

Pakistan: Battling transphobia

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Two brilliant khawaja sirah (transwomen) were awarded the Pride of Pakistan by the state at the Pakistan Day parade on March 23 in Islamabad – less than a week after four transwomen were murdered in KP and another raped in Islamabad, and a few days before another transwoman was murdered in Mardan.

Pakistan is among the first few states to have officially recognised the third gender. It also passed the widely lauded Transgender Protection Act in 2018. However, is the state making adequate efforts to prevent the disproportionate violence against transpeople?

Social media has given more prominence to the issues of Pakistan's trans community. A new generation of trans activists has built upon the struggles of the elders in their community to articulate their issues, highlight injustices, propose solutions and participate in legislative and policymaking processes. It is important for the state to ensure that these efforts trickle down to society to increase respect and acceptance of transpeople.

Transpeople should be celebrated, not ridiculed.

After the traumatic video of violence against a woman at Minar-i-Pakistan by a mob of more than 400 men shook the nation, the trans community spoke up in solidarity because such brutal incidents have been a regular part of the trans community's lived reality. This is also when the language of the khwaja sirah community became known: 'beela' is the term for men who harass, assault and rape transgender people, often operating in groups.

The state has done well to recognise the efforts of the trans community. Aisha Mughal, one of the recipients of the Pride of Pakistan award, also became the first transperson to represent a government at the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2019 as a consultant of the human rights ministry. She is also a university lecturer, and her contributions as an activist are well-recognised. Dr Sarah Gill Khan, the first transwoman to graduate as a medical doctor, also received the award.

The state's focus, as rightly pointed out by trans activists such as Dr Moiz Awan, must expand to battling transphobia. In the regard, there are a few key recommendations from the trans community the state must consider.

First, hate speech against the trans community should be criminalised. Transphobic and pejorative terms used for the khwaja sirah community should be discouraged, and action taken against people who incite violence against them. Seemingly trivial misdemeanours, such as name-calling, lead to social ostracisation and dehumanisation, and result in normalising violence against transpeople. The recent transphobic comments by MNA Kanwal Shauzab and Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid against their political rivals are condemnable. Political parties and the government should stress zero tolerance for transphobia in their policies. Using pejorative terms for khwaja sirahs is unbecoming of any public official, whether elected or appointed, as such terms are further encouraged in the public.

Second, activists have demanded that the National Commission of Human Rights and the National Commission on the Status of Women should order inquiries into systemic transphobia, starting with KP where the rate of murders of transpeople is disproportionately higher. According to estimates by Dr Moiz, over 70 transwomen have been killed in KP in the past few years, which translates to 789 killed per 100,000 transpeople. In comparison, the average murder rate of men and women is four for every 100,000 people. These statistics show that violence against transpeople is endemic in KP and requires urgent attention.

Third, trans rights activists demand reserved seats for their community in Pakistan's legislative assemblies so that their needs are reflected in legislation and its oversight. Even the best-intentioned allies cannot administer the same justice that transpeople, with their first-hand experiences, can.

This makes it all the more important for Pakistani parents, guardians and teachers to teach children to respect transpeople instead of fearing or ridiculing them. A trans child can be born to any family, and must not be a cause of shame but celebration, as they are just as human as any other child. This is also an opportunity for the revised curriculum at schools to include content about transgender people, respecting them, their historical role in our culture, and highlighting their success stories.

It is high time the state built on its admirable policy and legislative efforts to protect the rights of the transgender community in practical terms, by addressing the root causes of the violence they are subjected to, criminalising hate speech against transpeople, including them in the legislature, teaching and encouraging respect and inclusion, and conducting an impartial inquiry into the endemic violence the community has been facing. Trans rights are human rights, and they must be protected at any cost.

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