



## Life of Hijra in Bangladesh: Challenges to Accept in Mainstream

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to know about the hijra community and how much the society is ready to accept them. This paper is divided into two parts. First part discusses about the hijra community in Bangladesh, their life style, surroundings, struggle and the agonies of gender discrimination. Second portion discovers the readiness of the society to accept them as like as man and woman. To finalize the research data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. To find out the reality of hijra, both male and female have been interviewed. The study found that although hijra or hermaphrodite people are human being having physical presence, love, hunger and emotion like male and female have; are not accepted by the society in Bangladesh. They are thought as a result of curse and they lead a cursed life. They have limited or no acceptance in family, society, educational institutions, politics, administration, job, etc. They are living by begging and to some extent by committing social crimes such as prostitution and drug business. Though they have the same capability a man or woman has they cannot utilize this because of social stigma.

### INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of the human history hijras were there in the world. In different religious scriptures there is information about hijra (Hahm, 2010). In various parts of the world hijra is named in different ways such as transgender, eunuch, etc. The term hijra is used mainly in the South Asian region to refer the people who are neither male nor female. They are less in number. Bandhu, a very renowned organization working for hijra, termed them as sexual minority (Ahmed.S, n.d). The hijra community has been deprived since ancient period (Hahm, 2010). Social stigma is acute in society and that's why they are not getting equal opportunities and rights. Not only society but also state mechanism is depriving of them from their rights and opportunities. Though the society has almost accepted the physically disabled in the mainstream it cannot think about a sexual disabled or sexual minority person let alone accept. Hijras are the human being having same feeling like male and

female have but are not allowed to stay with their family and society where they have born. Though they are citizen of the country they are not allowed to practice their citizen rights and facilities. In a word, the society is not friendly to hijra at all. As they are not accepted in the mainstream society they have to live in an abnormal group which is not able to fulfill their needs at all. In a study Shawkat (2016) mentioned that when a child born it born as a male child but gradually the child can identify himself as a girl. From this moment a hijra has to face a lot of mental and physical pressures from her family and society. To save the family from social stigma and to be far away from the stigma they find the community which matches them best. The community has a leader called *Gurumaa* (leader). Under the leader all hijras become united and sometimes they have to cut their male organ. Becoming a hijra they started begging or prostitution to collect their livelihood. The whole society neglects them even if they become victim. Sometimes they have to be sexually harassed by general people and even law

enforcement agencies. As they are very few in number, 10000 according to the government but 100000 to other sources (UNB, 2016), no one is so much concern about them and their rights.

Gender discrimination is an acute social problem in Bangladesh. With the passage of time discrimination to women is decreasing and women are now coming forward. But the hijra community is lagging behind and they are highly deprived of from the society. As a human being, they have right to enjoy the opportunities and facilities of the society. Again, society has obligation to serve this group like other disables to perform its duty and responsibility properly. For this reason problem, challenges and other things of hijra community should be studied properly. But research on this issue is very limited. So, the present study has been undertaken to know the agonies of hijra life and challenges to come in mainstream. Further it also tried to study the social stigma and discrimination towards hijra community in Bangladesh.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Theoretical Framework**

It is important to justify the hijra community with appropriate theories. No specific theory has so far been found but two theories can be relevant here which are briefly discussed below.

### **Social stigma**

This theory is very much applicable to explain why the hijra people are being discriminated and why the male and female don't accept them in the mainstream of the society. It says that when a person or a group doesn't belong to the main cultural norm or doesn't behave like most of the people behave in society then an extreme disapproval has been occurred. Many social scholars such as Émile Durkheim, Erving Goffman and Gerhard Falk have supported this theory (Wikipedia, n.d). It has been found that though to some extent male and female have sympathy over the hijra they don't want them in the mainstream of the society. Let alone society their family even doesn't want to accept them. A hijra said that they

leave their parents and siblings to save the family from social stigma (News24, 2016).

