Adaptation Or Exploitation? An Analysis of the Family Structure of the Hijra Community in Bangladesh

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Abstract: This article examines the social and economic adaptation mechanisms practiced by the hijra community in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on the family structure and social relations. It posits that an analysis of hijra family dynamics may be effectively conducted by including theories of social adaptation and economic exploitation, drawing upon qualitative data. As the hijra children undergo maturation and manifest their sexual and behavioural distinctiveness, the familial outlook on the children experiences a transformation as time progresses. Hijra children are ultimately subjected to parental and societal neglect, rejection and discrimination, which in turn push them to establish an independent existence under hijra community. Within the community, the establishment and nurturing of the familial bond between the *guruma*, who serves as the head of the family, and the *chela*, who assumes the role of the disciple, is facilitated through a shared sense of affinity and unwavering loyalty. Furthermore, a significant correlation exists between hijra families and their economic system. The *chela* hijras, who have experienced separation from their biological families, seek shelter under the care of a *guruma*. Consequently, they endure processes of social and economic adaptation. However, they also experience economic exploitation from the *guruma*. This study applies a combination of primary and secondary sources of data, and Case Studies, In-depth Interviews and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) have been used to collect firsthand data. The research findings shed light on the process through which hijras are integrated into the community, as well as the various forms and degrees of economic exploitation they encounter. Thus, this article contributes to the existing body of literature on the issues of third gender and the vulnerabilities they face and what measures should be taken for their inclusive development.
Keywords: Family relations, social adaptation, economic exploitation, hijra community, Bangladesh

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Family is the fundamental social institution in all cultures. It plays a pivotal role as the primary social structure that underpins human society (Rasool & Zhang, 2022). The structure of a family entails the cohabitation of a minimum of two individuals of differing genders, ensuring their provision of sustenance, housing, security and legitimate sexual relations (Barnard, 2022). The primary goals of a family are to optimize the well-being of its members by fostering mutual respect, empathy and interpersonal bondage. Thus, the concept of family represents a dynamic social structure that encompasses living together, economic collaboration and the process of reproduction (Chowdhury, 1995; Gurer, 2019), as well as regulating sexual relations and distributing responsibilities for child care (Nanda & Warms, 2018). Family and kinship play a key role in the fabric of Bangladeshi society (Shah, 2020), as they contribute to the establishment of marriage bonds, blood connections, and exert influence on economic endeavors, socialization, identity formation, caregiving practices and the overall safety of its members.

The hijra is an institutionalized subculture in South Asia. While academicians and the media often portray hijras as a subculture in India, they are prevalent in Pakistani and Bangladeshi society as well (Hossain, 2020, p.404). Studies on hijras in modern South Asia often depict them as a social group that falls beyond the main categories of social distinction, such as "class, caste, religion, and ethnicity" (Reddy 2005a; Nanda 1999 as cited in Hossain, 2021, p.53). However, the identity, cultural status and social structure of the community exhibit similarities throughout the whole Indian subcontinent (Hossain & Nanda, 2020, p.35). A hijra is an individual who is neither male nor female (Hossain, 2021; Nanda,1999). They are legally known as 'third gender' in the Indian subcontinent (Hossain & Nanda, 2020) and are regarded as a marginalized and "shared lower-class background" social group in Bangladesh (Hossain, 2021, p.51). Aziz and Azhar (2020) also find that "the hijra who engages in traditional livelihoods for the community, such as *badhai*, often hail from lower socio-economic castes, while the hijra who work in non-profit settings often hail from higher socio-economic castes" (p.8). As a marginalized community (Rahman et al., 2020) and a subject for contemporary dominant development discourse, the legal recognition of hijra refers to the "disabled" category, while "popular public discourse constructs the hijra as people with genital anomaly" (Hossain, 2017, p. 1421).

Like mainstream society, the hijra community has its own family system. The family structure of the hijras exhibits notable distinctions in comparison to the prevailing mainstream cultural norms in Bangladesh. A hijra family does not necessarily hinge on the institution of marriage; rather, it encompasses the cohabitation of individuals belonging to the same group and gender. During the process of maturation within their natal families, hijras have apprehension over their future prospects (Chakrapani, 2010; Sema, 2019). Eventually, they are compelled to sever ties with their ancestral families because of the prevailing uncertainty, ill-mannered behaviour, torment and societal attitudes (Khan et al., 2009), the associated stigmatization (Sema, 2019), and Section 377 for the anti-sodomy legal provision (Hossain, 2020a). After leaving the ancestral family, a hijra seeks residence within the hijra community results in the formation of a new family unit, therefore gaining autonomy and establishing familial bonds. This process is facilitated under the guidance and leadership of a *guruma* who assumes the roles of both family and community leader (Hossen, 2019; Hossain & Nanda, 2020; Sema, 2019).

The socioeconomic condition in *guruma*-led households differs from that of the natal family of a hijra. Despite the Bangladesh government's legal recognition as "hijra gender" in 2014 (Abdullah, 2018), they continue to face challenges in their pursuit of basic rights, including but not limited to access to shelter, healthcare and education (Aziz & Azhar, 2020; Hyder & Rasel, 2019; Mitra, 2018; Singdha, 2021), in addition to social and cultural recognition. Moreover, the issue of economic insecurity becomes a significant concern when a hijra child undergoes the transition from parental family to the hijra home under the

guidance of a *guruma.* The hijra living in the *guruma*-managed residence is required to engage in employment and actively participate in different economic endeavors in order to cover the expenses associated with sustenance, accommodation, healthcare and other living expenditures (Hossain & Nanda, 2020; Sema, 2019).

The definition and responsibilities of family have played a crucial role in the process of building a nation in many postcolonial countries. This has included implementing changes in family law, such as increasing the minimum age required for marriage, controlling divorce, and managing property (Yeung et al., 2018, p. 473). Despite the predominantly patrilocal and patriarchal nature of the Bangladeshi family system, individuals irrespective of gender status can rely on unwavering support from their families (Zaman, 2005). This support includes access to education and economic opportunities, as well as guidance in navigating challenges stemming from sociopolitical disruptions (Ball & Wahedi, 2010). According to Hossain and Nanda (2020), "for the hijras, their households are analogous to a family and the concept of kinship is central to their social relationships and their identities" (p.38). The dynamics and roles within a *guruma*-led family are shaped by the economic obligations and interests of the *guru-chela* (leader-disciple) relationship (Reddy, 2005). Specifically, hijra families operate as a collective unit, wherein every member fulfils their respective roles in terms of financial contributions and domestic responsibilities (Nanda,1999, p. 41; Sema, 2019). In exchange, they receive accommodation, food, security and a venue to engage in various economic pursuits. As a result, the hijra family functions as both a residence and an economic unit. In this context, this article investigates the effects of the social and economic adaptation of hijra from a patriarchal household to a *guruma*-led household on their societal standing and quality of life. Our interest in the socio-economic adaptation of the hijra community stems from our background in gender, anthropology and development studies, our commitment to promoting diversity, inclusion, and social justice. We recognize the urgent need for an academic space that centers the marginalized experiences of the hijras within mainstream development discourse in Bangladesh. Within this study, we aim to explore the complex interplay between the psychological experiences of hijras and their social marginalization. This exploration illuminates how their transition into *guruma*-led households impacts both their internal well-being and their position within the broader societal fabric of Bangladesh, escalating between individual and collective perceptions. In doing so, we seek to contribute to a more inclusive academic space by exploring how the hijra family structure functions, the challenges and potential for both adaptation and exploitation, and the transformative role the community can play in shifting mainstream perceptions and driving inclusive development in Bangladesh. Our intention is two-fold: first, to foster greater understanding and empathy towards the hijra community by examining their lived socioeconomic realities, and second, to highlight their agency as they navigate challenging those structures. This will help illuminate the potential for a cultural transformation around the existing conflictive experiences of the hijra community in Bangladesh.

