

INHABITING THE IN-BETWEEN: EXPLORING THE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS OF  
TRANSPeOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY WEST BENGAL

A Thesis Submitted by

Srabasti Chatterjee

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Women's Studies

Faculty Council of Interdisciplinary Studies, Law & Management

Jadavpur University

2022

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Under the guidance of

Prof. Paromita Chakravarti

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2022

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-BETWEEN: EXPLORING THE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS OF TRANSPERSONS IN CONTEMPORARY WEST BENGAL by Srabasti Chatterjee A Thesis

**Submitted for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy** 148

**in Women's Studies at The School of Women's Studies Jadavpur University** 2022 To Shyam, **This** 74

is for you vii Acknowledgement My guide Prof. Paromita Chakravarti

**has been a constant source of support and** 296

confidence for me throughout the last seven years. The journey has been rough and she has always been there for me, closely monitoring my work, reading my chapters and continuously pushing me towards bettering myself. She has altered the shape and course of my work, nudging and directing me in the right direction when I have wavered. Her support and guidance has sustained me at times when I apprehended that this would not be possible. Her valuable advice and feedback has given me clarity on the topic.

## **CERTIFICATE FROM THE SUPERVISOR**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "INHABITING THE IN-BETWEEN: EXPLORING THE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS OF TRANSPeOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY WEST BENGAL" submitted by Srabasti Chatterjee, who got her name registered on 23.09.2015 for the award of PhD degree of Jadavpur University (School of Women's Studies, Faculty Council of Interdisciplinary Studies, Law & Management) is absolutely based upon her own work under the supervision of Prof. Paromita Chakravarti and that neither her thesis nor any part of the thesis has been submitted for any degree/diploma or any other academic award anywhere before.

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I hereby declare that this thesis entitled "INHABITING THE IN-BETWEEN: EXPLORING THE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS OF TRANSPeOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY WEST BENGAL" is an original research work carried out by me through an empirical interview based study for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The research methodology including all the interviews in this study was carried out in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct.

The interviews of all 60 respondents in this study were carried out with their informed consent. The names of all my research respondents have been changed and their confidentiality has been maintained. At the end of the study a respondent's meet was arranged via Google Meet on 30.01.2022 where I have shared my research findings with my respondents.

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Place: Kolkata

To

Shyam,

This is for you

## Acknowledgement

My guide Prof. Paromita Chakravarti has been a constant source of support and confidence for me throughout the last seven years. The journey has been rough and she has always been there for me, closely monitoring my work, reading my chapters and continuously pushing me towards bettering myself. She has altered the shape and course of my work, nudging and directing me in the right direction when I have waivered. Her support and guidance has sustained me at times when I apprehended that this would not be possible. Her valuable advice and feedback has given me clarity on the topic. I would like to express my love and heartfelt gratitude to her for being there for me, inspiring me with thoughts and ideas that have enriched my thesis. My sincere thanks also to the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University for giving me the opportunity to carry out my research study and I would specially like to mention Prof. Nandita Dhawan, Director, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University for having faith in me.

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Srabasti Chatterjee

Place: Kolkata

Date:

## ABSTRACT

This research explored the lives of transpersons through the lens of gender and attempted to understand transperson's (transfeminine and transmasculine persons) lived experiences across a spectrum of transbodies and gender expressions. The term 'trans' is often used as an inclusive category encompassing a wide range of experiences that involves some incongruence between the sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity and/or expression. The study tried to understand the various ways by which transgender persons relate their gender to their body. The study also explored the ways in which transindividuals experience the world through negotiating with different spaces (family spaces, professional spaces, intimate relationships, sexual relationships, friends etc.) to make life more 'liveable'.

The research is important given the fact that the last decade has seen transpersons coming out with confidence, asserting their non-normative gender preferences and claiming a visibility both within the private intimate spaces as well as the more public arena. Part of the assertion is in the domain of wanting to construct and reconstruct their gender and sexual identities – partially or fully, biologically and/or socially, to achieve that 'perfect' body so essential to their existence. The transition appears to be a life and death issue and transition gets defined ultimately through various markers that vary across individual and structural factors.

My research would take on the critical question: does the trans-person's desire to match their sex to their gender bring back body essentialism through the back door (reverse essentialism)? Feminists have challenged the sex/gender distinction to show that gender is socially constructed. Trans-theory has further demonstrated that sex is constructed too. While second wave feminism popularised the idea that gender is distinct from physiological sex and socially and culturally constructed, trans-people experience their biological sex as more artificial and changeable than their gender or inner sense of who they really are. My understanding is that though trans-persons appear to reinforce body essentialism and lend weight to the argument that gender is biologically determined, their inhabiting the trans-body (a body that has never 'perfectly' transitioned) and their experiences of masculinities and femininities create major disruptions in the unilinear understanding of sex and gender.

This study was contextualised at the juncture of an important judgment and an act for the transgender individuals and was situated in the state of West Bengal which has recently constituted its Transgender Development Board. In light of the landmark judgment on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2014, in the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) vs. Union of India, the Supreme Court of India affirmed that the fundamental rights granted under the constitution of India would be equally applicable to transgender individuals including those who identify as third gender and those who identify in a gender opposite to their biological sex, i.e., persons, assigned female sex at birth, identifying as male and vice-versa, and gave them the right to self-identification of gender as male, female or third gender, which meant that through this judgment the Supreme Court acknowledged the freedom of gender expression and right to self determination of gender identities. The spirit of the NALSA judgment has become nullified by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020 which has introduced a form of gate-keeping by the state for validation of transgender/transitioned identity by the state in the form of screening and scrutiny of surgical transition performed, by the District Magistrate. At this juncture it becomes even more important to understand the trajectory of the trans/queer movement, whether it is being split by those with resources undergoing SRS thereby transitioning into 'preferred boxes' or whether it is 'creating gender', a plurality of bodies, gender and identities.

Moreover the research has tried to understand the scope of livelihoods for the trans-individuals and how that exercises an impact on their liveability. The study also explored the relevance of these experiences in today's feminist movement, through trying to bring out how the spectrum of gender expressions and polymorphous bodies is impacting (if at all) the LGBTIQHKA+ movement at large, whether it is enriching or fracturing it. At a broader level, the study will explore the continuities and disjuncture between the trans- movement and the feminist movement on questions of sex, gender and the body.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFAB - Assigned Female At Birth

AMAB - Assigned Male At Birth

AIDS - Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

CBO - Community Based Organisation

Cis - Cisgender denotes a person whose gender identity is congruent with biological sex and gender assigned at birth

Cis-het - Cisgender heterosexual

CSR - Corporate Social Responsibility

DFID - Department for International Development

DGMS - Directorate General of Mines Safety

DJ - Disc Jockey

DSM - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA)

FGD - Focus Group Discussion

FtM - Female to Male

GAT - Gender Affirmative Therapy

GD - Gender Dysphoria

GID - Gender Identity Disorder

HEMM - Heavy Earth Moving Machinery

HIV - Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HRIS - Human Resource Information Systems

HRT - Hormone Replacement Therapy

ICD - International Classification of Diseases

IME - Initial Medical Examination

IPC - Indian Penal Code

LBT\* - Lesbian Bisexual Transmasculine

LGBTIQHKA+ - Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex Queer *Hijra Kothi* Plus  
(indicating possibilities for newer identities)

MSM - Men who have Sex with Men

MtF - Male to Female

NACO - National Aids Control Organisation

NACP - National Aids Control Programme

NALSA - National Legal Services Authority

NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation

OBC - Other Backward Class

PLUS - People Like US

SAATHII - Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India

SC/ST - Scheduled Castes/Schedule Tribes

SRS - Sex Reassignment Surgery

STD - Sexually Transmitted Disease

STI - Sexually Transmitted Infection

TG - Transgender, denotes a person whose gender identity is incongruent with biological sex and gender assigned at birth

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

WBSAPCS - West Bengal State AIDS Prevention & Control Society

WHO - World Health Organization

WPATH - World Professional Association for Transgender Health

## Introduction

The term 'transgender' implies a spectrum of gender identities that defy social gender norms based on the uni-linear relationship between sex and gender. 'Trans' is an inclusive term that describes the journey from one's ascribed gender to the achieved gender. According to an UNDP report on *Hijras/Transgender Women in India* with reference to HIV, human rights and social exclusion, transgender people break binarised social gender constructs and blur the socio-culturally prevailing gender stereotypes (Chakrapani, 2010). People who dress differently from norms associated with their socially ascribed gender, use prosthetics, cosmetically change their body, undergo voice therapy, hormone replacement therapy (henceforth referred to as HRT), partial or complete Sex Reassignment Surgery (henceforth referred to as SRS) in order to live their preferred genders. They could use one or all of these methods to express their preferred genders. Until recently gender non-conformity and the desire to express one's gender different to the gender ascribed at birth was considered a pathological condition by psychiatrists and psychologists. The third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (henceforth referred to as DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association used to refer to this condition as Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and in 2013 it was completely de-pathologised and renamed to Gender Dysphoria (GD) in DSM-5 to remove any stigma that may be associated with this condition. Being transgender is not a disorder; there could be an underlying gender or body dysphoria<sup>1</sup> that creates distress which can be resolved through one or many kinds of gender expressions and/or psychological/psychiatric therapeutic interventions/counselling and medical/surgical interventions.

In this research I have tried to understand the lived experiences of the transgender individuals in contemporary West Bengal through an empirical interview based study conducted with trans-persons. The thesis explores the transgender individual's perception of gender and situates that against the gender binary construct and the uni-linearity of sex and gender. In this context the thesis discusses the role of Gender Affirmative Therapy with reference to the lived experiences of the trans-individuals. These lived experiences are explored through the

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<sup>1</sup> Gender dysphoria is the discomfort and distress caused to a transgender person due to incongruity between the person's biological sex/gender assigned at birth and the person's felt sense of gender while body dysphoria refers to the distress centred around their physical body and their perception of that body in relation to their sense of gender. A transgender person always has gender dysphoria but may or may not have body dysphoria. The level of dysphoria or distress varies from person to person in the case of transgender individuals.

concept of liveabilities based on their capabilities with a focus on livelihood options and opportunities for trans-individuals. Finally the thesis examines the trans-movement against the environment created by legislations like the National Legal Services Authority (henceforth NALSA) judgment, reading down of IPC Section 377, The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules 2020 with the aim to trace its trajectory and the way forward. This is a narrative based empirical study that takes into account the subjective experiences of trans-individuals, gathering empirical data that can bridge the gap between theory and practice, between academics and activism. The knowledge and data gathered from lived trans-experiences could feed the feminist movement by providing a richer understanding of non-normative, marginalised gender and sexuality.

## **Section 1: Background of this Study**

In 2007, I was working as a documentation officer at MANAS Bangla, a network of community based organisations (henceforth CBO) for Men who have Sex with Men (henceforth MSM) population in West Bengal. It was a targeted intervention (TI) project launched by National AIDS Control Organisation (henceforth referred to as NACO) for prevention and control of HIV/AIDS among the MSM population. The second phase of India's National AIDS Control Programme (NACP-II, 2002–2007) recognized MSM as a high-risk group (NACO 2006). This period witnessed the establishment of CBOs in eastern India with funding under the MSM rubric, such as MANAS Bangla, a CBO network working throughout West Bengal. These CBOs used to work through their field level workers, i.e. peer educators and peer counsellors. They were predominantly self identified as *kothis*<sup>2</sup> and were increasing the MSM database by bringing new cases and doing regular follow ups. To be precise the HIV/AIDS targeted intervention programme for the MSM population was based on the contacts and hard work of the *kothi* sexual subjects (Boyce, 2007:75-203) and the *kothi* became an emergent reality during the expansion of HIV-AIDS intervention (Cohen, 2005: 285). NACP III (2007–2012) classified *kothi* as a high-risk group of 'effeminate males' acting as the counterparts of the normative male partners in the TIs for the MSM activity practicing population (NACO 2007).<sup>3</sup> During NACP IV, when I joined

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<sup>2</sup>*Kothi* is a South Asian term for effeminate persons, ascribed male at birth, some of whom may identify as transwomen. Unlike *hijras*, *kothis* do not form a separate community. However, some of them do adopt the *hijra* way of life and profession for experiencing belongingness

<sup>3</sup> <http://naco.gov.in/sites/default/files/NACP-III.pdf> (accessed on 14.09.18)

MANAS Bangla, MSM continued to be featured as a high priority group. I often heard from my colleagues many of whom belonged to the target group population self-identified as *kothis*, that though the project was a targeted intervention for the MSM population and despite the fact that they had got visibility through the HIV/AIDS intervention project, they still did not feel comfortable in identifying themselves as effeminate males. They had separate needs that were not being addressed through the MSM TIs. Though they inhabited a biologically male body they did not feel comfortable to identify themselves as a man and hence did not see themselves in a 'man having sex with man' equation. The word *giriya or parikh* means a 'true man' who is the sexual partner of the *kothi* and who often does not identify himself as homosexual or MSM and thinks of himself as a 'man' because of the penetrative role that he assumes in the sexual act with the *kothis* (Khan, 2004:4). The *kothis* were always looked at as a complement to the *parikhs* and they were searching for a platform where they could talk about their gendered self, which was missing somewhere. During our informal conversations, my friends and colleagues who self identified as *kothis* often shared their pain of not being able to live in their preferred gender and preferred body. These were narratives reflecting gender dysphoria where they would talk about their discomfort in being referred to in the gender they were ascribed by the society in relational terms with their biological sex. These were narratives expressing the discomfort of inhabiting a sexed body which did not match with their preferred gender, yet again there were expressions showing the need to match the body with the preferred gender, the need to live one's preferred gender with or without changing the body and also the need to inhabit a new body which would talk about some other possibilities by blurring and challenging the male-female binary and creating identities based on transgender locations.