### **Looking glass self**

This theory is also important to understand the reason why people don't want to accept hijra. It states that one wants to present oneself to people considering the judgment of others. The main three concepts of the theory are "we imagine how we must appear to others, we imagine and react to what we feel their judgment of that appearance must be and we develop our self through the judgments of others" (Yeung, et al. 2003). Parents or siblings don't want people to judge them as intimate persons of a hijra. The people also don't want to be judged as a friend or colleague of a hijra. Because of these people don't want to be close to the hijra people.

### **Data collection and analysis**

It is a mixed method study that used both qualitative and quantitative data each of from both primary and secondary sources. Data were collected by a 7-member team including the author. Both male-female and hijra were selected for the study. Primary data from male-female respondents were collected through direct interview while data from hijras were collected following focus group discussion (FGD) method. Sources of secondary data were different published works and internet based articles. All the data were collected during October 2017. The respondents were selected randomly and tabular method was followed to analyze data and presentation of result.

To know about the readiness and attitudes of the society 60 respondents (30 male and 30 female) were selected from the university students. They have been chosen as they have come from different parts of the country which provides a clear outlook of the whole country to hijra community. Among the respondents, 52% had experience of talking with hijra on various issues, 26% personally know hijra, 17% had or have hijra friends, 39% know that there were hijras in their locality, 37% mentioned that there was no hijra in their locality while 23% didn't know whether there was hijra or not. All the students fall into age

bracket of 19-21 years. Collecting data from hijra was not so easy. After several negotiations, 4 hijras gave time to do the FGD. All of them were of Mymensingh hijra community. Among them 1 was zone leader (*Gurumaa*), 1 unit leader (*nani*) and the rest 2 were money collector cum dancer. The dancers were Mohona and Ornob and the later one is a university student also. The ages of gurumaa, nani, Mohona and Ornob were about 55, 48, 20 and 23 years respectively. The FGD was taken place at Himu Adda park of Mymensingh.

All the quotations of respondents used here were translated from Bengali.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Characteristics of hijra

Hijra in Bangladesh is known as third gender. Different organizations and scholars defined hijra from different viewpoints. Usually “hijra is a transgender individual who was assigned male at birth” (Choksi, 2013). “In South Asia a hijra person is whose birth sex is male but who identifies as female or as neither male nor female” (Oxford, 2017). “In Bengali the synonyms of hijra are *rupantorito* (transformed), *antolingo* (intersex), *tritiyo lingo* (third gender), *khoja* (eunuch), etc”. (Wikipedia, n.d). So, it can be said that hijra is an individual being neither male nor female but has the characteristics of two. The characteristics of hijra are discussed below.

### Physical and sexual characteristics

In the interview hijras said that there are different categories of hijra. Some hijras are hijra from birth and some become hijra after a certain period of time. Some can identify themselves as hijra at the age of 7-8 years and some identify themselves at the age of 13-20 years or more. Some hijras have beard and looms in body and some don't have. Some have male sex organ and some don't have. Some look like male and some like female. Voice of some hijras is like male and some like female. They think the differences and similarities are

based on the density of hormone in their body (Table 1).

Table 1  
Characteristics and agonies of hijra life.

Heads	Description	
Characteristics	Physical	Different due to hormonal density
	Sexual	Different due to hormonal density
	Social	Mostly begging as means of livelihood due to lack of job opportunity
Agonies	Identification as hijra	8 - 10 years
	Weakness	Attraction to male
	Sexual life	Different sexual attitudes
	Early childhood	Lot of love at birth but neglected when identified as hijra
	Education	Usually leave school due to insult
	New life	Comparatively better than early family life

### Social characteristics

Maximum of the hijras lives in own community having no educational qualification and they earn their livelihood by begging and committing some social crimes such as prostitution, drug business, etc. (Table 1). In the interview they said that there are some hijras who are educated and have qualification to earn livelihood. Some hijras live with their family and some live both in family and hijra community. Those who are educated and have qualification are involved in various activities such as job in public or private organizations, dance or music, activist at NGOs and different government and non-government projects and programs.

### Life and agonies of hijra

No doubt, hijra community is one of the most deprived communities not only in Bangladesh but also in the world. The study focused on the life of hijra and their agonies as revealed below.

