

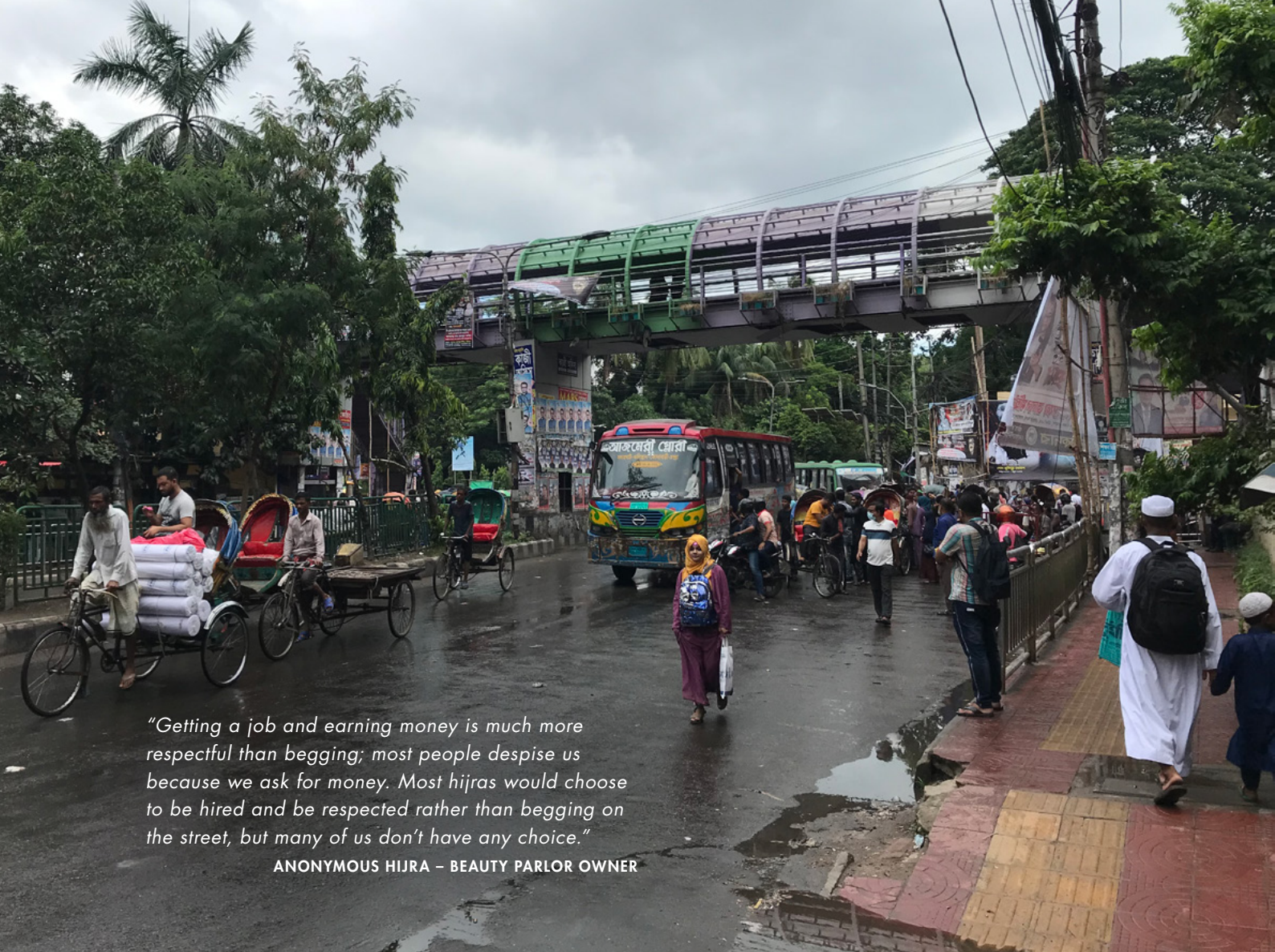
TRANSGENDER INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF HIJRAS TODAY

Enrico Fontana, PhD



MISUM



"Getting a job and earning money is much more respectful than begging; most people despise us because we ask for money. Most hijras would choose to be hired and be respected rather than begging on the street, but many of us don't have any choice."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – BEAUTY PARLOR OWNER

The content of this report was written by Enrico Fontana, PhD in collaboration with Bandhu Social Welfare Society and is the result of ongoing research conducted with hijras in Bangladesh. All hijras included in this study volunteered to disclose their knowledge. The author confirms that there is no financial relationship with other people or organizations that could have inappropriately influenced the work or generate a conflict of interest. The research project has received funding from Misum, the Mistra Center for Sustainable Markets, and Sasin School of Management, Chulalongkorn University.