All these voices resulted in various consultations between the years 2008 to 2009 across India with the demand for formulation of health policies especially for transfeminine individuals including those associated with the *hijra*<sup>4</sup> profession. As a consequence this gradually resulted in the separation of transgender individuals especially transfeminine identities from MSM through formation of distinct organisations, by and for the transgender identified individuals. The state representative of NACO, West Bengal State AIDS Prevention &

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<sup>4</sup> *Hijra* is a way of life practiced in the Indian subcontinent by marginalised feminine individuals ascribed male at birth. They may or may not undergo castration and removal of the penis. They practice commune living in a characteristic *guru-chela* (teacher-disciple) relationship. They follow traditional livelihood options like blessing (*badhai*) in marriage and birth ceremonies, begging (*challa*) and sex work (*khajra*).

Control Society (WBSAPCS), started separate targeted intervention programmes for the transgender community. Transgender identity surfaced as an emergent category of identity and representation. According to Stryker and Aizura 'transgender' arrived as an expansive category that characterised variant gender expressions and identities through an imitation of colonial ways of creating and disseminating knowledge (Stryker and Aizura, 2013) by subsuming the local identities and bringing all under the umbrella term, 'Transgender'.

The earliest mention of the word 'transgender' is found in 'transgenderism' a word used by Dr. John F. Oliven, a psychiatrist in his book 'Sexual Hygiene and Pathology' (Oliven, 1965) where he replaced the term 'transsexualism' with 'transgenderism'. Consequently transgender as a rubric of identity and activism (Dutta and Roy, 2014:320) appeared in the Indian LGBTIQHKA+<sup>5</sup> scenario. It appeared in the movement and the development sector in India approximately around the end of the first decade of 2000. From 2010, the Association for Transgenders/*Hijras* in West Bengal started to observe 'Transgender Day' on 30<sup>th</sup> April in West Bengal giving the movement a new direction. Till that time the words transgender and *hijra* were used interchangeably, but gradually clear definitions and compartmentalisation of the two started to take shape where *hijra* got more associated with a specific profession and way of life while transgender identities became broader by encompassing *hijras* and other marginalised gender identities. Thus the understanding that all *hijras* were transgender individuals but all transgender individuals were not *hijras* took shape.

The HIV framework brought in by the targeted intervention programmes gradually tilted towards the gender-sexuality framework as it was felt that the HIV framework with its focus on homosexuality was somewhere bypassing the questions on gender and rights. The term 'Transgender' has always been there in the LGBTIQHKA+ spectrum but it was considered a foreign term not embraced by the local community effeminate males or *kothis*. Suparna<sup>6</sup> (40 years from Hooghly) an activist and *hijra* identified person shared in her interview that,

We were happy with the term *kothi* as it was a local term close to our heart and very near to our identity. The term 'transgender' was used as a jargon by the upper tier activists and within acronyms like the 'LGBT' but due to the shifts in the pattern of funding, the term made a permanent place in the colloquial communication, in project proposals, project reports, protest demonstrations, pride walks and made a permanent place in our frame of reference.

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<sup>5</sup>Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex Queer Hijra Kothi Asexual + (+ denoting any other expression of non-normative gender and sexuality)

<sup>6</sup> Interview taken on 14.09.19 in Kolkata

Ever since 2007, the Indian state and transnational funders have increasingly recognized transgender people, particularly male-to-female (henceforth MtF) trans people as a high risk group for HIV infection while the NACP guidelines used the term 'transgender' implying *hijra*, replacing their earlier designation as eunuchs (NACO, 2007)<sup>7</sup>. Subsequently, in 2008, several consultations were organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), assisting the government of India in its HIV/AIDS programme. The objective was to plug gaps that existed in state policy and infrastructure. During the consultations the front line workers and activists first pointed out gaps that existed in policies and provisions for the transgender population. The first and foremost demand was to expand the spectrum under transgender to include people other than *hijras* as the definition of the term was extremely vague till then (UNDP 2010)<sup>8</sup>. This prompted UNDP to fund regional consultations organized by large metropolitan NGOs in 2009, which aimed to arrive at a common trans-regional definition of transgender in consultation with community representatives. The eastern and north eastern regions were represented by organisations from West Bengal (Kolkata, Siliguri, Bongaon, Jalpaiguri), Orissa (Bhubaneswar, Kalahandi, Balangir, Bhadrak), Meghalaya (Shillong) and Assam (Guwahati). Transgender was defined as an umbrella term, including both *hijra* and *kothi*: According to a report published by an NGO named Solidarity & Action Against The HIV Infection in India (SAATHI),

Transgender is a gender identity. Transgender persons usually live or prefer to live in the gender role opposite to the one in which they are born. In other words, one who is biologically male but loves to feel and see herself as a female could be considered as a male to female transgender person. It is an umbrella term which includes transsexuals, cross dressers, intersex persons, gender variant persons and many more. In eastern India there are various local names and identities, such as *Kothi, Dhurani, Boudi, 50/50, Gandu, Chakka, Koena*. Among these, the most common identity is *Kothi*. A few transgender persons also believe in a traditional culture known as *Hijra* . . . with its own hierarchical social system. (SAATHI 2009: 17)

Thus, in the rubric of the HIV/AIDS discourse the transmasculine identities got totally excluded and only existed in the queer feminist movements and research endeavours. The trajectory of transmasculine identities and their emergence into visibility has been discussed extensively in chapter 3 of this thesis. The local terms like *kothis, dhuranis*<sup>9</sup> and others got

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<sup>7</sup> <http://naco.gov.in/sites/default/files/NACP-III.pdf> (accessed on 14.09.18)

<sup>8</sup> [www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/hijras\\_transgender\\_in\\_india\\_hiv\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_social\\_exclusion.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/hijras_transgender_in_india_hiv_human_rights_and_social_exclusion.pdf) (accessed on 14.09.18)

<sup>9</sup> In '*ulti*', the language used by the *hijras, 'dhurani'* is another term for *kothi* who are effeminate males who engage in '*dhurpitti*' or sex work with the '*parikh*' or the male partner in the role of the recipient.

subsumed by the umbrella term transgender resulting in a common (trans)national, cross-cultural signifier (Dutta and Roy, 2014:327). Thus transgender came to include various cultural and socioeconomic contexts. The term incorporated as well as dissolved identities. In terms of biological essentialism the term transgender identified with the gender opposite to a person's biological sex through a transition from male to female with just a brief mention of gender variance and intersex. In previous HIV/AIDS funding of MSM persons, sexual and gender variance existed as an overlap in the form of *kothis* and *dhuranis* or effeminate males. In 2011 NACO in its NACP Phase IV formulated the "Strategic Approach for Targeted Intervention among Transgender and *Hijra*" and recognised *hijras* and transgenders as a separate category having unique needs and concerns (NACP IV, 2011)<sup>10</sup>. Following the initial articulations of transgender in the HIV-AIDS sector, recent policy directives such as a report by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MOSJE) and a judgment by the Supreme Court of India have also defined transgender as an umbrella category, extending its use beyond HIV-AIDS prevention (MOSJE 2014: 7; NALSA 2014: 10)<sup>11</sup>. These institutions included both male to female and female to male transitional identities as well as "third gender" identities<sup>12</sup>. The discussion in these documents goes beyond HIV-AIDS prevention and control and talks about the rights-based discourse while talking about the gender and sexually marginalised community. This paradigm shift happened due to the need for discussing 'sex' from a rights based perspective and challenging the opinion produced by the AIDS discourse labelling India as a 'sexually repressive' and 'sexually tabooed' society resulting in fast spread of HIV across the subcontinent. The rights based approach was adopted in order to see an individual not only as the member of the high risk group but as an individual entity being able to talk about their sexuality and sexual rights (Kole, 2007). Today the term transgender encompasses a wide spectrum of identities and experiences. It includes people whose gender expressions break binary norms assigned to their biological sex and gender ascribed at birth. People, who dress differently to norms associated with their socially ascribed gender, use prosthetics, cosmetically change their body and undergo voice therapy,

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<http://www.naco.gov.in/sites/default/files/Strategic%20Approach%20for%20Targeted%20Intervention%20among%20Transgender%20and%20Hijra.pdf> (accessed on 20.12.20)

<sup>11</sup> <https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/Binder2.pdf> (accessed on 18.06.18)

<https://main.sci.gov.in/jonew/judis/41411.pdf> (accessed on 18.06.18)

<sup>12</sup> Any gender that falls outside the man-woman binary is boxed under the third gender category. The term was used by the Supreme Court in the NALSA judgment of 2014. There is criticism on the concept of third gender from academics and activists as the term seems to reinforce the hierarchy already introduced by the patriarchal man-woman binary.

HRT, partial or complete SRS. They could use one or all of these methods to express their preferred gender.

## **Section 2: The Theoretical Framework**

When a child takes birth the doctor / nurse after checking the sex organ of the baby, informs the family whether the child is a 'girl' or a 'boy'. From that very moment the family members start tracing the course of the life of the child based on its gender identity which in turn is based on the child's external genitalia that defines the child's biological sex. At times (particularly in Western countries where pre-natal determination of sex is legal) even before the child is born, its story is written with the help of toys and colours adorning the nursery. The babies born with a vagina are 'girlled' and the babies born with a penis 'boyed' and the babies born with 'neither or both or something different' are labelled as abject beings who do not appear properly gendered, excluded and if possible 'corrected'. This naming at once sets a boundary and hence starts the repeated inculcation of a norm (Butler, 1993:8).

We are socially tied to certain body parts and mapping cannot be done when the entity becomes 'inconceivable'. The baby is never asked or given an option to live 'its' life on 'its' own terms and preferences. Society creates a stereotypical schemata and limits our thoughts within the male-female and normal-abnormal binary for protecting and establishing mainstream patriarchal heteronormative hegemony. The 'man' and 'woman' binary fixed by the mainstream androcentric society is labelled as 'normal' and any gender expression outside this binary are therefore labelled as 'abnormal'.

Gender is a fluid concept and the human female body becomes the substrate of the construction of 'woman' and by the same logic can be the site for other creations of gender as well, which therefore implies that female and woman are two different entities altogether (Butler, 1986). By introducing the category of gender rather than sex it is hoped that people would come to see the feminine and masculine differences as constructed through socialization rather than by biological determinism, and hence can be changed over time and across culture which brings us to the point that there is no gender core. Judith Butler further argues that 'sex' is a construct which is reinforced and materialised through time (Butler, 1993:1). This materialisation is achieved through a forcible reiteration of the norms. Therefore sex is normative. Sex is implicated through the binarised reification, i.e. gendering and sexing the bodies through forcible reiteration of the binarised, heteronormative norms.

This continuous process of gendering and sexing the bodies therefore leads up to the project of consolidating heterosexuality. Here the phrase 'forcible reiteration' becomes significant due to it being a necessary process which implies that it is never quite fully materialised, the bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialisation is impelled (Butler, 1993:2). For transgender people this 'incompleteness' is the point of subversion. The identities they break, make and take are never quite stable according to the domain of cultural intelligibility and are always in a flux as they inhabit what I have termed an in-between space in the gender binary spectrum. I have conceptualised 'in-betweenness' as a transitional, dynamic fluid space that separates, overlaps and merges in a state of constant flux.

The concept of in-betweenness was described by Indian English scholar and postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha in 'The Location of Culture' (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha describes this as hybridity in the context of cross-cultural hybrid identities that negotiate and challenge the cultural binary from which the hybrid emerges. I have applied the concept of cultural hybridity and in-betweenness into indeterminate in-between spaces in our gender binary social fabric that prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities (Bhabha, 1994:5). Through reading and appreciating the narratives I have tried to understand the multiple locations created by the trans-persons on the basis of their gender identities and expressions forging in in-between positions or going beyond the gender binary or creating something new and in the process finding themselves in transitory moments interweaving multifarious identities through landscapes of space, time, inclusion and exclusion (Bhabha, 1994:1).