Against this background, the primary objective of this article is to make a comparative analysis of the hijras in terms of family system, social relationship and economic adaptation in Bangladesh. More specifically, to ascertain the family structure of the *hijra* community and to determine how it functions in relation to the economic adjustment. It examines the transition process, the dynamics of hijra family relationships and the extent of their social integration and economic exploitation. Finally, it raises the question of whether hijra families can be considered as adaptive social mechanisms or as entities that perpetuate economic exploitation.

Literature Review

Although there is a substantial amount of research on the hijras in India and a growing corpus of writings from Pakistan, there has been a limited number of in-depth research on the hijra community in the context of Bangladesh (Hossain, 2020).The existing literature examines the significance of the relations between *guru-chela*, social structure, political system, fundamental rights and means of livelihood. According to Snighdha (2021), the hijra community in Bangladesh is not a uniform group, since their sexual behaviours and customs might vary and are not strictly regulated. This undermines the belief that hijras are sexually impaired or exclusively attracted to males. However, the current Bangladeshi society marginalizes and devalues hijras, a phenomenon that may be attributed, at least in part, to a lack of comprehension of their cultural identity, which has historical roots in Bangladesh's colonial regime. Abdullah (2018) finds that Bangladeshi hijras had very little presence in the global academic sphere and media only two decades ago. Even the representation of alternative gender identities in the media was limited. However, the recent portrayal of hijras in films is paving the way for broader cultural depictions of such identities in Bangladesh. Furthermore, these representations not only promote awareness and acceptance, but also showcase the understanding, culture, accomplishments, art and views of the community that have been historically suppressed owing to a dearth of platforms. Moreover, their lack of formal education renders them marginalized and deprives them of fundamental rights (Goni & Hoque, 2020).

The hijras of West Bengal in India and those of Bangladesh have significant similarities in terms of language, the customs and rituals that govern their communities (Hossain, 2018); as well as "transregional hijra network" (Hossain & Nanda, 2020, p.34). In this context, the work of Majumdar and Basu (1997) is very relevant that focuses on the socio-economic and political life of the community, including the relationship between *guru* and *chela* which possesses a much greater degree of significance compared to blood ties. The obligations of *chela* to the *guruma*, the responsibilities of *guru* towards the *chelas*, and the prevailing conventions, principles, norms and traditions all demonstrate a profound sense of familial cohesion among the community members. Hossain (2020) contends that the community is built around a social hierarchy called *guru-chela*. With the mentorship of a *guru*, a *chela* undergoes initiation into the hijra lifestyle. A *guru* is a powerful symbol for an individual's identification with the community during their whole existence as hijra. Besides, hijra groupings function as economic entities. The group owns the income acquired under its jurisdiction. Following the hijra occupational tradition, the group members submit all the resources they acquire, including money and goods, to the *guruma*. The *guruma* then divides the money among the group members or utilizes it to support the entire group.

The ethnography of Nanda (1999) described the social organisation and economic adaptability of the hijra community, offering a critical analysis of their position, family system, social structure, customs, religious identity, economic adaptation and gender identity in Indian culture. Reddy (2005) also focused on the social dynamics of hijras in India, including their familial structure, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious practices, kinship ties and marital customs. She further underlined the significance of hijra family identity, gender characteristics, homosexuality, health disparities and socioeconomic conditions. A *guruma* is mostly recognized as the parent of her followers, resulting in the establishment of particular reciprocal obligations and duties among them, hence fostering a sense of social and economic interdependence. However, both studies mainly focused on the Indian hijra population and their cultural aspects, thereby leaving the Bangladeshi hijra community's family structure and bonding unexplored.

Sarker and Pervin (2020) have noted that hijra people encounter social prejudice and are denied basic human rights. Although the work has emphasized on the socioeconomic conditions of the community, it has not adequately investigated the familial dynamics and

their impact on social and economic adaptation. Hijra people often engage in street begging, participate in dance performances at diverse occasions, prostitution and contribute to the entertainment industry as a means of income generation (Ahmed & Sifat, 2021). However, due to a significant reduction in their income, the community members have opted to curtail their food. Hossain (2021) conducts an analysis of their employment, power dynamics, gender dynamics, experiences of love and intimacy, as well as the sort of exploitation the community encounters. He demonstrates how this group creates space for the exchange of prohibited happiness and subversive relationships, while maintaining a calculated public image that enhances their efforts to gain social and legal acceptance.

Al-Mamun et al. (2022) analyze the socioeconomic conditions of the hijra community, specifically in connection to income, education, health, housing, social relations, and shed light on the presence of stigma, prejudice, exclusions and discriminatory attitudes towards this community. Because of prevailing socio-cultural norms, they engage in various activities including begging and prostitution, as a means of livelihood so subjecting themselves to significant maltreatment. Hijras are frequently subject to the denial of entry into government institutions, live in impoverished conditions, and have limited access to healthcare and employment opportunities. Thus, it is essential to prioritise social recognition and financial solvency as the primary measures to eliminate prejudice. Furthermore, government and non-government organizations must place a significant emphasis on safeguarding the community's human rights. Hyder and Rasel (2019) suggested the provision of complimentary educational opportunities from primary to university level, the implementation of a third gender quota system, and a standardised inheritance system for hijras.

Aziz and Azhar (2020) examine the phenomenon of social exclusion and legal recognition of hijras, shedding light on the challenges they face in terms of employment opportunities and access to healthcare.They propose various steps to overcome the challenges, including the implementation of vocational training programmes, heightened awareness among healthcare providers and legal actions aimed at safeguarding the civil rights of the community. Likewise, the study conducted by Khan et al. (2009) focused on the relations between exclusion and sexual health among the hijras. The study indicated that hijras occupy a position of utmost marginalization, characterized by a lack of sociopolitical agency. These seclusions serve as a hindrance to their potential and security resulting in instances of physical, verbal and sexual abuse. Moreover, unavoidable conditions and elements are impeding their economic progress (Sema & Islam, 2020). Mitra (2018) also contends that hijras are hindered from fully participating in mainstream society due to the prevailing stigma and lack of acceptance, despite their purported entitlement to choose their gender depending on sexual orientation. While national recognition may be a step in the right direction, it alone is insufficient to ensure the protection of human rights for the community. The legislation should integrate the societal embrace of this marginalized group, foster awareness among the mainstream populace, and provide unambiguous and enforceable penalties for any transgressions.

