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## Article Title

## Empowering the Excluded: A Review of Skill-Based Education for Eunuchs in South Asia

## Abstract

In South Asia, the eunuchs are known as hijras, and the lack of access to education or employment opportunities makes them one of the most marginalized communities. Potential avenues for economic empowerment, skill-based education, and vocational training remain unavailable and underutilized. This review is based on studies from 2015 – 2025 in South Asia and analyzes the role of educational barriers and vocational programs. Having untouchable stigmas like the scars of colonial rule or present-day prejudice ensures that the doors of learning are shut at all costs. In spite of India's Transgender Persons Act and Pakistan's Constitutional protections, the lack of enforcement, institutional discrimination, and non-inclusive infrastructure sustain the status quo. Government and NGO skill development programs are poorly funded, designed, and constructed. The review emphasizes that systemic change is necessary. The suggestions call for strong partnerships, policy enforcement, and inclusive educational spaces for social and economic exclusion.

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## Empowering the Excluded: A Review of Skill-Based Education for Eunuchs in South Asia

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## Contents

## Abstract

In South Asia, the eunuchs are known as hijras, and the lack of access the education or employment opportunities makes them one of the most marginalized communities. Potential avenues for economic empowerment, skill-based education, and vocational training remain unavailable and underutilized. This review is based on studies from 2015 to 2025 in South Asia and analyzes the role of educational barriers and vocational programs. Having untouchable stigmas like the scars of colonial rule or present-day prejudice ensures that the doors of learning are shut at all costs. In spite of India's Transgender Persons Act and Pakistan's Constitutional protections, the lack of enforcement, institutional discrimination, and non-inclusive infrastructure sustain the status quo. Government and NGO skill development programs are poorly funded, designed, and constructed. The review emphasizes that systemic change is necessary. The suggestions call for strong partnerships, policy enforcement, and inclusive educational spaces for social and economic exclusion.

## Keywords:

Transgender Education, Skill-Based Education, Hijra Community, Social Exclusion, Eunuchs, South Asia

## Introduction

Eunuchs are a group of people or even a community that also goes by the term hijras or third-gender people in the South Asian society, and are notoriously the most underrepresented in terms of prejudice as well as misunderstanding in the society (Zhang, 2025). They experience extensive social stigma, systematic marginalization, and poverty, which all create a vicious circle of low incomes and social discrimination (Kalam et al., 2024). This frame of societal ostracism is especially reflected in their access to basic rights and opportunities, wherein they have been systemically denied education and rightful jobs, making them unacceptable in the mainstream society (Ismail et al., 2018). As a result of gaining momentum, there has been a dominant and dehumanizing social perception in the society, especially in Pakistan, that Eunuchs can do nothing, but only dance and sing, which is more of a downward spiral of degradation due to limiting and subjecting this community into strictly defined traditional roles that extend to the margins and may be more of a precarity rather than empowerment (Butt, 2021). The creation of such an environment

leads to an independent existence where people live in poverty with no chance to contribute to the overall life of others around them (Butt, 2021; Bibi et al., 2021).

In this regard, vocational training, practical programs, and life skills can be referred to as an important tool used in empowerment and socio-economic mobility (Zhang, 2025). In a society that is mostly closed off to traditional education and workforce development, it presents a way of gaining economic independence, self-worth, and social belonging (Ahmed et al., 2014). There is sound evidence to suggest that increasing access to skill-based education may also enable migration of eunuchs to improve their chance of inclusion and eliminate their dependency on exploitative or informal labor opportunities like begging or sex work (Kalam et al., 2024; Noorani et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such crucial efforts is always hampered by some deep-rooted perceptions, institutional factors, and poor policies and practices (Svanemyr et al., 2015; Butt, 2021).