With this perspective as a framework, my research seeks to explore the lives of trans-persons through the lens of gender and attempts to understand trans-person's (transfeminine and transmasculine) lived experiences across a spectrum of trans-bodies and gender expressions. The term 'trans' is often used as an umbrella term category implying the difference between ones ascribed gender and achieved gender. Transgender identities also challenge what second wave feminism has continued to reiterate that the origin of sex is biological while gender is a socio-cultural construct. Judith Butler also critiqued this 'nature-nurture' binary and said that one is not born with a sex; instead one is given a 'sex' after birth. Sex and gender are both activated at the same time; at the moment a child is born, in some societies even before the child is born planning starts. The study tries to understand the various ways by which transgender persons relate their gender to their body. The central question of this study is,

"what is 'gender' as perceived by the trans-individuals?" Is there something as the 'ethereal and formless truth' of 'gender', which cannot be defined and limited by human anatomy, physiology or cultural norms of human society? In her book *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler speaks about the performativity of gender where gender is consolidated through stylized repetition of acts. Butler puts forward that gender exists as performance and not as an inner reality. This belief creates numerous possibilities of gender. So the question that follows is that do the transgender narratives reinforce biological essentialism and maintain the heteronormative binary hegemony or are they actually denaturalizing and deconstructing the binary by mobilising gender? Are they questioning and challenging the binary phallogocentric model that speaks of 'men with penises' and 'women with vaginas' by creating a spectrum of polymorphous bodies having diverse expressions? The study also explores the ways in which trans-individuals through their polymorphous expressions of gender constantly negotiate with their environment, with different institutions and relationships, both personal and professional to make life more 'liveable'. And in their quest to make their lives liveable the study explores trans-liveabilities with a focus on their capabilities especially their livelihood. So starting with gender as the central theme, I have tried to understand how diverse gender expression in transgender individuals become voices of subversion, how these varied gender expressions are shaped, how they negotiate with the environment and how their choices of gender and sexual expression are intertwined with their environment and livelihood.

The study is based on the 'gender' question as its theoretical framework, which in turn organically flows into a study on trans-liveability with a focus on education, health and livelihood. The focus has been especially on livelihood as from the Focus Group Discussions (FGD) that were conducted in the field areas (Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Darjeeling districts) the question of 'livelihood' came up everywhere. Moreover, the role of the Transgender Development Board constituted in the year 2015 is not very clear and from the narratives of the respondents of this study it emerged that the board is yet to take concrete steps for creating employment opportunities for the trans-persons. The board has been reconstituted in January 2021 again for working for the development of the trans-community. Expectations are high from this newly constituted board for creating and securing job opportunities for the community, hence the need for locating my study in West Bengal. The study tries to explore the 'livelihood' question and tries to understand the relationship between livelihood and the trans-person's choice of gender expression. The study explores the relationship between gender identity and the various economic structures within which

transgender persons live, that may or may not influence their gender expression and choice of livelihood. This research focuses on the politics of identity of trans-people by looking through the lens of economic structures. It tries to find out how education and socioeconomic background impact the lives of transgender people, their choices and gender expressions as well as gender transition/reassignment. Here the research takes the 'Capability Approach' as propounded by Dr. Amartya Sen as its theoretical framework to understand the dynamics between one's gender identity and livelihood.

The study looks at how gender influences choice of livelihood and how Gender Affirmative Therapy (henceforth referred to as GAT) and SRS, which is a part of GAT, may become an extension of the capitalist market driven economy and the extent to which it becomes a medium for the intrinsic need of gender expression vis-à-vis its role in shaping the trans-body to influence livelihood. This study tries to understand the choices of livelihood that the trans-persons had before coming out and whether gender expression and later on GAT / SRS helps / hinders their economic choices. How do economic decisions shape gender expression and how gender identity impacts economic decision? Lastly, the study looks at the relevance of these trans-experiences in today's queer movement, trying to bring out how the spectrum of gender expressions and polymorphous bodies is impacting (if at all) the LGBTIQHKA+ movement at large, whether it is enriching or fracturing it.

All of us try to express ourselves in our own words, in our own language, to give a self description which is to be honoured. However the language which we use daily is already loaded with norms that influence us as we start to verbalize our self description. This means though we are describing ourselves we are doing so through a medium which is structured, hegemonised and normative. Languages are intrinsically gendered as they are dominated by heterosexual discourse and works through the male-female binary. The Trans-persons standing outside the man-woman binary therefore cannot express themselves and their experiences in the gender dimorphic language guided by the patriarchal discourse. The trans-persons, whether Female to Male (henceforth FtM) or Male to Female (henceforth MtF), whether identifying themselves as 'man' or 'woman' or 'third gender' or 'transgender' or 'transsexual' express themselves through the dominant language, which is gendered and limited by the male-female binary. For them the frame of reference is the heterosexual patriarchal society of which they are a part but basically an isolated, labelled, stigmatised 'other'. Judith Butler puts forward that a 'subject' in order to be intelligible in the society must

be identifiable by a normative standard, a regulatory power that determines our 'being'. According to Butler this power is not specific to the juridical power, but it is much more ingrained than that (Butler, 2006:183). The transgender individuals by their very positioning as the 'other' as the 'deviant' as the 'queer' are always posited outside the regulatory regime as they are not intelligible by the society and the state as their 'being' is not comprised of norms and practices which have become the premise of intelligibility without which the society cannot think the 'human' at all (Butler, 2006:183). As society cannot be sure about the gender identities of the transgender persons, it cannot be sure about the social norms that need to be honoured and expressed for gaining 'personhood' and becoming allocated. 'Un-recognisability' of one's gender becomes the reason for 'un-recognisability' of one's personhood for society. Here Foucault's conceptualisation of norm, normativity and normalization becomes significant. According to Diana Taylor (2009) in her understanding of Michel Foucault, she puts forward that Foucault conceives the norm as playing a pivotal role in the way modern power emerges, circulates, proliferates and legitimates. Normal is consolidated by the norm. Techniques of normativisation and normalisation work on to 'make normal'. In the process these norms interact both with bodies as individual as well as whole populations to make them adhere to prevailing social norms. According to Diane Taylor (Taylor 2009: 47) norms consolidate power within society and restrict social subjects within a range of narrowly defined practices which are performed by them efficiently and repeatedly resulting in the process of normalisation of norms. In case of gender norms there are only two mutually exclusive groups in society in which the gender norms becomes so normalised through repetitive performance that they become naturalised beyond critique. With respect to the process of 'normalisation' the transgender individuals unsurprisingly remains outside the boundary of 'normalcy' as defined by the social regulatory regime. Here I would refer to Butler, where Butler (2006:184), through asking the question, "What happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth?" clearly raises the uncertainty, insecurity and pain of the transgender persons. For them the identity crisis stemming from the sense of being otherised is multiplied by the socio-legal situation of the country where a derogatory bill supposed to safeguard the rights of the transgender individuals has been passed by parliament and is now The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. This law requires a certificate from a district magistrate to decide the gender identity of a trans-identified individual which instead of being affirming and supportive to the trans-person subjects them to state scrutiny for validation and authentication. The act falls far short of what is required for the protection of transgender

individuals who face continuous harassment, abuse, stigma and discrimination. Butler asked, "What is it to occupy the place of not-being within the field of being? What it is to live, breathe, attempt to love neither as fully negated nor as fully acknowledged as being?" (Butler, 2006:184). Responding to this crisis of identity, of being, of loving each other, Luce Irigaray in her article "When Our Lips Speak Together" welcomes the non-normative, non-binary trans-people to come out of 'their' language, the language of heteronormative society. As Irigaray puts forward that in this heteronormative patriarchal society dominated by gender dimorphism, people haven't been taught, nor have been allowed to express multiplicity. Irigaray welcomes the queer people to pay attention to themselves as they are, still not absorbed into the bodies already encoded within a system (Irigaray, 1980). This moment celebrates the freedom of the trans-persons, the freedom from being suffocated by the regulatory regime, freedom from being stifled by the process of normalization. In this research I have tried to discuss about both pleasure and pain, of inhabiting this in-between position, meandering all the way through the transgender individuals' lived experiences with a focus on GAT/SRS and have tried to understand the meaning of trans-bodies and polymorphous gender expressions with the aim to develop an 'oppositional consciousness' (Collins, 1986) of the marginalised experiences of the sexual minority people. As a feminist researcher I have carried on this research with the belief that there is a crucial link between feminist scholarship and activism.

### **Section 3: The research questions**

In this research the central question around which all the other questions revolved has been to know what could be the perception of gender according to the trans-individuals that they developed through their lived experiences. The thesis has tried to understand the trajectory of their lives through a feminist lens trying to unfold the way they felt, identified, accepted and claimed their gender by at times embracing and at times subverting the socially ascribed gender roles and living their preferred gender roles by walking the path less traversed. According to Dona J. Haraway (2004), in the struggle for existence and claiming of rights, the concept of gender challenges sexual differences being naturalised. In order to get a clearer perception about the sex/gender distinction, the article "Interpreting Gender" by Linda Nicholson (1994) was an informative reading in which the author has said that the strong basis of argument for the feminists came in the form of the concept of 'gender' and by including the category of gender rather than sex it is hoped that people would come to see the

feminine and masculine differences as constructed through socialisation rather than biological determinism, and hence could be changed over time and across culture. The lived experience of the transgender and transsexual people challenges heteronormative binaristic hegemony by questioning the immutable nature of "sexed bodies" through their idea of Sex Reassignment Surgery. In Judith Butler's article "Bodies That Matter", where in the conclusion she questions the protection of the 'viable bodies' through the heteronormative hegemony and the exclusion of the 'abject bodies', she puts forward the need to rearticulate the notion of what qualifies as bodies that matter. During the last few decades a new politics around gender and sexuality has evolved through the LGBTIQHKA+ movement which has given rise to queer theory and practices within feminist theory. The relationship of the movement and its activism with academics centred around feminist studies is complex and is one of mutual nourishment as well as conflict. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, the editors of the book *Because I have a Voice* have shared that the queer struggle "is not just a public movement for rights and legal change, it is also a map of how people navigate their most intimate geographies: their bodies, their desires, their families and their selves." (Narrain, Bhan, 2005:4).

"Sex is what you are born with, gender is what you recognize and sexuality is what you discover." This was a comment made by one of the first *hijra* respondents of Anita Chettiar's study on the *hijras* of Mumbai city (Chettiar, 2015:752). Chettiar states that this response comes straight from her heart. It is a response that explains in a simple and lucid manner three of the most difficult and complex concepts in the gender-sexuality discourse that academicians and activists struggle to understand. According to Candace West and Don Zimmerman, gender is more an outcome of the interplay between the self and its environment, something recurrent and repetitive that comes out of those interactions (West, Zimmerman, 1987:129). The discourse around transgender arises when an individual slowly but surely feels and finally realises that their sense of gender does not match the socially ascribed gender at the time of their birth.

According to I. Sen (2005) the term transgender describes people who transgress gender boundaries constructed by society as their biological sex is not in sync with their sense of gender. Most of the narratives of my respondents have revealed that the awareness of being different from the ascribed gender at birth and the gender role that they were expected to play came at a very early age. Most of them started developing 'gender non-

conforming' behaviour patterns of cross dressing and forms of play around the age of 4 to 5 years. The origin of the transgender discourse appears to be physiological; it is permanent and is not a passing phase. Therapy, drugs, pleading, bribery, intimidation and threats do not work and the 'phase' lasts till death (Chettiar, 2015: 752). One of the solutions or therapies to the intense body dysphoria in many transgender individuals is to surgically alter the body to synchronise with their mind. A common perception shared by many transgender individuals including many of the respondents in my study is the 'feeling of being trapped in the wrong body' while some respondents (as will be later discussed in the theses) have critiqued this notion saying that 'it's my body'. On the basis of an understanding of the sex-gender divide the thesis has focused on the critical question: Do trans-persons' desire to match their sex to their gender bring back body essentialism through the back door (reverse essentialism)? Feminists have challenged the sex/gender distinction to show that gender is socially constructed. Queer theory has further demonstrated that sex is constructed too. Trans-persons experience their biological sex as more artificial and changeable than their gender or inner sense of who they really are. If gender is constructed, then the question that arises is that in case of a transgender individual how is it being constructed contrary to the socialisation mechanism that forces and teaches us to conform to the 'mainstream heteronormative way of life'? Is the trans-person's experience of growing up problematising the theory that proclaims gender is constructed or opening up some new insights? My argument is that though trans-persons appear to reinforce body essentialism and appear to lend weight to the argument that gender is biologically determined, their inhabiting the trans-body (a body that has never 'perfectly' transitioned) and their experiences of masculinities/femininities (which though alleged to be reinforcing stereotypes) is always in a flux and creates major disruptions in our understanding of sex/gender. The research will explore how gender and more specifically concepts of femininity and masculinity are defined and redefined through trans-persons in their lives through experiences of living both genders as most are forced to live a dual life before being able to assert their difference.

