

Review

GCC transgender labor market outcomes in GCC

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Abstract

This research endeavors to bridge a vital gap in the study of transgender individuals' participation in the labor market within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. It is driven by the question: "What are the underlying factors contributing to the reluctance of GCC employers to hire transgender individuals, and how does this impact the labor market participation of this group?" In pursuit of comprehensive insights, the study aligns with the Cochrane Handbook for systematic research design. The methodology used encompasses an extensive review of academic literature from 2012 to 2023, in-depth interviews with transgender individuals in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and thematic analysis to identify critical factors. The findings reveal that transgender individuals face significant legal challenges and widespread cultural discrimination in the GCC. These issues lead to workplace biases, unequal pay, and hindered career progression. A key factor in the limited employment opportunities for transgender individuals in the GCC is the reluctance of employers, stemming from cultural stigma and legal shortcomings. This reluctance propagates employment discrimination and a hostile labor market environment for transgender individuals. The study found that employers' hesitancy to hire transgender individuals leads to higher unemployment rates within this group, perpetuating poverty, social exclusion, and hindering economic diversity and innovation in the GCC. The study underscores the urgent need for holistic strategies and policy reforms in the GCC to ensure workplace equality and full labor market integration for transgender individuals, addressing a crucial research gap and emphasizing the need for dedicated efforts in this field.

Keywords Transgender labor rights · Transgender employment laws · Labor market outcomes · Gender-based discrimination · Income inequality

1 Introduction

Previous studies on transgender issues encompass a wide array of topics, including health status, psychological problems, satisfaction, mental health, discrimination, and rights. However, a notable gap exists in the literature concerning the labor market participation of transgender individuals. Studies like "Transgender Health and Well-being" [1–7] "Global Perspectives on a Marginalized Community" [8–10] "Transgender Human Rights" [11–13] and "Mental Health Challenges Facing Transgender Individuals" [14–16] delve into the health and psychological aspects. Meanwhile, "The Impact of Discrimination on the Mental Health of Transgenders" [16] and "Transgender Rights and Issues in Contemporary Society" explore social challenges and legal rights [15] Yet, despite this extensive research, studies specifically investigating the

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labor market dynamics for transgender individuals remain scarce [17, 18], particularly in GCC [19] indicating a critical area for future exploration.

Recent research suggests that there is a transgender labor supply in the GCC, but also shows that frictional and structural unemployment exists in this population [20]. These individuals often face negative social attitudes, which can affect their ability to find and retain employment [21]. Further research and policy initiatives are therefore urgently needed to help address the specific challenges faced by transgender people in the GCC labor market [22]. Meanwhile, studies on labor demand for transgender workers in Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia reveal that employers are generally not familiar with transgender issues and express concerns about the negative impact of hiring transgender individuals on their company's image and reputation [23]. However, it is not discussed why employers believe that transgender individuals are unsuitable for employment in their companies. Despite the pressing need for in-depth research into unemployment, the literature in the field remains rather sparse. This study failed to find a previous paper that delves into the intricacies of transgender unemployment, leaving much to be desired in understanding this important issue in GCC. Similarly, wage discrimination against transgender people, especially during the hiring process, has been poorly studied in the GCC. The complexities of the problem still exist. For example, the Human Rights Center (2019) reports that a staggering 82% of transgender people in the region face direct or indirect discrimination in job applications and interviews [24]. This lack of knowledge is a serious concern and may be due in part to the GCC government's reluctance to collect and publish data on the subject. Indeed, the lack of official statistics on unemployment and wage rates for transgender people is palpable and shows a fundamental disregard for the plight of this vulnerable group [20]. This represents a significant gap in our understanding of the broader social and economic landscape of the GCC that needs to be addressed through broader and more detailed research.

Considering the above discussion, this study aims to fill a research gap by providing a comprehensive review of labor market outcomes for transgender individuals in the GCC region. Its findings will be valuable to researchers, policymakers, and social activists as it provides a single source of information on this population. The study emphasizes the need for further research to promote social justice and equality for transgender individuals in the GCC region. This study raises the question *"Why do employers in the GCC hesitate to hire transgender individuals, and what are the challenges and consequences for their labor market participation in the GCC region?"*

The comprehensive literature review comprises four distinct sections that delve into various aspects of the transgender and labor market. In the first section a general overview is given that discusses the current state of knowledge about the study. The subsequent two sections expound on the GCC transgender workers' labor demand, delving into existing literature and identifying gaps therein, before shifting focus to the GCC transgender workers' labor supply and the available research in that area. The final section represents the culminating point of this exhaustive review, where the focus is on the outcomes of labor demand and labor supply. This section carefully examines four distinct segments, namely, employment rates and wages, working conditions, income inequality, and job satisfaction. Through a critical synthesis of existing literature, this section offers valuable insights into the situation in these areas, identifying gaps and potential avenues for future research.

In this review paper, the opening section pertains to the literature review itself and comprises three distinct subsections that address the labor demand and labor supply dynamics of transgender workers, the unemployment rate and wage rate, the working conditions, income inequality, and job satisfaction. The second segment is devoted to the discussion of research methodology. The third section discusses the results and findings based on the literature review within this study. The fourth section offers a conclusive summary of the literature review. The fifth segment critically assesses the implications of the research. Finally, the sixth and last section provides valuable insights into the limitations and future research guide, which are integral components of the review paper.

2 Literature review

The literature review has been organized into three principal segments. The first segment endeavors to provide a comprehensive survey of the intricate relationship between transgender individuals and the labor market. The second segment, on the other hand, sets its sights on the labor demand and labor supply dynamics of transgender workers. Lastly, the third segment scrutinizes the outcomes of labor demand and labor supply. The latter segment comprises five distinct subsections. The initial subsection endeavors to explore the impact of transgender status on this groups' unemployment and wage rates. The subsequent subsection expounds on the working conditions of transgender workers. The succeeding subsections, however, delve into the critical issue of income inequality among transgender workers while the subsequent

subsection discusses transgender rights: a legal overview in the GCC. Lastly, the fourth and final subsection probes into the subject of job satisfaction among transgender workers.

