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Exploring Transgender Social Inclusion at Public Universities in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Transgender student's social inclusion is crucial for ensuring human rights. This study explores the social inclusion status of transgender students at public universities in Bangladesh. This study followed a phenomenological approach to get in-depth lived experiences of transgender students. Six participants from four public universities were selected purposively for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted, and data was analyzed thematically following an inductive approach. Nine themes emerged, such as the gender identity of transgender students, experiences of discrimination in campus activities, social exclusion, bullying and harassment, impact on mental ability, impact on academic performance, university livelihood, institutional supports, and inadequate policy. This study indicated that transgender students are deprived of their rights as human beings in universities. Besides, they are the victims of bullying, sexual harassment, and avoidance from classmates and teachers, which impact their physical, mental, and academic lives. This study urges university authorities to take specific policies to ensure transgender students have congenial and inclusive learning environments.

Introduction

All over the world, dominant norms of society impose a binary understanding of gender and traditional gender roles that restrict individuals' unique identities and lead to exclusion against non-binary individuals, hindering their access to equal opportunities in society (Boudet et al., 2023; Wickham et al., 2023). Although a transgender person is usually born with a male or female body, they are individuals whose gender identity does not align with the assigned sex at birth (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2019), and they may feel that they are being trapped in the wrong body (Netshandama et al., 2017). Challenging societal norms, transgender individuals face an unimaginable number of impediments in their everyday lives, including bullying, discrimination, harassment, physical abuse, and violence. These impediments mostly occur in educational settings where transgender students experience hostility, bullying, and exclusion from peers, staff, and, surprisingly, from teachers. Several recent studies report that transphobic bullying and discrimination in educational institutions faced by transgender individuals is woefully universal (Domínguez-Martínez, 2019; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2019; Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016). Despite the growing awareness and conspicuous attention on the legal rights of transgender individuals in the political debates (Seals & Gonzales, 2019), researchers report a lack of knowledge and resources to establish a safe and gender inclusive environment in educational institutions (Martino, 2022). Consequently, along with other influential factors, transgender identity diminishes their educational aspirations (Islam et al., 2024).

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966) which sets out principles against discrimination and affirms the right to education for all, irrespective of gender identity. Article 13 (2) (c) of this covenant states, "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, based on capacity by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education". Besides, the UNESCO's Rio Statement in 2011 stated "the right to education must not be curtailed by discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity" (UNESCO, 2012).

Moreover, the UN's Born Free and Equal Policy in 2012 also emphasized the rights of LGBTQIA individuals (United Nations, 2012). Both declarations contribute to the significant shift in transgender representation in higher education worldwide in recent years. However, heteronormative values, cultures, and religious systems continue to influence higher education institutions negatively (Letchfield et al., 2017). It has been reported that 86% gender diverse students, especially transgender students in higher education face obstacles in their learning and work due to their gender diverse identities (Lawrence et al., 2019). For this high level of marginalization and harassment experience in the educational institutions intensively effects on their academic participation, mental health, and sense of community (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2020). Therefore, higher educational institutions need to take adequate measures to foster an inclusive climate and belonging to address the needs of sexual minority and gender variants (SMGV) students, who report reduced minority stress and improved belonging in an inclusive climate on campus (Budge et al., 2019).

In several studies, the exclusion experience of transgender students in higher education in the world has been reported. Freeman and Stephenson (2024) reported that in the United Kingdom a high number of trans and non-binary students experienced loneliness, and 56% of the transgender individuals in higher education felt rejected by others. In the United States, 55% transgender students suffered from mental health issues while they were in higher education programs, 39% faced bullying, harassment, or assault, and 32% experienced unfair treatment by teachers, staff, or school administrators (Conron et al., 2022). Similarly, in South Africa, transgender students feel excluded and misunderstood in academic environments due to the remaining dominant heteronormative values (Buthelezi et al., 2023). In parallel, transgender students enrolled in higher education encounter significant barriers in the Asian regions, such as in Japan, despite undertaking policy reformation steps by some universities to accept transgender students, their traditional societal beliefs and legislative constraints limit transgender students' complete participation, comfort and acceptance in higher educational environments (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Unlike most Asian countries, it is unsurprising that Bangladesh is yet to affirm transgender inclusion at the desired level in higher education. In parallel with other Asian societies, gender and sexual diversity here are perceived negatively due to historical, political, and religious reasons (Eng & Yang, 2020). However, since very few studies have been conducted on the social inclusion experiences of transgender university students, this study addresses the critical gap. This study's research question is: What is the current state of social inclusion at the public universities in Bangladesh? The findings of this study can guide higher educational institutions in Bangladesh in formulating inclusive policies to foster inclusion and better support transgender students. Furthermore, the study's findings are expected to guide educators, policymakers, and activists in taking more inclusive steps to ensure transgender students have equal opportunities on campuses. On top of that, the study may guide future in-depth studies on transgender inclusion in primary and secondary education, curriculum development and gender sensitivity, teachers' preparedness and their development, campus climates, barriers to access and participation in higher education in Bangladesh, and so on.