Three major research questions:

1. How do trans-individuals perceive their gender identity? Is it a social construct or a 'sense of being' or a blend of both or something beyond?
2. How far do livelihood options for transgender individuals determine what kind of gendered bodies they can inhabit? Thus what is the relationship between their capabilities and liveabilities?
3. How do laws and the movement (feminist and queer) look at various transgender identities that inhabit the in-between and what are the points of connection and disjuncture between the feminist movement and the trans movement?

The research is significant as in the last decade trans-persons have come out with confidence, asserting their different gender preferences and claiming a visibility both within the private intimate spaces as well as the more public arena. The thesis tries to understand GAT through exploring the spectrum of trans-persons' gender expressions. These expressions range from keeping the body as it is and living the preferred gender through perception, imagination, cognition and behavioural expressions, to changing the body through complete SRS, both being expressions that describe them instead of being ascribed on the basis of social norms. Within this spectrum there exists a number of experiences constituting and reconstituting the rainbow. Part of the assertion is in the domain of wanting to construct and reconstruct their sexual identity – partially or fully, biologically and/or socially, to achieve that desired body so significant to their existence. The transition appears to be an integral issue but transition gets defined ultimately through various markers that vary across individuals and structures.

#### **Section 4: Contextualising the study: Laws and Movement**

From the 1990's there has been an increased visibilisation of people belonging to the gender and sexual minority communities with the advent of HIV/AIDS intervention projects and campaigns against IPC sec 377. While gay individuals, bisexual males, transgender MtF individuals, *kothis*, *hijras* built up a movement centring on HIV/AIDS and campaigns against section 377 of IPC, lesbian, bisexual and transmasculine (hence referred to as LBT\*) focused on feminism and women's movement. There was a feeling of camaraderie, competition and cooperation as more and more people started coming out of the closet and started expressing

their sexuality. This coming out has been facilitated by the HIV/AIDS projects of NACO that started from 2002-03. As Susan Stryker mentions that the AIDS crisis necessitated a profound rethinking of the relationship between sexuality, identity and public sphere (Stryker, 2006:7). According to Suhani, a research participant, a transwoman<sup>13</sup> (37 years, South 24 Parganas), "We never knew that HIV projects would bring money and visibility for us. Society is ignorant about our existence but the HIV/AIDS prevention and control project launched by NACO through the State AIDS control bodies brought us in the forefront as a 'high risk group' and paved the way for our movement." This exposure and mutual support gave many, the confidence to actualise their gender expression through transforming their body in the form of cross dressing, using breast implants (MtF), binders (FtM) and various other prosthetics and even through HRT and SRS.

The gradual shaping of this study witnessed several important verdicts of the Indian Courts. On 11.12.13 the Apex Court of India in its verdict 're' criminalized voluntary non-penetrative, non-procreative sex, setting aside the 2009 Delhi High Court verdict that had previously decriminalised homosexuality. The next six years witnessed mass protests as the movement intensified into a fight for claiming rights. On 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2014 the Supreme Court delivered the landmark NALSA judgment<sup>14</sup> recognizing the rights of Trans-persons (Transgenders, Transsexuals<sup>15</sup>, *Hijras*, Eunuchs, *Shiv-shaktis*<sup>16</sup>, *Aravanis*<sup>17</sup>, *Jogtas*<sup>18</sup>) as third gender, constitutionally. The NALSA verdict recognised that transgender individuals would enjoy the same fundamental rights in the Indian constitution that was available to all other Indian citizens. The biggest take away from NALSA was that it gave transgender persons the freedom of gender expression and the right to self determination of gender. This meant that a transgender individual could now identify as male, female or transgender without having to undergo medical scrutiny or sex reassignment surgery and could accordingly get their official identity documents changed to their preferred gender. While the NALSA judgment spoke about the right to self determination of gender, it remained silent on sexuality. The verdict sought to help transgender individuals define their gender expression in their own terms and experience their body on the basis of their varied imaginations and desires. The NALSA

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<sup>13</sup> Interview taken on 15.01.19 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

<sup>14</sup> The judgment is available at <https://main.sci.gov.in/jonew/judis/41411.pdf> (accessed on 12.04.20)

<sup>15</sup> Transgender individuals who change their biological sex through SRS to match their preferred gender

<sup>16</sup> Transgender community in Andhra Pradesh who are married to Shiva

<sup>17</sup> *Hijras* in Tamil Nadu who feel they are women trapped in men's bodies

<sup>18</sup> MtF transgenders in Maharashtra and Karnataka who dedicate their lives as servants to God in temples

verdict becomes particularly pertinent to talk about in this study in an effort to understand the gender expressions, perception of polymorphous bodies and desires. Focusing on the trans-bodies brings to the fore the different voices and lived experiences of the transgender people. However, I would like to add, that in the NALSA judgement there was no mention about the sexuality of the 'trans-persons', perhaps for maintaining status quo by not challenging Sec. 377, which was in force at the time of the judgment. Most of the TG/Hijra CBOs of Kolkata and other districts of West Bengal were elated with the judgement and they welcomed the verdict in a celebratory mode. But activists were not very sure about the procedure of implementation of the verdict. They found some ambiguity regarding the right to self declaration of gender and absence of any mention of the sexuality of trans-persons in the verdict.

This was followed by the Supreme Court of India upholding the Right to Privacy as a fundamental right in another historic judgment on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2017. The right to privacy was held to be an inseparable and fundamental right that protected individuals from absolute state powers to intervene and interfere into the private lives of its citizens. arbitrary state interference and prevented the state from being totalitarian. The privacy judgment respected the freedom of individuals in expressing their thoughts, beliefs and ideologies against societal steamrolling into uniformity. The judgement believed privacy to include "the preservation of personal intimacies, the sanctity of family life, marriage, procreation, the home and sexual orientation."<sup>19</sup> Where NALSA remained silent on the question of the sexuality of the transgender individuals the privacy judgment acknowledged sexual orientation and the expression of one's sexuality as a core fundamental right granted by the Indian constitution. The removal of IPC Sec 377 was just a question of time. This arrived on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2018 in the long awaited judgment of the Supreme Court of India declaring IPC 377 as unconstitutional thereby granting legality to the practice of homosexuality in India. In a formal discussion session post 377 organised on 30.09.18 by Sappho for Equality, a queer feminist organisation working for Lesbian, Bisexual Woman and Transman (LBT) rights in Kolkata. At the discussion held at the Triguna Sen Memorial Hall, Jadavpur University, Delhi based advocate Amritananda Chakravorty said, "When the reason for a law ceases to exist the law itself ceases. 377 acted as an impediment to rights of full personhood. Denial of one's sexual orientation is denial of privacy. Right to sexual privacy is fundamental to liberty. The

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<sup>19</sup><https://thewire.in/gender/right-to-privacy-377> (accessed on 11.06.19)

constitution protects the fluidities of sexual experiences." Advocate Nanda also referred to a statement made by Justice Chandrachud, that "Human sexuality cannot be reduced to a binary formation." All these verdicts have impacted the lives of the LGBTIQHKA+ community people directly. This study has followed the trajectory of the LGBTIQHKA+ movement in the backdrop of these landmark judgments revolving around IPC section 377 and the rights of transgender individuals. All along, Section 377 has been the glue binding all the identities together. With 377 gone this glue is no more and the movement now stands at a critical juncture raising questions. What is there to achieve now? Should the movement now focus on the demand for legalising same sex marriages, civil union, free of cost SRS, adoption rules, reservation? What else? My thesis witnessed all these changes as the narratives of my respondents in this study got thicker and richer with multiple stories, multiple voices, multifaceted gender identities, expressions and struggles.

The study now is at a critical juncture where we have the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2019, passed by the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha and becoming the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019. The bill was first tabled in parliament in 2016 and had since met with severe resistance and criticism from the community. Despite some modifications being incorporated the present act passed by parliament still remains problematic. Though some of the aspects of the previous bill such as criminalization of begging and the presence of the district screening committee have been omitted, any transgender person would have to obtain an initial transgender certificate from the district magistrate based on which they could proceed for SRS. Only after completion of SRS and its subsequent validation/endorsement by the district magistrate again could the trans-person get their official documents changed to their preferred gender. This form of 'gate-keeping' becomes derogatory and the freedom of choosing one's own gender identity upheld by the NALSA Judgment becomes a far-flung dream. The spirit of the 2014 NALSA judgment of the Supreme Court which spoke of self determination of gender irrespective of whether the person underwent SRS has been violated. The act makes SRS mandatory. This study becomes even more important as the act challenges the NALSA judgment and the lived experiences and the desires of transgender persons to have their preferred body in sync with their gender expression. The punishment for sexual abuse on a transgender person has been stipulated as imprisonment between 6 months to 2 years. This is in stark contrast to the punishment stipulated by law on sexual abuse on a woman which is imprisonment between 2 - 7 years. This provision in the act is discriminatory against transgender persons. There are no

provisions for any reservation in education and jobs for transgender persons in this act. The presence of the district magistrate as gatekeeper, requirement of SRS procedure, lesser punishment for crimes against transgender persons and no provision for any kind of reservation are features in the Transgender Persons (Protections of Rights) Act 2019 that have been severely criticised by the community as being in complete violation of the NALSA judgment of the Supreme Court in 2014 which spoke about right to equality and fundamental rights of transgender persons as granted in our constitution. Moreover, now we have the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules 2020 along with the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019, which has thrown out of contention the right based, effective and uncomplicated method of changing identity documents for transgender individuals based on the Supreme Court's NALSA judgment of 2014. The act has introduced gate-keeping by the state in the garb of a welfare stance that in all probability has been introduced to either keep the trans-individuals in a separate gender category box outside the ambit of the patriarchal family structure allowing entry into the binary domain only when the person conforms to the gender stereotypes, norms and constructs associated with the gender the person wishes to transition into. This study becomes even more important as the act challenges the NALSA judgment and the lived experiences and the desires of transgender persons to live their life at par with their gender expression with or without changing the identity documents or changing their body.

## **Section 5: Methodology**

### **Section 5a. The research method**

This doctoral research has intended to follow Feminist Standpoint Theory as an epistemological basis in order to bring about the voices of the transpeople who have been continuously otherised beyond the realm of the 'other'. The traditional androcentric research guided by the mainstream relations of power, that is the power relationship between man and woman, has always otherised 'woman'. The very focus on male experience as the dominant entity of traditional social science research has always rejected woman as a distinctive category of knowledge production, where woman can be the 'knower' and the 'known' in her own right. In this scenario the trans-persons stand outside the ambit of the man-woman binary, 'otherised' by the traditional, androcentric realm of scientific analysis, and so they are

even more invisibilised. Here Standpoint Theory gives a way to help surface the unheard voices by empowering oppressed groups and valuing their experiences as Patricia Hill Collins (2018) puts forward, as developing an 'oppositional consciousness'. This oppositional and shared consciousness in oppressed groups has made my respondents 'collective subjects' of research as opposed to 'objects' of study as regarded by conventionalists to whom the point of reference is solely the man's experience (Harding, 2004:3). Standpoint theory helps to bring the unheard voices to the forefront. The research in order to bring about the unheard voices has followed the principles of feminist ethical research and has tried to bridge the gap between activism and academia about the lived experiences of the trans-persons with the aim to facilitate awareness and sensitivity.

In this research guided by feminist research methodology, it becomes important to locate myself as a feminist researcher. According to Sandra Harding a feminist analysis requires the researcher to place herself at the same level as the subject so that the researcher is not an unseen authoritarian voice but a real person in flesh and blood (Harding, 1987). This prevents the creation of a hierarchy to be created in research relationships, a hierarchy which feminist research aims to break. This helps the study to be reflexive, through respecting the subjective experience of people and the knowledge they possess and making the process empowering for both the researchers and the subjects through mutual sharing of knowledge and experiences.

In my thesis, an exploratory and descriptive research design with a non-probability purposive sampling has been used. The exploratory and descriptive research design has helped me to gain better insight on the issue as in West Bengal qualitative research focussing on the trans-person's lived experiences with respect to GAT and the question of livelihood hasn't been done so far. For purposes of this empirical interview based research a qualitative method is adopted. The research documents the lived experiences of the trans-persons, through taking in depth interviews, writing narratives, and analysing them. The research study explores the narratives of trans-individuals through thick stories of subversion and resistance and tries to find agency and autonomy in a repressive social structure where gender binary is the norm. As a queer woman, a mother, a researcher, psychological counsellor and an activist I have tried to locate the agency of the transgender individuals across their lived experiences. The study is located in West Bengal as there are a number of community based organisations working on the issue of livelihood which has increased manifold as a result of the Covid pandemic. Another reason for choosing West Bengal as my field area is that I am from

Kolkata, West Bengal where I have been working as an activist, social worker and mental health professional and have been following the queer movement for the last 15 years.