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BUILDING EQUITABLE AND SAFE SPACES THROUGH BUSINESS INTERVENTION

Creating transgender inclusion as part of the broader diversity, equity and inclusion agenda is a growing priority in the business community to help transgender persons improve their quality of life. Recent studies demonstrate that transgender inclusion is associated with a higher level of economic growth¹⁻³ and can help companies to demonstrate their commitment towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities)^{4,5}.

Nonetheless, a gap continues to exist between aspiration and action. The global business community remains too slow in advocating for the protection of transgender persons and many companies fail to offer an environment that enables them to experience safety⁶. Transgender persons across the world continue to struggle to be recruited, to find training opportunities and to access safe workspaces where they can freely express who they are^{7,8}. This is particularly the case for transgender persons living in countries of the Global South with lower gross domestic product per capita⁹.

Although the recognition of hijras in 2013 has represented an important step for change, hijras in Bangladesh continue to face major barriers that prevent them from thriving in life^{10,11}. The respondents in this report were able to start a business of their own, but they all shared the view that lack of employment opportunities and fears of discrimination at work are the main causes as to why many hijras continue to be exploited and to be found on streets and crossroads, begging for money to survive.

The good news is that discussion on the inclusion of hijras could not come at a more opportune time because corporate awareness of the importance of inclusion is higher now than ever before. This is not solely because companies are recognizing that alleviating the longstanding hardship of gender minorities

such as the hijras is the right thing to do, but also that they can capture the long-term economic benefits that stem from building a more equitable and diverse working environment.

I hope this report will provide an additional opportunity for employers and the broader business community to learn more about the challenges faced by hijras in Bangladesh, and so advance dialogues on how to address these challenges. I also hope that the recommendations in this report will serve as a catalyst for action to draft legal, policy, and social reforms that will support hijras to achieve equitable hiring and employment opportunities.



Enrico Fontana, PhD



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ADVOCATING FOR TRANS-INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Transgender persons experience social stigma, harassment and violence and are denied basic human rights. In Bangladesh, hijras are excluded from accessing the main education channels and struggle to find employment opportunities. Spurned from the formal labour market, most join the hijra community to survive and seek social security under a guru. Many hijras collect money from members of the public by begging, some risk their lives engaging in sex work and others are forced to conduct criminal activities for survival. All these realities intensify the negative predisposition of the society against hijras and deteriorates their acceptance.

Population and housing census counted only 12,629 hijras in 2022, and this is only 0.00765% of the entire population in Bangladesh. The constitution of Bangladesh (Article 19) highlights the importance of ensuring equal opportunities to all citizens; it aims to attain a uniform level of social and economic development as a fundamental principle of state policy. The existing misconceptions and prejudices surrounding hijras undermine the work of the government and the attempts to provide employment opportunities for the hijra community. Although we see some explicit efforts, the number of initiatives is insufficient and weakly supported. Today hijras are still not considered as equal citizens and experience institutionalized discrimination due to their gender and gender expression, often suffering from sexual harassment and violence in the workplace.

Countries and organizations worldwide are already enacting policies and practices that align with the sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially by offering equal access to economic resources (UN SDG 1), ensuring gender equality (UN SDG 5), providing decent and humane working conditions for all workers (UN SDG 8), creating social and economic inclusion (UN SDG 10). As part of this broader

development process, the government and the private sector in Bangladesh are also recognizing the relevance of creating inclusive employment opportunities for the hijras, as written in the constitution, in the international conventions, and in the universal human rights mandates.