This review aims to recapitulate recent peer-reviewed literature to provide a broader picture of the eunuch educational scenario, specifically focusing on skill-based programs in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The scope is narrow since it involves only contemporary challenges and contemporary interventions reported in the articles written between 2015 and 2025, even though it takes advantage of historical information reported in the same sources to place the current situation in its historical context. This paper seeks to answer the following pivotal research questions: (1) What historical and societal factors have shaped the eunuch community's access to skill-based education? (2) How do stereotypes, government policies, and community support influence their educational opportunities? (3) What are the primary barriers to access, and how effective are current educational programs? (4) What recommendations can be formulated to improve educational and economic outcomes for this marginalized community? By examining these questions, this review aims to highlight both the significant challenges and the potential pathways forward for empowering eunuchs through education (Zhang, 2025).

## Historical Context and Evolving Social Status

The current marginalization of the eunuch community is a stark departure from their historical roles in South Asia, where they occupied diverse and often respected positions within society (Zhang, 2025). During the Mughal and pre-colonial eras, individuals known as hijras often held positions of influence, serving as trusted advisors, guardians in royal courts, performers, and confidants (Jain et al., 2025). The atrophy of this status has, however, systematically occurred throughout the British colonial era and has brought different social and legal systems of Victorian morality aimed at non-normative gender types. The impact of policies such as the criminal tribes Act of 1871 was to not only criminalize their community, putatively making them deviant, a nuisance, and innately criminal group and disrupting their traditional means of livelihood and the survival process of their community (Jain et al., 2025). Understanding of eunuchs as outsiders of society has had a traumatic legacy stretching back to the colonial era, and this stigmatisation has had severe deprivation of resources, social status, and dignity post-independence (Batool et al., 2019).

This history has had a significant impact on their schooling prospects. The carry-over into the independent nation was that social exclusion in Pakistan was deep-rooted because eunuchs had long been deprived of access to proper schools and universities, forcing them into either informal student learning or absolute educational deprivation (Batool et al., 2019). The idea of a transgender child being brought up in a regular family and studying in a regular school was, and to a certain extent still is, an unacceptable state of affairs in society (Butt, 2021). In the same way, in India and Bangladesh, there was no particular emphasis on formal education as part of traditional jobs (Jain et al., 2025; Kalam et al., 2024). Though there is some modern legal recognition of the lack of attention to people who do not conform to the binary genders, such as the Indian landmark NALSA judgment recognizing the third gender, there has yet to be sufficient implementation of inclusive policies, so even in this, there are consistently low literacy rates (Jain et al., 2025). This background highlights the manner in which historical stigmatization of eunuchs as being worse than normal is being

directly performed at present in creating disparity in education, with skill-oriented programs only emerging in recent times as an attempt to mend the long-standing academic wound (Kalam et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025). It is this historical exclusion that has made the lack of ethical economic opportunities drive many into begging, prostitution, or entertainment activities that further place them on the periphery of society (Noorani et al., 2022).

## Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Societal Barriers

Eunuchs, due to this specific need, have to deal with multiple, and highly ingrained, stereotypes that associate them with being deviant, sinful, taboo, or economically unproductive in nature (Kalam et al., 2024; Batool et al., 2019). These stereotypes lead to massive discrimination in all areas of life, such as education, workplaces, and medical care (Zhang, 2025). In Bangladesh, the societal perception tends to stigmatize hijras as abnormal, thus isolating them in social life, with the further development of the right-based belief that they do not deserve an education (Kalam et al., 2024). In a similar way, some religious groups in Pakistan have extremely negative views of eunuchs, considering them sinners, which increases discrimination and social intolerance (Batool et al., 2019). Challenging these stereotypes is another critical component in providing education and access on equitable terms (Iqbal et al., 2025).

The effects of discrimination in accessing education are severe and multidimensional. It is often termed as bullying, harassment, and systemic discrimination, which leads to extreme dropout and complete failure to enroll (Batool et al., 2019). In another study in Pakistan, 79 percent of eunuchs lack education and are targets of verbal vitriol, sexual harassment, and systemic discrimination from both educators and peers (Batool et al., 2019). This further limits the chances of their participation in competency-based training later.

In India, transgender students describe how they are routinely excluded from classrooms and access to essential facilities, with gender identity being the source of frequent ridicule and violence against transgender students (Jain et al., 2025). This is further enhanced by the issues of institutional invisibility; in a survey, it was discovered that only 23.5 per cent of higher education establishments had a third-gender option on their forms, essentially scrubbing them out of the system (Jain et al., 2025).