Hossain (2023) argues that the Bangladeshi government is actively seeking to eliminate *hijragiri*, which refers to the traditional occupations of hijras. This includes discouraging activities such as *badhai* and *cholla*, which include collecting money and food from marketplaces and publicly identifying oneself as a hijra (p. 43). Despite current efforts by state and civil society programmes to eradicate the hijra occupation as part of Bangladesh's developmental vision, the recent economic growth and increase in conspicuous consumption have unexpectedly created new motivations for hijra group to request *badhai* and *cholla*. Hossain and Nanda (2020) further argue that hijras typically do not solely define themselves based on gender or sexuality, but instead emphasize the significance of hijra kinship and society in shaping who they are. Household members give a portion or the whole of their income to the household head (*guruma*). Additionally, they assist with all sorts of

domestic tasks. In exchange, they are provided with a safe and stable residence, access to engage in both their traditional and modern occupations, sustenance and safeguarding from the local law enforcement agencies.

The above literature addresses the social, economic and political life and challenges faced by the hijra community. These challenges may significantly differ across the country. Moreover, the examination of the social organization of the *guruma*-led family within the setting of Bangladesh remains an underexplored issue, particularly in relation to its role as either a mechanism for social and economic adaptation within the larger community or a means of exploitation for hijra individuals. In this regard, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive study of the family, social and economic dynamics of the community.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This article draws upon theoretical frameworks pertaining to social exclusion, social stigma, and social inclusion in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the family relations of hijras in Bangladesh. The concept of social exclusion, as first articulated by René Lenoir, pertains to the systematic marginalization of individuals or collectives, resulting in their limited or total exclusion from active participation within their respective societies (Rawal, 2008).The theory provides valuable insights on the marginalization of the hijra community, highlighting their limited access to resources, rights, services and opportunities for social engagement. On the other hand, the concept of social inclusion emerged in reaction to the phenomenon of social exclusion, with the aim of promoting social justice, equality and collectivism as a means to address various forms of oppression (Allman, 2013). The social inclusion theory provides insight into the strategies used by hijras individuals and the community as a whole to enhance their opportunities, capabilities, and quality of life within the context of wider society.

In accordance with Goffman's theory on social stigma, individuals who possess a certain characteristic or are known for engaging in certain behaviour that are socially disapproved are subjected to cognitive categorization, resulting in their association with unfavourable and rejected stereotypes, as opposed to those that are considered normal and acceptable (Goffman, 1986). In contrast, social adaptation refers to the process by which an individual or a group adjusts their behaviour, attitudes and beliefs to align with the social norms and expectations of a given social situation. The phenomenon of social adaptation entails individuals fulfilling their desires and needs within the context of their social surroundings. According to Terziev (2019), sociology focuses on several forms of adaptation, all of which are inherently social in character. Hijras are social groups that have emerged from specific occupational roles. The principles of authority, respect, essentiality and reciprocity have wider significance within their social context.The social structure and cultural practices of the hijra group facilitate their survival and success by accelerating their adaptation to a broader society (Nanda, 1997).

The social structure of the hijra community is greatly influenced by the familial ties, which serve to facilitate the reproduction of material life and have substantial importance for society as a whole (Reddy, 2005). The community operates on a system whereby its members are required to contribute to their income in order to access provisions such as housing, food, security and a venue for economic activities (Nanda, 1999). The social organization in which *chelas* engage and provide support via the *guruma*, wherever they function as clans, is a further aspect of the family system. Respect for possessions is perceived as a fundamental principle within the community (Nanda, 1999).

The followers of a *guruma* maintain the social and financial obligations of the family. Hijras usually follow hierarchies based on seniority, which function as a system for

organizing and managing social dynamics (Reddy, 2005). In instances where notable transgressions of societal standards take place, the hijra individual is ceremoniously trimmed as a means of being publicly stigmatized. Even individuals may face expulsion from the hijra society on such occasions (Nanda, 1999). Although *guruma*-led familial arrangements are social collectives in which individuals have the opportunity to assimilate into the community, these structures have the potential for instances of physical, psychological and economic exploitation (Nanda, 1999).

The concept of 'exploitation' pertains to a situation when a certain group utilizes its advantageous position to its own benefit over others. The hijra family system entails a scenario in which some individuals benefit financially from the affliction experienced by others. The act of exerting relational power over marginalized people is the strategy used by those who exploit them for economic profit. In contrast to the prevailing anthropological approach of employing a third gender framework to analyse pertinent matters, as exemplified by Hossain (2021), our contention posits that the exploration of masculinities can offer valuable insights into comprehending the dynamics of the hijra population, including their adaptation strategies and experiences of exploitation. This perspective sheds light on the multifaceted nature of hijra subjectivity, as well as the intricate processes involved in the construction, perpetuation and evolution of masculinities.
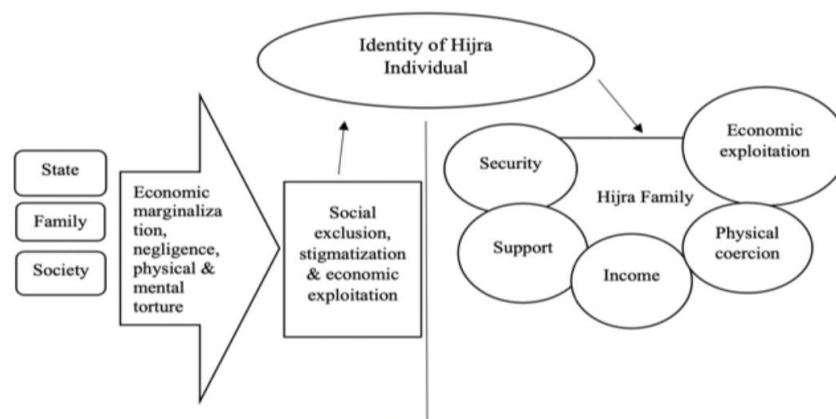

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

This article began with the idea that hijras are among the most disadvantaged groups in the family, community, and state realms as a result of neglect and physical and emotional abuse. These led to a life of exclusion in all areas, including social exclusion, stigmatization and economic destitution. In this situation, they seek their own way of life, and the hijra family enables them to integrate into greater society by offering protection and support.

