

Brief supporting Evidence Report 165

LIVING ON THE PERIPHERY: THE *KHAWAJA SIRAS* OF PAKISTAN

Sexuality, Poverty and Law

Aimen Majeedullah

January 2016

The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Sexuality, Poverty and Law theme.

The material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

AG Level 2 Output ID: 609

LIVING ON THE PERIPHERY: THE *KHAWAJA SIRAS* OF PAKISTAN

Aimen Majeedullah

January 2016

This is an Open Access publication distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are clearly credited.

First published by the Institute of Development Studies in January 2016
© Institute of Development Studies 2016

IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (No. 877338).

Academic literature suggests that development is inherently heteronormative in its narratives, policies and practices: as a result, 'heterosexuality is normalized, naturalized, and privileged in societies of the global South, in the international development field, and in colonial and post/neocolonial narratives of the so-called Third World or global South' (Lind 2010: 7). Thus, people with non-conforming gender and sexual identities living in poverty are rendered invisible in development. In an attempt to counter this invisibility, this report investigates the experiences of exclusion encountered by *Khawaja Siras* (KS), a gender and sexual minority in Pakistan. It also investigates the role of a gender identity-based programme in bringing about changes in their experience of exclusion.

The KS challenge the social and biological determinations of gender and sexual identity in the patriarchal and heteronormative society of Pakistan. They have been a part of the sub-continent's history for centuries (Reddy 2005). In the Mughal era the KS served as army generals, harem guards and advisers to emperors (*ibid.*). However, with the onset of British rule and the fragmentation of the Mughal courts, KS were stripped of their powerful positions and no longer participated in government (Pamment 2010). Today they experience extreme levels of stigmatisation and according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan are the most disadvantaged group in Pakistan, suffering exclusion in social, cultural, economic and political spaces (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2011).

Persistent discrimination against this non-conforming minority prompted the Pakistan Supreme Court to take action in 2009, when the court recognised the gender identity of KS. As a result of the ruling, KS were given a 'third gender' status, which was to appear on all of their official documents, and they were accorded the right to vote as KS and to contest elections. Following this, in 2012 the court's subsequent ruling also guaranteed a series of – previously denied – inheritance rights; assured them of protection from abuse by the police and other organs of the state; and directed provincial government agencies to provide KS access to health care, education and employment (Redding 2012).

Despite this recognition of their identity and subsequent rights, normative societal prescriptions still push KS to the periphery, denying them full participation in society. This denial not only robs them of livelihood opportunities and education, but also subjects them to extreme levels of abuse at the hands of family and various social actors. Recognising the marginalisation of KS, Akhuwat-Fountain House, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Lahore, Pakistan, began the '*Khawaja Siras* Socio-Economic Rehabilitation Programme'. This programme aims to alleviate the exclusion experienced by KS to help them tap into the economic and social resources available in society.

This case study focuses on understanding the role played by this NGO-run, gender identity-based programme in alleviating the poverty KS experience. To carry out this investigation, the study focuses on understanding the social and economic exclusion KS experience. It also aims to analyse how the gender identity-based programme that Akhuwat-Fountain House initiated is changing this situation.

This study draws on primary data collected in June 2015 through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six KS and Akhuwat-Fountain House's programme manager. This research is geographically limited to Lahore because this is where the *Khawaja Siras* Socio-Economic Rehabilitation Programme works. Moreover, it is limited to studying the experiences of KS involved in the programme.

To conceptualise the exclusion KS experience, the report uses the web of poverty's disadvantages (WPD) that Chambers (2005) described. This multi-dimensional web recognises 12 interlocking and mutually reinforcing dimensions that inform the experience of poverty. An analysis using these dimensions allows for a thorough investigation into how KS experience poverty. By engaging through WPD with the poverty KS experience, this report draws attention to how they experience social and economic exclusion simultaneously.

Moreover, it highlights the centrality of their ascribed and legal inferiority in informing their experience of exclusion on other dimensions. It also brings to the fore how the gender identity-based programme has missed out a holistic analysis of the exclusion KS have experienced and has not addressed their main exclusionary dimension of ascribed and legal inferiority. However, the report recognises that the programme operates in a highly contested and volatile space, and the work it does is truly commendable.

This study's findings contribute to the local context literature on KS of Pakistan, while also contributing to the global literature on the connections between gender and sexuality and experiences of poverty. The general literature on this subject, specifically in the context of Pakistan, is inconclusive on the vital questions regarding a holistic view of their experience of exclusion and the ability of development programmes to tackle it.

This research fills this gap by providing a nuanced analysis of how KS experience exclusion in the social and economic facets of their lives. Moreover, it establishes how these dimensions of exclusion are interlinked and mutually reinforcing by tracing how ascribed and legal inferiority associated with the KS identity impinges on their access to livelihoods, physical health, living conditions, education, family support systems and sense of security.

Additionally, the global literature building linkages between non-conforming gender and sexual identities and KS' experience of poverty highlight the heteronormative assumptions that are dominant in development practices, policies and programmes (Bedford 2005; Cornwall and Jolly 2009). These assumptions are apparent in how development through its programmes interacts with heterosexual married couples and heterosexual sex relations (*ibid.*). This leads to non-conforming individuals becoming invisible in development practice.

As a result, theorists argue for the need to pay attention to the lived experience of the exclusions non-conforming individuals suffer and call out development's heteronormative presumptions. This study has contributed to the literature by researching the lived experience of exclusion that confronts KS in their daily lives, and has gone further by also identifying the interplay between different dimensions that subject them to this exclusion in Pakistan.