Transgender Inclusion Status in Bangladesh

The hostile attitude of society towards the inclusion of transgender and gender diverse students in Bangladesh became intelligible after the declaration of a quota system for transgender students by the University of Dhaka in 2023. Facing significant backlash, especially from religious groups, the university authority had to declare that the quota will remain only for third-gender applicants (Erasing 76 Crimes, 2024). Additionally, the hatred scenario towards the transgender people came to a clear stand by the protest for the cancelation or edition of an added content (titled, 'Sharifa's Tale') to a Grade 7 social studies textbook arguing that the content contradicts the religious and social norms, which was further decided to be removed by the Ministry of Education (The Daily Star, 2024). Although the inclusion of gender-diverse people in education in Bangladesh advanced through some policy initiatives, such as acknowledging Hijra people as 'Third Gender', the absence of clear guidelines created widespread misunderstanding and confusion (Amanullah et al., 2022).

Furthermore, there are no specific anti-discriminatory laws which may protect and/or recognize the sexual minorities and gender diverse population (Mitra, 2018) despite having the clear declaration in the constitution of Bangladesh in Article 28(1), "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth." and Article 28(3), "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition about access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution" (Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972). However, Article 28(2) of the constitution makes it clear that the basic gender binary, men and women, leading transgender and gender diverse population, has no access to constitutional membership as right holders (The Daily Star, 2023). Therefore, the situation reflects the complex intersections of religious, cultural, and political influences and the absence of protection laws and policy framing directly impacting transgender and other gender diverse students' access, participation, and continuation in higher education in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This study was a qualitative phenomenological research project that explored transgender students lived experiences of social inclusion in public universities in Bangladesh. This study collected data from six transgender students at four public universities. Due to privacy and confidentiality, universities and participants names are coded. Two students from University A, two from University B, one from University C, and one from University D were selected as participants of this study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews to gain deep insight into transgender students ' experiences in universities. Interview guidelines were prepared to collect data, which were then validated by a language expert and a subject expert. However, the interview was conducted conversationally to allow for flexibility in gaining real-life experiences without hesitation.

With participants' permission, researchers recorded the interviews. Each interview lasted for 50–60 minutes. After collecting data, researchers transcribed the data verbatim. The data were analyzed

thematically following an inductive approach to emerging patterns and themes from the participant's data. This study followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step thematic analysis. At first, researchers read the transcript iteratively to familiarize themselves with the data and to take notes. Later, initial codes were generated individually. After a series of discussions among the researchers about similarities and discrepancies in the initial coding and clustering similar codes into broader themes, the researcher finalized and renamed the themes and finally prepared a data analysis report.

Study Period

This project started on 01/03/2025. For this study, after obtaining ethical approval, data were collected in November 2025 and analyzed between November and December 2025.

Story of the participants

Story of participant 1

The first participant was a transgender woman, who completed her secondary school certificate exam at a local school, was admitted to a government college for higher secondary education and later enrolled at the University of A for higher education. During her academic career, she felt comfortable identifying herself as a transgender woman. Despite receiving care and love from teachers, she was discriminated against by some male friends. During her student life, sometimes she was teased by her friends, which hurt her emotionally and most of the cases she was discriminated against than other students of the campus. Despite social discrimination, the teachers' support inspired her to be proud of her identity. She feels the necessity of creating an equal and non-discriminatory environment for transgender students.

Story of participant 2

The story of the second participant illustrates the experience of a transgender female student at the University C. She feels hesitation to express her gender identity on the university campus, as society does not yet accept transgender women. As a result, she has been forced to introduce herself as a male. However, her behavior exposed her identity because she is unable to suppress the feeling of femininity within her as a transgender woman. She expressed that she had a complicated life on campus. Negligence and distance from classmates hurt her too much. Usually, she is not invited to group programs or friends' gossip on campus. A kind of contemptuous attitude is thrown towards her at the university. As a result, she struggles to accept her existence as a 'normal' student. Friends and family do not accept her, and this lack of acceptance has taken a toll on her self-confidence. Though she is invited to dance in any cultural program, at the end of programs she is bullied.