This report offers some important guidelines on how to create inclusive spaces for the hijras in the workplace, and advocates for trans-inclusive policies in businesses that can facilitate access to economic empowerment. In this report, we want to celebrate the spirit of all transgender persons in society; we especially want to pay homage to the hijras and to raise awareness of the difficulties they face when seeking employment.

Shale Ahmed, Executive Director, Bandhu Social Welfare Society



Shale Ahmed is the executive director of Bandhu Social Welfare Society (more commonly known as Bandhu). Since 1996, he has been a human rights activist and a dedicated pioneer of SOGIESC (acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics) human rights, quality health and SRHR (acronym for sexual and reproductive health and rights), livelihood and sustainability in Bangladesh. He is working with several regional, national and international networks to improve human rights in Bangladesh. Shale Ahmed was awarded the International Ashoka Fellowship in 2009 for his outstanding contribution to sexual health and rights of the SOGIESC population in Bangladesh.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report offers an understanding of the challenges that hijras face today, but also offers insights on how employers can play a significant role in overcoming these challenges and better create an inclusive environment for them.

- **DEFUSING FEARS OF WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION**

Creating inclusion can be a difficult endeavor, but it starts by offering dedicated positions and career pathways. Hijras need to know that the employer to which they are applying welcomes their application. Defusing fears of workplace discrimination starts with an invested top management that genuinely believes in recruiting hijras and in their untapped abilities. To do that, employers should advertise these positions and career pathways to solicit applications from hijras.

- **CREATING A SAFE SPACE**

Because hijras are highly stigmatized and very much misunderstood, employers need to create a safe space for hijras and sensitize all employees by working collaboratively with non-governmental organizations and civil societies. Creating a safe space for hijras is important to ensure that their turnover rate remains low, but it is a process that requires time and resources: it should require ad hoc trainings for all employees on what it means to be hijra, the challenges that hijras encounter during their life but especially the importance of working alongside hijras.

- **COMPENSATING FOR THE LIMITED SCHOOLING**

Hijras suffer from intense hardship during their lifetimes. Difficult family situations often limit their access to the public education system. As a result, some hijras are more likely to suffer from mental health issues and to lack a strong educational background. To maximize their human capital and productivity, employers need to compensate for the limited schooling, such as investing in on-the-job trainings for hijras to improve their skills and qualifications. For some hijras whose educational background is particularly limited, employers should be ready to provide additional sources of support.

- **NAVIGATING THE OBSTACLE OF THE HIJRA GURUS**

Although most hijras want to find jobs and feel respected, many are in thrall to their guru and are not free to choose their own path. Employers should be aware of the strong link between hijras and their guru; their gurus may try to persuade them to leave and come back to their previous life once they have been hired. To navigate the obstacle of the hijra gurus, employers should work collaboratively with non-governmental organizations and civil society to create a dialogue with gurus. They should also extend their support to hijras who might continue to suffer from verbal and even physical aggression from their guru after being employed.

- **BEING READY TO OFFER EXTRA JOB SECURITY**

As the Covid-19 pandemic has shown, hijras are particularly vulnerable during times of crisis because they already live on the fringes of society and have limited resources to survive in their quotidian life. In particular, because of their stigma, they are more likely to fall under false accusations for no reason. As part of their commitment, employers should offer extra job security during time of crisis, such as better protections and insurance conditions.

NOTES ON THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The insights in this briefing capture the perspectives of 50 hijras predominantly based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The data was collected through interviews and discussions completed between August 2019 and August 2022.

Although all these hijras have initiated their own business activity, and believe to have accomplished different degrees of personal success because of that, this report focuses on their general views and experiences as hijras rather than their individual business circumstances. In particular, this report focuses on the most important challenges that hijras face today to grow as independent persons and offers insightful recommendations to companies on how to address them.

This report also includes the case study of Denim Expert Limited. Evidence of this case draws on two fieldwork trips conducted by the author in Chittagong in 2019 and 2022. During these visits, 3 hijras now employed by Denim Expert Limited and the staff of the company have been interviewed at different times.

In this report, the pronoun 'she/her' was adopted to label all hijras, in line with the preferences of the majority. More information on the research methods is available from the author upon request.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION: THREE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

WHO ARE THE HIJRAS?