2.1 Transgender and labor market

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, which includes Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), employer reluctance to hire transgender individuals is evident, influenced by societal stigma, legal inadequacies, and limited awareness of transgender identities. Despite similar labor productivity between transgender and non-transgender workers [18, 25, 26], transgender individuals confront systemic employment discrimination, resulting in restricted job opportunities, reduced wages, and impeded career advancement [27, 28]. This discrimination adversely impacts their economic stability and access to essential resources like healthcare. The GCC region is characterized by insufficient legal protection for transgender individuals, exacerbating employment challenges. Particularly in Oman, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, societal resistance to gender non-conformity intensifies difficulties in obtaining employment and seeking legal recourse against workplace discrimination [29–31]. Although the UAE shows some support through various groups, it still lacks a comprehensive legal framework for transgender rights [32]. Bahrain, despite enacting a gender identity law in 2016 [33], also suffers from a notable research deficiency in understanding employment barriers for transgender workers.

Furthermore, existing research on the GCC labor market largely neglects the specific challenges faced by the transgender community [29]. This oversight impedes a thorough understanding of their labor market participation and the extent of the employment barriers they encounter. In summary, the GCC region's labor market is marked by employer hesitancy, societal prejudices, legislative gaps, and a lack of focused research, collectively contributing to the marginalization of transgender individuals in the workforce. Research indicates that employment discrimination against transgender individuals typically leads to constrained employment opportunities and lower wages [2], with no evidence of inherent differences in labor productivity between transgender and non-transgender workers [18]. The disparities in labor productivity are more likely a consequence of systemic barriers faced by transgender individuals rather than intrinsic attributes [25]. An inclusive workplace environment is crucial for the productivity and well-being of all employees, including transgender individuals [34]. Hence, the GCC region shows a significant research gap in understanding the labor market dynamics for transgender workers, both in terms of supply and demand.

2.2 Employment rates and wages

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, characterized by economic growth driven largely by oil reserves, the employment landscape varies across nations, with countries like Bahrain and the UAE exhibiting high employment rates, in contrast to lower rates in Oman and Saudi Arabia, alongside wage disparities between local and foreign workers in various sectors [35, 36]. This backdrop contrasts sharply with the employment challenges faced by transgender individuals in the region. Transgender individuals in the GCC often encounter significant barriers to employment, frequently finding themselves in low-paying jobs, if employed at all. In the UAE, over 80% face wage discrimination [37], while in Saudi Arabia, the lack of gender recognition laws and social obstacles severely limit employment access [38]. Workplace discrimination, harassment, and violence are common in countries like Kuwait. In the UAE, the discovery of an employee's transgender identity often leads to termination, resulting in limited career opportunities and lower wages for this group [28, 38].

Despite the region's economic prosperity and high wages in certain sectors, transgender individuals are systematically excluded from equal labor market participation. The absence of legal protections and prevailing societal stigma create formidable barriers to securing stable, well-paying jobs, highlighting the necessity for policy reforms and societal change towards greater inclusivity and equality in the workforce [39]. Transgender individuals' employment struggles are intricately linked to broader challenges, including limited access to healthcare services, which exacerbate their financial and social insecurity [40]. In Kuwait and Jordan, the prevalence of discrimination and lack of legal protections result in high unemployment rates among transgender individuals, often relegating them to low-skilled jobs or unemployment, coupled with workplace harassment [38, 41]. In countries like the UAE, Kuwait, and Oman, transgender women face significant obstacles in employment, amplified by legal, medical, and societal hurdles [22]. These systemic barriers and discriminatory practices have a profound impact, affecting not only the employment prospects but also the broader social inclusion and access to essential services for transgender individuals in the GCC region [42, 43].

2.3 Working conditions

Research within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region indicates a prevalent pattern of hostile and discriminatory work environments for transgender individuals, characterized by harassment, ridicule, and social exclusion [22]. These adverse conditions, exacerbated by employers' failure to ensure safe and supportive workplaces, significantly contribute to heightened stress and mental health concerns among transgender employees [42]. Furthermore, widespread issues like prolonged working hours, low wages, and job insecurity are prevalent, with nearly half of transgender respondents in the United Arab Emirates reporting such unfavorable conditions [42, 44]. However, it should be noted that research in this domain is still limited. Sector-specific studies within the GCC reveal that the construction industry is plagued by long hours, low pay, and poor safety standards, while healthcare sector employees face high stress and burnout levels, coupled with inadequate training and support. These challenges are mirrored in other sectors, including hospitality in Qatar and retail in Saudi Arabia.

In Kuwait, transgender workers often contend with job insecurity, extended work hours, and limited social protections [28]. The Gulf Center for Human Rights has documented extensive workplace harassment, including physical and sexual harassment, and denial of basic facilities like restrooms [45, 46]. In Jordan, transgender individuals frequently hide their gender identity to evade discrimination and harassment at work. To address these issues, GCC countries need to implement policies promoting gender equality, eliminating discrimination, and providing legal protections for transgender individuals [47]. Enhancing access to health and support services, alongside educating healthcare providers and policymakers, is also vital [46]. Tackling social stigma and discrimination is crucial for improving working conditions and empowering transgender individuals in their professional lives. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced and comprehensive approach that acknowledges the complexities faced by transgender individuals in the GCC region.

2.4 Income inequality

Income inequality, detrimental to economic growth and productivity, exacerbates social and political tensions and reduces consumer spending, impacting the broader economy. Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, research highlights significant wage discrimination and economic inequality faced by transgender individuals. Notably, transgender individuals, especially those identifying as female, often earn less than their male counterparts, evidencing a gender pay gap in this community [29]. However, comprehensive research focusing on income inequality among transgender individuals in the GCC is conspicuously lacking, emphasizing the need for policies promoting equal pay and workforce opportunities.