Story of participant 3

The third participant is a transgender woman, currently a student at the University B and an employee of a human rights organization. Her gender identity has become a source of social and familial conflict. During her academic life at university, she faced extensive discrimination due to her gender identity. She mentioned that she had to be mentally abused almost every day. Her classmates used to mock and laugh at her for any speech, behavior, or movement. Sometimes, her classmates would gather to take group pictures for presentations, assignments, or other group activities, and they would avoid her even though she was with them. She said that previously she considered herself as a male, but in 2017 she identified herself as a transgender woman. Since then, she started to feel shy revealing her identity and gradually became isolated from friends and relatives. A new challenge began when she was admitted to the university, because the university environment is mostly congenial for intersex people and reluctant to recognize and support transgender people. For this reason, many of her classmates, teachers, and even staff do not respect her as a human being. Most people laugh at her gender identity, even sometimes want to touch her with bad intentions and behave abnormally. As a result, she spends her entire university life in a state of crisis. Also, she cannot join any group or club at the university where other students can freely join. According to her statement, she feels comfortable only with her transgender community. However, despite her mental breakdowns, she never gives up hope to survive respectfully. She believes everyone should acknowledge diversity and create a non-discriminatory, inclusive environment for transgender people in tertiary education, helping every student feel proud of their identity and focus on their studies.

Story of the Participant 4

The fourth participant is a post graduate student at University A, who identified herself as a transgender woman. She never hesitates to express herself as a transgender woman. She believes that a university should have a diverse environment where people from different castes, religions, and genders live together peacefully. Previously, she graduated from University C when she faced many obstacles. She had to go through many painful experiences due to the negative attitude towards transgender people, and she was bullied in different ways. When she submitted her study proposal at University A, she faced some odd questions unrelated to proposals and received more criticism than other proposal presenters. She claimed that the current environment at University A is increasingly insecure due to religious and political pressures. For which she does not feel safe. Finally, she calls everyone to come forward with a compassionate attitude, without discrimination, to create a supportive environment for transgender students.

Story of the participant 5

This participant's life story was full of obstacles, and she had to fight for her identity constantly. The participant is a student at University B. Although she is proud to express her gender identity, she constantly struggles with social barriers to maintaining and accepting her identity. The national identity card of Bangladesh still mentions her identity as "male" due to the complex process of changing and

editing the identity. At first, when she attended a private university, she was called "half ladies" by her classmates, which destroyed her mental peace and eventually forced her to drop out of that university. After that, even though she started studying at the University B, she is forced to attend classes in men's clothes. So, she is hesitant to reveal her identity, as she fears controversy. Although some teachers and colleagues have supported her, there has been a lack of real inclusion throughout university life. She is often isolated from her classmates. Negative environment at the classroom and university decreases her confidence, affects her academic results. She feels that an inclusive policy should be incorporated into Bangladesh's education system, where all gender identities are respected, and equal opportunities are provided. According to her statement, the university should have a strong support system that provides emergency assistance and helps every student feel safe.

Story of the participant 6

This participant, who is the student at University D, is proud to identify herself as a trans woman. Since entering university, she has tried to expose her true identity and feel proud of her gender identity. However, her university life is not so easy. She faces discrimination from most of her classmates and teachers. Many of them cannot accept her normally, which hurt her emotionally. Specifically, during exams and viva board, a few teachers also made fun of her identity and teased her about her future. The teacher's condescending behavior makes her frustrated. Although some of her classmates support her, most of the time she is subjected to physical and emotional abuse due to feminine behavior and dress. Amid this unfavorable environment, only a professor supported her and tried to instill emotional strength. The professor appreciated her struggle and encouraged her to continue her journey. Nevertheless, this participant repeatedly feels lonely and does not feel safe at university due to discriminatory behavior. She is often isolated by others from various social events, which continuously hurt her confidence. Even she faces sexual harassment. However, she continues her academic career with determination and struggles to change traditional attitudes of the people. She dreams that all students should be treated equally and a respectful environment and equality should be created for transgender students as well.