Hijras are persons from the South Asian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal) often described as third gender, e.g., neither men nor women¹². Although they are often assigned male at birth, many hijras have an inner psyche that is feminine and behave in non-conforming ways above and beyond the binary rules that society imposes¹⁰.

Hijras derive their name from the *hijra culture* or *hijra community*, whose ancient origins come from Hinduism. Although hijra is often used as a gender in the official documents, hijra is thus not a gender per se, but a label attached to persons who are accepted into the hijra community at some point of their life¹³. This hijra community is characterized by a seniority system where a senior and maternal figure, the guru (*guruma*), manages the younger hijras (*chelas*), and has the last word on whether or not to accept new members into the hijra community¹².

Today in Bangladesh, hijras are considered the most excluded of the excluded, and are associated with stigma, poverty, and amorality¹⁴. Hijras are often found on the side of busy streets and crossroads, stopping passersby and asking them for money. Their official number is believed to be approximately 12,600¹³, but different sources contest it and argue that it may be as high as 500,000 or even 1.5 million¹⁵.

WHAT IS THE LEGAL STATUS OF HIJRAS IN BANGLADESH?

Hijras have been legally recognized in Bangladesh in November 2013. As a result of that, national identity cards in Bangladesh distinguish between being woman, man or hijra.

Although the recognition of hijras represents an important milestone, much debate exists on the extent to which this addition is creating benefits for the hijras^{11,16}. Most hijras today continue to suffer verbal

and physical abuses and grapple with the strong prejudice linked with their gender expression: ignorance and conservative norms increase their vulnerability, and hijras are often denied employment opportunities after being dismissed as not valuable¹⁷.

WHY SHOULD COMPANIES INVEST TO CREATE INCLUSION FOR HIJRAS?

As the respondents of this study confirmed, many hijras dream of being respected and having a job: they want to live with dignity, being able to have a professional life without being labelled for their gender expression. Many want to see others in their community achieve this change, too.

Investing in the inclusion of the hijras can help companies capture multiple long-term economic benefits, but also requires outreach efforts and supportive corporate policies that can create safe spaces and make the hijras feel more welcome.

The inclusion of the hijras can help companies create a diverse environment that is conducive to more creativity, more openness, and more willingness to dare. In turn, this can play a crucial role for companies that aim at establishing a more satisfied workforce, that want to attract more talents and that want to distinguish themselves from others.

Concurrently, creating inclusion for the hijras can help companies: demonstrate explicit commitment to the diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda; show active allyship; contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 5 (gender equality) and 10 (reduced inequalities); build a competitive advantage as a global changemaker and leader. This can create higher recognition and foster new opportunities especially for companies operating in Bangladesh, where efforts of creating inclusion for hijras remain limited.

FIVE MAIN CHALLENGES OF BEING HIJRA

The evidence from this study indicates that hijras today continue to face five predominant challenges that impact their ability to find work and stay at work.

1. FEARS OF WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION
2. STRONG PREJUDICE FROM PEOPLE IN SOCIETY
3. LIMITED SCHOOLING OPPORTUNITIES
4. HIJRA GURUS AS A POSSIBLE OBSTACLE TO CHANGE
5. HIGHER VULNERABILITY DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

1. FEARS OF WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

Hijras often fear the reactions of potential colleagues and bosses because of their gender expression. Against this backdrop, many hijras give up finding jobs in the private sector altogether. Those who navigate these fears and survive the interview process are often dismissed from their position, facing verbal and physical harassment as soon as they start expressing their gender. Some hijras manage to conceal their gender expression for some time, until they start experiencing alienation and restlessness, and decide to leave. The lack of a safe space in settings of work makes it particularly difficult for hijras not only to find the courage to search for jobs, but also to stay employed in the same job for a long time.

SOME NUMBERS FROM THIS STUDY

56% (28 of 50 hijras) did not seek to find a job in the private sector because they feared the reaction of potential colleagues and boss.

Of the 22 hijras who worked in the private sector before:

50% (11 of 22 hijras) were fired after the employer discovered their gender.

50% (11 of 22 hijras) concealed their gender at work until they felt alienated and left the job.