Research Approach

The hijras' unique origins, language and fictitious ancestry have led to fear, indifference and irritability in mainstream society. Despite open communication, they remained skeptical leading to a lack of outcomes from the structured method interview. In this case, we have

applied qualitative methodology. According to Hara (1995), qualitative research has a certain amount of complexity and is adept at exploring complex social matters. Besides, qualitative researchers conduct studies in natural settings, aiming to comprehend and understand events based on the significance individuals attribute to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). They further state, "We want a social science committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights" (p. 11). The first author of this study has been doing academic research on the hijra community in the Hili region of northern Bangladesh for the last 15 years. As a result, he had developed a rapport and regular contact with the study population where the fieldwork was conducted. This allowed him to have easy access to talk with the interlocuters anytime, in person or sometimes over the phone.

For this particular study, case study methodology was chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth and nuanced understanding of a complex phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). According to Stake (1995), a case study involves making a deliberate choice regarding what to examine, focusing on a single instance within a well-defined system and taking into account both the temporal and spatial constraints. This entails the meticulous gathering of extensive and thorough information from several sources, including observations, interviews, video material, documents and reports (Yin, 2018 as cited in Shah, et al., 2023). As a result, this process generates projected assumptions and collects evidence from several sources, ensuring that the data comes together in a triangulated manner (Yin, 2018). However, there has been a scarcity of academic investigations focused on analysing the cases of those affiliated with the hijra group. And hence, following the guidance of leading case study methodologists (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009), this research aims to provide a rich and contextually sensitive analysis of the hijra community's lived experiences.

Data Collection Methods and Tools

Case study research often entails extensive data gathering, including several sources of information such as observations, interviews, documents and audiovisual resources (Creswell, 2013). The primary data gathering techniques for this study were interviews and document reviews. An extensive examination of 10 case studies (CSs) that investigated the life experiences of hijras was conducted. According to Yin (2018), case study interviews may be described as guided talks rather than organized enquiry. During the conversations, two particular criteria were followed, as suggested by Yin (2018): to align with the research questions and to correctly record the talks without being biased (as cited in Shah, et al., 2023). We established rapport with the hijras by spending a long time, stating study objectives and convincing their leaders that our visit was for academic purposes. The ten cases were selected purposively to represent a diversity of experiences of the hijra community (e.g., variations in age, length of time with the *guru*, specific roles). Data saturation guided the number of cases, indicating that additional cases were unlikely to yield significantly new thematic insights (Yin, 2018).

This research has also conducted 10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to examine the historical background and wider ramifications of the community. According to Yin (2018), key informants are crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of a case study. These individuals may provide valuable perspectives on a subject and help the researcher establish connections with other respondents who may have supporting or conflicting evidence (Yin, 2018 as cited in Shah, et al., 2023). This study conducted interviews with key informants that included experienced and reputable people from the hijra community at large. The interviews provided insights into the factors that impact the social position of the hijras. Besides, a total of 10 In-depth Interviews (II) were conducted using purposive sampling, with the criteria for selection being their firsthand involvement with the *guruma* family, discipleship, disputes and instances of exploitation. Moreover, the literature on the hijra community, including books, articles,

research reports, and policy documents, was examined and used to complement the primary material.

Table 1

Sample distribution

Methods	Number of Participants	Education level	Total
Case Study Interviews	10	Primary to Higher Secondary level	10
Key Informant Interviews	10	Primary to University level	10
In-depth Interview	10	Up to Secondary level	10
		Total	30

Data Management, Analysis and Presentation

Upon the completion of the fieldwork, the data was transcribed. Following that, the narratives shared by the participants were subjected to a thematic analysis. This approach is well acknowledged in the literature as a commonly used way of analysis in case study research (Yin, 2018). In order to comprehensively document and analyse personal life experiences, the views shared by the participants were documented into several theme components that exhibit unique perspectives. Specifically, we used the method of thematic analysis, including several essential stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of overarching themes, examination and refinement of themes, assignment of labels to themes, and preparation of the report. The process of data analysis involves the inclusion of verbatim quotes in order to improve the quality of the data and to get a more thorough grasp of the real-life situations experienced by the study participants. Selected quotes were chosen to highlight typical responses while acknowledging that some variation existed within the participant group. We used triangulation to ensure data reliability- the data collected through IIs and CS were compared with the data from KIIs (Creswell in Wertz et al., 2011). The research adhered to ethical protocols pertaining to several facts, such as securing informed permission from participants, safeguarding their anonymity, privacy, and assuring their voluntary involvement.

While case study methodology allows for a rich understanding of particular cases, the specific focus on the Hili region may limit the generalizability of findings to other hijra communities in Bangladesh, particularly those in urban areas. The sensitive nature of the topic may have led to some participants withholding information (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The potential for researcher bias or misinterpretation in qualitative analysis is acknowledged. However, measures such as prolonged engagement and triangulation were used to mitigate these risks. The researchers' extended time in the field and sensitivity to cultural dynamics ultimately facilitated the collection of rich data.

Results and Discussion

Hijra Family Structure

The family is a prominent social institution (Chowdhury, 1995) and its significance resides in its role of facilitating social existence through the practices of marriage, sexual interactions, kin relations and mutual obligations in Bangladesh.The hijra community comprises individuals who form familial bonds known as *guruma* and *chela*, which are based on fictive ties. Despite its fictitious nature, the bond between *guruma-chela* endures through mutual respect and unwavering dedication (Habib, 2012; Hossen, 2019). In this regard, Laila hijra (33) said,

> I have been separated from my natal family for nearly five years and living with *guruma* in her family. Our family consists of *guruma*, a *malkin* [just above a *chela* in hierarchy], and six of us [*chela*]. Although we have no blood relations, we have mutual respect and commitment to our kin members which strengthens and lasts our family ties. *Guruma* is both our mother and father.

The division of economic activities in the hijra family differs from that practiced in the mainstream family. With the exception of *guruma*, all members, including the disciples, engage in income-generating activities. According to Ball and Wahedi (2010), a father is the key figure of authority within the family unit and is considered primary guardian for family members in Bangladesh. They usually play a crucial role in guiding family members along with economic security and actively strive to overcome challenges untill the younger achieves self-sufficiency. However, the situation is different in hijra family as Karima (55) who has been living with a *guruma* as a *chela* said, *"My guruma takes care of myself and other chelas as family members. However, all of us must work to bear the expenses of the family. Only earning can provide the guruma satisfaction towards us."*

Hijras usually take part in a range of activities to fulfil their economic needs including collecting money at marketplaces, railway stations and bus terminals, as well as engaging in performances of dances and songs. They customarily undertake the responsibility of carrying their households' expenses. However, those who collect money, alms and involve in prostitution, they face social exclusion in Bangladesh (Al-Mamun et al., 2022). This exclusion extends to all other aspects of their life. Jyoti hijra (31) who lives with a *guruma* family narrated her experiences:

> We collect money at bus terminal, rail stations and other places. We then distribute the collected money among ourselves. However, our *guruma* must get the majority of the money, as she is the guardian of the family. This is how things work in our *guruma* controlled family.