Findings of the Study

The gender identity of transgender students

In this study, all participants reported realizing their gender identity before entering university. However, while a few students in the study openly discussed their gender identity, most students tried to hide their identity. Participant 1 mentioned, *"I was born into the world as a transgender, so why should I keep my identity a secret? I feel comfortable expressing my identity as a transgender person. I think I am a human being in a word, so gender identity does not fact."* In this regard, participant 3 said, *"I discovered myself as a trans woman in 2017, and since then, I have started to express myself as a trans woman. I have found strength in my identity and do not care what people say."* On the other hand, participant 2 shared a different experience, saying, *"Society considers me a boy, but I am unable to express my inner state. So I*

am forced to identify as a boy, even though I am a trans woman inside." Such incidents raise concerns about transgender students' identity.

Most students have faced negative experiences with their real identities. They mentioned that revealing their gender identity has a profound impact on social acceptance. In this regard, participant 4 said, *"Although I feel proud of my identity, I am very worried about my identity at my university. Whenever I reveal that I have changed my gender, I have to face various questions, which are also very embarrassing to answer. So, I did not reveal my true identity to people."* Moreover, some transgender students have faced social norms and stereotypes regarding their identity. In this regard, participant 5 mentioned, *"Many people in my university thought that my presence would spoil something sacred, bring bad luck, and bring bad omens. So, I felt inferior in revealing my identity."* Participant 6 also indicated, *"I was kicked out of the residential hall for revealing my true identity in the university. Later, I had to pay a lot to live in a separate house outside the university."* All the transgender students who participated in the study expressed hope for a day when they would be able to express their identity in public proudly, and everyone would accept their identity wholeheartedly.

Experiences of discrimination in campus activities

Transgender students witness various discrimination and stigmatization incidents in university life that disrupt their academic and social lives in multiple ways. Most students report university environments where transgender people often face disrespect. For example, participant 2 shared a bitter experience, *"One day, when I went to my teacher's room with a problem, there were two boys and two girls with me. We were all sitting on chairs, but one boy was standing. Suddenly, my teacher lifted me from the chair and asked the boy to sit down. She made me stand for twenty minutes in that meeting, which shocked me; I could not even share it with anyone."* Participant 4 also described a sorrowful experience: "*Some students in my class cannot tolerate me. Some people on campus did not take my presence on campus positively. They laugh at me, joke, or make fun of me, which greatly hurts me."* This kind of environment harms the academic success and personal confidence of transgender students. Participant 3 said, "Due to humiliation on the campus by classmates, staff, and even teachers, I am upset and cannot concentrate on my studies properly.

Moreover, participant 6 mentioned a discriminatory incident in her life, *"In different academic and cultural events in my institute, I do not get a chance to attend as a participant. As an audience, when I go, no one talks with me. They talk to each other and behave in such a way that they do not notice me. As a result, I feel alone."* Participant 2 added, *"My department had programs and cultural events at various times, but I was never allowed to play a leading role. Sometimes, I might have performed, but I was never put in charge of handling the program."* Furthermore, some transgender students have expressed frustration with campus culture, as they frequently face bias from teachers and students. Participant 5 mentioned, *"I joined political and cultural groups on campus in the first year of my study, but they removed me as soon as my identity was known."* This fear of discrimination forces most transgender students to withdraw from various activities. She also said, *"I am currently refraining from attending all events and organizations*

because I know I will be treated differently or humiliated in various ways." These findings indicate that transgender students are deprived and are discriminated against in campus activities.

Social Exclusion

In this study, transgender students struggle with social exclusion and marginalization that impacts their sense of belonging. Their lives are intertwined with the hijra and transgender community due to the breakdown of relationships with Society, relatives, and neighbors. Several participants mentioned that as they are excluded from Society, they are also excluded from various social activities within the university campus. They lived like outsiders on their campus. Participant 2 told a story about the social isolation in her life, saying, *"My classmates formed different groups, joined clubs, and participated in different activities, but I never got any opportunity to join with them."* As a result, transgender students are being deprived of gaining diverse experiences from different communities. Participant 5 mentioned, *"I was added to Facebook's social media presence with many university students. When they know the details of my identity and activities, they block me from their friends list."* However, some participants also reported that no one is interested in including them in group work or teamwork for assignments. If students are compelled to add them to the group due to teachers' orders, they humiliate transgender students. Participant 1 said, *"My classmates hesitate to talk with me in group work. They ignore me and sometimes do not consider my opinion about group assignments."* Moreover, participant 4 said, "Now, I take it as normal that I am excluded from the campus activities as I am transgender. But the horrible thing is that if someone feels sympathetic to me, others also mock them and start to consider me transgender. So, I am also afraid to mix with a sympathetic person."