"I joined a parcel business before because they were very impressed with my work and hired me for their local office. I worked there for about four years. But after I got the job, they started to restrict my behavior. They wanted me to wear formal attire, but it doesn't suit me. They also gave me guidelines on how to be more manly. But I can't hide who I am. It was too much for me and I left at some point."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – ART BUSINESS OWNER

"If a hijra had job opportunities, she would stop begging for money. Sometimes a hijra stops begging and finds a job, but after some days they [the employers] understand she is hijra. She is fired and she must go back again to the street. If we are accepted at work, we don't have to go back to the street. But job opportunities are very limited for us."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – BEAUTY PARLOR OWNER

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS: DEFUSING FEARS OF WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

Employers need to establish dedicated positions and career pathways for hijras, and promote these positions and pathways to solicit applications. This is important to make hijras aware of which employer welcomes their application, and to make them more comfortable to apply. It is particularly important that the top management is invested and truly believes in recruiting hijras and in their abilities.

2. STRONG PREJUDICE FROM PEOPLE IN SOCIETY

Most hijras feel unaccepted by society and that they are disrespected because of their gender expression. Consequently, many feel that there is no safe space for them outside the hijra community; they must put an extra effort to overcome prejudices and convince people that it is safe to work together with a hijra, to purchase goods and services from a hijra, and that they are not malicious. Many hijras are concerned about the implications of the prejudice against them on their personal security, especially when travelling outside the locality or neighborhood where they usually live and meet people who are not accustomed to seeing them.

SOME NUMBERS FROM THIS STUDY

92% (46 of 50 hijras) experienced explicit verbal and physical abuse.

32% (16 of 50 hijras) are accompanied by cis-gender females and males to be seen as legitimate.

70% (35 of 50 hijras) acknowledge that travelling to areas away from their locality can be risky for their personal safety.



"People see us as dangerous. One day, we were working in the parlor and a young woman entered. She saw us and screamed: "Oh God, there are hijras in the parlor doing the job! If I do my make-up here, my marriage will be cancelled!" She ran from the place and kept shouting. That day we were afraid that the other people in the market thought that we did something wrong to her, and then our dignity would have been gone."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – BEAUTY PARLOR OWNER

"I sell chicken through different online e-commerce websites. One day a person ordered a chicken, and I went to his house with a hijra friend to deliver it and to receive the payment. We could not get inside because the security guard stopped us at the main gate. We had heated arguments with the guard, until the buyer came down and talked to us. He said that he did not know we are hijras, and he does not want to buy the chicken from us anymore. We had to leave, and it was an embarrassing moment."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – FARMER

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS: CREATING A SAFE SPACE

It is important for employers to create a safe space for hijras. To do that, they need to work collaboratively with non-governmental organizations and civil societies to sensitise all employees. Creating a safe space for hijras is a process that should require ad hoc trainings for all employees on what it means to be hijra, the challenges that hijras encounter during their life and the importance of working with hijras.



3. LIMITED SCHOOLING OPPORTUNITIES

Hijras are often misunderstood by the members of their own family since early childhood. As soon as they start expressing their gender - e.g., in the way they speak, walk, behave, and present themselves; many hijras are mocked, scolded, and beaten by their family members who are concerned about their 'reputation' as a household with neighbors and other people in their locality. Many hijras are then abandoned on the street, and the weak social safety net that begins at such a young age has severe implications for their ability to go to school and to thrive in life.

SOME NUMBERS FROM THIS STUDY

80% (40 of 50 hijras) had long-lasting and acrimonious disputes with some (if not all) of their family members and had to stop their education at some point.

16% (8 of 50 hijras) have no contact with any family member anymore.

42% (21 of 50 hijras) communicate with some family members, but they live apart and are not welcomed in the family home.

42% (21 of 50 hijras) have been accepted by and live with some of their family members.