Status of Hijra Children in Traditional Family

A hijra child, like children in mainstream society, undergoes the process of maturation within their familial environment. However, when reaching the age of 4-6 years, family members begin to detect atypical patterns in both their movement and behavior. The act of a child adopting feminine attire, including the use of cosmetics and other embellishments such as jewellery, may elicit a sense of suspicion among those who possess a skeptical disposition. Regrettably, the child's subconscious mind remains unaware of the emergence of a distinct force known as human nature, which significantly upsets their ordinary existence. Subsequently, throughout the developmental stage of 9-10 years, the youngster may become cognizant of the disparity between their own physical maturation and that of typically developing peers. Specifically, they start to encounter instances of neglect, humiliation and abuse as a result of exhibiting feminine behavior (Khan et al., 2009).

At one stage, family members compel the hijra child to conform to certain clothing codes that adhere to gendered societal standards. However, due to the atypical nature of his

biological development, the family imposes restrictions on him. During a certain phase, when the family's neighbours and relatives are cognizant of this circumstance, the family encounters a multitude of social predicaments. Consequently, the family's perception of the hijra child undergoes a transformation, leading to the youngster being subject to various forms of prejudice within the socioeconomic and cultural milieu (Sema, 2019). According to Aziz and Azhar (2020), instances of social exclusion often originate within the familial context. Rahima hijra (35) describes her experience,

> I have always wanted to dress like a woman since I was a child. However, my family's strict standards prevented me from wearing a girl's dress in public as I grew up. When I was around 15 years old, I found a *guruma* and became her disciple. But two weeks later, my family brought me back home and forced me to live with them as a boy.

Separation of Hijra Children from the Natal Family

Like other children in mainstream society, hijra youngsters spend their formative years under the supervision and guidance of their natal families. During the transitional period of puberty, hijra children experience the terrible consequence of their voice changing, which subsequently leads to derision and mocking. Additionally, the meddling of external factors, particularly from the family, exacerbates this situation. Consequently, the families of these children experience heightened levels of concern over their future prospects (Chakrapani, 2010). In addition to the presence of unfavourable sentiments and prevailing social stigma, neighbours and relatives limit their visits to households where hijra children are identified. Consequently, the hijra children experience different forms of ridicule from their families and neighbours due to their adoption of transgender behaviour and speech patterns (Khan et al., 2009; Sema, 2019). They may also suffer physical abuse; a hijra named Sumi (23), talked about the reasons for leaving her family,

> I fled my home because of my family's physical and emotional torture. I knew very little about the outside world. When I left my home, I was very tensed to see the new challenging world. However, things began to change when a hijra noticed me. She took me along and allowed me to live with her. Later, we rented a home jointly, despite the fact that very few house owners wanted to rent it to us! Since then, I have been living here and have never gone back to my family.

The statement supports the views of Hossain and Nanda (2020) who find that hijras often sever ties with their biological families before joining the hijra society and do not maintain contact with them later. In rare instances, hijras do preserve familial connections and sometimes make visits only if they consent to assume a male identity.

Formation of Hijra Family

Following exposure to diverse instances of familial and societal neglect, the hijra children undergo a process of detachment from their paternal households, subsequently establishing a distinct and autonomous family unit. In hijra culture, there are distinct variations in the factors that contribute to family bonding as compared to the mainstream society. These variations mostly revolve around the concepts of fictive kinship, mutual respect and attachment. In addition to conjugal relationships, the hijra community exhibits fictive and conventional familial ties that are prominent within their social structure, and this

supports the remarks of Turner (1989), "kin relationships do not necessarily coincide with biological or genetic relationships" (p.4). Sworna hijra (17) also comments,

> A *guruma* is our family's all-time guardian. She is responsible for a variety of family tasks and duties. We are currently eight *chelas* living with our *guruma*. When we are in any trouble, she protects us by any means possible. We also try to keep our *guruma* happy always.

Hijras are interconnected through their shared social and cultural cohabitation, as well as their collective experiences of both favorable and unfavorable circumstances. Anastasiu (2012) asserts that within the larger societal context, families often fulfil the role of providing love, safety and emotional support to their members. Within the hijra community, it is customary for all adherents of *guruma* to identify themselves as her daughters, thus establishing a familial bond in which she is perceived as their mother or parent/mentor (Nanda, 2010). Similarly, they extend this familial association to one another, acknowledging and treating each other as sister. The mutual kinship between *guruma* and *chela* is thus quoted by Serena Nanda (1999) as, "the *guru* is expected to take care of the *chela* as a parent does of a child, and the *chela* is expected to be loyal and obedient to the *guru*. As in families, too, the *guru*, as elder, is the centre of the *chelas* social relationship" (p.45).

There are different types of mutual bonding of kinship exist in the hijra family; e.g., *soi, mitin,* and *bandhovi* (denoting female friendship and special attachment). These relationships exemplify social cohesion and collective resilience in the face of challenging circumstances. Hijras promote a sense of responsibility by facilitating access to care for those who are confronted with perilous circumstances. These individuals typically encounter challenges stemming from their social surroundings, emotional detachment, substance abuse, sedatives or suicidal tendencies. The assistance provided by *soi, mitin* and *bandhovi* facilitates the resolution of familial values and pride. In a similar vein, it is the duty of parents in conventional households to assume responsibility for the welfare of their offspring, encompassing provisions such as sustenance, safeguarding, fostering self-assurance, offering help during challenging situation and providing medical support when required (Anastasiu, 2012). In the context of hijra family, Sagoriaka (31) describes it as follows:

> Our *guruma* is known as *ma* [mother] to us, and we are her daughters. We are all sisters from the same family, led by the *guruma*. When we are in danger by other members of society, we all move together to protect us and solve the problem.

Types of Hijra Family

The hijra community comprises three distinct types of families with regards to their family structure: *guruma*-centered families, *parik*-centered families and joint families. Families centred on the *guruma* emerge when hijra children choose to live and learn under the guidance of a *guruma*. Hijras leave their natal families after experiencing neglect, humiliation and discrimination. Natal families, specifically parents deem the birth of hijra children as a 'misfortune'. In the mainstream society, families are usually classified into three distinct categories based on marriage and consanguinity: joint, extended and nuclear family (Chowdhury, 1995). Hijra families, by contrast, have fictitious relationships that distinguish them from these categories. Sworna hijra (17) described her experience of why and how she became a member of a *guruma* centered family,

> Although my real name is Ripon, my *guruma* named me Sworna. For my studies, I had to reside at my uncle's house. He enrolled me in a madrasa so that I could study Arabic. As I grew older, I prefered to dress like a girl. I used to dress up with my aunt's sarees. For this behaviour, I had to face humiliation frequently. Once I found Sumitra

hijra who came to our neighbor's house. As I was unable to bear the severe difficulties in my everyday life, I moved with her to a *guruma* controlled family.