In the GCC, transgender individuals frequently face employment barriers, leading to high unemployment rates and exacerbating income inequality. For instance, in Kuwait, discrimination in employment sectors and limited access to education and training intensify this disparity. Wider studies on the LGBTQ+ population in the region indicate that workplace discrimination and harassment result in lower job satisfaction, salaries, and elevated stress levels, with broader economic consequences including income inequality and impeded economic growth [48]. To address these issues, enhanced protection and support for transgender individuals and the wider LGBTQ+ community in the Middle East are imperative [49, 50]. Implementing gender equality policies, eliminating discrimination, and providing legal protections for transgender individuals are essential steps towards addressing income inequality in the GCC [51]. Additionally, expanding access to healthcare and support services, as well as educating healthcare providers and policymakers, is critical for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

2.5 Job satisfaction

Research across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, encompassing Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Jordan, and Qatar, consistently reveals that transgender individuals face discrimination and stigma, adversely affecting their working conditions and job satisfaction [22, 52]. A key factor diminishing job satisfaction among transgender employees is the need to conceal their identity, often due to fear of discrimination or social ostracism. This concealment negatively affects job satisfaction, as it hinders individuals from being authentic and can lead to feelings of disconnection and discomfort in the workplace [53]. Conversely, the implementation of inclusive and supportive workplace policies and practices that acknowledge the needs of transgender individuals has been shown to enhance job satisfaction [43]. However, persistent workplace discrimination and harassment significantly impair the mental health and well-being of

transgender individuals in the GCC, leading to decreased job satisfaction and heightened stress and anxiety [54, 55]. Arab transgender individuals often experience feelings of isolation and exclusion at work, culminating in reduced job satisfaction and motivation. For instance, a survey in the UAE revealed a substantial portion of transgender respondents were unhappy or dissatisfied with their work situation [56].

2.6 Transgender rights: a legal overview in the GCC

In terms of the legal status and protection for transgender individuals across GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar offer no legal protection for transgender people [57, 58]. In these countries, Sharia law and other legal frameworks criminalize cross-dressing and gender non-conformity, leading to highly restricted environments. Enforcement of these laws is typically strict, and there are high levels of discrimination and violence against transgender individuals, with no significant recent changes to improve the situation. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) present a slightly different scenario. While Bahrain offers limited legal recognition for transgender individuals, restrictions on gender expression persist [22]. The enforcement of these laws is variable, and social stigma and discrimination remain prevalent, though there has been slow progress in legal recognition. Similarly, the UAE provides limited legal recognition with certain conditions and faces variable enforcement of its laws. Despite some progress in legal recognition, transgender individuals in the UAE continue to face discrimination and social challenges.

Oman's situation mirrors that of the more restrictive countries. With no legal protection for transgender people, the Penal Code criminalizes their gender expression. The enforcement of cross-dressing laws is active, leading to a social environment marked by discrimination and a significant risk of violence against transgender individuals. [59]. As with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar, Sharia law and other legal frameworks in Oman criminalize cross-dressing and gender non-conformity, leading to highly restricted environments. The Quran does not explicitly mention or address transgender individuals. Discussions on transgender issues in Islam are based on scholarly interpretations of the Quran and Hadith, rather than direct Quranic text. Islamic jurisprudence, which varies among different schools of thought, is used to form opinions on these matters [60]. Consequently, acceptance and understanding of transgender identity differ widely within the Muslim world. Interpretations range from more progressive views to traditional perspectives on gender roles and sexuality. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, transgender individuals, both expatriates and nationals, face significant legal and social challenges. Expatriates, who visit the GCC for employment, are bound by labor and immigration laws with limited protection, and face cultural discrimination and heightened vulnerabilities, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. Nationals, while potentially having better job opportunities, also experience workplace discrimination and societal stigma. Access to healthcare, including gender-affirming treatments, is riddled with barriers for expatriates, and nationals encounter their own societal and legal challenges. The GCC's labor laws offer minimal worker protections, placing transgender expatriates at increased risk of exploitation. Addressing these issues requires targeted policies and support systems within the GCC, and consultation with legal experts or human rights organizations is essential for current, region-specific insights.

Table 1 provides a comprehensive legal overview of transgender rights in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman, highlighting the lack of protection, the influence of Sharia law, and the societal challenges faced by transgender individuals in these regions. This overview underscores the need for greater legal protection and recognition of transgender rights within the GCC.

3 Research methodology

This study has adhered to the Cochrane Handbook guidelines [61]. It was methodically structured into four phases to thoroughly explore the academic discourse related to the research question. The first phase involved an extensive review of scholarly publications from 2012 to 2023, utilizing databases such as Scopus and Web of Science. This phase was crucial for establishing a comprehensive baseline of existing literature. The second phase focused on the selection of literature, employing key terms like "transgender," "transgender employment demand," "transgender workforce supply," "transgender law," and "employers' perspectives on transgender employees." From the 121 articles initially identified, 81 met the inclusion criteria, as outlined in the third phase (see Fig. 1 for the systematic review process). The fourth phase involved a detailed evaluation and analysis of the data from these articles, using thematic analysis for categorization, as depicted in Figs. 2 and 3.

Table 1 Transgender Rights: A Legal Overview in the GCC

Country	Transgender legal protection	General legal status	Specific laws	Enforcement	Discrimination and violence	Recent developments
Saudi Arabia	None	Sharia law criminalizes cross-dressing and gender non-conformity. (Highly restricted)	Specific articles not available	Strict enforcement	High levels of discrimination and violence	No significant recent changes known
Kuwait	None	Laws against cross-dressing and impersonating the opposite sex (Highly restricted)	Specific articles not available	Active enforcement	Societal discrimination and violence	No significant recent changes known
Bahrain	Limited	Some legal recognition; restrictions on gender expression (Restricted)	Specific articles not available	Variable enforcement	Social stigma and discrimination	Slow progress in legal recognition
Qatar	None	Sharia law influences; strict norms against transgender identities (Highly restricted)	Specific articles not available	Strict enforcement	High risk of discrimination and violence	No significant recent changes known
UAE	Limited	Legal recognition with conditions; restrictions on gender expression (Restricted)	Specific articles not available	Enforcement varies	Discrimination and social challenges	Some progress in legal recognition
Oman	None	Penal Code criminalizes gender expression of trans people (Highly restricted)	Active enforcement of cross-dressing laws		Social discrimination and risk of violence	