"The words of my family were like blisters on my skin. They were unbearable. How would you feel if your own father mocked you and asked you: "Why are you wearing this? Have you become a hijra?" [...] At that age, it was really excruciating. I cried a lot with my mother, as well as during the prayer. I cursed myself to be born this way. My relatives, my neighbors, and even my own parents were against me."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – STREET FOOD BUSINESS OWNER

"I liked to be in the house with my mother, but my parents wanted me to work in the fields. They beat me so much. I have scars on my body for that. They told me that I am a boy, but I am not a boy. I did not know how to make them understand that [...] I had to suffer a lot. They stopped giving me food at one point and I had no choice but to work in the neighbors' house as a servant. However, I could not tolerate this anymore and I found the courage to leave. I have had no family since then."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – CLOTHING BUSINESS OWNER

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS: COMPENSATING FOR THE LIMITED SCHOOLING OPPORTUNITIES

Employers should try to compensate for the hijras' limited access to the public education system during their life. In a bid to do that, and to maximize their human capital and productivity, they should invest in on-the-job trainings and improving their skills and qualifications. For some hijras whose educational background is particularly limited, employers should be ready to provide additional sources of support.



4. HIJRA GURUS AS A POSSIBLE OBSTACLE TO CHANGE

Many hijras feel that the hijra community is a unique space where they can freely express their gender and a refuge where to escape from society. However, many show affection and distress when it comes to their guru. As more senior hijras, the gurus control the finances of the hijra community, protect the younger hijras, but also often exploit their power position and expect to be paid, which gives young hijras limited freedom of choice. This is not solely in Bangladesh: Evidence from Pakistan¹⁸ and India¹⁹ for instance details that gurus are the main decision makers and expect younger hijras to be subordinate and earn money for them. The influence exerted by the gurus can be immense, and that makes it more difficult for the younger hijras to change their lifestyle and freely decide their work environment.

SOME NUMBERS FROM THIS STUDY

60% (30 of 50 hijras) experienced physical violence from their abusive guru and accuse her of hindering the empowerment of hijras.

80% (40 of 50 hijras) still view the hijra community as a safe space to express their gender.

64% (32 of 50 hijras) try to help other hijras to find employment opportunities.

"Many hijras want to work with me. They want to develop. But I must first persuade their guru to let them join my business. I tell them that: "Give me some of your chelas, I will train them. I will buy the machines so that you will also benefit from their work." Many hijras do not want to beg, they are looking for respectable jobs. But they have to manage the guru first."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – GARMENT FACTORY OWNER

"It is very common that gurus do not want younger hijras to live an independent life. They believe that this will reduce their income because they rely on the money that these younger hijras collect for them. Sometimes, the gurus punish them violently for trying to leave. Most hijras however see their guru as their mother and have nobody else to support them. This is one of the biggest deterrents for the hijras who want to live independently."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – FOOD BUSINESS OWNER

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS: NAVIGATING THE OBSTACLE OF THE HIJRA GURUS

Employers should be aware of the strong link between hijras and their guru, and that gurus may try to persuade hijras to leave and come back to their previous life. As a result, it is important for employers to work collaboratively with non-governmental organizations and civil society to create a dialogue with the gurus, as well as extending their support to hijras who might have to withstand verbal and even physical aggressions from their guru to continue to work.



5. HIGHER VULNERABILITY DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

Global crises do not affect people equally: hijras are more vulnerable during times of crisis because they already live on the fringes of society and have limited resources to cover the cost needed to survive. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed such vulnerability. Evidence from India, for instance, indicates that Covid-19 had a negative effect on the health conditions of hijras and decreased their access to healthcare services¹⁹. Hijras in Bangladesh have similarly been impacted by Covid-19, also in their ability to conduct business independently and to remain mentally healthy. Many have sought the support of non-governmental, non-profit organizations and civil societies that have offered them grocery donations to survive. Additionally, some hijras had to face the ignorance of some citizens and were victims of conspiracy theories, including that they have been bringing and spreading Covid-19 to Bangladesh.

SOME NUMBERS FROM THIS STUDY

56% (28 of 50 hijras) received the support of nongovernmental organizations and other non-profit organizations, mostly through grocery donations.

26% (13 of 50 hijras) faced explicit accusations of bringing Covid-19 to Bangladesh and spreading it in the country.

"During the pandemic I had to close my shop for one whole month. I tried to sell the products on the streets directly. I sat on the street and packed everything up quickly when the police were coming [...] I suffered financially and in many other ways. Mentally, I was tense all the time about what could happen and how to manage."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – CLOTHES RETAILER

"It is common for people to see us as dirty. Some think that we are the reason for Covid-19 in Bangladesh. An elder lady told me to stay away, that: 'you are a hijra, and hijras go to many places, and meet many people. You brought the coronavirus to Bangladesh, and you are spreading it'. I asked her how come she knows that I meet many people, but she just told me not to come closer."

