Khwaja Sira: “Transgender” Activism and Transnationality in Pakistan

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In 2009, gender non-normative Pakistanis known as *khwaja sira* (also *khwajasara*) were granted rights by the Pakistani Supreme Court after decades without any legal recognition or protection. This action coincided with attempts by community activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the state to organize and empower khwaja sira. NGOs involved in HIV intervention have been financially supported by the Pakistani government and foreign donor agencies since the early years of the twenty-first century. In addition to the surveillance and control of the disease, these funds are meant to support and empower vulnerable groups, including khwaja sira. NGO-led sexual health programs have created opportunities for khwaja sira to learn about advocacy, rights, and organization management, which in turn have helped to propel “transgender” activism in the country. Khwaja sira activism has been not only encouraged but also influenced by the intervention of NGOs and their international benefactors. However, even as they play a key role in defining and representing gender non-normative people, these transnational forces are met with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance from khwaja sira activists.

Khwaja sira, commonly known as *hijra* in many parts of South Asia, are assigned male at birth, gender ambiguous individuals who are among Pakistan’s most marginalized citizens. They are viewed with ambivalence not only due to their ambiguous physical features, but also because they are believed to possess the power to bless and curse. Invoking a sense of fear, disgust, and curiosity in the general public, they have been excluded from mainstream society. Faced with ridicule from family and friends, many leave their homes at an early age to find refuge among other gender nonconforming people. Most khwaja sira receive very little formal education, and employers are typically unwilling to hire them due to their gender difference. The few who manage to find employment emphasize the difficulty in retaining jobs because of routine harassment by coworkers. Consequently, a large majority end up joining khwaja sira social networks in order to access the traditional sources of hijra livelihood, including begging, singing and dancing, and blessing newborns and newly married couples. Most khwaja sira also engage in sex work, which increases their susceptibility to sexually transmitted diseases. Moreover, their inferior social status makes them vulnerable to physical violence and to emotional and sexual abuse.
In light of this situation, the Pakistani Supreme Court’s 2009 decision to grant rights to khwaja sirs was hailed by civil society groups as a crucial step to rehabilitate the “transgender” population. Though unexpected, the court’s decision coincided with similar developments in other South Asian countries. India allowed transgender citizens to register for passports in 2005, added a third gender category to the country’s voter registration process in 2009, and included transgender people in the country’s census and citizen identification system in 2011; Nepal created a third gender category in 2007 and included transgender people in its census in 2011; and Bangladesh allowed transgender citizens to register to vote in 2008. Improvement in their legal status has created a public discourse around “transgender” rights in Pakistan and provided certain protections to khwaja sirs, particularly with respect to their treatment by law enforcement personnel. However, it has done little to positively impact other aspects of the everyday lives of most gender variant people, thus explaining the involvement of khwaja sira rights groups and NGOs in the rights activism and social development of this minority population.

The efforts of established NGOs are influenced by the decisions of their elite leaders and by the funding trends of their international donors, who are interested in supporting a diversity of causes across the globe. The foreign sponsors of these organizations often dictate which sexual minority groups are most vulnerable and how they should be supported. In keeping with project requirements, NGOs regularly recruit indigenous khwaja sira activists and provide them with educational training on topics related to gender, sexuality, human rights, and sexual health. This training and the experience of working with NGOs have taught many khwaja sirs how to run organizations of their own. However, despite their best efforts, khwaja sira organizations, handicapped by a lack of education and basic skills, are still heavily dependent on established NGOs for material, financial, and educational resources.

Khwaja Sira: History and Context

South Asia has a rich history of gender ambiguity, one that the anthropologist Gayatri Reddy—in the 2005 work With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India—broadly divides into four chronological time periods: ancient, medieval, colonial, and contemporary. Evidence of hijras appears foremost in ancient Indian texts from the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. The historical record of the medieval period focuses on eunuchs, or castrated men, of the royal Mughal courts, who were known as khwaja sirs. These individuals served as army generals, harem guards, and advisers to the emperors. Khwaja sirs were considered ideal for the protection of the women of the harem due to their inability to reproduce. Later colonial accounts of Indian history
When studying activism, collaborating with relevant organizations can be mutually beneficial to the researcher and to the groups involved. Research results can help the organization better understand both the constraints on and the potential of their activism, while ensuring that the data collection process goes unhindered for the researcher. Moreover, institutional constraints can often affect the conduct of research. For instance, researchers often encounter “gatekeeping,” a process whereby outsiders, including researchers, are prevented from gaining access to information, people, and events. Understanding the workings of such institutional constraints, therefore, is useful in finding solutions to the problems they pose.