Source: Author

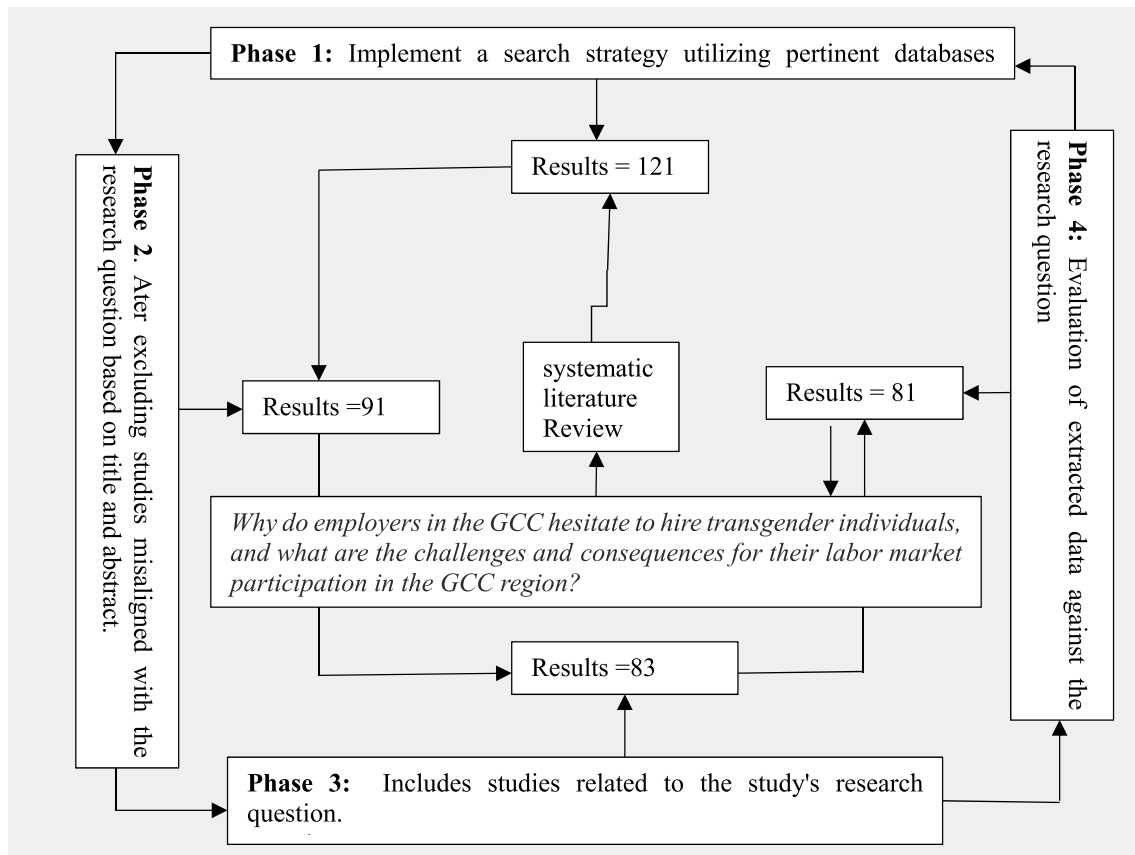


Fig. 1 Four Phases of Systematic Review, Source: Higgins & Green, 2011, 79–101

The study investigated employer hesitancy in hiring transgender individuals in the GCC, employing qualitative research for its capacity to uncover deep, nuanced insights into social and cultural dynamics affecting employment. It highlighted the importance of understanding employers' and transgender individuals' perspectives to address societal stigmas and cultural norms influencing hiring decisions. The research utilized snowball sampling, initiated through social media in Saudi Arabia, to engage transgender participants, ensuring anonymity. Despite limited participant responses, the study augmented its findings with a comprehensive literature review, incorporating direct quotes to emphasize transgender voices. Employing Braun and Clarke [62], thematic analysis, the study systematically analyzed interview and literature data, providing a detailed exploration of employment barriers for transgender people in the GCC. This approach ensured that the data from the interviews was methodically integrated and analyzed in conjunction with the secondary data, offering a comprehensive view of the challenges and hesitations in transgender employment, as illustrated in Figs. 2 and 3.

4 Results and discussion

Building upon the literature review and insights derived from five interviews conducted with transgender individuals, the challenges encountered by this demographic in the labor market are delineated in Fig. 2. The dimensions and sub-dimensions within this framework have been systematically categorized utilizing a six-step thematic analysis process, as elaborated in the section titled 'Research Methodology.' This framework necessitates a comprehensive approach to understanding the interrelationships among the identified variables, given their interconnected nature and mutual influence within the context of transgender labor market challenges.