In this study my respondents are both transmasculine and transfeminine persons. Following a feminist research methodology I have put an effort to bring about different voices in my research in order to understand the plurality of experiences that the trans-persons go through. The different voices expressed different perceptions about sex, gender and sexuality. The research explored various experiences of trans-individuals regarding gender in relation to their biological sex. It has attempted to find out the various negotiations of the trans-individuals within their intimate spaces and the social and political space they inhabit. In doing so as a researcher, I have followed the path showed by Urvashi Butalia in her seminal work on voices from the partition of India (Butalia, 1998) and I have tried not to ask questions as far as possible during in depth interviews in order to facilitate the free flowing nature of the narration. This helped me to read each interview as a continuous narrative without any interference from outside.

Apart from the qualitative thematic analysis of the narratives obtained from the in depth interviews I have used simple percentage analysis for understanding the trend shown by the sample size I worked with. This work is solely based on the sample size (27 transmasculine and 33 transfeminine) I have worked with and thus has no purpose to generalise but to flag some trends that surfaced. In order to understand Gender Affirmative Therapy, livelihood options, the rights and entitlements of trans-individuals, the process of legal document change, relationship with the LGBTIQHKA+ movement and the way forward, I have also interviewed eight gender rights activists, three doctors specialising in GAT, one lawyer working on trans-issues, six partners of trans-individuals, three office colleagues of trans-persons and three corporate personnel and working in human resource development and two entrepreneurs.

While writing this thesis I have used pronouns with great care and transparency. I have asked my participants about the way they would like to describe themselves. All the interviews were taken in Bengali where the pronouns are not gendered and while writing this thesis I had to carefully use pronouns he/she/they on the basis of the gender expression of my respondents that emerged from their narratives. The aim of this research was to capture the diversity by enumerating multiple experiences and talk about a range of gender expressions, exploring and understanding both transfeminine and transmasculine individuals' lived experiences.

Before going for in depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions were conducted with small groups. These helped in brainstorming about the significant main themes on the basis of which the semi-structured interview schedule was planned. As a result of conducting couple of FGDs in the field, the interview schedule was formed which was divided into seven parts along with a consent form at the beginning of the schedule.

## **Section 5b: The Interview schedule**

### **I. Consent form**

While conducting interviews, the informed consent of respondents was taken so that they participated in the research as an exercise of their choice which is free of any element of fraud, deceit, coercion or manipulation. The confidentiality of the respondents has been maintained throughout the process of transcription, translation, analysis and writing of this thesis with the names of all 60 respondents being changed. The names of doctors, lawyers, trans-activists, allies, colleagues and corporate HR personnel interviewed have not been changed with their consent.

### **II. The interview Schedule**

1. General information
2. Childhood experience and growing up (School and college days)
3. Professional life - Livelihood
4. Idea / Experience regarding gender expression and bodily experience
5. Idea and experience regarding SRS
6. Negotiations in the private, intimate and public spaces
7. View about the LGBTQIA+ movement and expectation from the government

## Section 5c: Geographical area - Districts of West Bengal

**Table 1.1**

Bardhaman Division	Jalpaiguri Division	Presidency Division
Bardhaman	Cooch Behar	Kolkata / Howrah
Hooghly	Darjeeling	Nadia
		North 24 Parganas
Birbhum	Jalpaiguri	South 24 Parganas

The above mentioned geographical locations were selected on the basis of association of these areas with the queer movement starting from the late twentieth Century (1990s). Also the presence of CBOs working on the issue in Cooch Behar, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Kolkata, North and South 24 Parganas is a significant reason for choosing the areas for my study. In Birbhum there is a dearth of CBOs working on trans-issues but in 2017, while working for a project initiated by Sappho for Equality in Birbhum, I had found that transgender individuals were scattered in the district and were in need of community support. Through *Swapnil's*<sup>20</sup> intervention in the district I contacted my respondents in Birbhum. As I was associated with MANAS Bangla from 2006 to 2010, I developed an idea about the transgender community in the districts which helped me decide on the geographical location of my thesis with better understanding and acceptability in the field areas.

### Section 5d: Use of FGDs

I have used FGDs as a point of discussion and analysis because it allowed for spontaneous response. By using FGD as a method of feminist enquiry, discussions could be contextualised through the interaction among the respondents. Through the focus group an individual could be studied both as a part of a group and as an individual. Through FGDs, the respondents got an opportunity to share each other's experiences and feel empowered by making sense of their vulnerability and subjugation and also with the feeling that they were not alone.

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<sup>20</sup> CBO in Bardhaman district run by MSM, Transgender, *Hijra (M2F)* community people

## **Section 5e: Use of Interview schedule**

Given the complex subject of the study, qualitative interviews were conducted with my sample respondents. It is important to capture the diversity of the transgender people coming from different socioeconomic categories and geographical locations. An interview study has its own advantages and disadvantages. It is a flexible method where the interviewer can probe for specific answers if the response is insufficient or inappropriate. Oakley (2016) prescribes a participatory model for interviewing which can be best achieved through a relationship where there is no hierarchy and the interviewer participates by responding to questions and sharing information and experiences. Through this participatory method I have tried to break the binary between researcher and subject and apart from just asking questions to the respondents, presenting the researcher's own ideas about the topic creates the potential to bring about debates and discussions. The focus has been on an empathic approach in the process of interviewing where mutual interaction is encouraged and where the researcher is open to sharing knowledge and experience by answering questions whenever asked. It is this kind of mutual interaction which helped the respondents share their intimate experiences, which is an objective of the study. My interviews with the respondents have become interactions in each case and has enriched 'our understanding' of the subject. The interview pattern was informal, unstructured and in-depth. In all of the interviews I made a list of relevant topics and themes on which I wanted information and sharing of experiences on the part of the respondent. The questions were asked in an order in which the conversation flowed.

I have used a semi-standardised interview structure where certain predetermined questions or themes were supplemented with unscheduled probes that arose during the interview process itself. A preparation was done before the interview so that the essential questions which concern the focus of the study were asked during the interview. The interview was however initiated through a few rapport building questions which were essential for developing rapport between the interviewer and the respondent. While these questions may be incidental or unnecessary, they were invaluable for drawing out the complete picture from a respondent. It was essential to set up a flowing conversation with the interviewee, so that the responses could be rich and detailed. Since the conversations were lengthy I had to ensure that the interest of the respondent was kept active. To build this rapport and to ensure that the conversation did not become weary, it was useful to share some of my experiences on the

issues. It was important to recognize when the respondent did not want any further discussion on a specific issue and to respect such a wish.

## **Section 6: Ethics of research**

I take this opportunity to talk about myself as a researcher in this concluding section of the first chapter. I started my work in Kolkata as a social worker and a psychological counsellor in the year 2002. I was working as a counsellor at *SANLAAP*<sup>21</sup>, working with survivors of trafficking as a counsellor. It was a fulfilling job, but I felt the need for doing something different and knowing something more. In my family I was very close with one of my cousin brothers, who used to have a boyfriend. They were never invited to any of our relatives' houses, but ours. My mother was a very progressive woman and to her it was acceptable. That was my first initiation into the queer world. There was another friend of my cousin sister, Assigned Male At Birth (AMAB), who was a dancer and was bullied for 'her' effeminate nature. By that time I also watched *FIRE*<sup>22</sup> at Chaplin movie hall with my college friends. I also had a friend who identified herself as a lesbian. So this was my repertoire of knowledge and information about the LGBTIQHKA+ community. Then in the year 2007 I joined MANAS Bangla and from there started my journey from the mainstream to the margins and in this journey my political became my personal. I joined MANAS Bangla as a documentation officer in the NACP III Targeted Intervention project. Collecting all the reports coming from eight districts, scrutinising and integrating them into an amalgamated report to send it to WBSAPCS, was my main responsibility. I was also responsible for executing monitoring and evaluation activities, visiting drop-in-centres, cruising sites, holding meetings, conducting trainings and interacting with people having various narratives, different ways of looking at life and subverting the normative ways by reclaiming the spaces they wanted to inhabit. My whole body of experiential work gave birth to an activist in me and changed my life forever.

By the time I joined MANAS Bangla my first born child was 2 years old. When MANAS Bangla was closed due to financial irregularities in the year 2011, I was the mother of two. I was doing freelance work and psychological counselling at my personal chamber. In 2012, I joined School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University as an M. Phil student. By that time

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<sup>21</sup> SANLAAP is a development organisation, an NGO in West Bengal, India focusing on Counter Trafficking Initiatives for the most vulnerable – namely women and children

<sup>22</sup> 1996 film directed by Deepa Mehta about a lesbian relationship

my first born (who was Assigned Female At Birth or AFAB and whose gender identity is a man) had started to verbalise his likes and dislikes in a very confident manner. Slowly and gradually he started showing extreme anger and frustration if anyone mis-gendered him. He stopped wearing earrings and hair-bands. We noticed that he was more comfortable in t-shirts and trousers. Some of my friends and relatives started telling me that my association with MANAS Bangla must have brought these changes in my child. My partner and I started educating ourselves reading articles and mixing with people from the trans-community. We were trying to understand our child and mentally prepare ourselves for the future. I joined Sappho for Equality (SFE), a lesbian and bisexual women and transmasculine persons' support group as a counsellor. Both me and my partner became members of SFE and started taking our child for counselling there. My activist self and counselling knowledge helped me to accept him as he was. My understanding and personal exploration around the issues evolving from non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities also gave me courage to identify and accept myself as a queer woman. It was a celebratory moment for me as well. I finished my studies in 2014 and joined a research project on women and work at Jadavpur University. I felt my love for research was growing and I applied for PhD, in Women's Studies, focussing on transgender persons' lived experiences of gender identities, expressions, their livelihoods and live-abilities. Initially I started my work questioning the sex/gender binary and trying to understand the subversion of transgender individuals in questioning and challenging the patriarchal hegemony. With the help and guidance of my supervisor I started to look into the livelihood question as well through a sociological lens.

Given this backdrop I must mention that as a researcher I have never tried to detach myself from the experiences that my research participants have shared with me. The 'professional' detachment or the absence of the 'I' would have helped me to create the 'illusion of objectivity', but I never wished to protect the said 'objectivity' of the narratives told and analyses made in this paper. My positionality as a researcher, as a gender and sexuality rights activist, a mother, a queer woman and a mental health professional enriched the process of my PhD research making it a located, ethical action research where 'full objectivity' is never possible. Referring to Urvashi Butalia (1998) I would also like to mention that such an objective detached approach would never be possible for me to take as a researcher due to my positionality. During the many years I have been involved in the movement at a professional level, on the level of activism and on a personal level, I have felt more and more involved in the whole process, intensely and emotionally, politically and academically. My role as an

activist, as the mother of a gender non-conforming child, as a queer woman and as a researcher has gone hand in hand without any pretention of being 'objective'.

In this research I have taken consent from my respondents by obtaining their signatures in the consent form after explaining the research and the interview schedule to them. I have also maintained the confidentiality of all my respondents. The names of all sixty respondents and their partners, parents or significant others have been changed. I have also shared my research findings in an online respondent's meet held on 30.01.2022 where I have taken the feedback of my respondents and have incorporated their suggestions in my thesis.

## **Section 7: Chapter divisions**

The thesis comprised of five chapters exploring personal narratives of transmasculine and transfeminine respondents who participated in my research and my professional experiences as an activist, a social worker, a psychological counsellor and a mother of a gender non-conforming child. I have tried to understand the sociological implications of the transgender identities and the lived experiences associated with it.