In this chapter, the term queer is not used as an identity label but to describe those whose gender role or sexual behavior does not conform to dominant social norms. Khwaja sirs do not use the word as a self-descriptor. The term “transgender” is used in the broadest sense to refer to those whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex (e.g., a person who is born physically male but does not identify as a man). At the time of this study, the term had gained currency among many khwaja sira activists, particularly those affiliated with sexual health NGOs. The reader should note, however, that the local terms hijra, zenana and khwaja sira do not neatly coincide with the Euro-American category of “transgender.”

indicate that British rulers identified hijras as a criminal caste, a classification under which they could be subjected to surveillance and arrest. Following the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the formation of Pakistan, hijra activities were banned in the early 1960s during the presidency of Ayub Khan. However, as discussed by Nauman Naqvi and Hasan Mujataba in “Two Baluchi Buggas, a Sindhi Zenana, and the Status of Hijras in Contemporary Pakistan” (1997), the ban was lifted after hijras staged a sit-in in front of Khan’s residence.

Pakistan is an Islamic republic with a majority Muslim population. Homosexual acts are illegal under Section 377 of the country’s penal code, an injunction that was inherited from British colonial rulers. Through rarely invoked, same-sex sexual behavior is punishable by up to ten years in prison. With Section 377 intact, the Supreme Court granted rights to khwaja sirs in a series of historic rulings in 2009, and it ordered the government to issue them national identity cards indicating their third gender status. Pakistan now recognizes “khwaja sira” as a distinct sex in addition to male and female. In subsequent hearings, the court ordered the provision of security, inheritance, and voting rights, educational and job opportunities, and access to government-sponsored welfare programs for khwaja sirs.
Khwaja sirs have a centuries-old system of social organization through which they forge alliances with other gender ambiguous people. This social structure is based on the master-disciple (guru-chela) relationship in which a mentor, typically an experienced khwaja sira, takes on a student, a novice khwaja sira, through ritual initiation. By forging relationships, these gender minorities are enmeshed in a vast network consisting of khwaja sira households, classes, and lineages. Initiation into this system allows members to earn a living through begging, dancing, and blessing.

While there is no firm consensus about who should be enumerated under the broad khwaja sira category, my informants generally acknowledged that khunsa, zennana, and hijra were the three main khwaja sira subcategories. The word khunsa refers to those who are intersex, meaning those born with a mixture of both male and female hormonal, chromosomal, and/or genital features. However, intersexual khwaja siras were few in number, and they rarely if ever joined khwaja sira social networks.

Naila beautifies herself for work. She is regularly hired to dance at weddings. (Photo by Faris A. Khan.)
The majority of khwaja sirs are zennanas. A zennana is someone born physically male; that is, with male sexual organs, but who is believed to have a feminine spirit. Zennanas situationally adopt the appearance of men or women—they may wear men’s clothes, keep their hair short, and sport beards and mustaches, or they may dress in women’s clothes, wear makeup, and grow out their hair or use wigs. Zennanas tend to transition back and forth between looking and behaving like men and like khwaja sirs, since many of them are married to women and have children. Their fluid and situated identities allow them to manage the split between their familial and khwaja sira lives.

A relatively small number of zennanas decide to undergo emasculating surgery, which involves the removal of the penis and testicles. Emasculating is desirable not only because it enhances femininity, but also because it improves one’s status among khwaja sirs. Yet very few zennanas choose to undergo the procedure because it is irreversible—not only does it close the option to marry and reproduce, but physical emasculating is also believed to be prohibited in Islam. The identity of an individual changes from zennana to hijra after the removal of the genitals. Hijras mostly dress in women’s clothes and many permanently grow out their hair.