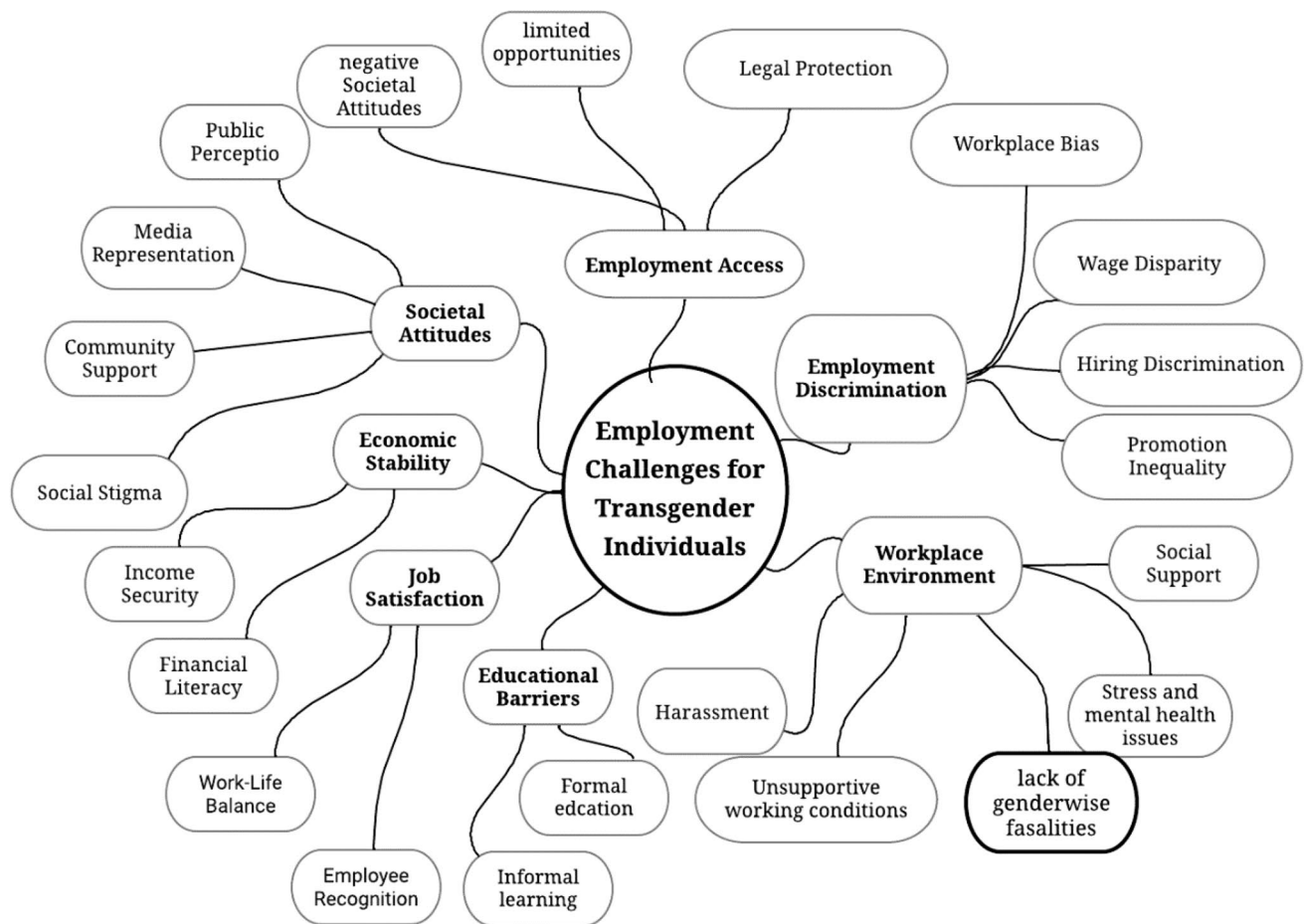


Fig. 2 Employment Challenges Faced by Transgender Individuals in the Labor Market, Source: Author

4.1 Challenges

The findings from the study on the challenges faced by transgender individuals in the Gulf Cooperation Council labor market can be summarized as follows: First, the study illuminates that employment accessibility for transgender individuals in the GCC is markedly limited. This limitation stems primarily from the lack of comprehensive legal protection, which hinders their ability to access job opportunities and enables them to advance in their careers [63]. This finding resonates with the principles of the theory of equal opportunity employment [64], which emphasizes the critical role of legal frameworks in ensuring fair treatment in the labor market, particularly for marginalized groups [65]. These frameworks are instrumental in breaking down barriers and fostering an equitable employment landscape.

Secondly, the research reveals that discrimination in employment is a significant issue in the GCC. Workplace bias, wage disparity, hiring discrimination, and promotion inequality are deeply rooted in the cultural and social norms prevalent in the region [65]. Social identity theory offers an explanatory lens, suggesting that the power dynamics prevalent in GCC societies contribute to systemic discrimination against transgender individuals [65, 66]. These individuals are often perceived as divergent from the societal norm, leading to their marginalization in the workplace. These findings align with the interview response provided below, corroborating the presented statement.

Respondent A stated:

"I face wage discrimination and unsupportive working conditions at my workplace. We are treated as less than human. Our parents also suffer because society doesn't accept us with equal rights, and sometimes the challenges come from our parents too. I've considered migrating to Europe, but Eden Knight's story haunts me. She, a transgender Saudi woman, lived in fear and desperation. In the US, seeking refuge, she was forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia by her family using 'fixers.' In Saudi Arabia, her discovery of hormone therapy led to severe family condemnation. This criminalization and

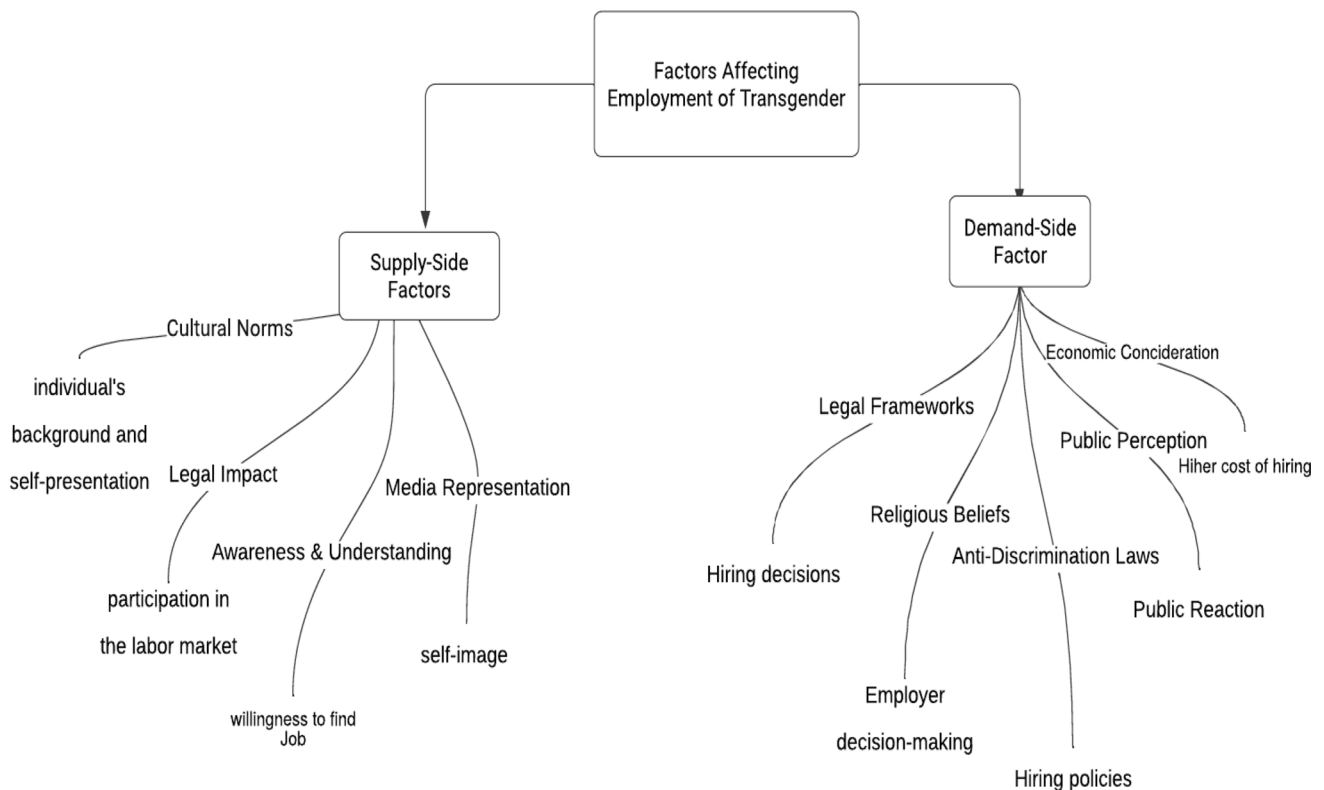


Fig. 3 Employment Challenges Faced by Transgender Individuals in the Labor Market, Source: Author