ANONYMOUS HIJRA – AUTOMOBILE PART SELLER

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS: BEING READY TO OFFER EXTRA JOB SECURITY

Employers should offer extra protection to hijras to ensure that they can survive during times of crisis. This means, offering better contractual clauses in terms of extra job security, better protection and insurance conditions.



CREATING INCLUSION FOR HIJRAS IN BANGLADESH: DENIM EXPERT LIMITED (CHITTAGONG) AS AN EXAMPLE OF BEST PRACTICE

Denim Expert Limited (Denim) is an export-focused Jeanswear manufacturing company headquartered in Chittagong that specializes in denim bottom apparels and garment washing. It was established in 2009 and employs today approximately 2000 workers. Denim is a member of the International Apparel Federation, Sustainable Apparel Coalition, ZDHC and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It has been lauded in 2019 by the World Economic Forum for being a “New Champion” and for its excellence in social and environmental sustainability²⁰.

Mostafiz Uddin, its CEO, is an invested business leader that took bold action to create inclusion for the hijras. He is also the main organizer of Bangladesh Denim Expo, an international fair usually organized in Bashundhara (Dhaka) that aims at promoting the technology, innovation and sustainability advancements of Bangladesh.

HOW DID DENIM ADDRESS THE MAIN CHALLENGES OF THE HIJRAS?

“Including hijras who need help is social innovation. This is where my interest lies. I want to do more. I want to take it to a different level. I want to create examples so that others can follow. If I don’t do that, then others will never follow.”

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN – CEO, DENIM EXPERT LIMITED

“What I see from our hijra workers is that they do not leave until the job is done. They have become very loyal to us and very responsible about their job, more than any other employee here. This is good for us as a business.”

HR STAFF – DENIM EXPERT LIMITED

“I supervise all 35 cleaning operators that we have now. I manage all problems of the officers. I have a responsibility job now and they respect me here, why should I leave? I already told the hijras I know to leave their gurus and come here. I tell them to take this opportunity.”

ANONYMOUS HIJRA WORKING AT DENIM EXPERT LIMITED

1. FEARS OF WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

WHAT HAS DENIM DONE?

Denim has made the inclusion of hijra a top priority and major part of its social responsibility. It has been investing in creating an environment where hijras can feel more welcome, where they can express their gender and stay long-term.

HOW HAS DENIM DONE IT?

- It has offered a special entry track for hijras and made the whole human resource department aware of the importance of helping hijras access the company.
- It has established non-discriminatory policies and the possibility for hijras to speak up and report wrongdoings.
- It has initiated a supervisory career track for hijras and is giving them the opportunity to reach higher positions over time.

WHICH HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS THAT DENIM GAINED FROM IT?

It has been able to hire a growing number of motivated hijras who feel empowered and are working productively to develop their own career in the company.

WHICH HAS BEEN THE MAIN OBSTACLE FOR DENIM?

Denim and in particular Mostafiz Uddin have been facing the multiple negative comments of the skeptical business owners who do not believe in the potential of hijras.

2. STRONG PREJUDICE FROM PEOPLE IN SOCIETY

WHAT HAS DENIM DONE?

It has invested in training the workers on respecting hijras and working alongside with them.

HOW HAS DENIM DONE IT?

- It has signed a partnership agreement with non-governmental organizations and civil societies to provide awareness trainings and sensitize the workers. For instance, it liaised with expert trainers from Bandhu Social Welfare society to organize interactive workshop sessions with workers and the hijras.

WHICH HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS THAT DENIM GAINED FROM IT?

It has been able to develop a more balanced workforce that is more aware of the challenges of being hijra and can work with them.

WHICH HAS BEEN THE MAIN OBSTACLE FOR DENIM?

It has been difficult for Denim to involve all workers, e.g., just some workers ultimately participate to the trainings. Denim has found it difficult to organize a more coherent number of trainings while also managing the work demands.



3. LIMITED SCHOOLING OPPORTUNITIES

WHAT HAS DENIM DONE?