What unifies zennanas and hijras, who come from lower-class backgrounds, is their defining characteristic: a feminine spirit, which all khwaja sirs are believed to possess from the time of birth. Khwaja sirs claim that this spirit makes them effeminate and drives them to be feminine in appearance and gender role; not only does it produce in them the desire to dress like women, but also to engage in women’s work, such as cooking and cleaning.
The feminine spirit is also believed to shape the sexual preferences of khwaja sirs. Zennanas and hijras engage in a variety of sexual relationships with men. The majority of these men are heterosexual, but some maintain that they are exclusively attracted to effeminate males and hijras. Khwaja sirs refer to their male lovers as giryas, with whom many maintain both long- and short-term relationships. In addition to their partners, khwaja sirs who are involved in prostitution regularly engage in sexual activity with their clients. Zennanas are typically passive sexual partners or recipients in sexual encounters with men. However, their sexual behavior does not always conform to a strict top-bottom or active-passive oppositional binary, according to Shivananda Khan and Tahir Khilji, the authors of the 2002 World Bank report Pakistan Enhanced HIV/AIDS Program, because role reversals occur often. In contrast, hijras can only assume the receptive role in sexual encounters with men, since they are physically emasculated. The idea of a khwaja sira engaging in sexual activity with another khwaja sira, be it a zennana or a hijra, is considered anathema.

“Transgender” Activism in Pakistan

Khwaja sira activism started around 2005, when several activist groups began to mobilize and publicly challenge the status quo. Several factors facilitated the development of khwaja sira organizing in Pakistan. First, the economic liberalization of the early 1990s introduced changes in trade policies, strengthened the private sector, and increased the transnational traffic of people and ideas. Second, the sexual health and advocacy programs that were set up to contain HIV/AIDS created opportunities for sexual minorities to organize and learn about rights activism. Third, the Supreme Court’s ruling in favor of khwaja sirs further encouraged such activism in the country.

A variety of stories have been published online, many by the Euro-American press and LGBT advocacy publications, reporting on how “transgender” individuals have been speaking out politically during Pakistan’s 2013 national election campaigns. Here are two:

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sh0AKISTAN S (AJIRAS 4RANSGER 3EEKS %ELECTIONv HTTP WWW.THEADAILYACTIVIST com/lgbt-pakistans-hijras/

The term khwaja sira has regained currency since the early years of the twenty-first century owing partly to the efforts of hijra and zennana activists who have appropriated the title as a politically correct identity label to replace hijra, which they believe carries negative connotations among the general public. However, the term hijra is still used within khwaja sira communities. In addition, some khwaja sira activists have started calling
themselves “transgender,” an identity label they have acquired through their participation in HIV/AIDS intervention programs.

Pakistan is home to a host of NGOs that are engaged in the surveillance and control of HIV/AIDS. Many of these organizations work on the health issues of vulnerable “males who have sex with males” (MSM), a broad framework that includes gender non-normative populations. Along with disease prevention and control, a few NGOs even work on the issue of rights and on the social development of khwaja siras, but up until 2011 little progress had been made in this area.

A strong yet complex link exists between health and activism, in that issues of public health invite social reform when they become life threatening, according to Vincanne Adams and Stacey Leigh Pigg, the authors of *Sex in Development* (2005). Consequently, political organizing often occurs in and through public health domains. This has certainly been the case for HIV/AIDS intervention in India and now increasingly in Pakistan, where programs to control the spread of the virus have mushroomed across the country in the last decade or so. Sexual health organizations have created spaces for khwaja sira activists to convene and share experiences. These NGOs are entangled in webs of structured interactions with each other and with local, national, and transnational entities. The hierarchical relationships of dependency among them are based on the distribution of material, financial, and educational resources. For instance, NGOs obtain funding from a combination of sources, including the Pakistani government, United Nations agencies, and other local and foreign foundations and charities. These funds are meant primarily for projects focused on HIV intervention, but also they are
allocated for the capacity-building efforts of smaller organizations that provide services to sexual minorities. Capacity building involves a host of activities, including the provision of material and financial support, educational training and skill enhancement, leadership development, alliance formation, fund-raising, research and assessment, media advocacy, strategic planning, and so on. The educational training of these NGOs covers topics related to gender, sexuality, and human rights along with the issues of sexual and reproductive health.