stigma of being transgender in a conservative society left her feeling hopeless. Her plea for global trans rights and her final message on Twitter, where she said she'd rather die, reflect the dire struggles we face. It feels like it's better to die here and consider it luck."

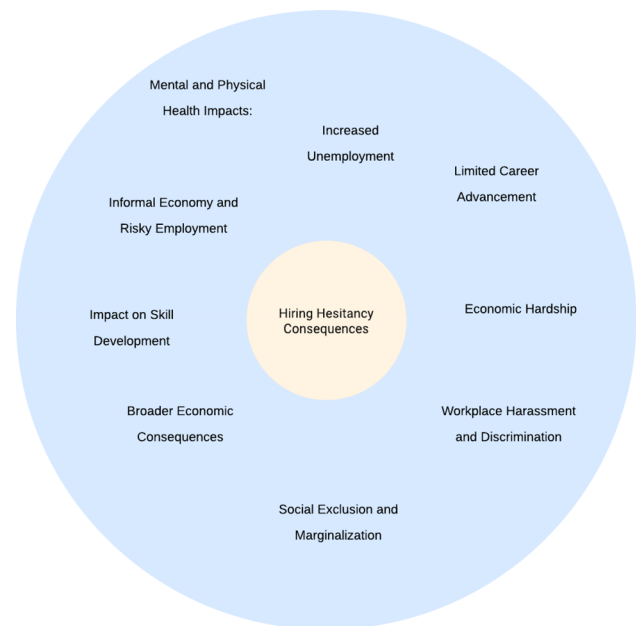
While respondent B from Saudi Arabia reported that:

"My experience highlights the significant challenges that transgender individuals like me face. One of the primary issues I encountered involved my identification documents not reflecting my true gender identity. This often led to legal and social complications, especially during interactions with law enforcement. As a social media influencer, my visibility in the workplace increased my vulnerability, illustrating that transgender individuals in public roles are more exposed to risks. My experience of violence and abuse in detention, including being raped in prison, underscores the grave dangers we face in environments where discriminatory laws and social attitudes are prevalent. The emotional trauma and psychological impact of these experiences have been profound, leaving long-term effects on my mental health. Being sentenced to prison for my gender identity or sexual orientation was emotionally devastating. Finally, being granted asylum in Europe highlights the critical need and intricate challenges involved in seeking refuge. For transgender individuals fleeing persecution, the asylum-seeking process is often fraught with uncertainty and difficulty, a journey marked by daunting challenges and constant hardship."

So, findings from the study indicate that the legal support and workplace environment in the GCC is generally unresponsive of transgender individuals. Crucial factors such as social support and inclusivity, which are vital for a healthy work environment, are often lacking due to the prevailing societal attitudes in the region [67]. The theory of psychological safety in the workplace underscores the importance of a supportive and inclusive environment for the well-being and productivity of employees [68]. This theory posits that such an environment is essential for employees to feel valued and safe, which is not commonly found in the GCC context, as the experiences of transgender individuals demonstrates Fig. 4.

Transgender individuals are impacted by educational barriers in the GCC. The conservative cultural context in many GCC countries can render educational environments less inclusive, impacting the ability of transgender students to develop the necessary skills and qualifications needed to find financially lucrative jobs [69]. This is consistent with the

Fig. 4 Hiring Hesitancy Consequences, Source: Authors



human capital development theory, which posits the importance of an inclusive education for building a competent workforce [70]. These findings align with the interview response provided below, corroborating the presented statement. Transgender “C” from UAE explained:

"In the GCC, transgender individuals like me face educational barriers due to the conservative culture, which makes learning environments less inclusive."

Job satisfaction among transgender individuals in the GCC is influenced by working conditions and inclusive policies. However, the prevalence of non-inclusive policies and unfair working conditions in many GCC companies can lead to lower job satisfaction [71]. Hackman, & Oldham, (1976) found is supported by the job characteristics model, which relates the nature of the job and organizational policies to job satisfaction [71].

At the same time, limited access to healthcare and supportive resources is a significant concern for transgender individuals in the GCC [72]. Engel, (1977) discussed that the scarcity of gender-affirming treatment and mental health services, coupled with often inadequate insurance coverage, poses challenges for their overall well-being. This situation is explained by the biopsychosocial model of health, which emphasizes comprehensive healthcare addressing biological, psychological, and social needs [72].

Lastly, societal attitudes in the GCC, including public perception and social stigma, significantly shape the experiences of transgender individuals [73, 74]. The conservative nature of many GCC societies often leads to negative public perceptions and heightened stigma, creating a hostile environment. This is in line with social cognitive theory, which highlights the role of social interactions and observational learning in shaping attitudes and behaviors [74].

4.2 Hiring hesitancy for transgender individuals in the GCC

This segment is divided into two parts, each addressing Hiring Hesitancy for Transgender Individuals in the GCC. The first part delves into Hiring Hesitancy for Transgender Individuals from the supply side, while the second part explores it from the demand side. These aspects are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Supply-Side Factors: In examining the supply-side factors that impact transgender individuals in the GCC, several key elements emerge, each supported by relevant theories. First, cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's background and self-presentation. This directly influences how transgender individuals perceive themselves and are perceived in society, which in turn impact their employment opportunities [74–76]. In the conservative societal framework of the GCC, where cultural norms are deeply ingrained, the challenge for transgender individuals in aligning their identity with societal expectations can be significant [77]. This misalignment often leads to stigmatization and discrimination. Goffman's theory of stigma explains how societal perceptions of 'difference' can lead to individuals being treated as less desirable, and this is evident in the experiences of transgender individuals within these cultural norms [73].