Additionally, transgender students are often perceived as inferior to all other groups within the university. Participant 4 again said, *"Sometimes students, staff, and other behaviors on the campus make me wonder if I am really a student at this university or something else. When everyone feels embarrassed sitting next to me in class, it makes me feel bad."* Participant 1 said, "On my campus, I am not considered human; some treat me like an animal, which makes me socially isolated day by day." As a result, participant 5 in the study expressed a desire for a safe space on campus and mentioned, *"If there were at least one organization at my university where I could present myself without fear, then I would be able to develop myself at university."*

Bullying and Harassment

Bullying and harassment are major problems for transgender students in universities in Bangladesh, which have a significant impact on their academic lives. The study found that most students have been victims of various types of bullying during their academic careers. Participant 3 mentioned, *"I usually dress however I like, but the people around me don't allow me to wear my clothes. They insult me in various ways, make me fun, and use bad language. I feel very uncomfortable now." Besides this*, some students mentioned that bullying is now not just limited to verbal abuse but has also escalated to physical intimidation. Participant 5 described an incident, *"One evening, I was walking down the campus street singing, suddenly some students from the student group stood in front of me and threatened me, saying I*

couldn't sing. When I protested, they threatened to beat me and ordered me to leave the campus." Such physical and mental bullying of transgender students tarnishes the internal image of the university and is an expression of intolerance. Participant 6 also faced various forms of bullying at different times in the university. She mentioned, *"My classmates mistreated me. I usually sat alone in a corner in class, but one day I hurried over and sat next to a classmate. While taking notes, my hand accidentally brushed his bag. For this reason, after the class ended, my classmate scolded me very badly."* Such disrespectful behavior toward transgender students significantly affects their confidence in their academic careers.

However, some students also mentioned that they were often subjected to various forms of harassment based on their physical characteristics. Participant 1 said, *"Some classmates didn't look at me well; they looked at me in a way that made me feel very helpless. Many times, while walking down the street, many people used bad signals to me."* Besides this, transgender students often faced sexual harassment at university, which was another fear for them. Participant 4 mentioned, *"In the early days of university, I used to walk around dressed like a girl, with light lipstick on my lips, a bag on my shoulder, and go to class dressed up. Because of this, many students would glare at me, laugh at me, and sometimes touch me badly."* Some have also boycotted classes at university after being subjected to such sexual harassment. For example, participant 2 said, *"I stopped attending classes after being constantly harassed by my classmates. The teacher suggested I just come on the exam day and attend the exam."*

Impact on Mental Ability

This study explores how transgender students struggle with discrimination, exclusion, and harassment, which badly affect their mental health. They mention that such obstacles are taking a toll on their intelligence, skills, creativity, and mental strength. Some transgender students reported that their academic progress slowed down when classmates made very sarcastic comments about them. In this regard, participant 4 said, *"My classmates sometimes comment on me that my only job is to have sex, that socially I am an inanimate object, that I cannot do anything. They attach various tags like that to me."* Some students also mentioned that they are constantly reminded that they are different from everyone else and that their place is not at the university; this makes it impossible for them to continue their studies there. They mention that such neglect and oppression around them is making them mentally unstable. Participant 2 said, *"There's a tug in my mind now; I feel like I'll never be useful to this Society. Sometimes I feel like it's better to commit suicide than to live as a burden to Society."*

Participant 3 also mentioned that constant discrimination was putting her under psychological pressure and reducing her confidence. Participant 1 described that such cruel treatment by the educational institution was sapping their strength to go on with their daily lives. However, some mentioned that they have kept themselves together even after enduring hundreds of mental pains; they never want to stop the pace of their lives. Participant 4 said, *"I repeatedly console myself that education is necessary for me. I never care about what people around me say. I am always determined to achieve my goals. I am trying to take mistreatment normally as I was born differently from them". Similarly*, participant 6 said that every discriminatory incident they encounter strengthens their morale and motivates them to work hard. She said, *"If I become weak in their behavior, they will win, and I will lose. So I mentally strengthen myself to*

overcome all obstacles and become a role model for Society." Such a strong mentality not only inspires transgender students but also paves the way for their future in Bangladesh.