In recent years, donor agencies have become increasingly interested in funding community-based organizations (CBOs) in developing countries. CBOs are either independently run or are nonprofit subsidiaries of large NGOs. Individual CBOs are run by and for specific local or indigenous communities, and they are either self-funded or operate on a voluntary basis. Some CBOs receive support through their parent NGOs during their initial years until they become self-sustaining. Their recent popularity among donors is based on the notion that small local groups are more effective than large organizations in addressing the needs of target populations.

In addition to established NGOs, several small activist groups are run independently by khwaja sirs. In 2011, there were about ten such indigenous organizations in Pakistan, but less than half of them were registered with the government. As mentioned earlier, development programs play a key role in transforming target populations by educating them about sexuality, identity, and rights. Similarly, these small groups occasionally receive instructional support from larger organizations, and they are impacted by flows of information that have the potential to shift local understandings, including the ways in which sexual minorities view their own behavior. To date, NGOs in Pakistan have done little in terms of supporting and transforming khwaja sira organizations. However, this may change with the arrival of new players in the NGO sector.

In this chapter, I have used pseudonyms for organizations and the people affiliated with them in order to protect their identities. Gender Solidarity Society (GSS) is one of the few registered entities run by and for khwaja sirs. It has been in operation in the southern port city of Karachi since 2009, and it functions primarily as an advocacy group that speaks on behalf of khwaja sirs. Since its inception, GSS has organized and participated in various activist events, such as World AIDS Day festivities, national and provincial consultation workshops, press conferences, training programs, and public protests.

**GSS’s Origins: Local and Transnational Influences**

The transnational context of khwaja sira activism can be better understood by tracing the origins of GSS. Payal Choudhery, the president of GSS, is a non-literate khwaja sira who comes from a poor family. She started her journey as a social worker in 2006, and around the same time she met Hira, a student of gender and sexuality at a liberal arts college in the United States, and her mother, Aaliya, a veteran activist of the women’s movement in Pakistan. Hira wanted to make a documentary on khwaja sirs for her senior thesis, and her project connected her with Payal. Payal was suffering from a sense of disillusionment about her dream to make a difference, but her outlook changed when
she met Hira. She credits Hira for inspiring her and instilling confidence in her to begin working for her community.

In fact, it was Hira who suggested that Payal set up her own organization, and she even coined the name Gender Solidarity Society. According to Aaliya, the title of the organization reflects Hira’s personal philosophy as an activist and her desire for greater collaboration between different genders and sexual identities:

When she was thinking about what she should do, we played off ideas and were a sounding board for her. I think Hira was interested in gender interaction herself. She believes there should be alliances between all the groups of the spectrum, [in order to] . . . build a strong community. Hira was keen on that happening because it was part of her philosophy . . . . But Payal had the tendency of putting people into boxes because that is the life she had led. In that sense, I think Hira’s explanation of identities made a difference. She asked Payal, “So what’s wrong with somebody who wants to be a cross dresser or somebody who is gay or identifies differently? What is it to you? . . . Should we be breaking people up into smaller and smaller minorities or should we be collecting them if we want to move forward?” (Author’s transcript)

Payal was receptive to Hira’s ideas, which Aaliya attributes to Payal’s intrinsic acceptance of difference, a quality that sets her apart from most other khwaja siras. When GSS was eventually formed, Aaliya contributed to the online content of the organization’s new website. Aaliya also introduced Payal to women activists and took her to various meetings. This gave Payal the opportunity to learn how other activist organizations function. The transnational links in GSS’s creation are evident in Payal’s relationship with Hira and Aaliya. The intervention of this mother-daughter duo was instrumental not only in establishing GSS, but also in influencing Payal’s thinking and in shaping her into the activist leader she is today.

GSS has had a tenuous existence since its formation, and it almost shut down in late 2010 due to a lack of resources, including funding, education, and the skills required to keep it afloat. In early 2012, GSS’s existence was yet again threatened when many of its core members were offered high-paying jobs by a transnational NGO. As part of their employment contract, they were required to step down from their posts at GSS, which they did. By early 2013, GSS’s dwindling leadership was struggling to run the organization in the absence of experienced khwaja siras to replace its executive committee. In the event that GSS is forced to close its doors, transnational influences will have played a role not only in establishing the organization, but also in bringing about its demise.