It is found that hijras are discriminated in terms of family status compared to their non-hijra siblings (Khan et al., 2009). Even parents, siblings and relatives of hijras are subject to ongoing societal disregard. Consequently, hijras are deprived of the right to live with their natal families (Sema & Islam, 2020). According to Sarker and Pervin (2020), the majority of hijras do not have familial ties and instead live-in communal settings alongside *gurumas* in Dhaka city. As a result of familial and economic challenges, a significant number of hijras are compelled to sever links with their families and affiliate themselves with the hijra community. However, individuals belonging to conventional households depend on their family members for financial assistance and security (Mokomane, 2012).

Reddy (2005) asserts that hijras are required to adhere to certain regulations and traditions in order to gain membership within the community. As an example, a *guruma* is an esteemed person who assumes the role of a nurturing maternal figure, imposing the condition upon fresh followers to rest their heads across her lap, thereby evoking the image of a dependent child. Upon initiation into the hijra community, a novice adherent undertakes a customary obligation to disseminate confectionery to all participants present during the ceremonial proceedings under the guidance of the *guruma*. The *guruma* conducts the rituals of mirror reflection to persuade her *chela*, asking her to renounce her desire for material gain and sensual pleasure, as well as complete her hijra obligations with integrity. During the process of discipleship, the new *chela* contributes money or presents gifts to the *guruma* as tokens with the aim of fostering a mindset centered on generating revenue (Reddy, 2005).

The terminology pertaining to the concept of fictive kinship in the community is characterized by the use of the terms '*guruma*' and '*chela*', which respectively denote the roles of leader and disciple. Upon initiation into discipleship, the *chela's* name undergoes a transition to a feminine designation prior to being a complete hijra member (Freeman, 1989). According to Reddy (2005), the newly introduced hijra receives comprehensive instruction on the cultural norms and traditions of the community under the guidance of a *guruma*. The relationship between the *guruma* and *chela* is often seen as a maternal bond in the community, where it is acknowledged as *dudh bety* (milk daughter) (Hossain, 2021). The *guru* assumes a dominant role within the family structure, imparting knowledge and guidance to her *chela* on the established norms, cultural practices and principles that govern both her immediate kinship group and the wider society (Reddy, 2005). Similarly, conventional family members acquire social and personal development competencies from their family units, including unconditional affection, moral discernment, empathetic understanding and self-control (Mokomane, 2012).

The *guruma* furthermore imparts instruction to *chelas* on acquiring a means of sustenance, encompassing various strategies pertaining to the market, handclapping and drumming (Hossain & Nanda, 2020). The allocation of tasks is determined by the *guruma*, taking into account factors such as age and competence. These tasks include a range of responsibilities, including cooking, tending to the needs of the *guruma*, maintaining household cleanliness and procuring funds from the local market. Each hijra effectively carries out the obligations that are entrusted to her. While traditional families often handle various aspects of daily activities, such as managing lifestyles, food preparation, dishwashing and cleaning in their own households (Anastasiu, 2012), hijra families differ in that they do engage in the practice of sending their members to collect money from marketplaces. In order to maintain family discipline, the *guruma* has the authority to administer various forms of punishment (Nanda, 1999). Reddy (2005) further said, "In exchange for their *chelas*' services and earnings, *gurus* are required to look after their health and well-being, treat them fairly,

provide them clothes and food, and give them the necessary training and knowledge about hijra customs and manners to permit their rise in seniority" (p.157).

When a disagreement arises among the followers, *guruma* often acts as the mediator to resolve the conflict. According to Majumdar and Basu (1997), the newly engaged hijras in their familial context refer to the head *guruma* as '*didima*' (grandmother). Before going to collect alms from a particular place, the *chelas* seek permission from the *guruma*. In this regard, Nanda (1999) said,

> *Gurus* control work, both through their house's ownership of the territories where *hijras* work, as well as acting as employment agents-whether for ritual performance or prostitution or asking for alms. Freelancing by *hijra* imposters, or by *hijras* who do not have a *guru*'s permission to work in a particular territory, is strictly controlled, trespassers, if caught, will be beaten or fined or both (pp.33-34).

In contrast, hijras who cohabitate with their *parik*, termed as "normative Bangla men" by Hossain (2021) and establish family units, are often referred to as *parik*-centric households. These couples engage in extended periods of courtship prior to marriage, and their union is formalized through the involvement of a *guruma*. Later, they live as husband-wife (Hossain & Nanda, 2020). This pattern broadly belongs to the practice of western romantic love and marriage (Kottak, 2023). These marriages typically last shorter than those in mainstream social contexts. According to Hossain (2021), "there are pariks who live on a permanent basis with their hijra partners. Then there are also pariks who live away from their hijra partners but visit them on a regular basis. There are also long-term pariks who only receive visits from their hijra partners" (p.159). Most pariks come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, experiencing economic hardship and opting to form partnerships with hijras to attain financial security. In addition, *chela* hijras are required to provide care for their *guruma* and adhere to a set of regulations while living in the community. Anowara (35) hijra said, "*Despite the fact that I live with my parik, I do all of my tasks for my guruma. I try to see her at least once a month. On different occasions, I present her gifts, provide money for treatment and other essentials.*" Furthermore, the hijras provide support for their pariks' material needs, with economic considerations playing a significant role. Similarly, within the context of a traditional family, the husband and wife establish a distinct and effective economic entity, functioning as a cohesive unit to fulfil the fundamental necessities of existence.

Hijras who live with their parents and siblings, mostly because of their families' esteemed reputation or lineage standing, and occasionally live with the hijra community, are considered members of joint families. As a result of family norms, the hijras live with relatives from their paternal lineage and simultaneously maintain contacts with the *guruma* household as per their preference at a given time. Sarker and Pervin (2020) conduct research on a sample of 135 hijras and discover that a minority, namely 5.9% of the hijra population, resides with their natal families in their own households and interacts with other hijras on an as-needed basis. Despite the fact that these hijras independently absconded from their homes on a few occasions, their family members intervened to ensure the preservation of their family's reputation and social standing. Anastasiu (2012) asserts that individuals from conventional households often exhibit a strong sense of affiliation and strive to preserve the social standing of their family unit. Rahima hijra (35) said,

> When I was 14, I ran away from home and began to live with a *guruma*. I felt good about living with her because I was accepted as a girl. However, after two weeks of searching, my family found me and forcibly returned me home. Because my family was respectable, they did not allow me to live in the hijra community. However, I still maintain secret relations with other hijras. I always feel that I am a member of their family. That's why I am here today!

The above narrative indicates that hijras are also heterosexually married; in these cases, they practice their traditional hijra occupations (*hijragiri*) in a location away from their households (Hossain 2018). Hijra sexual encounters with both men and women complicate and question the traditional and long-established characterization of hijras as being neither male nor female. This classification has mainly disregarded their sexual interests or relationships that extend beyond prostitution (Hossain & Nanda, 2020).