Impact on Academic Performance

Students in this study have mentioned that their academic performance has been adversely affected by the discrimination they face. Participant 2 said, *"I got admitted to university with excellent results, but now I can't get good results; I can't focus on my studies. I'm a student of a different sex, so I always have to be a little scared."* Participant 3 also mentioned that they are regularly disadvantaged academically due to various forms of discrimination at the university. She said, *"If I had not had to face various forms of discrimination at university, I could have achieved much better results. I am applying myself to my best in education, but the sarcastic behavior of teachers and students is not allowing me to achieve good results in any way."* On the other hand, participant 1 mentioned that classmates' discriminatory behavior made them bored in the classroom and demotivated them to study. She noted, *"When my classmates don't talk to me, I feel like I'm not fit to study at university. So, I do not get the motivation to study."*

Participant 6 said, *"When teachers divide the work into groups, no one wants to take me to the group. As a result, I must work alone. Due to this, I never get the same marks as them in group work."* Some students reported not receiving adequate support or encouragement from most teachers or students at the university. This is one of the obstacles in their academic life. In this regard, participant 5 said, *"No matter what I do, the teacher never notices my efforts. Whereas the teacher rewarded the student on the bench next to me for doing well, I never verbally praised myself for doing well."* Despite the many obstacles students face, some still dream of doing well academically. Participant 4 said, *"I know no one will ever notice my hard work, but I am still working hard. I want to prove that we transgender people also have the right to do good things by doing better than everyone else."*

University Livelihood

This study reveals that transgender students have to struggle with every aspect of their university life. Meeting all the basic needs of food, clothing, housing, education, and medical care was a big challenge in their lives. Some students expressed concern about finding safe accommodation. Participant 4 said, *"I did not get accommodation in my university due to my gender identity. As a result, I needed to rent a room far distance from my university.* Moreover, some students felt a lack of privacy and security in the university halls and dormitory environment, so they avoided university residences, which led to financial difficulties. Participant 2 said, *"Most of the students at the university looked at me with sexual intent, and many sexually proposed to me. Because of these reasons, I felt unsafe in the campus halls. I felt like I could be in danger at any time."* Most students mentioned that they often did not get part-time jobs to bear daily living expenses. Because organizations are reluctant to hire transgender students. As a result, some of them are forced to beg to survive. Participant 3 explained, *"I tried hard and soul to get a job. But did not get any. So, at night, I stand on the street and beg for money. I want to avoid such activity, but reality does not support me."* Such problems not only disrupt the lives of transgender students financially but also affect their academic performance.

However, students identified the lack of family ties as one of the obstacles to their education, which made them more financially disadvantaged. In this regard, participant 3 again said, *"My family has cut off ties with me since the day I changed my gender identity. My family does not support me financially, making my life even more difficult."* Participant 5 mentioned, *"A university provides various facilities to underprivileged students, but a student like me is not provided with any financial facilities. If we receive support from the university, transgender students will not be standing on the streets to collect money."* Although managing academic life is difficult, many students accept the hardship with a smile and adopt various strategies to manage their lives. Participant 4 said, *"Since the day I accepted myself as transgender, I have taken my life as a challenge. Therefore, I have become a lot stronger. I am ready to adapt to everything to keep my educational path smooth."*

Institutional Supports

Institutional support for transgender students is an essential element for the proper management of their studies at university, which will play a significant role in helping students adapt to the hostile environment. However, most students in the study mentioned that the lack of institutional support made student life more challenging. However, some noted receiving valuable support from teachers at their institutions at various times. In this regard, participant 2 said, *"I was once having a lot of trouble understanding a topic; when I went to the teacher to solve the problem, he treated me respectfully."* Participant 3 also mentioned, *"A few teachers at my university were very supportive of me, helping me with anything. This boosted my motivation to study."* This kind of support has made difficult moments much easier for many. However, most of the participating students expressed a negative attitude towards institutional support. Participant 1 said, *"Although my university has a counseling center for general students, we are not welcomed cordially. However, I feel that we always suffer from depression, so we need a counseling center first and foremost."*

Moreover, most students strongly demanded residential, medical, cultural, and security facilities from the university. According to them, they cannot move around safely like other students, cannot gather in public places and talk, and can't eat in the same canteen safely. Participant 5 said, *"If a residential system had been established within my university for our community, then we could communicate with each other; we would not feel lonely."* Participant 6 also mentioned, *"The university should provide us with a safe place to study, where we can speak freely without any negative fear."*

Participant 4 mentioned the lack of separate washroom facilities for them. She said, "*I knew many countries' universities build separate washroom facilities for transgender and other special students, but in my university, there are no separate washrooms and other facilities for us*." Furthermore, some students also demanded financial support from the institution. They mentioned that the university authorities can provide financial stipends to transgender students based on academic progress.*"* Therefore, all the students who participated in the study demanded institutional support to solve all their problems. They believe that if they receive institutional structural support, transgender students will feel safe and will be able to overcome all the obstacles in their educational path easily.