Creating Activists: Change and Resistance

Dominant beliefs against same-sex sexuality in Pakistan stem from a combination of religious and cultural beliefs. The notion of sin, the fear of God and an afterlife, and views on morality and propriety shape the ways in which both the general public and khwaja siras view sexual behaviors and lifestyles. In addition, negative attitudes toward alternative sexualities are rooted in patriarchy, marriage and familial obligations, the importance of maintaining ancestral bloodlines through reproduction, and the concept of respect.

Religious and cultural notions of morality and decency play a role in shaping the legal and activist discourse around “transgender” rights in Pakistan. The discourse on the eman-
participation of khwaja siras in the Supreme Court rulings and in Pakistani media aimed at making them “decent citizens.” This reasoning emphasizes the need to create job opportunities for khwaja siras in order to prevent them from leading an immoral life of begging, dancing, and prostitution. Similarly, the approach of most NGOs involved in HIV intervention in Pakistan has been consistent with this discourse. Previous efforts to promote safe-sex practices through various media failed in large measure because HIV/AIDS-related messages did not clearly explain how the infection spreads. For example, posters attempted to communicate ideas about virus transmission through the idiom of morality. Instead of stating explicitly how the infection circulates, posters warned against leading an “immoral and unnatural lifestyle” and encouraged people to “use caution,” “observe the Islamic lifestyle,” and “protect our country from this shame” (Khan and Khilji 2002, 15). Informed by the failures of earlier HIV programs, some NGOs are attempting to expunge moralistic views from their intervention efforts. The following case provides an in-depth look into the ways in which social norms pertaining to sexual propriety continue to influence khwaja sira politics despite efforts to separate morality from activism.

In late 2011, Payal and I, along with two other GSS representatives, attended a workshop hosted by an NGO called Male Health Community in Islamabad. Various NGO and CBO partners from across the country were invited to the event to share their knowledge and experience of working with marginalized communities. The training was designed to enhance the ability of the partners to work collectively. This was a sizable gathering consisting of khwaja sira, gay, and HIV/AIDS activists and NGO workers, and many of the participants were non-queer identifying.

One of the sessions focused on the impact of social conditioning on the well-being of MSM and “transgender” populations. A close analysis of this session provides useful insights into both the effects of transnationalization and the identity politics of khwaja siras. The moderator of the session, Saif, a tall and lanky man, was dressed in skinny jeans and a fitted top paired with leather boots. He stood before the participants with one hand on his hip. He held a marker in his other hand, which was supported by a limp wrist. With a slight lisp, Saif asked, “What is normal?” Met with silence, he rephrased his question: “What does the general public consider normal? A girlish boy or one who is completely like a boy?” Finally, a khwaja sira responded by saying that a person who is physically and behaviorally a man or a woman is considered normal, according to Islam and Pakistani culture. In agreement, Saif stated that society determines what is and is not normal, even though in reality all individuals are normal in and of themselves. Next, Aisha, a woman doctor wearing a hijab (headscarf), stated that it is the job of medical professionals to determine whether or not a person is normal or sick. In response, Saif emphasized the role of science in determining normality and abnormality, noting that scientific knowledge differs across time and space:

Back in the day, psychology manuals used to say that homosexuality and transsexuality were abnormal, but then scientists realized that they were wrong. Today, transgender people are not considered abnormal in the US. . . . But here, even now our medical books say that it is abnormal. Perhaps people in the West are more broadminded. . . . Who a person sleeps with in their bedroom should not concern us. That is between them. (Author’s transcript)
An NGO worker reacted strongly to Saif’s comment by asserting that sexual encounters between men are abnormal. Surprisingly, the khwaja sira participants applauded the man’s remark. Aisha echoed the NGO worker’s response by declaring same-sex sexual behavior to be immoral. Again, the khwaja sira attendees applauded enthusiastically.

Saif’s objective was to challenge the participants’ preconceived ideas about normal and abnormal, to highlight that each society defines normalcy differently, and to make clear that those who are deemed “abnormal” have fewer rights. He emphasized that every person is normal and has equal human rights, including the right to health, regardless of their sexuality. Saif’s agenda was to transform his audience into critical thinkers who are capable of emancipation from sociocultural restrictions. This form of capacity building is a vital component of HIV intervention through which individuals from marginalized groups are transformed into community leaders and avid activists.