Secondly, the legal landscape significantly affects the participation of transgender individuals in the labor market. In many GCC countries, legal recognition of transgender identity is limited, and anti-discrimination laws are either absent or not effectively implemented. This can lead to direct discrimination in hiring practices and workplace environments. Here, the legal theory of rights and recognition provides a framework for understanding how legal recognition (or the lack of it) impacts the social and professional inclusion of transgender individuals [78]. Thirdly, awareness and understanding about transgender issues within the GCC society directly impact the confidence and willingness of transgender individuals to seek employment. The lack of understanding and acceptance of transgender identities in the workplace can create hostile environments, affecting mental well-being and professional development [77]. This aligns with the theory of social identity, which suggests that an individual's understanding of their social environment and their place within it significantly impacts their behavior and choices [74].

Lastly, media representation affects the self-image and labor market participation of transgender individuals. In the GCC, where media often reflects conservative values, the representation of transgender individuals is limited and frequently skewed. This inadequate or negative portrayal can reinforce societal prejudices and stereotypes [79, 80]. The cultivation theory in media studies suggests that long-term exposure to media content can shape an individual's perceptions of reality, which in this case, could negatively influence the public's perception of transgender individuals and their capabilities in the workplace [81]. Therefore, the interplay of cultural norms, legal frameworks, societal awareness, and media representation creates a complex environment for transgender individuals in the GCC, profoundly influencing their employment prospects and experiences [65]. These elements, examined through various sociological and psychological theories, provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by transgender individuals in the GCC labor market.

Demand-Side Factors: In the GCC, the decision-making process of employers regarding the hiring of transgender individuals is influenced by several interconnected factors, each playing a critical role in shaping their attitudes and policies. Firstly, legal frameworks within the GCC have a direct impact on employers' hiring decisions [28]. The presence or absence of laws protecting the rights of transgender individuals can significantly influence employer behavior. In environments where legal protection is minimal or non-existent, employers might feel less constrained by legal repercussions, leading to discriminatory practices [82]. This aligns with the legal theory of compliance, which suggests that the presence of legislation can compel organizational behavior towards inclusivity [18].

Secondly, religious beliefs, deeply ingrained in the fabric of GCC societies, play a significant role in shaping employer decision-making [83]. These beliefs often dictate norms and values, and in contexts where they are incongruent with transgender identities, this can lead to biases in the hiring process. The theory of planned behavior, which suggests that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape individuals' intentions and behaviors, can explain how deeply held religious beliefs translate into hiring practices [84]. Thirdly, the absence of robust anti-discrimination laws directly affects employers' hiring policies. The lack of legislative mandates to protect transgender individuals from discrimination in the workplace can lead to their exclusion from employment opportunities [85]. This reflects the theory of institutional discrimination, which highlights how systemic factors, including laws and regulations, can perpetuate inequality.

Fourthly, public perception and concern about reactions from others influence employer decisions. Employers often consider the potential backlash or controversy that might arise from hiring transgender individuals [85]. As Respondent "D" said, *"The government offers jobs, but employers, especially in the private sector, show reluctance to hire us. Our number of applications exceeds employer demand for vacancy filling, but our acceptance by private employers is not supported as much as by government employers."* This is in line with the social identity theory, which postulates that group membership and societal norms significantly influence individual behaviors and decisions, including those of employers. Fifthly, economic considerations, such as the perceived costs of accommodating transgender employees, come into play. Employers might be deterred by the potential financial implications, reflecting a cost-benefit analysis approach where decisions are influenced by the perceived economic impact [86].

Sixthly, workplace dynamics, including concerns about team cohesion and the environment, are significant [87]. Employers may worry about potential conflicts or disruptions, reflecting the theory of group dynamics which suggests that the composition of a team can significantly impact its functioning and harmony [88]. Seventhly, international relations can impact hiring decisions, particularly for businesses with global connections. Employers might consider the cultural and legal views on transgender issues of their international clients, reflecting theories of globalization and cultural sensitivity in business practices. Lastly, awareness and understanding about transgender issues among employers shape their attitudes and decisions. Misconceptions and biases can lead to unfounded fears, aligning with the theory of cognitive bias, which highlights how preconceived notions and lack of information can skew decision-making processes [89].

These factors together create a nuanced and complex environment for the employment of transgender individuals in the GCC, underlining the multifaceted nature of the challenge that combines legal, cultural, economic, and social dimensions.

4.3 Hiring hesitancy consequences

The employers' reluctance to hire transgender individuals in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have profound implications, which can be better understood through the application of various theoretical frameworks at the end of each consideration. Transgender individuals often face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment due to discrimination and bias in hiring practices [90]. This means that individuals are less likely to find jobs matching their qualifications or are forced to accept lower-paying jobs. This finding can be explained by Gary Becker's theory of discrimination in labor economics [91]. This theory highlights how biases in the labor market led to unequal employment opportunities, explaining the disproportionate unemployment and underemployment rates among transgender people in the GCC.

Respondent E said, "We also pay tax like other citizens, but we do not have facilities like other citizens. We not only bear limited career advancement opportunities, but when it comes to promotion and training, we are not given insurance that covers all types of treatment, especially abroad." Previous studies highlight workplace discrimination against transgender individuals, limiting career growth through reduced promotion chances, training access, and professional networking opportunities [92]. Social capital theory emphasizes how societal biases restrict these essential networks, impacting professional advancement, while economic hardship from unemployment and underemployment exacerbates financial insecurity [93]. Social exclusion theory further explains the systematic denial of resources to marginalized groups, perpetuating poverty and social inequity [54].

Transgender employees face harassment and discrimination, leading to stress and decreased productivity, explained by the minority stress model's focus on the chronic stress of stigmatized groups causing health issues [93]. The biopsychosocial model links these adverse health outcomes to the interplay of psychological, social, and biological factors [94]. Discrimination and social exclusion significantly harm transgender individuals' mental and physical health in the GCC. Exclusion from formal employment pushes transgender individuals into the informal economy or risky jobs, reflecting the dual labor market theory's distinction between stable formal jobs and precarious informal employment [74]. This limits skill development and long-term economic prospects, as human capital theory suggests that skills and experience are key to employability [94]. The workforce exclusion of transgender individuals not only perpetuates social injustice but also results in economic losses by sidelining skilled talent, hindering diversity, innovation, and economic growth, as indicated by the economic theory of diversity and innovation [28, 58].