Such discrimination not only provides barriers to access but also cripples the worth and mental health of individuals, making them incapable of even setting their sights on skill-based education, which could otherwise be empowering to them (Agrawal, 2013; Bibi et al., 2021). This is further exacerbated by the socio-economics of the region. Prevalent poverty and the inability of the family compact have left numerous people at an early age to resort to either begging or unregulated work in an attempt to secure sustenance (Noorani et al., 2022). In a study conducted in Bangladesh, financial crisis was noted as the main factor that prompted 14 of the 20 hijras to leave school (Kalam et al., 2024). Also, the structural issue of the absence of safe and inclusive infrastructure is significant; in India, only 1.51% of educational institutions have gender-neutral facilities, such as restrooms, which endangers the lives of transgender students and discourages them from attending (Jain et al., 2025). It is important that addressing these intersecting and complex barriers should be approached in a holistic approach to various systemic, institutional, and individual levels (Zhang, 2025).

## Government Policies and Legal Frameworks

Even the South Asian government policies and juridical mechanisms are a very significant and conflicting part of the lives of eunuchs since they support their inclusion in some cases, and are undermined by implementation failures in others (Mendoza & Heymann, 2022). The legal environment is progressive in India. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, stipulates that it is the mandatory policy to enable inclusive education (Section 13) and to put a ban on discrimination in institutional learning sites (Jain et al., 2025). This is further supported by the National Education Policy 2020, which designates transgender persons as a socio-economically disadvantaged group deserving of support through schemes like Samagra Shiksha (Jain et al., 2025). However, the practical application of these laws is severely lacking. For example, despite legal mandates, 98.5% of educational institutions lack gender-neutral facilities, and only 1% of hostels are available to transgender students, making the right to education largely theoretical (Jain et al., 2025).

Pakistan's Constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens, and Supreme Court rulings since 2009 have extended fundamental rights such as voting and inheritance to the transgender community (Batool et al., 2019). In 2018, the Punjab Social Protection Authority developed a "Transgender Persons Welfare Policy" to address social, cultural, and educational issues facing the community (Butt, 2021). Despite these non-discriminatory policies, the education sector itself lacks a formal law or specific quotas to facilitate the participation of third-gender individuals in mainstream institutions (Butt, 2021). This creates a significant policy vacuum where legal rights do not translate into accessible educational opportunities.

In Bangladesh, the official recognition of a third gender in 2013 provided crucial legal backing for the hijra community (Kalam et al., 2024). However, the measures taken on the basis of such recognition do not contribute to anti-discrimination enforcement in schools. That failure to enforce translates into an unchecked continuation of harassment and bullying, resulting in high rates of dropouts and inability to access additional education/vocational training (Kalam et al., 2024). Such a comparative overview, summarized in Table 1, illustrates a constant policy trend in the region: there are systematic legal frameworks in place to provide these protections, yet they are poorly enforced and lack the well-funded educational policies necessary to ensure that protection translates to personal and social inclusion based on ability.

**Table 1**

*Comparative overview of transgender-inclusive education policies in South Asia*

| Country | Key Policy | Promotion / Hindrance |
| --- | --- | --- |
| India | Transgender Act 2019; NEP 2020 | Promotes via mandates but is hindered by implementation gaps (e.g., only 1% hostels are available) (Jain et al., 2025). |
| Pakistan | Constitutional equality; Supreme Court rulings | Limited promotion; no specific educational quotas (Batool et al., 2019). |
| Bangladesh | Third-gender recognition 2013 | Hinders due to unenforced anti-discrimination provisions (Kalam et al., 2024). |

## Current Skill-Based Education Initiatives and Interventions

As a result of this systematic exclusion, various skill-based educational initiatives have been launched, mostly with government and non-governmental organizations (NGO) driving them (Ahmad, 2023). In Pakistan, such measures are regarded as an urgent measure of social descent, causing unemployment rates to be extremely high in marginalized communities and youth (Saeed et al., 2022). National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC) offers short-term training that is aimed at enhancing employability, and Punjab Vocational Training Council (PVTC) has developed specific programs where the eunuchs get training to promote both skills and social status (ASIA, 2019). Some of the most significant governmental adjustments include the Adult Literacy Center, which was launched in Ladhoran in August 2018 and enrolls 20 transgender students at a time, teaching them basic education in Urdu, English, and arithmetic (Butt, 2021).

