study's insights and contribute to sustainable change in both research and practice.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Declaration of conflict of interest: We declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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