Unfortunately, the exercise was a failure, and heated arguments broke out between the moderator and the participants who perceived Saif’s radical statements as an affront to religious and social norms. To them, Saif encompassed unbridled modernity with his radical views, effeminacy, and “Western” clothes. For instance, in describing cross-cultural and temporal differences in medical information, Saif privileged knowledge originating from the West. Moreover, he advocated beliefs and practices that are considered immoral and sinful, or the antithesis of what it means to be Muslim and Pakistani. Consequently, the participants openly resisted what they were being taught because they felt their views were under attack by a “sellout.”

It is both interesting and important that the khwaja sira trainees reacted to the discussion by expressing support for those who spoke against same-sex sexual behavior. By applauding their remarks, the khwaja sira activists distanced themselves from men who have sex with men, a view enhanced by their new legal status as a third sex distinct from male and female. By this logic, their sexual encounters with men would not fall under the category of same-sex sexual behavior.

Later in the session, Beena, a khwaja sira activist, reacted strongly when Saif started explaining the sexual practices of khwaja sira sex workers. When she urged him to stop focusing on the “vices” of khwaja siras, Saif suggested that she change her perception of sex work as a vice:

Beena: Please stop talking about our vices!
Saif: Beena, we cannot call it a vice.
Beena: You don’t have to call it a sin if you don’t want to, but I think it is a sin. Even though some khwaja siras engage in sex work, we ourselves are against it and we declare that this is wrong! Wrong! Wrong! (Author’s transcript)

The audience clapped in support of Beena, and the fervor of the participants grew as Aisha went over to embrace her:

Saif: Beena considers sex work to be a bad thing, but not everyone thinks that way.
Beena: I was talking about us khwaja siras—we think it is bad!
Aisha: Beena is right! A vice is a vice no matter what! (Author’s transcript)
In the above conversation, the moderator attempted to change Beena’s negative perception about sex work by separating it from the notion of vice. Saif wanted to use this opportunity to underscore his argument that culture and society determine propriety and impropriety, and that sex work should not be considered a vice merely because people are conditioned to believe that it is wrong. Nonetheless, Beena upheld her views by defiantly declaring sex work to be a sin.

Beena’s strong statement against sex work came as a surprise to me, because earlier that day I had overheard her telling a group of her khwaja sira friends that one of her students—also a workshop attendee—had been covertly engaging in sex work with a male participant at the training. Beena was excitedly giving her listeners a graphic description of her student’s sexual encounter with the client. I wondered why someone whose own students participate in sex work and who takes great pleasure in talking about sex would vehemently oppose both during the training.

Beena’s aggressive stance against the moderator’s remarks makes sense given the presence of non-queer individuals at the workshop, some of whom had already expressed their condemnation of non-heteronormative sexual behavior. That the discussion kept focusing on the sexual behavior of khwaja siras agitated a number activist leaders, who were uncomfortable that these issues were being discussed in the presence of people who were not khwaja siras. They were afraid that the moderator would damage the reputation of khwaja siras by exposing the particulars of their lives. Beena’s strong reaction speaks to the identity politics of khwaja siras, which hinges on maintaining a public image of respectability.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that the many of my khwaja sira interlocutors consider themselves to be sinners and view their lifestyle to be in conflict with Islam. In other words, Beena’s proclamation about sex work being a sin does not merely reflect her attempt to portray khwaja siras as respectable people. Many khwaja siras believe that they are indeed sinners due to their involvement in socially and religiously prohibited behavior. However, they also believe that they are helpless due to their feminine spirit, which allows them to be attracted only to men. Moreover, many are unable to earn a “respectable” livelihood and resort to sex work due to workplace harassment or the reluctance of prospective employers to hire nonconforming individuals. That the khwaja sira trainees resisted the moderator’s acceptance of their sexualized lifestyle reveals the paradox of their lives, highlighting their internal conflict between their desire for a lover and their involvement in sex work, on the one hand, and their conviction that having a lover and engaging in sex work are immoral and prohibited in Islam, on the other.