In India, to pursue vocational training, Transgender students receive scholarships in the SMILE Scheme (Support of Marginalized Individuals, Livelihood and Enterprise) launched in 2022 (Jain et al., 2025). On the same lines, Kerala has a program called Saphalam, which offers 1,00,000 to enable skills training in tailoring and other activities, demonstrating moderate effectiveness at a local level (Jain et al., 2025). In Bangladesh, NGO-led initiatives, such as workshops run by the Bandhu Social Welfare Society, provide essential life skills and basic vocational training to the hijra community (Kalam et al., 2024).

However, the uptake of the SMILE scheme in India is low at only about 1 percent in some institutions, largely because of administrative problems, such as the inability to get official identity cards (Jain et al., 2025). In Bangladesh, hijras attend NGO workshops and only 20-30 percent of the population is reached, dropping out owing to the social stigma as well as the pressing need to earn income (Kalam et al., 2024). Moreover, equity

initiatives at a larger level are not particularly effective in Pakistan; only 1 in 10 trans individuals get access to appropriate education and other services (Batool et al., 2019). However, the effectiveness and coverage of these programs remain severely limited, a challenge consistent across the region (Ahmad, 2023). As summarized in Table 2, major governmental and non-governmental initiatives consistently fall short in their reach and impact. The uptake of India's SMILE scheme is reportedly low, with utilization at around 1% in some institutions, largely due to administrative barriers such as the difficulty in obtaining official identity cards (Jain et al., 2025). In Bangladesh, NGO workshops reach only 20-30% of the hijra population but suffer from high dropout rates due to persistent social stigma and the immediate need for income (Kalam et al., 2024). Meanwhile, broader equity efforts in Pakistan fail to gain traction, with less than 10% of the transgender community accessing relevant education and related services (Batool et al., 2019).

**Table 2**

*Effectiveness and Reach of Transgender Support Programs in South Asia*

| Program | Country | Effectiveness / Coverage |
|---|---|---|
| SMILE Scheme | India | Moderate; low uptake (≈1%) due to barriers (Jain et al., 2025). |
| NGO Workshops | Bangladesh | Limited; 20–30% coverage with high dropout rates (Kalam et al., 2024). |
| General Equity Efforts | Pakistan | Poor; less than 10% access to education and related services (Batool et al., 2019). |

In addition, most programs fail to calibrate their training to the reality on the ground, and this is enhanced by a bias in society that snuffs out the value of vocational training as opposed to traditional academic degrees and white-collar jobs (Lateef et al., 2024). The need to transform supply-driven vocational training to demand-driven vocational training is significant, although one of the major gaps in several programs is the lack of satisfactory market needs assessment, which is why cosmetic reforms are more of the fashion than actual improvement (Pirzada et al., 2022). The fact that there is no involvement of the private sector in these Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs and low investments affects even the number of jobs that graduates can secure (Pirzada et al., 2022). Thus, regardless of the intentions, the efficiency of such programs, as a whole, is low, and less than one tenth of the target community can reach relevant education and related services in certain regions (Batool et al., 2019).

## The Role of Community Support, Allyship, and Empowerment

At a time when the state and societal framework have left the eunuchs on their own, a lifeline is most likely to take place in the form of community support, where they can receive some form of skill-oriented education (Brumback et al., 2024). The hijra community is also embedded in the guru-chela (teacher-disciple) system, which can provide strong mentorship guidance, protection, and support (Kalam et al., 2024). In Bangladesh, gurus have helped their disciples to train in areas such as running a beauty shop, where, in addition to financial freedom, they feel part of something (Kalam et al., 2024). In India, advocacy groups and queer collectives have led the way in promoting educational initiatives that are more inclusive and in ensuring a sense of resilience and community in members of the community (Jain et al., 2025). They are locally driven projects that ensure a sense of safety, resources, and advocacy that enable eunuchs and affirm their education (Brumback et al., 2024).