Fictive Kin-Relations of Hijra

The fictive kinship within the hijra community is a multifaceted link that serves as a source of support and resilience in the face of familial challenges (Nanda, 1999). In order to assume the role of a traditional hijra, an individual is required to engage in the process of community integration and establish a "fictive kinship" relationship with fellow members. Additionally, to be recognized as a hijra, it is necessary to become a disciple (*chela*) of a respected mentor (*guru*). According to Snigdha (2021), each hijra is identified by a certain *ghor* (home), with each *ghor* being designated by the title of "*malik*." The *guru-chela* relations have significant social and economic importance since they involve the transmission of a *guru*'s family link to her *chela*. Consequently, within the context of *guru-chela* relationships, the term "granny" is used to refer to the *guru's guru* (the leader's leader), namely the maternal grandmother, while the term "aunty" is used to denote the *guru*'s "sister" (Nanda, 1999).

The social networks play a vital role in facilitating economic adaptation in the hijra community. Hijras are able to sustain their financial stability by engaging in household chores, particularly in situations when they are unable to pursue external employment opportunities owing to factors like age or illness. Few hijras may choose to reunite with their fictive family, either for the purpose of recuperation or at the final stage of life-cycle. According to Nanda (1999), the majority of hijras, irrespective of their degree of feminism, see these practices as resonating and culturally appropriate.

According to Reddy (2005), in larger social contexts, hijras do not regard consanguineous or affinal relatives as 'family'. A *guru-chela* tie, a cyclic relationship that spans generations, is the central axis of hijra kinship and descent. When the *chela* is sick or in need, the *guruma* is responsible for caring for her as well as representing the *chela* during hijra meetings and ceremonies. A *chela's* role is to look after and protect her *guruma,* as if she were her own daughter. In Bangladesh, a son is traditionally responsible for caring senior family members as well as providing food and accommodation for ageing parents (Begum & Islam, 2018). Beauty hijra (37) said,

> We are not ordinary people like everyone else. When we live together or travel someplace, we have disagreements with people. People hate and disapprove of our way of life. People refuse to accept our way of speaking, dressing and being present, so how can we lead a normal life? Your society is unaware that God has created us. They think it's all our fault. We can continue to live in our present ways as long as there is *guruma*. The *guruma*, like our father and mother, is our guardian. She is always concerned about our well-being and attempts to ensure it. Because of our *guruma*, we can earn, live and stay out of danger. Without *guruma*, we will not be able to survive in the wider society.

A hijra family system operates based on a *guru-chela* relationship in which both parties share equal responsibilities and benefits. The *guru-chela* bond serves as the bedrock of the hijra family system, as the *chela's* conduct mirrors that of the *chela*, family and community. Without a *guru*, a *chela* may experience an identity crisis and a decline in social

standing. According to Hossain (2021), *hijragiri* is an institution that revolves on the lessons and guidance of a *guru*. *Chelas* hold *gurus* in great esteem. When a *guru* becomes physically sick, it is anticipated that the disciples would provide care for her. So, a *chela* is an essential component in preserving the hijra lineage and signifies the *guru*'s *izzat* (prestige) and community seniority (Reddy, 2005). Similarly, elderly individuals are held in high regard in traditional families (Islam, 2015), which ensures that their members are shielded from perils for the duration of their lives. From this perspective, Nahar Banu hijra (32) said,

> We earn roughly 5000 to 6000 taka [$1equivalent to 115 taka], but we have to pay *guruma* 2000–2500 taka and *malkin* 800-1000 taka. *Guruma* receives our money under the logic of providing shelter and safety. We don't say anything, even when it appears unhappiness to us. Because *guruma* is our protector and gives us all assistance.

Livelihood of Hijras and Alternatives

A hijra child becomes impoverished after being detached from the natal family. The newly recognized hijra adjusts to new social and economic conditions after joining a regulated household under a *guruma*. Hijras' customary rules are to collect money by dancing and singing and return home (Habib, 2012; Hossain, 2017). The traditional hijra occupation has engendered unfavourable opinions among the general populace, prompting them to seek alternative occupations. Despite public compassion, criticism of hijras' occupation, especially their traditional manner of earning money, is growing. As a consequence, hijras are transitioning to more convenient employment. Sohani (30) stated the way of alternative earning,

> I used to dance as a youngster because I wanted to be a lady. Now I earn a living by playing on stage in various locations. I run my own dance school. Sometimes, I go to India to perform a dance. I do my income by dancing.

Social Adaptation or Economic Exploitation?

The hijra community experiences marginalization in several aspects of social, political, and economic spheres, including significant abuse and exclusion (Al-Mamun et al., 2022; Mitra, 2018; Sema, 2019). Therefore, a perpetual kind of economic adaptation is seen among the community (Nanda, 1999). Over the course of time, the hijras have gone through a range of transformations in their social and economic structures due to colonialism, modernization and globalization (Hossain & Nanda, 2020). They encounter several challenges in public settings, including the experience of terror, instances of both physical and psychological abuse, and a dearth of adequate healthcare and civil services (Al-Mamun et al., 2022). According to Hossain and Nanda (2020), "[Hijras] are subject to marginalization, economic discrimination, inadequate opportunities for shelter, security and safety, and medical care, and are forced to beg and engage in sex work" (p.35). Thus, hijras are marginalized and experience the adverse consequences of the prevailing societal attitudes and oblige to adapt to the emerging social order. They undergo a process of adaptation to the economic and social dynamics, followed by a subsequent adjustment to the new economic and social milieu within their *guruma*-led families. However, in the recent paradigm of social development in Bangladesh, *hijragiri* is seen as a major roadblock to the social empowerment and economic development of the hijra community. *Badhai* and *cholla*, are seen as types of extortion and beggary. This is where the state's goal of reducing *hijragiri* aligns with its goals to eradicate street begging in major cities (Hossain, 2023).

The hijra community is very susceptible to several forms of discrimination, including negligence (Mitra, 2018). Moreover, they experience deprivation in terms of government-provided facilities (Al-Mamun et al., 2022). A hijra child's social standing within the paternal family differs from that of a *guruma's* household. In a *guruma*-led family, significant changes are found in several aspects of their livelihood, including housing, nutrition, education, healthcare and social security compared to their biological families. It is also mentionable that the new family provides *chelas* with essential physical, psychological and economic support, as well as facilitating their integration into the broader community. This enables them to not only endure but also prosper (Hossain & Nanda, 2020). The *chelas* encounter a novel economic framework inside *guruma's* household, necessitating their engagement in occupations prescribed by *guruma* as part of the new economic system. Upon joining *guruma's* family, the *chela* becomes involved in a diverse range of activities in order to provide financial sustenance for *guruma's* household. Within the framework of the economic system, a *chela* is compelled to adjust and familiarize herselves with diverse skills and jobs. According to Hossain (2020), "dressing like a female, learning to perform various kinds of clapping, singing and dancing, speaking the clandestine *hijra* argot, acquiring the skills of arbitration and learning the *hijra* origin myths are some of the practices a *hijra* has to learn over time" (pp.408-409).