Inadequate Policy

In the study, most students cited inadequate university policies regarding their rights and discriminatory practices. The inadequate policies expose students to discrimination, segregation, and various risks. In this regard, participant 2 expressed frustration, saying, *"University students have harassed me in various ways at different times, but the university administration has not taken any action in this regard. It seems to me that the university has no plans to take any action regarding transgender students."* Due to the lack of such proper measures, the university has become a nightmare for many transgender students. The statements of the transgender students indicate that proper policy can save them from harassment and bullying in the university. Participant 5 also prioritized specific guidelines regarding transgender issues at the university. She mentioned, *"I think the university should make specific policies regarding disabled, transgender, dalit, and other marginalized groups to ensure inclusivity."*

Some transgender students have also been urged to build separate washrooms or accommodations for them in universities. Participant 1 said, *"I feel that universities should take some measures where we can study safely and sleep at night without any worries."* The absence of such facilities is playing a significant role in the isolation of transgender students. Participant 6 shared an incident, *"When I was in my second year, I made some suggestions to my department to adopt some policies for the inclusion of our transgender students, but the teachers in my department did not prioritize my demands, considering them unnecessary."* Transgender students claimed that it would be a timely decision to formulate the right policies and take steps to alleviate the apathy among transgender students in a university's learning environment and spread their presence throughout the university.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly reflect that transgender students studying in public universities in Bangladesh are still deprived mainly of social acceptance and a safe learning environment. Most participants were aware of their gender identity before enrolling in university, but many were forced to hide their identity due to social fears. Only a few courageous participants came forward, despite adverse reactions and social stigma. This indicates that transgender students' self-disclosure at the university level is still a challenge. These results further support the idea of Brauer (2017), who explored that transgender students encountered considerable difficulties in expressing their self-identified names and pronouns because of hegemonic, binary gender preconceptions in higher education. The current study finds that transgender students regularly face discrimination and ridicule in various university activities. They are sometimes subjected to disrespect and neglect by teachers, classmates, and administrative staff. Many of them are afraid to participate in cultural events or academic activities because they know they will face humiliation or neglect. Even some participants have been expelled from cultural and political organizations after revealing their identity. It is clear from their life experiences that they are socially isolated from university. They do not have the opportunity to participate in their classmates' groups, clubs, or team activities. As a result, they are socially isolated and feel emotionally disconnected. Similar findings were reported by Breyer (2017) and Rehmat et al. (2025). In their studies, it is evident

that transgender students face greater rates of discrimination, mistreatment, and marginalization. This includes less obvious forms of prejudice in university classrooms, such as peer neglect, ridicule, and insufficient faculty support.

According to the present study findings, most of the transgender students are often ignored, and at times, they are viewed with hatred by their classmates and others. In this situation, transgender students experience a decline in self-esteem and gradually become isolated from society and the university. Some participants in this study mentioned that if someone shows sympathy for them, that person is also mocked and insulted. Amid this disgraced situation, transgender students become emotionally distressed. These results are in line with Prakasha (2023), who pointed out that the lack of sympathy and empathy from society prevented transgender students from expressing themselves and growing in society. Another important finding in the present study is that transgender students are subjected to various forms of bullying, verbal and physical harassment at the university. Many people ridicule, abuse, and even physically threaten them because of their dress, behavior, or demeanor. Some participants mentioned that such threats made them unable to move around campus without fear. Incidents of sexual harassment had a profound impact on their psychological safety and classroom attendance. Negative comments, ridicule, and harassment from classmates and society create severe mental stress in them. As a result, many consider themselves unworthy, unnecessary, and a burden on society, which increases the tendency to depression. These findings align with the findings of Aslam et al. (2022) and Mulkern et al 2024), who found that transgender students suffered from verbal, nonverbal, physical, and sexual bullying, all of which hurt their mental health, and increase the risk of suicidal tendency and other serious mental health issues.