### **First Chapter: Sex, Gender, Sexuality and the Transgender Identities: An Overview**

The first chapter reflects on my theoretical understanding as a researcher. I have tried to understand the changing discourse around sex-gender-sexuality by panning across the different forms of feminisms. The chapter tried to trace the trajectory of changing notions around sex-gender-sexuality by touching upon the understanding of achieving 'sameness' of genders as understood by the liberal feminists, passing aside the idea of 'difference' as propounded by the radical feminists and then coming to the post-structuralist understanding of intersectional identities, and arriving at the continuously evolving, intricate, open spaces of dialogue through deconstruction. Through my reading of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, I came across the enriching experiences of creating spectrums of sexes, genders and sexualities. As I have posited my research against the post-structuralist readings I could appreciate how just like gender, sex got socially constructed too and how this knowledge impacted the feminist movement as well. With the aim of understanding transgender individuals' lived experiences I took the opportunity to read sociologists and transgender theorists like Candice West, Don Zimmerman, Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy Mckenna,

Stephen Whittle, Leslie Fienberg, Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, J. Prosser, Gayle Rubin and Jamison Green. The theoretical framework against which the question of live-abilities and livelihoods were seen was the 'Capabilities Approach' as propounded by Prof. Amartya Sen. The axes for exploring the lived experiences of the transgender individuals became two fold, one being Gender Affirmative Therapy and the other the livelihood question. I read the works of Richard Ekins, Dave King, Brent L. Bilodeau, Kristen A. Renn, J. Kessler, Wendy Mckenna, Susan Stryker, Stephen Whittle, Sivananda Khan, Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan and report publications of LABIA<sup>23</sup>, Alternative Law Forum and Sappho for Equality.

### Second Chapter: Transition, Transformation or Transcendence: The Transmasculine Experience

The chapter has tried to understand the trajectory of transmasculine narratives starting from their emergence and gradual visibility in West Bengal through interviews of transmasculine individuals and activists. The thesis explored various aspects of gender identities, gender expressions, gender roles through rich stories of childhood and growing up, inhabiting the private and public spaces like families, friends, neighbourhoods, intimate relationships, support spaces and work places through the interplay of autonomous self and relational selfhood. I have also tried to understand the development of the transmasculine identities through GAT/SRS.

### Third Chapter: Transition, Transformation or Transcendence: The Transfeminine Experience

This chapter has tried to trace the evolution of the transfeminine narratives starting from the effeminate male component of the MSM targeted intervention project to transgender targeted intervention and the emergence of the pre-op and post-op transfeminine individuals. The transfeminine experience has a history of its own in West Bengal starting from the advent of HIV/AIDS prevention and control programme by NACO. The chapter has tried to understand the reason for greater visibility, multiplicity of expressions through a range of trans-bodies and their livelihoods. The chapter has traced the consolidation of transfeminine identities and expressions and their negotiations with various patriarchal institutions. The chapter has tried to show how the transfeminine narratives have repeatedly broken the sex-gender unilinearity and reinforced the constructedness of sex and gender by doing, undoing and redoing gender.

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<sup>23</sup> LABIA is a Mumbai based queer feminist LBT collective

The second and third chapters have tried to highlight the spectrum of trans-identities that constitute the rainbow.

#### Fourth Chapter: Capabilities, Liveabilities and Livelihood

This chapter explored transgender individual's lives through the lens of 'capability approach' as propounded by Professor Amartya Sen by considering the three fundamental capabilities - health, education and income (Sen, 1993) and its relation to liveabilities, a concept introduced by Judith Butler (Butler, 2009). It studies questions around livelihood and attempts to understand trans-person's lived experiences across a spectrum of trans-bodies and gender expressions. Livelihood is one of the most important issues being raised by the transgender movement in India at present and this research is important given the fact that the last decade has seen a many fold increase in visibility of trans-persons including transmasculine individuals who are coming out confidently and claiming their rights.

#### Fifth Chapter: Beyond the Cis-tem - The Road Ahead

The concluding chapter revisits the questions asked and answers attempted throughout the research. Who is a transgender individual? What is gender affirmation? Do we need the term transgender after sex reassignment and gender affirmation? What is transition? What is it achieving? How do we distinguish between those who identify as transgender and those who identify as 'man' or 'woman'? The chapter has looked at GAT and SRS through the Foucauldian lens of biopower and biopolitics and has also drawn from Martha Nussbaum's 'Universal Capabilities' given that we are talking about human lives. This necessitates a holistic approach to well being to explore the opportunities and liberties that a human needs in order to actualise their personhood. The chapter has also tried to understand the transgender movement through a feminist perspective. Till the first half of 2018, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was the glue binding together the various factions of the LGBTIQHKA+ community but with 377 being struck down by the supreme court of India on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2018 that glue had ceased to exist. With the rise of right wing forces in India, the transgender movement stands at a critical juncture today. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 and Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules 2020 are considered to be laws that have not understood trans-identities and liveabilities. These laws have introduced a screening committee to verify the authenticity of the subjective transgender experience of an individual. This is completely against the spirit of the NALSA judgment of 2014. In light of these developments the thesis has tried to look at the movement

in its present form. Where is the movement going? Is it being appropriated by majoritarian forces? What is the 'marriage question' telling us about the movement? Is it the initiation of homo-normativisation? Is the movement losing its cutting edge? What is the future of this movement? These are some of the questions the last chapter has tried to answer. The chapter and the thesis ends with a section on transfeminism. It is my understanding from this study that the transgender movement needs to have a feminist understanding of sex, gender and sexuality to thrive and make progress and the feminist movement also needs to understand and appreciate the transgender experience for broadening its understanding of 'woman' as the central subject of feminism. I have also introduced a new concept of 'gender creativity' that has emerged from the narratives of my respondents which talks about creating one's own gender. The chapter also touches upon 'trans non-binary' as identities or non/not-identities in the trans-spectrum which could open up new possibilities. Through this research the search for identities and experiences opened a whole new range of options, ideas and possibilities. Body essentialism is there, but there seems to be an effort to transcend beyond the body. The urge for changing the body might not always come from a feeling of incompleteness or to satisfy the partner but as has been observed in the study, some of the transfeminine persons want to go for hormone therapy or breast augmentation just because they want to adorn their bodies, to look beautiful. Some crave for a new body in sync with their mind and for them SRS is the answer and some do not want to change their body but want to ornament and fashion it to look beautiful and in harmony with their preferred gender while others treat their existence as distinct and different and consider themselves neither male or female, nor a transfeminine or a transmasculine person but a 'transgender' person. Thus the 'queer movement' breaks gender stereotypes and opens not only a range of gender identities but a range of bodies or trans-bodies thereby breaking biological stereotypes. Here I would like to reiterate that the most important aspect of a person's life is 'self expression', the way the person wants to see the self and communicate it to others. Sexuality and gender expression is one's basic right for living a healthy and happy life and for mobilising the human mind to disapprove the concepts of what is 'natural and normal' and to disrupt the heteronormative systems of sex, gender, and sexuality providing greater possibilities for individual liberty and social understanding. With this immense possibility in mind the thesis raised the sail in search of the multiplicity of experiences, negotiations and expressions, beyond the man-woman binary, forming a rainbow of polymorphous bodies, genders and desires and opening up multiple ways to construct and reconstruct one's gender and therefore one's sex.

# **Chapter 1: Sex, Gender, Sexuality and the Transgender Identities: An Overview**

My thesis talks about the multiple locations in between the man woman binary inhabited by transgender individuals and their journey of going beyond the binary as well. The aim is to destabilize the iron clad binarised compartments as promoted and continued by the heteropatriarchal society based on the cis-het<sup>24</sup> ways of life and living. The more the identities, the more the possibilities of challenging the binary, reclaiming the polymorphous positions and reframing the ways to look at sex, gender and sexuality. In this chapter I have tried to create the theoretical framework and the theoretical lens through which I will be looking at the transgender identities, expressions and lived experiences that emerge through my empirical interview based narratives in the subsequent chapters. The theoretical framework is based on three sections. The first section looks at the trajectory of the feminist movement in the 19th and 20th century to the queer movement in the late 20th century. The second section explores how Western conceptual categories of sex, gender and sexuality were formed in the feminist movement and how these concepts evolved and changed from liberal to radical to post-structural feminism and finally to queer feminism with the emergence of the term transgender. The third section traces the emergence of transgender in South Asia to India through the HIV/AIDS discourse, through TI projects and then through various judgments of the Indian Courts and the formation of policies, laws and acts by the Indian state and through the medical discourse of Gender Affirmative Therapy (GAT) and Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). There are many approaches of looking at transgender, some of them being medical, psychiatric, biological, pedagogical and legal. However, being trained as a feminist, I have used the feminist lens because it challenges the androcentric, gendered and binaristic approaches adopted by the other lenses.

## **Section 1: Tracing the discourse: Liberal to Radical to Post-structural Feminism**

In this section I have tried to trace the trajectory of feminist movements through which ‘woman’ as a gendered category has evolved. I have also tried to understand how the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality has taken shape through the shifts from liberal

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<sup>24</sup> Cisgender heterosexual, where cisgender is a person whose gender identity is congruent with biological sex and gender assigned at birth.

to radical to intersectional and post-structural feminist movements. The 1900s saw the feminist movement gather momentum with increasing demands for reforms in education, law and politics that soon started a mass movement for political action on these demands and a mass campaign for voting rights (Bryson, 1992: 36). This was a liberal feminist stance which believed in bringing about gender equality between women and men. According to liberal feminists, in order to achieve equality, sameness needs to be achieved. Women would have to have the rights to whatever men already have which included education, livelihood and right to vote in order to claim 'personhood' similar to men (Bryson 1992, Donovan 1992). Contrary to the liberal stance, radical feminism (1960's to 1970's) emphasised on the difference between women and men, the reason being the division of the public and private sphere. Giving women access to the public sphere did not ensure any change in the private sphere as their role did not change. They had to cope with the double burden of working outside and inside. The sameness as prescribed by liberal feminism for achieving equality did not ensure equality. According to radical feminists, that could only happen by bringing about a change in the private sphere (Bryson, 1992: 182). Private sphere is about the 'core' and 'essential' aspects of being a woman and the domain includes sex, motherhood and social reproduction/domestic work (which is not even acknowledged as work). Concealed under the garb of culture and tradition, the injustice propagated in these domains is normalised and considered to be unquestionable. Thus women have to accept the fact that the struggle to transform the private sphere has to be fought by women alone and during the late 1960s and early 1970s radical feminists like Catherine A. Mckinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Alice Walker began to challenge the private sphere, the domain of domesticity (Donovan, 1992). This created a tension between the concept of equality based on sameness and the concept of difference between the two sexes (Mackinnon, 1989: 216). But both the strands (liberal and radical) of feminism believed in the concept of sex being fixed and gender being constructed.

Radical feminism sees itself as carving out a space for women that has nothing to do with men and tries to bind all women into a sisterhood that is beyond caste, class, creed and race (Bryson, 1992). It is the celebration of that difference of women from men that gave rise to separatist politics in radical feminism. In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw, an American lawyer and intersectional feminist first coined the term intersectional feminism to highlight the intersectional discrimination of black women where they were discriminated on the basis of

their skin colour (race) as well as gender<sup>25</sup>. Intersectional feminists say that separatist politics is problematic. Biological difference is heightened and politicised through separatist politics. It creates an essentialist understanding of 'women' as a rigid gender category based on biological sex. Liberal and radical feminists reinforce the binary, intersectional feminists challenge it. The intersection of other identities with the woman identity is important and the movement needs men to be a part of these movements. Intersectional feminism questions the homogenisation of the 'woman experience'. According to this essential understanding, if a person is born a cisgender woman (which means there is no incongruence between the ascribed gender and the sexed body), she goes through a narrative of suffering and deprivation and therefore she is entitled to be a part of that movement. This had political implications for the trans-movement. Because transpersons do not go through this socialisation, they have not been born a 'woman'; they do not have the experiences of a 'woman' and then how can they be part of the 'women's movement'? Hence, though gender's constructedness is acknowledged but the essential nature of 'sex' categories remain unquestioned. And this concept of 'sex' based on biological essentialism continues to uphold the patriarchal construction of womanhood.

At this juncture Michel Foucault's seminal work on tracing the history of sexuality becomes significant. According to Foucault if something has a history it cannot be biological. Through his work he offers a lens of viewing the human subject not as fixed, essential and determinate but rather as discursively produced historical products. Foucault talks about sexuality as a historically produced evolving concept (Foucault, 1998). History implies that sexuality has changed and it is a social thing. The experience of sexuality may be same but our understanding changes. The raw fact of biological sex may be constant but who one calls a woman depends whether one is in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Foucault (1998) the binary classifications are only means to order the world and with reference to that world order, subject positions are discursively created.