### Physical identification as hijra

Generally hijras born as boy and after a certain period they can identify themselves as hijra. Some change their names after identifying own selves as hijra. Mohona and Ornob mentioned that when they were growing up gradually they identified themselves that they feel like girls. They liked to play with girls and people called them *maigga* (male having attitude like girl). They felt weakness to male. At the age of 8-10 years they identified themselves clearly that they are not male at all. Various documentaries available on youtube and literature provide the same information about the physical identification of hijra. Mohona said, “When I was 10 I could realize that I have sexual attraction to male. Though I had male organ I felt like I was a girl. I was used to play with girls and dressed like them” (Table 1).

### **Sexual life**

Hijras are human being and they have different sex and sexual orientation. It is important to know about their sexual life to know the agonies to them. Though it was embarrassing to both the interviewee and interviewer they were asked to inform about their sexual life, love, relationship and marriage. First they felt shyness but later on they told everything very easily. They told that they have body like man but mind like female. Their male organ is neither able to have sex with girl nor they want. Their breast size is not like girl but sometimes it is bigger than those of a boy. Mohona and Ornob informed that both of them have boyfriend and they have sexed with them several times. They are not able to do sex like other girls do, that’s why they do anal sex, oral sex, blow job and hand job (Table 1).

### **Early childhood, education and new life**

As the physical identification is being changed a hijra finds herself in a great problem. She is neither male nor female. No one likes her. Family, relatives and the whole society are against her. No one wants her in their locality. With this big pain they grow up with the new identity, hijra (Table 1). The team asked to give an instance. They laughed and asked how many

instances the team wants to listen. Mohona said her story:

“Though I born as boy with a lot of love from family I could realize that I am not boy mentally and sexually when I was only 10. This identity created a hostile world for me. My relatives and neighbors started to neglect my family. Once I kissed a boy and somehow my father was informed about it then I was beaten by my family members. I was beaten several times by my father and brother. No one talked to me easily, boys teased me. Relatives cut ties with my family and society also didn’t accept my family easily. Facing all these problems I took Tk 20 (around 25 cents) from one of my cousin and left the home. I went to Chittagong and worked as waiter in a restaurant for 3 days and left the restaurant when I communicated with a hijra. The hijra brought me to the leader and the leader named me Mohona. I started a new life in that new society.”

They were then asked about their education and institutional harassment. Mohona told that her teachers took her easily and they loved her a lot but her classmates teased her. That’s why she could not continue her study after class 4. Ornob is a university student and she is continuing her study with female identity. Though there are a lot of people to tease but she has become used to it and she don’t have any objection against anyone. She thinks she is now in better position than she supposed to be.

### **Challenges to come in the mainstream**

Being a part of the mainstream society is challenging for hijra. The challenge was created by the society and it is difficult to vanish it overnight. This part discusses the degree of challenges of hijra to come in the main stream of the society.

### **Challenges in job sector**

Getting job in Bangladesh is too much difficult for a normal person let alone hijra. People have strong social stigma about hijra, moreover they

have limited scope to be qualified enough to get a job. Data from both hijra and male-female showed how difficult the way is. Mohona told that she never has been appointed in any office; she has no experience of job. She is now working as a money collector (beggar) in public transport. Though Ornob is a university student she thinks that it is not possible for her to manage a job after completing her education. So, she thinks she will have to earn her livelihood by being a dancer only. As they have no way they collect money from bus by begging. They told that it is also so challenging. They have bitter experience of being sexually harassed during collecting money in bus and other public transports. They told the team that very few people give money without any reciprocation. Generally people give money for getting sexual pleasure. Mohona said: "They touch our breast, belly and other organs of the body for giving money. The bus conductors also let us get on the bus for touching our body. We are not supposed to protest it as we are hijra."

Data collected from the male and female respondents showed how much the hijra community will have to face challenges if they get any job or want to get a job or they try to be qualified by acquiring knowledge from educational institutions. Respondents were asked, what they would do if they have any hijra classmate or colleague. Data show that 44% consider the hijra in the same way they consider other while only 4% avoid them but positively no one will leave the organization. The respondents were also asked that, what they would do if they have a hijra boss. The question was set to know to what extent people are ready to see them in the higher position. Data show that in the case of a hijra boss or superior they (37%) try to be normal while one respondent answer that he/she will leave the organization (Table 2). Comparing with the previous chart a difference is clear between a colleague/classmate and boss. The society can more easily accept a classmate or colleague but it is more difficult to accept a hijra as his/her boss.