In Pakistan, community-based awareness sessions proved to be helpful in changing the mentalities of those who can read and write, which has a secondary effect of facilitating access to vocational education (Batool et al., 2019). In addition to the direct community, the role of allies would also be relevant to the wider LGBTQIA+ community, which is being discriminated against in overlapping ways (Huynh et al., 2024). Proper allyship consists of recognizing the existence of health and social inequalities and having continuous education to

comprehend the challenges affecting the community and actively employing the advantage of privilege to create change (Huynh et al., 2024). The relevant elements of this enabling environment can be summarized as shown in Figure 1. Allyship can do a lot of good in the health and well-being of the LGBTQIA+ community and is an important aspect of creating a more inclusive society (Huynh et al., 2024).

The second way of empowerment is through displaying successful stories. The many successful applications made by individual cases such as the transgender in India who took up vocational training in community medicine and was given access to the hostel after taking the court stand (Jain et al., 2025) and the hijra in Bangladesh who started her own business after training skills (Kalam et al., 2024) are indicators of the vast success that can be achieved. Such stories can help to resist negative stereotypes and serve as the inspiration for other members of the community (Brumback et al., 2024). Despite these strong examples, such initiatives are still limited in their financial capabilities and cannot replace a change on a systemic level through the intervention of policy (Butt, 2021).

**Figure 1**

*Effective Allyship (Source: Huynh et al., 2024)*
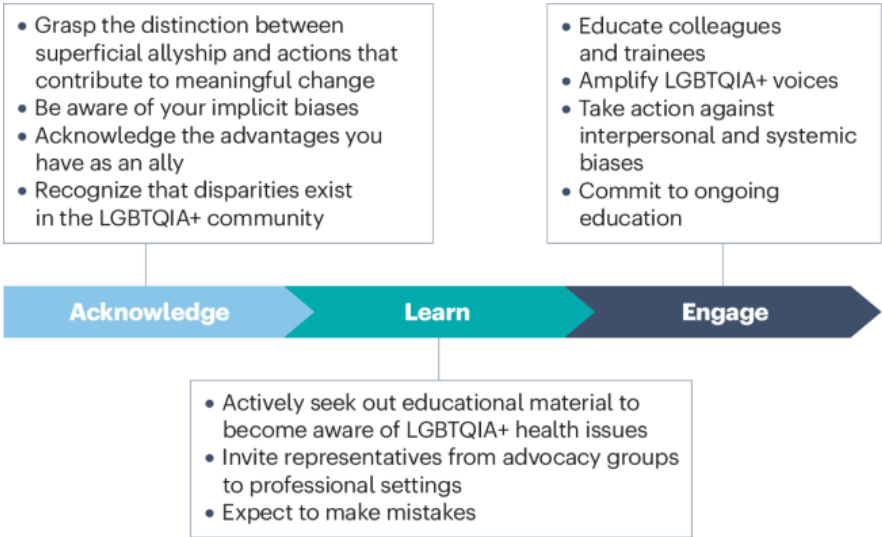


## Intersectionality and Compounded Disadvantages

The label of a eunuch cannot exist in a vacuum, but occupies a space where other marginalized identities may arise, including class, caste, and religion, as well as LGBTQ + status, a de facto addition to disadvantages in education (Jain et al., 2025). Transgender women in India are subject to dual discrimination within vocational training that is male-oriented. In one study, it was discovered that 33 percent of them had never gone to school because of a combination of caste and gender discrimination (Jain et al., 2025). In Bangladesh, hijras, who also exist on the margins by being intersex, face a considerable increase in harassment and segregation, which has been shown to decrease their access to an intercessor skill-based course by up to 50 percent (Kalam et al., 2024). The high level of bullying and multi-level exclusion of the Pakistan community is present as a way of life at an estimated 77% of the community (Batool et al., 2019) due to the combination of gender non-conformity and conservative religious understanding of morality. This fact of multi-discrimination necessitates interventions that cannot be restricted to employing a one-axis logic. Educational programs and policies need to consider intersectional approaches to education in order to be successful and effective in addressing the specific set of barriers that individuals in the community have to endure.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As this review shows, eunuchs of the three countries, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, experience harsh and complex obstacles to skill-based education.