Khwaja siras neither resist behavior that is considered socially unacceptable nor advocate for it to be legally and socially sanctioned. Instead, they conceal their involvement in such activities and engage in a public representation of khwaja siras as good Muslims and responsible Pakistani citizens. For instance, during the training, Beena felt compelled to represent khwaja siras as decent members of society when Saif began discussing the sexual behavior of khwaja siras. She reacted strongly when Saif highlighted that not all khwaja siras are recipients in male-male sexual encounters:
Please don’t think that we khwaja siras want that someone should have sex with us. There are so many hijras who have never done it with men. You shouldn’t talk about something you don’t know. Our big households where our elders live are locked up at dusk . . . and no stranger can enter their home. Many of them have been to Mecca for holy pilgrimage, and Allah’s grace is upon us since we can bless people. Some of our khwaja siras even veil their faces and go out in burqas. My point is that if one woman is a character that doesn’t mean everyone is like that.

(Author’s transcript)

Beena’s response demonstrates the tendency of khwaja sira activists to represent themselves and their communities in a socially acceptable manner as respectable and religious people. She emphasized the conservatism and asexuality of khwaja sira elders and urged the moderator not to misrepresent khwaja siras by focusing exclusively on those who engage in “sin.”

This representational strategy is most prominent in the media advocacy of khwaja sira activists. At the workshop, this maneuver was exercised in response to the negative remarks of the non-queer participants against same-sex sexual behavior. The gender non-normative trainees aligned themselves with these “respectable” people and spoke out against the moderator, who was clearly in favor of the sexualized lifestyle of khwaja siras. They thought that the moderator was doing them a disservice by exposing their clandestine sexual life. They countered his claims by depicting khwaja siras as religious and moral, even though they engage in socially objectionable behavior in their private lives.

The above analysis of the workshop demonstrates the inclination of transnational NGOs to challenge the beliefs of local sexual minorities in an attempt to transform them into rights-conscious individuals. Such attempts are characteristic of organizations that receive large sums of money from international sponsors to educate vulnerable populations. Moreover, the workshop reveals the resilience of local beliefs among khwaja sira activists. Their resistance to external—and purportedly foreign—influences reveals not only their conviction involving certain religious tenets but also their propensity to maintain a positive image of their communities in an effort to gain social respectability.

Looking Ahead

Transnational forces influence the direction of khwaja sira activism when elite leaders and the invisible hand of foreign donors attempt to transform sexual minorities through capacity building. However, ethnographic research reveals the complex realities on the ground, where khwaja sira leaders encounter and address transnationalizing forces by negotiating and resisting ideas that do not resonate with them, while also accepting those ideas that hold the promise of individual and communal gain. Khwaja siras are not passive beings who unquestioningly adhere to the views that are imposed on them by NGOs. Instead, they openly contest ideas that either conflict with their long-standing beliefs or could lead to a loss of respect. Moreover, khwaja sira activists are heavily vested in representing gender nonconforming people in a manner that is culturally and religiously appropriate. That khwaja sira activists are allured by globalizing influences speaks in part to the power of monetary incentives, especially the sway they have over impoverished groups, but the fact that they also resist these forces reveals the resilience of culture in the face of change.
Since about 2000, resistance from local activists has coincided with an increasing emphasis on indigenism in the NGO sector in South Asia and elsewhere. For instance, in neighboring India, queer organizing was largely motivated by the interests of elite leaders who, for a long time, played a central role in defining the contours of indigeneity. Today, however, foreign donors are increasingly interested in supporting indigenous sexual minorities by funding both new and existing CBOs. As a result, the constitution of queer groups has started to change as a host of new social actors take up leadership positions and vie for a share of the funding pool. In terms of organizing, these developments, while giving rise to a moderately equitable power structure, also create conflict within and between queer groups in India. How will the surge in importance of CBOs and indigenous leadership affect khwaja sira activism in Pakistan? Will disagreements between elite and indigenous leaders escalate, and what form will they take as various stakeholders continue to contend over who should represent “transgender” people? What unanticipated outcomes will arise from evolving donor interests and their changing funding patterns, and how will they continue to shape khwaja sira activism?

References and Further Research