Continued discrimination and exclusion from the labor market further lead to broader social marginalization of transgender individuals, reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion. This aligns with the social exclusion theory, which addresses the multi-dimensional process of being shut out from the social, economic, political, and cultural systems that contribute to the integration of a person into the community [28, 63]. For transgender individuals in the GCC, this exclusion has far-reaching implications, affecting not just their economic stability but also their social integration and well-being. These consequences underscore the need for inclusive policies and practices in the workplace, as well as broader societal changes to support the full participation of transgender individuals in the GCC labor market. Implementing these changes requires a multi-faceted approach, addressing legal, social, and economic barriers to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all individuals.

5 Conclusion

The gap in research on transgender individuals' labor market participation in the GCC, particularly in terms of supply and demand factors, raises a critical question: *Why are employers in the GCC hesitant to hire transgender individuals, and what are the challenges and consequences for their labor market participation?* This study, adhering to the Cochrane Handbook guidelines, has conducted a thorough investigation, including a review of scholarly publications from 2012–2023, interviews with transgender individuals in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and a thematic analysis focusing on transgender employment. The findings reveal a multifaceted challenge: firstly, transgender individuals in the GCC face numerous hurdles, including a lack of comprehensive legal protection and pervasive workplace discrimination, fueled by cultural and social norms. These factors contribute to workplace biases, wage disparities, and limited career advancement, exacerbating access to further education and healthcare access and leading to lowered job satisfaction and overall well-being. Secondly, the study highlights the reluctance of employers to hire transgender individuals,

stemming from cultural stigmatization, lack of legal protection, and societal biases. This reluctance not only leads to direct employment discrimination but also creates a challenging environment in the labor market for transgender individuals. It emphasizes the need for inclusive and comprehensive strategies to foster workplace equality.

Lastly, the consequences of hiring hesitancy towards transgender individuals manifest in high rates of unemployment and underemployment, significantly impacting their career advancement and economic stability. This situation perpetuates a cycle of poverty, social exclusion, and adverse health impacts, while simultaneously depriving the economy of diverse talents and innovation. The study underscores the urgent need for inclusive policies and societal changes to fully integrate transgender individuals into the GCC labor market, highlighting the necessity for a concerted effort to address these challenges.

6 Implication of the research

The research on transgender individuals' participation in the GCC labor market carries significant implications for various stakeholders, including policymakers, businesses, and the broader society. One of the primary implications concerns the development of public policy. The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive legal reforms in the GCC countries. Such reforms should aim at enhancing the legal protection of transgender individuals, ensuring their equal rights and opportunities in employment, and safeguarding them against workplace discrimination. Implementing anti-discrimination laws, recognizing gender identity, and ensuring equal access to employment opportunities are crucial steps in this direction.

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of fostering workplace inclusivity. Businesses and organizations in the GCC need to adopt more inclusive hiring practices, while actively working to eliminate biases against transgender individuals. This involves not only revising recruitment policies but also creating supportive and welcoming work environments. To achieve this, conducting training and awareness programs for employees is key. These programs should educate staff about gender diversity, inclusivity, and the importance of respecting and valuing all employees, regardless of their gender identity.

Moreover, the research has significant economic implications. By addressing the employment challenges faced by transgender individuals, GCC countries can tap into a more diverse talent pool, leading to increased innovation and productivity in the workforce. Reducing unemployment and underemployment among transgender individuals not only benefits this marginalized group, but also contributes to the overall economic growth and competitiveness of the region. A diverse workforce brings a range of perspectives and skills, fostering creativity and innovation, which are crucial for economic advancement.

7 Implication of the research

Research on the labor market participation of transgender individuals in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) offers crucial insights for stakeholders such as policymakers, businesses, and society at large. A key implication is the necessity of public policy development, particularly the need for comprehensive legal reforms in GCC countries. Such reforms should focus on enhancing legal protection for transgender individuals, guaranteeing equal rights and employment opportunities, and protecting them from workplace discrimination. This includes implementing anti-discrimination laws, recognizing their gender identity, and ensuring fair access to jobs. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of creating inclusive workplaces in the GCC. Businesses and organizations should revise their hiring practices to eliminate biases and foster environments that support and welcome transgender employees. This can be achieved through training and awareness programs for employees, focusing on gender diversity and inclusivity, while promoting ideas on how to respect and value all employees, irrespective of gender identity. By addressing the employment barriers faced by transgender individuals, this will enable GCC countries to access a more diverse talent pool, enhancing innovation and workforce productivity. Reducing unemployment and underemployment among transgender individuals not only aids this marginalized group but also boosts the overall economic growth and competitiveness of the region. A diverse workforce introduces varied perspectives and skills, essential for fostering creativity and economic development.

8 Limitation and future research guide

This study on transgender labor market participation in the GCC, while thorough, faces limitations such as its geographic and cultural specificity to the GCC, limiting its broader applicability. The reliance on limited literature and interviews from a limited number of participants deriving from only two countries may not fully represent the region's diverse experiences among transgender persons. Future research should broaden its scope to include more varied cultural contexts, involve a larger and more diverse sample from all GCC countries, and focus on identifying successful strategies for transgender employment inclusivity. Additionally, there's a need for quantitative data to assess the economic impact of transgender inclusion, providing a stronger foundation for inclusive policymaking and business practices.

Author contributions Y served as the first author of this review paper, responsible for the overall conception, design, and coordination of the study. K contributed as the second author, actively participating in the literature search, data collection, and analysis of the studies included in the review. M, as the third author, provided critical revisions, valuable insights, and assisted in finalizing the manuscript for submission. All authors collectively collaborated in the writing process and approved the final version of the paper.

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Data availability Due to confidentiality agreements with participants, raw interview data from this study on transgender labor market participation in the GCC cannot be publicly shared. Summary findings are presented in the manuscript. For inquiries on methodology or non-confidential insights, please contact the corresponding author.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Not applicable.

Competing interests The authors declare that there are no competing interests of a financial or personal nature that could have influenced the outcome or interpretation of this research.

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