The results of this study indicate that discrimination and social exclusion hurt transgender students' academic performance. Teased by classmates and faced with teachers' negligence, they lose interest in studying. As a result, most of them cannot achieve the desired results. Several participants said that not receiving equal treatment from teachers and not receiving support from classmates is complicating their learning experience. These results also accord with Islam et al. (2024), who showed that transgender students also encounter obstacles in their academic careers due to unfavorable learning environments. However, some students are trying to prove themselves by maintaining a positive mindset despite adversity. They believe that despite societal neglect, they can establish their position through perseverance and hard work. In a similar vein, Nanclares et al. (2024) stated that many trans students aim for success despite a hostile environment in educational institutions.

In addition, this study finds that transgender students studying in public universities encounter the absence of gender-neutral safe housing, insecurity in university halls, and fear of sexual harassment, which makes them mentally and physically weak. Even though there are no separate toilets or other facilities for them, this finding aligns with the conclusions from Regan (2023), who found that transgender students encounter gender neutral safe housing, toilets, and other facilities, which made them uncomfortable and hindered their academic inspiration. According to the present study, transgender students live in hardship due to a massive financial crisis. Most of them do not get financial

support from their families. They also do not get part-time jobs. Similarly, Devi and Uma (2024) figured out that transgender people's financial crisis has a significant influence on their access to study. In this study, most of the participants claimed that universities do not have specific support structures for transgender students. They believe universities should have separate counseling centers, housing, medical facilities, security, and cultural facilities for marginalized students. They demanded a safe living environment, separate toilets, and an accepting environment in the classroom. These results agree with Rehmat et al. (2025), who found that a lack of institutional support causes transgender students to face significant problems, making it more difficult for them to succeed academically.

This study finds that the lack of appropriate policies hampers the inclusion of transgender students in public universities. They are subjected to harassment and isolation due to the indifference of the administration and the lack of anti-discrimination measures. Participants demanded specific policies at the university, measures to ensure their safety, and the establishment of a safe environment for housing and learning. They believe that with appropriate policies, harassment and discrimination would have been significantly reduced, and their university life could have been more dignified and inclusive. These results align with Shen and Jiang's (2024) findings, which highlight the need for targeted educational initiatives and policies to improve the quality of education for transgender students, addressing concerns about academic resources, opportunities, and justice.

Limitation

This study collected data from only six participants across four universities due to time constraints, limited availability, and permission restrictions. Though this study used a phenomenological approach to explore the in-depth social inclusion experiences of transgender students at public universities, it limited the generalizability of the findings to the broader population.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, transgender students' social inclusion in public universities remains a challenge due to discriminatory practices among classmates, teachers, and staff. This study captures the lived experiences of six transgender students at the university, which are the story of deprivation, exclusion, and discrimination. They were not treated well by their classmates or teachers. Even if they are a victim of bullying and sexual harassment. Most classmates avoid them on campus, even though they are not welcome to work in teams on assignments and other academic activities. They cannot live in the campus dormitory and are not welcome to use campus facilities like others. Moreover, they do not have the opportunity to participate in campus events, which leaves them socially isolated. Social exclusion impacts their physical and mental health, self-esteem, and academic performance. Human beings have the right to receive education in a safe, peaceful, and non-discriminatory learning environment. As the university is considered an agent of social change, these institutions have the responsibility to ensure the rights and safety of transgender students. University authorities need to implement specific policies

to foster a congenial and inclusive learning environment for all and to play a transformative role in advancing social justice and equity.

Declarations

Ethics Statement

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines stated in the Declaration of Helsinki. All individuals who took part in this study were given their informed consent before participating, and their confidentiality and privacy rights were protected during every stage of the research procedure. All potential risks for the participants were minimized. This study received ethics approval from an ethics committee.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no competing financial, professional or personal interest which could influence this paper.

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Author Contribution

Fist author Sadikul Islam contributed to conceptualization and planning, methodology, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing. The second author Md Tanvir Ahmed supported the development of the tool, data collection, data analysis, manuscript writing, and review. The third author Md Shahidul Islam contributed to data transcription, data analysis, and manuscript writing and reviewing, while the fourth author Arifur Rahman contributed to supervision, manuscript reviewing, and editing. All authors have carefully reviewed the final manuscript and approved its submission to the journal.

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Data Availability

This study collected data from transgender students. All deidentifying data will be available upon request to the corresponding author.

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