It has been able to overcome the hijras' limited schooling opportunities by offering on-the-job trainings and growing their skills.

HOW HAS DENIM DONE IT?

It has been saving funds for the education and training of the hijras.

WHICH HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS THAT DENIM GAINED FROM IT?

It has been able to increase the skills and productivity of the hijras in the company, thereby fully taking advantage of their human potential.

WHICH HAS BEEN THE MAIN OBSTACLE FOR DENIM?

Contrary to the initial expectations, not all hijras hired by Denim have been willing to grow in their job position and to engage in the trainings. Hence, a few could not grow as expected and eventually decided to leave.

4. HIJRA GURUS AS A POSSIBLE OBSTACLE TO CHANGE

WHAT HAS DENIM DONE?

It has actively protected the hijras who wish to work independently from their abusive gurus.

HOW HAS DENIM DONE IT?

- It has involved the police personnel in the area and briefed it about the need to protect the hijras from the gurus.
- It has made its own human resource department aware of the need to offer full time support to the hijras against any possible aggression from gurus.
- It has involved nongovernmental organizations and civil societies about establishing consultation projects with the gurus to lobby them and to foster more awareness on the importance of enabling hijras to freely choose their professional path.

WHICH HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS THAT DENIM GAINED FROM IT?

The hijras employed by Denim have stopped to fear their guru, and the gurus have also stopped to reach out to them. This helped the hijras focus on their work and increased their loyalty to Denim.

WHICH HAS BEEN THE MAIN OBSTACLE FOR DENIM?

It does not have a directly relation with the gurus and has to rely on other organizations to manage them. Gurus remain powerful actors in Bangladesh, and it is difficult to predict how much the hijras continue to be influenced by them even after they find a job. Although Denim planned to hire 15 hijras, only 9 of them signed up for the job¹³. The lower number can be attributed to the difficulty of hijras to leave the hijra community.



5. HIGHER VULNERABILITY DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

WHAT HAS DENIM DONE?

It has offered additional benefits to the hijras to make sure they do not leave. This means, it has ensured them a salary even when production stops.

HOW HAS DENIM DONE IT?

- Although it has suffered economically during the Covid-19 period and several international brands cancelled the orders, Denim has committed to pay salaries to the hijras and all other workers even when there is no production.

WHICH HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS THAT DENIM GAINED FROM IT?

This has provided a strong signal to the hijras and has increased their loyalty. This has allowed Denim to retain them after the Covid-19 crisis.

WHICH HAS BEEN THE MAIN OBSTACLE FOR DENIM?

It has struggled to sustain the finances of company during the Covid-19 crisis. It has operated at loss for some time, especially because it continued to pay salaries at a time in which it had limited inflows.



CONCLUSION

In Bangladesh, hijras continue to be excluded and face multiple challenges that prevent them from empowering themselves and conducting an independent life. These challenges comprise the fears of workplace discrimination, the strong prejudice from people in society, the limited schooling opportunities, the actions of hijra gurus in obstructing change and the higher vulnerability during times of crisis. This report however indicates that the business community

has an important role to alleviate these challenges and offers some guidelines on how employers can create a more equitable and diverse working environment that can help them capture long-term economic benefits. Going forward, we hope that more and more businesses will recognize the benefits of investing in the inclusion of hijras, not only as a moral imperative but also for their long-term economic growth.

ENDNOTES

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MISUM

MISTRA CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE MARKETS (MISUM)

Misum is an interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder research center at the Stockholm School of Economics focused on sustainability with competences in economics, finance, sustainable development, business leadership and innovation. Its aim is to develop rigorous knowledge around how markets may best be advanced to support the transition to sustainable development.



BANDHU SOCIAL WELFARE SOCIETY (BANDHU)

Bandhu Social Welfare Society (Bandhu) is a nongovernment community-led organization formed in 1996 and registered in 1997 under the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) and the NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh. Bandhu's purpose is to protect human rights and bring positive change for the sexually and gender diverse people who struggle with social, religious, cultural, and legal barriers. Moreover, it conducts activities to protect sexual and reproductive health rights that include HIV intervention, legal support, capacity building and policy advocacy.