The next question was set to know to what extent the superior are ready to accept them in their office. As the respondents are students and they live in different messes they appoint chef for themselves. So the question was relevant enough. They were asked that among a hijra and male or female which one they would choose as their chef. Another purpose of the question was to know in which extent the society is ready to take food from a hijra. Table 2 shows that 70% prefer qualification rather than gender while 15% have clear objection about the hijra and they don't want to get food from a hijra. On the other hand 3% have sympathy over the hijra and they want to appoint a hijra (if available) as his/her chef. The respondents were asked another question to know another important point that to what extent the society is ready to accept a hijra socially and to what extent a person or group of people are ready to be close with a hijra publicly. They were asked that, if there are two tea stall. One has a boy waiter and another has a hijra waiter. In which shop they would like to go to take tea or for gossip. Data show that 81% prefer quality of tea rather than gender while 5% have clear objection about the hijra and they don't want to be close with a hijra publicly and accept socially.

Mohona and Ornob were asked if they want to come in the mainstream of the society or not. They answered boldly: "Of course, we want. Who would like to beg if she has the opportunity to lead a respectful life? We don't like our present life. We want to lead life like male and female with our own identity, hijra. But because of the social stigma and lack of opportunity we cannot prepare ourselves for the job market. If we get proper education or training we are highly interested to change our life style and earning procedure. We are even ready to work as salesman, garments worker, school peon, sweeper, etc." The team then asked what type of job they want. They answered "any job". It seems that they are fed-up with their current job and any how they want to lead a normal life but as no one accepts them they have to continue this. Data show that larger portion of the society consider qualification rather than gender. Hijra

don't get job as they are less qualified. If they become qualified enough no doubt the society will accept them easily. The path to acquire knowledge should be wider for the hijra.

Table 2  
Challenges to come in mainstream.

Heads	Ready to accept (%)	Moderately ready to acceptance (%)	Don't want to accept (%)
As colleague/classmate	44.00	52	4.00
As boss	37.00	61	2.00
As subordinate/chef	70.00	3.00	15.00
As Residence mate	54.00	24	22.00
In Cultural activities	71.00	22.00	5.00
In Sports	19.00	78.00	-
In Religious matters	90.00	3	0.00
In eating food together	90.00		03.00

### Accepting/living in mainstream society

To come in the mainstream one of the most important pre requisitions is to live in the mainstream society like male and female live. To know about the living condition or acceptance in society, both kinds of respondents were questioned. The team asked Mohona and Ornob to tell about the experience of getting a house rent for residence. Mohona told "When I want to get a house rent generally people accept me easily but when they come to know that I am a hijra and there will be more hijras with me then they refused me."

People accept her as she looks like a girl not a hijra. Literally she is different from other hijras. She is beautiful and none of the team member thought her hijra at first sight. So people let her get a house. A question was set to know to what extent

people are ready to accept a hijra socially in his/her own residence. They were asked that if they are the owners of house and they are going to let a person rent an apartment of it, among a boy/girl and hijra which one they would choose to let in their home. Another purpose of the question was to know to what extent people want to share their residence and live in a house for a certain period of time sharing common objects such as stair, roof or gate. Data show that 54% don't want any discrimination. They are ready to accept them while 22% have clear objection about them and 24% prefer male or female in his/her residence (Table 2).

### Acceptance in the cultural arena

To be a part of mainstream it is important to be culturally strong enough. Both hijra and male-female were asked about it. Mohona and Ornob were asked to share the experience of participating in cultural program. Those the team met with most of them are dancers. The team found one dance master also. Ornob said: "We both are dancer and in many cultural programs we get invitation and honor. We are happy with this cultural participation. The society is now more developed and people are now more civilized. People can easily accept us on the stage."