This opposition to a monolithic concept of women was the pivotal juncture at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in feminism that led to development of post-structural feminism (Donovan, 1992). The post-structural feminist movement was partly borne out of the inability of radical feminism to take into account the difference in 'woman' or the intersectional identities of

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters> (accessed on 12.01.22)

women which cannot be homogenised under 'woman' as an over-arching category. In post structural feminism the aim is to bring about multiple voices of 'many feminisms' such as black-feminism, dalit-feminism, lesbian-feminism, transfeminism. Gender was anyway known to be constructed and at this juncture Judith Butler 'troubles' gender and sex when she says 'sex' is constructed too (Butler, 1999). Butler questions the fixed nature and biological essentialism of sex. Just as Foucault questioned the biological nature of sexuality and through writing its history brought it to the realm of the social and the political, Butler questioned the existence of the biological nature of sex. There might be a sexed body but the question is how is it constructed? The sexed bodies are gendered through social construction and thus man and woman are created. Differences exist between different bodies in terms of genitalia and other anatomical aspects but the patriarchal binaristic system dictates that if one is biologically male (determined by the presence of a penis), one's gender identity will be masculine, gender expression will be masculine too and one's desire will be towards a biological cisgender woman. Butler troubles this unilinear, essentialist understanding of sex, gender and sexuality and aims at breaking the 'natural and obvious' connections between them. According to Butler, performativity constructs a subject. Sex is not what lies between the legs or in the chromosomes, it is actually how one gets constructed as a social being, sexing and gendering are both processes of construction. The body is thus a representation, not the foundation of social gender. Butler becomes so important because Butler states that the difference on which radical feminist movement is based is not real, it is created socially by the 'speech act' (Austin, 1975) an act or doing produced by something it names (Butler, 1993). When the doctor comes and announces 'it's a boy' that is when the 'boy becomes a boy'. The boy has no other reason to be a boy. According to radical feminists sex is biological, it cannot be changed. But sex can be changed and is being changed by us continuously. Post-structural feminism denaturalises sex, making it constructed and socially changeable. If we consider gender to be constructed and sex to be constructed too, the categories become blurred and there is no problem in thinking that this same body that one has, can be the body of a man, or a woman or a trans-person. According to Butler (1999) one is not born with the sex that they are given. Sex, gender and sexuality all are activated at the same time at the moment a child takes birth. Thus the existence of the trans-individual poses a threat to patriarchal essentialism of sex and also to the understanding and position of trans excluding radical feminists (TERF). When a trans-person performs certain gendered activities with a body that is not assigned to perform them in a heteropatriarchal society, patriarchy becomes confused. This 'confusion' is a post-structuralist tool of warfare against patriarchy

(Butler, 1999). At a same time it also has a profound impact on the feminist movement. If the category 'woman' gets blurred then who remains as the subject of feminism? How do we then define woman if transwoman can become an integral part of this category? How do we then define woman if man becomes the ally? How can we then define woman if a person taking birth in the body with a vagina claims their space as a man? According to transfeminists anyone who identifies as a woman is a woman. This raises larger questions in the feminist movement about whom to build solidarity and form alliances with. Who is the subject of feminism? Who is the women's movement for? How am I defining women?

## **Section 2: Sex, Gender and Sexuality**

The terms sex, gender and sexuality are related but not identical. There is no linear relationship between them. Each domain is heterogeneous, diverse and understanding of each domain is evolving. The relationship is complex and fractured. The notion of sex and gender has been widely discussed by a range of theorists and thinkers. Some of the formulations that I came across as a part of developing my research understanding are explored in this section. Thomas Laqueur in his book, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* mentioned that before the 18<sup>th</sup> century a woman was believed to be a flawed version of man and her anatomy and physiology were interpreted accordingly. The vagina was seen as an inverted penis, the womb as a scrotum and the ovaries as testicles. On the basis of this understanding women were invisibilised. With the French Revolution came Industrial Capitalism when the acts of production and reproduction of the workforce became significant. Women started asking for the recognition of their separate entities, equality and rights. At this juncture the two-sex model came into play and woman became 'the other' entity and was considered as just the opposite of 'man'. The uterus became the 'seed' of motherhood and peno-vaginal sex became the norm (Laqueur, 1992). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western World the concept of man and woman was confined to women bearing children in their womb and men impregnating the womb and becoming the father of her children or in other words man and woman was defined only by their reproductive functions (Hines, 2020). The basis of understanding sex/gender was natural or biological. They spoke about 'sex' and not 'gender' and did not differentiate between the two. The two sexes man and woman were paired as opposite sexes and was considered as predetermined by nature and located in their bodies (Richardson, 2015). During the 1960s and 1970s a shift from the naturalistic approach in understanding sex and gender to a social constructionist account surfaced, challenging the

essentialist framework. The distinction between biological sex and constructed gender assumed significance as the word sex was based on the difference in biology, anatomy, external genitalia and reproductive functions of male and female sexes while gender was a socio-cultural construct that could be categorised into masculine and feminine (Oakley, 1972:21-22). According to anthropologist and feminist activist Gayle Rubin, sex and gender were distinct where biology as in sex and reproduction was the primal material that was shaped into the sex-gender framework by human social intervention (Rubin, 1975:165). This binaristic understanding of sex and gender is reflected in seeing sex as a constant and gender as open to change, as social roles taken by women and men are not fixed by nature. This distinction between gender and sex was a significant moment when women became aware that their subordinate position to men was not decided by some 'natural traits' but was the result of continuous conditioning through social structures that is based on inequality.

Coleman et al (1993) suggests that in trans-lives there are two stages of development, the first being gender identity and the second being their sexuality. This statement is true to a large extent. The question of whether to understand sexuality through gender identity or whether gender identity develops through exploration of one's sexuality is important to ponder upon. The feminist approach challenged the naturalist or essentialist approach where either gender is prioritised over sexuality or the other way round, but there is an effort to draw a link between these two. Discussions on multiple genders and multiple sexualities indicate multiple relationships between these categories; a boundary in motion (Richardson 2007:32).

### **Section3: Understanding 'Transgender' as a category of gendered identities**

Queer Theory originated between 1980s to 1990s due to the HIV/AIDS crisis and the connections between gay men and lesbian women in respect of this crisis (Bettray, 2020). The word 'queer', originally a pejorative term, a slur was reclaimed by people belonging to marginalised gender identities and sexual orientations for bringing about multiple marginalised voices. One of the major starting points of queer theory is the post-structural concept as propounded by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1998), that sexuality is a socially constructed discourse which is historically located and is not a naturalised phenomenon. Transgender theory also emerged as a response to the HIV/AIDS crisis and at the same time queer theory formed alliances with other affected groups of which the transgender community was one. Transgender theory is more connected to concerns around embodiment

and identity rather than sexuality and desire and finds resonance with intersectional issues of class, caste, race, religion, disability, nationality (Stryker, 2006: 7).

It is believed that the transgender lived experiences by its very existence disturbs the gender binary as it challenges the linear relationship between sex and gender. As a consequence of formulating iron-clad compartments of the binary model, male and female were polarized and variations between the binaries were pathologised. Identities traversing in between the binaries or going beyond it were pathologised by medical science, psychiatry and criminology. Notions of gender, power, hierarchy, oppression, inequality are extremely significant to the understanding of the transgender lived experiences. Being a man or a woman is not a pre-determined state of 'being' but a continuous process of 'becoming'; a 'condition actively under construction'. To be more precise this process of 'becoming' is discussed as the development of gender identity (Connell, 2009:5). William Byne also distinguishes between gender role and gender identity, where gender role has more to do with the interaction with the outside world and gender identity is the sense of belonging to one's preferred gender (Byne, 2007). These conceptualisations are significant to the transgender identities. The conflict between the outer gender role and inner gender identity becomes important in relation with transgender studies.

Being familiar with developing gender identity or becoming a gendered self, West and Zimmerman (1987) constructs the sociological notion of gender through conceptualising the process of 'doing gender', which indicates the differences between girls and boys or men and women as far from being natural, essential or biological. Harriet Bradley refers to this process of 'doing gender' as 'gendering' (Bradley, 2007:23) and this process is described as 'performative' by Judith Butler (1986, 1999). These notions around 'gender' are directly relatable to the trans-experiences. Judith Butler wrote extensively about transgender identities and transsexuality, critiquing the medical model of diagnosis and treatment as a site of establishing gender normativity (Butler, 2001, 2006, 2011). These open spaces of being, becoming and constructing gives the transgender movement an impetus and a holding that opens up immense possibilities as Connell (1987) suggests that focusing on the variation in gender theory is significant because both femininities and masculinities vary and change and understanding these varieties is at the crux of understanding and appreciating their experience.

In a patriarchal society the gender roles as either woman or man assigned to people are based on their biological make up or sexed bodies. The sexed bodies are gendered and this process is dependent on the material body that we are born with. This process is guided by the paradigms of a binarised gender system based on a socially assigned biological sex that does not understand, accept and appreciate any other identities, expressions and orientations in-between or beyond the binary framework. Society feels comfortable ignoring those people who live a non-normative life based on non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities. According to Mousumi Mondal as stated in her article "Gender Geometry: A Study of A. Revathi's Autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*" that one of the grass-root level struggle of the transgender community is the struggle for a dignified social recognition as an independent existing gender category (Mondal, 2014:126). But our heteropatriarchal binaristic society continues to thwart any identity other than those that have been 'normalized' by norms. This creates identity crisis, which mainly originates from what Judith Butler has identified as the 'heterosexual matrix' – a grid which is produced by the various social institutions and practices which links the human body to certain fixed sexual and gender identities on the basis of the biological body (Butler, 1999). Any identity whose coordinates do not lie within the map of this heterosexual matrix is considered 'abnormal'. Following the same flow of debate, Cressida J. Heyes (Heyes, 2000:173) said that one needs to problematise the cis-het belief that there is only one possible option of gender expression which is to occupy a normative landscape. The use of words like 'norm' and 'nature' indicates the blatant ploy of binarised patriarchal society to push people to the margins, to exclude, label and invisibilise.

Ki Namaste in her article *The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Post-structuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality* tried to problematise the inside-outside dichotomy in relation to the location of homosexuality with reference to heterosexuality. Namaste aimed at looking at the inter-category dynamics between heterosexuality and homosexuality and tried to show the interdependence between the two in defining each other. In the same light, development of transgender as a category subverting the binarised understanding of gender could be seen and understood as an important moment of self identification and expression. Just like the conceptual opposition between 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' the opposition between 'transgender' and 'cisgender' creates yet another set of binary. Whenever these boundaries are created, the mutual dependence between the categories in order to explain each other, through the inside/out dichotomy or through the 'not-this-ness'

description, reinforces the binary. Namaste said that queer theory is interested in exploring, questioning and challenging these boundaries and identifying, understanding and claiming the identities. The moment we are talking about the dialectical movement, we tend to visibilise some people and invisibilise the others, as according to Diana Fuss, (Fuss, 1991:4) "The emergence of homosexuality was accompanied by its disappearance." Hence it created blurred junctures and porous boundaries. In queer theory the aim is to think about how these boundaries are created. Queer theory tries to examine the discursive subject-positions, not only accepting the fact that they exist but how they are created, regulated, negotiated and contested (Namaste, 1994:224).

Queer theory pans across these theoretical perspectives in order to create its own claim of transversing the border and necessitating the constitution of the border at the same time (Fuss, 1991:3). Queer theory functions at a juncture of the inside/outside model. Queer theory also tries to understand and analyse the process of normativisation of the binary gender model and the heterosexual hegemony through cultural texts, social norms and juridical dictums. While the LGBTIQHK+ discourse is identity based, each identity claiming its separate space, queer as a concept is a politics countering heteronormativity. It disqualifies the practice of labelling that considers non normative subject positions as 'deviant' and puts forward the component of 'variance' in order to understand and accept difference. The divide between transgender and cisgender subject positions creates an open space for celebrating variations and differences. The transgender experience is also not homogenous. It varies from woman, man, transwoman, transman, transfemale, transmale, transfeminine and transmasculine as expressed by my respondents during their interviews. The process of broadening the categories through naming it as transfemininities or transmasculinities, creates a roadmap towards a spectrum of identities and sexualities destabilising the gender dichotomy, suggesting that many non-binary and non-heterosexual positions are available and providing people with more and more choices in defining themselves. Hence, the activism based on queer theory focuses its attention on displacing the hetero-homo/cis-trans binary and the relations between the sets. If heterosexuality and cisgender subject positions are something which are taken for granted and homosexual and transgender identities are only there to strengthen heterosexuality and the binary gender model, then according to Namaste sites of resistance that are most effective are those that are formed by individuals who reject the gender binary and create in-between locations of identities, desires and possibilities moving beyond the inside/outside model (Namaste, 1994:230)

Now, thinking about the creation of the gendered self or the process of gendering the self, we need to question the 'autonomous' subject position. According to the poststructuralist tenets, the focus on the individual as an autonomous agent must be deconstructed, contested and problematised. As Leslie Feinberg in her book *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (1998), said that sex, gender and sexual identities need to be understood through narratives and in term of relationship with others. According to Feinberg every individual is free to express their gender in any way they desire and that gender is like a poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught to express ourselves. Jay Prosser also in his book *Second Skin: The Body Narrative of Transsexuality* talked about embodiment and narrative, indicating towards a process of discourse formation. According to Prosser (1998), embodiment is a process of narrating one's story through which one expresses their identities to others. Following Jay Prosser and Leslie Feinberg, Alexis Shotwell and Trevor Sangrey (2009) also talked about relational selfhood against the liberal-individualist models of selfhood, in their article *Resisting Definition: Gendering through Interaction and Relational Selfhood*. According to Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy Mckenna, gender is 'socially constructed', rather than being natural it is produced through social interactions. (Kessler & Mckenna, 2006:165). Diane Richardson also explores the dynamics of gender, where she mentioned that the main focus of the works on gender throughout 1970s and 1980s was the exploration of the production of femininity and masculinity where many feminist writers talked about gender being culturally determined through socialization into 'gender roles' or often termed as 'sex roles' (Richardson, 2007). Harriet Bradley also suggests that gendering through socialization allows us to explore the process by which individuals develop as agents in interaction with the environment (Bradley, 2007). When we are talking about transgender individuals one's inner sense of 'self' becomes significant and more logical. Many transpersons share about the perceived conflict between their sense of gender identity and the gender role to which they feel obliged to conform. Here a distinction between gender identity and gender role becomes apparent and the pressure of such a dual inner life needs release and/or resolution (Norman, 2017). According to Ekins and King (Ekins, King, 2006) transgender individuals can be separated into four types based on their gender expressions and behaviour which are oscillation, migration, negation and transcendence. The 'Migrator' migrates or shifts permanently to the opposite gender role from their gender assigned at birth through surgery. The 'Negator' un-genders by erasing the history associated with their ascribed gender at birth, the "Oscillator" is the cross-dresser who moves to and fro between

their assigned gender and preferred gender while the process of transcendence transcends the gender spectrum and goes beyond gender.