These issues have a century-long history of the criminalization of the colonial era and are evidenced by dominant stereotypes, deep-seated discrimination, and policy-implementation disparities (Jain et al., 2025; Batool et al., 2019). The outcome is a feedback loop of marginalization with very low literacy levels, as observed in one study in Pakistan, with 79 percent of eunuchs still uneducated (Batool et al., 2019) and low exposure to activities aimed at building economic independence. The number of focused initiatives implemented, although small in scale, is something of a cause for optimism, especially when placed alongside the more recent legal recognitions. But the funding support remains, alongside social acceptance, quite shallow (Butt, 2021; Kalam et al, 2024).

The success stories of a number of individuals, who trained for a skill and earned quite a fortune, further confirm the tremendous potential of vocational training in the process of development (Jain et al, 2025; Kalam et al, 2024). In order to make full use of such a potential on a larger scale of operation, a multifaceted initiative is necessary. Based on the reviewed literature, it is recommended as follows:

## For Policymakers

1. Enforce Anti-Discrimination Laws: Move from simply drafting policy frameworks to the active enforcement of anti-discrimination policies within educational institutions. Anti-Discrimination policies should have clear sanctioning measures for non-compliance (Mendoza & Heymann, 2022, p. 424).
2. Implement Educational Quotas: Enforce and allocate quotas for third-gender people at the level of vocational training institutes and universities for their historical exclusion (Rizvi et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2014).
3. Remove Administrative Barriers: Jain et al. (2025) argue that the most significant barriers to participating in government schemes and programs are the absence of official identification documents and government identification cards that recognize the person's chosen gender.
4. Provide Targeted Financial Support: Allocate scholarships and financial aid to the eunches for the purpose of accessing skill-based training and education to alleviate the dropout

problem (Mendoza & Heymann, 2022; Kalam et al., 2024).

## For Educational Institutions

1. Create Inclusive Infrastructure: Allocate resources for the construction of new gender-neutral restrooms and hostels to improve the psychosocial safety and physical accessibility of the learning environment (Jain et al., 2025).
2. Develop Inclusive Curricula: Jain et al. (2025) and Faustino & Kaur (2023) state that modifying the curriculum to include the life experiences of eunuchs and gender diverse individuals should also be accompanied by the rest of the teaching and learning steps in the education system.

## For Civil Society and NGOs

1. Fund and Franchise Initiatives Incorporated in The Community: Scale up fiscal mobilization for community-based CBOs providing tailored vocational training, mentorship, and counseling (Brumback et al., 2024; Aziz, 2020).
2. Foster Awareness, Advocacy, and Partnerships: Fund and spread media and education campaigns to counter negative stereotypes and promote broader societal acceptance and advocacy (Iqbal et al., 2022; Naz et al., 2025).
3. Foster Advance Partnerships: Increase synergy among NGOs, community members, and the business community to ensure training curricula meet market needs and genuine post-training employment opportunities exist (Pirzada et al., 2022; Ahmad, 2022).

## Future Directions and Research Needs

While this review synthesizes the current state of knowledge, significant gaps remain. Future research should move toward evaluating the long-term impacts of skill-based programs on employment, economic stability, and overall well-being for the eunuch community (Zhang, 2025). Longitudinal studies using mixed-methods approaches, particularly in rural and underserved areas, are urgently needed. Potential research questions include: How can digital vocational tools and online platforms be leveraged to overcome physical access and safety barriers for eunuchs? (Kalam et al., 2024). To what extent do intersectionality (e.g., caste,

religion, disability) affect the outcomes of skill-based education programs, and what tailored interventions are most effective? (Jain et al., 2025). Finally, systematic studies on the implementation and impact of post-2025 policies will be essential to advance our understanding and craft more effective, evidence-based interventions for this deeply marginalized community (Zhang, 2025).

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