The male and female respondents were asked to know to what extent they are ready to accept them in cultural program. They were asked that in their cultural party, if they will invite a hijra band party. Result shows that in the case of cultural program like concert 71% depend on quality rather than gender while 22% want to consult with others and 5% don't want them to see on the stage (Table 2).

### Acceptance in sports

Sport is one of the most important elements of culture and through participating in sports hijra community can enter into the mainstream. Both kinds of respondents were asked about sports. Mohona and Ornob were asked if they get any chance to participate in a football or cricket team what they would do. They laughed and said: "We play with dolls like girls do. If women football or cricket team accepts us we are highly interested.

We also think it is important for us to come in the mainstream.”

The male and female respondents were asked to what extent they are ready to accept a hijra in playground. The question was set to know in which extent people are ready to accept a hijra in sports program and to what extent a person is ready to tolerate taking a hijra in own team. Findings show that in the case of social program like sports and taking a hijra in own team and consider her as a part of them 41% think that they would try but not sure while 37% depends on other's decision. Only 8% are ready to consider them as a part while 11% depend on quality. But no one think to give up her directly (Table 2).

### Acceptance in religion

Religion is one of the most important parts of the society. Acceptance in religion is one of the most important points for the hijra community to be accepted in society. Both types of respondents were asked about it. Mohona and Ornob were asked about religious acceptance and they told that they are most neglected by religious leaders and in religious places. This is supported by the statement of Mohona. She said: “There was a religious leader lived just next to my home. He never looked at me as he thought that seeing a hijra is a sin. Great religion like Islam and Hinduism recognized us and asked their followers to accept hijra easily. But as the religious leaders of the country have very poor knowledge about religion and humanity they even think looking at hijra is a sin.”

The male and female respondents were asked to know to what extent they would like to accept the hijra in prayer hall and religious program. They were asked that if they are in a mosque for prayer and if a hijra sits just beside them what they would do. Data show that in the case of accepting hijra in prayer hall 90% will remain normal while 3% feel highly discomfort and they don't want to sit beside a hijra. But no one think to leave or shoo off the hijra from the prayer hall. The study also shows that in the case of sharing food during *Iftar* (taking food

after daylong fasting during the month of Ramadan) with hijra 90% will remain normal while 3% feel highly discomfort and they would like to leave the iftar party. But no one think shoo off the hijra from the party (Table 2).

### Reason of social stigma

The social stigma didn't created from thin air rather there are some points which created it. To collect money sometimes hijras demonstrate themselves in offensive and abnormal ways. Their behavior makes people frightened and disturbed. It is accused that hijras are being neglected because of their uncivilized attitude. In this study both male-female and hijra were asked about this. Mohona and Ornob were asked about the peoples' reaction to them. Generally people have objection about them that they insist people for money. The question was, “Why do you do that and how can it be stopped?” Mohona told, “It is unethical and we have no permission to do that. Very few of us insist people, not all and if anyone insists for money, our *gurumaa* punishes her for this crime. The direction from the *gurumaa* is not to disturb or insist anyone. We feel that it is not a good job but as there is no way to earn livelihood we have to do it. We want highly to stop it. We want job.”

### Policy Suggestions

From the study the following points can be drawn finally.

- Hijra don't get enough opportunity to be qualified and civilized.
- If they become qualified and civilized enough mainstream society will accept them easily.

The policy maker should consider the two points and smooth the path of hijra to come in the mainstream.

### CONCLUSION

Hijras are living a measurable life having a little opportunity of health, education, income and security. They are criticized, harassed and neglected by the society. They cannot fulfill their basic physiological needs such as nutritious food and sexual desire. They have to live in a separate society where basic elements of life are absent. In

this case, it is the moral and civic duty of the mainstream people and policy makers to provide them with opportunities to be qualified enough and utilize themselves in order to develop the society. In this study it is seen that generally people don't accept them in the mainstream but if they can acquire knowledge and qualification people may accept them. It is high time to think about our civilization. A good civilization should not have any discrimination. Society having discrimination toward any group can be neither a developed nor a civilized. Hijra has emotion like girls have and they want to be mother like other girls want but it is not possible for them. So sometimes they adopt child and bring it up. They want people and the society to accept them with equal opportunity and honor as hijra identity not male or female.

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