The *guru-chela* relation is often seen as reciprocal, multidimensional, and mutually beneficial within this particular context (Nanda, 1999). The *guru* assumes the responsibility of nurturing the *chela*, akin to a parental role, while the *chela* is expected to demonstrate fidelity and obedience towards the *guru* (Nanda, 2010). Similar to the dynamics seen within familial structures, the *guru* assumes the role of an older figure, hence assuming a central position in the *chela's* social connections. Upon initiation, a disciple assumes the social roles of her spiritual mentor's kin, thus expanding her social, emotional, and economic spheres via a system of constructed family ties.

The *gurumas* have established a strong economic network, enabling them to exert a sufficient degree of influence over their own community and their relationships with individuals from other locations. The evolution of traditional occupations and their current manifestations also bear witness to this. The *gurumas* have a significant influence on the economy as a result of their strong conviction in their unique capabilities and their exceptional determination to achieve tasks that others may find challenging. However, *chela* hijras might experience different forms of abuse from their *gurus*, including physical, psychological, sexual, and material exploitation (Al-Mamun et al., 2022). They are compelled to provide a significant monetary contribution to the *guruma*, who has a position of authority within the community's conventions, practices and systems. According to Hossain (2020),

> Hijra groups operate as economic units. The revenues collected from within their jurisdiction are owned by the group. In keeping with the *hijra* occupation, members of the group hand in all the collected resources both in cash and kind to the *gurus*, who later distribute the money among the members or use them to look after the group (p.409).

Hijras are said to experience economic exploitation at the hands of *gurumas*, as noticed in social and economic adjustments. As a result, the relations between the *guru* and the *chela* may be seen as a potential avenue for growth and development, as well as exploitation (Reddy, 2005). The social structure exhibits undemocratic characteristics, since seniority is determined by inequitable choices. *Gurus* are recipients of both pecuniary and social obligations, since they may commercially exploit *chelas*. The *chelas* are required to adhere to household rules, failing which they risk expulsion, being widely known, and being barred from admittance to any other hijra house, which, among other things, severely limits their capacity to work (Hossain & Nanda, 2020).

Partners, often known as *parik*, are an essential and irreplaceable component of the hijras' existence. The hijra identity revolves around a continual and unwavering desire for a romantic partner (Hossain, 2021).The inquisitiveness and vulnerability of hijras culminate in a romantic entanglement characterized by a transactional nature, when they provide everything in return. However, the relationship ultimately dissolves owing to a lack of prospects, resulting in severe financial hardship for the hijras involved.

Despite the aforementioned borders, hijras exhibit a preference for residing under the family due to the increased prospects it offers for engaging in sexual activities, as well as the enhanced freedom to consume food and rest at their own discretion (Reddy, 2005). In spite of encountering social marginalization and being seen as belonging to a subordinate social position, these people actively adopt and maintain their hijra lifestyle, therefore affirming their identity and connection within the broader network. They get more autonomy and advantages from their affiliation with the community.

Implications and Limitations of the Study

This research enhances scientific understanding by investigating the factors that contribute to the marginalization and stigmatization of the hijras in Bangladesh, as well as the problems they encounter at different stages of their lives. Through the use of case study and thematic analysis approach, this research provides unique insights into the intricate dynamics of the cultural paradox of creating and perceiving identity recognition, and how it affects the hijra community. The results underscore the pressing need for interventions aimed at addressing the vulnerabilities faced by hijras, including the attitudes of their natal families, societal attitudes, social stigma, economic fragility and exploitation, social sufferings and structural violence. This study enhances our understanding of this marginalized population and adds to the current body of literature on gender and development. The anticipated outcomes aim to have a scholarly impact and assist policymakers in assessing patterns and enhancing strategies for implementing policies for the hijra community. Policy development should aim to foster a society that is more inclusive and fair, with a focus on prioritizing the well-being and rights of this vulnerable group. We may summarise the findings of the research in terms of implications as follows:

- This research has examined the challenges faced by the stigmatized and marginalized hijra population and therefore, identified the need for and developed a space for inclusive development.
- There is a need to raise awareness about the hijra community and eradicate the social and cultural stigma associated with them.
- It is essential to formulate policy and guarantee the well-being of all hijras, which encompasses their health, education and economic stability through the Sustainable Livelihood Framework.

Concurrently, we acknowledge that the article has several limitations that need to be taken into account. Despite being fieldwork done in a semi-urban region, the study had a total of 30 participants only. Increased interlocuters and additional field sites would have provided a more comprehensive picture of the community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article undertook an analysis of the hijra family structure, examining its social and economic adaptability as well as cases of exploitation. Despite experiencing marginalization and stigmatization in the Bangladeshi society, hijras have managed to establish a distinct social sphere. The community continues to have a prominent position

within the broader spectrum of Bangladeshi society. When some individuals adopt hijra identity, they need social support, economic stability and cultural significance. Their affiliation to the hijra community serves to establish connection to the mainstream society and assist in mitigating their trauma of leaving biological family. The relationship between *chelas* and their *guru* is significant in their social structure, as it includes reciprocal obligations that are both beneficial and complicated, spanning social and economic elements.

The hijras establish complex fictive kinship networks in order to manage their own family unit. The examination of kinship patterns and traditional family structures prompts enquiries into the intrinsic symbolic importance of the connections among its members. Diversified interpretations of kinship have been formulated by anthropologists and sociologists through an examination of the varied family relations observed globally. These scholars have raised enquiries on the potential challenges to the conventional family ideal posed by these forms of kinship. These narratives need an enquiry into the extent to which family alignments really contribute to the formation of distinct and gendered individuals. This research highlights the need for a reevaluation of the concept of family and kinship, specifically by examining the structures and connections among hijra families across various developmental contexts.

The hijra community in Bangladesh encounters many forms of prejudice and obstacles, such as exploitation by both their own group and the wider society. It is necessary to eradicate the discrimination against the hijras by the provision of social inclusion and economic empowerment. The government and non-governmental organizations should emphasize the protection and advocacy of the rights of the community. The below suggestions may be implemented to address the issue of infringement upon the basic human rights of hijras.

- Hijra villages could be built in every subdistrict, district and division in Bangladesh, as most hijras face a housing crisis.
- The hijras' educational rights can be ensured by issuing a government gazette and delegating responsibilities to educational institutions.
- They might be trained as skilled manpower through technical education, allowing them to transition from their traditional occupations.
- Through seminars and workshops, their self-consciousness can be raised.
- They should be allowed to work in both public and private organizations.
- Making an effective policy to improve their lives and means of subsistence is necessary.
- Providing a donation or an easy loan to help them grow their own business.
- To keep hijras out of dangerous activities, they need to be motivated.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Acknowledgments

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