Transgender as a rubric of identity formation subsumed under its scope all the local identities especially the South Asian variations of non normative gender and sexual identities as has been discussed in the previous chapter. This concern is expressed again and again by academician and activist Aniruddha Dutta (2012, 2013, 2014, 2017). Transgender as an expansive category for all gender variant practices and identities risk replicating colonial form of knowledge production (Stryker, Aizura, 2013:8). It tends to homogenize distinctive experiences and examples. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's criticism of feminist literature that homogenises 'third world women' as victims in the hands of patriarchs reinforcing extreme forms of gender oppression (Mohanty, 1984). It indicates that similar Western values may generalise transgender issues as nothing more than merely reassigning bodies to match identities. Though the transgender terminology arrived in India in the late 2000s through the HIV/AIDS prevention and control discourse, it moved from the public health discourse to a rights based discourse as is evident from a series of judgments and acts that are discussed in the next section.

#### **Section 4: Supreme Court NALSA Judgment 2014**

The last ten years has witnessed many countries bringing in laws and acts recognising the rights of transgender individuals across the globe and giving them legal protection. (Jain and Kartik, 2020). Anti-discrimination and gender affirmative legislations have created a supportive environment across the globe. The worldwide view is to recognise the rights of transgender individuals based on self determination of gender identity, the spirit of which was echoed in the 2014 Supreme Court NALSA judgment. NALSA spoke of the right of self determination of gender irrespective of whether the person opted for HRT or SRS. The Supreme Court in the 2014 NALSA judgment referred to previous judgments given by the highest courts of several countries in Europe and also made reference to international statutory law that recognised the rights of individuals to alter state documents of identity based on self identification of gender. The judgment also spoke of equal opportunities of transgender people, to be free from discrimination and also spoke about legal and social benefits for the betterment of the lives of transgender individuals. The NALSA judgement is based on Article 6 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948,

Article 16 and 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 and the Yogyakarta Principles, a document on human rights drafted at an international meeting of human rights activists and groups at Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2006. The NALSA judgment drew from the India's Constitution that requires the state to recognize the personhood of gender-variant individuals. The rights guaranteed by the constitution to transgender individuals consisted of the rights of self determination of gender, to live a life free from discrimination, and to be equal under the law based on Articles 14, 15, 16, 19, and 21 of the Indian Constitution. NALSA judgment is without doubt a progressive and commendable judgment but it also has its limitations. It does not acknowledge the intersectional identities between gender and sexuality and remains completely silent about the sexuality of transgender people (given that Section 377 of the IPC was in force at the time of the judgment).

The court's judgment excluded the rights of many identities of gender variance which remained outside its ambit. In the NALSA judgment the definition of transgender became myopic as the judgment traced the history of trans-people in India and said that the trans-community comprised of *Hijras*, eunuchs, *Kothis*, *Aravanis*, *Jogappas*, *Shiv-Shakthis* etc. It created an environment of blatant generalization and labelling the diverse community as *hijra* or eunuch giving it a skewed meaning. It is quite perplexing to note that a word like 'eunuch' which is derogatory and has a history of colonial medicalised oppression has been used twenty times in the judgment (Jain, 2017) demeaning and misrepresenting gender variance in the trans-spectrum. Clubbing the term 'transvestite' as a part of the transgender community also creates misunderstanding as it oversimplifies and gives a wrong notion about being a transgender person. Overemphasis on the term *hijra* also gives rise to a direct equation between transgender identities and the *hijra* identity. As the representation of *hijra* identified individuals among both the petitioners and interveners is higher and there is no representation of transmen and intersex individuals, it creates a limiting understanding about the gender diverse spectrum. Experiences of transmen and intersex people are excluded from NALSA judgment with transmen being mentioned just twice in the judgment, in pages 35 and 61 only. The judgment also in a way tries to put emphasis on categorising the gender variant groups under the 'Third Gender' category which comes against the tenet of self determination of gender identity as propounded by the judgment itself. 'Self determination of gender identity' is muddled at best and contradicted at worst.

There has been an effort to relate gender with caste categories in the judgment that also creates uneasiness among the community people as many gender variant people have vehemently opposed to being classified as Other Backward Class (OBC). The judgment is also criticised for being representative of a larger right wing 'saffron' appropriation as while tracing back the history of transgender people in India it mainly refers to the Hindu mythologies and religious texts, but strong presence of transfeminine individuals in Mughal courts is consciously ignored. There seemed to be a conscious effort by the Honourable Court to ignore and erase the Islamic cultural context under which the *hijra* communities thrived to flourish, to saffronise the transgender discourse (Jain, 2017).

### **Section 5: Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019**

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 was intended to be the culmination of the transgender community's long struggle to be legally recognised and to have their rights validated by parliament through an act. But in its present form the Act has actually set the community back to the pre-NALSA days by denying them many of the rights and entitlements that had been guaranteed by the NALSA judgment in 2014.

According to the Act the District Magistrate (henceforth DM) has the power to recognise a person as transgender, whereas, self determination of gender identity was the crux of the NALSA judgment. The 2014 NALSA judgment had said that it would be illegal and immoral to make SRS a pre-requisite for state recognition of the trans-individual. However, the 2019 Act requires a trans-individual to first apply to the DM for a transgender certificate/identity card with supporting gender dysphoria certificate (GD certificate) from a psychiatrist/psychologist. After receiving the transgender certificate from the DM, the trans-individual would then have to undergo SRS and submit proof of SRS with a certificate from the medical superintendent of the hospital where the surgery was performed. Only after receiving state endorsement of SRS from the DM through a gender-change certificate could the trans-person then apply to the state for change of gender in their photo identity documents. This introduces a form of gate keeping by the state with possibility of misuse or arbitrary use of power by the state machinery.

The Act keeps very little scope for legal redress in matters of sexual abuse of the transgender identified individual for which punishment stipulated being between six months to two years along with imposition of fine. This is far less than the punishment for

rape against women which is imprisonment of not less than seven years up to life imprisonment along with a fine. Though the Act is supposed to eliminate discrimination against trans-persons, the act makes no deliberation on the nature of discrimination and the punishment for discrimination of transgender individuals. The Act also states that if the natal family of the trans-person is unable to take care, the trans-individual would be placed in a rehabilitation centre. The Act fails to recognise the agency of trans-persons and their capability to decide for themselves and reinforces the heteropatriarchal family structure by invisibilising the friends, collectives and support groups that creates an alternate family structure for the trans-individuals. The Act does not make any provisions for education or employment opportunities for trans-persons and also goes against the spirit of the NALSA judgment by failing to provide any reservation in educational institutions or creating employment opportunities for the trans-community.

The rules as stated in the Act say that even for self-identification as a transgender person, one would need a gender dysphoria certificate from a qualified psychiatrist / psychologist. The Act was hastily passed, without giving enough time to the transgender community/activists for sharing their feedback. The process of obtaining feedback was flawed as it was during lockdown and as a result mobility was restricted and only transgender individuals and activists having internet access and the knowledge of the English language were contacted for feedback. Furthermore, the Rajya Sabha had only half of its members in attendance when the Trans Act was passed<sup>26</sup>. In 2020, the Government of India brought in The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020 for implementing the 2019 Act. There were only some cosmetic changes after the Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown by allowing online application for obtaining the transgender certificate from the DM with supporting gender dysphoria certificate from psychiatrist/psychologist along with an affidavit through an online portal.

In order to obtain a certificate from the DM validating gender change the trans-individual would have to undergo SRS, surrender the previous transgender identity card issued by the DM and apply for the gender change certificate to the DM with a certificate from medical superintendent certifying SRS. The DM after being satisfied about the 'correctness of the

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<sup>26</sup> <https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/trans-act-2019-rules-feedback-activists> (accessed on 30.11.21)

procedure' would then issue a certificate endorsing gender change on the basis of which the trans-individual could get their gender changed in their photo identity documents.

## **Section 6a: Medical perspective on gender identities – Tracing the historical background**

In 1932, *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change*, the story of Lili Elbe's life, male to female transition and sex reassignment surgery was published. It was the first recorded case of SRS. Most likely she underwent procedures with no scientific backing. In 1945, Sir Harold Delf Gillies along with Ralph Millard carried out the first SRS on Laura Dillon where the biological sex was changed from female to male. He later performed the first MtF surgery on Robert Cowell changing her to Roberta Cowell. In 1967, laws were changed in Britain that allowed hospitals like Charing Cross Hospital to start SRS. In 1972, American Medical Association gave permission to perform SRS as a treatment for transsexualism. In Iran homosexuality is a criminal offence punishable with the death penalty. The only way to survive as a transgender person in Iran and come to terms with one's preferred gender and bodily experience is SRS which is socially accepted, legally sanctioned and subsidised by the state.<sup>27</sup> Japan allowed first legal sex change operation from female to male in 1998 (Gupta & Murarka, 2009). In India, Sex Reassignment Surgery came into reality from the early 2000s. Since then, along with HIV/AIDS intervention, SRS also became an important issue with respect to the transgender individuals. In Chennai SRS is done free of cost for the *Aravanis* or transgender people.

According to 'The Hindu', New Delhi, May 7, 2016, there is a gradual increase in the number of transgenders coming to India from abroad for SRS due to the cost of such procedures being much cheaper in India. Olmec (Transgender Plastic Surgery Institute based in Delhi) founder and plastic surgeon Narendra Kaushik said that he operates on up to 200 patients, who are mostly local, every year. But he said that he was also seeing increasing numbers of foreigners from the U.K., U.S., and Australia, seeking lower costs and those from developing countries wanting better quality care than they receive at home. The number of foreign nationals having such surgeries has jumped from between five and ten to as many as 20 a year and the surgeon predicted that the figure would continue to rise. The government is actively promoting India's booming medical tourism industry; Indian surgeons are also

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<sup>27</sup> <https://qz.com/889548/everyone-treated-me-like-a-saint-in-iran-theres-only-one-way-to-survive-as-a-transgender-person/> (accessed on 20.04.20)

developing their own techniques for transgender operations. This includes for female-to-male surgeries, which are complex and less widely available, according to industry experts.<sup>28</sup>

Harry Benjamin (1885-1986) recognised transsexualism, treated hundreds of patients and established the modern scientific management of this condition. In 1979, Harry Benjamin's International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIIGDA) was founded which established the Transsexual Standards of Care (TSOC) that set the standards for diagnosing, managing and performing SRS. HBIIGDA is presently known as 'World Professional Association for Transgender Health' (WPATH). In 1980, The American Psychiatry Association (APA) listed transsexualism as an official disorder in Disorders III. Since DSM-IV the name of the diagnosis was changed to 'Gender Identity Disorder' (GID). In the new edition of DSM-V it has been changed to Gender Dysphoria, which de-pathologises and de-stigmatises the transgender experience. In the old DSM-IV, GID focused on the 'identity' issue - namely, the incongruity between someone's gender at birth and the gender to which they identified. While this incongruity is still crucial to gender dysphoria, the drafters of the new DSM-V wanted to emphasize the importance of distress<sup>29</sup>, about the incongruity for a diagnosis.

What is the perception of being male or being female? Dr. John Money of the John Hopkin's Institute believed that at birth a child was a clean slate whose gender identity developed during the window period of the first two years of life where gender identity was shaped by the child's environment. The 1960s and 70s was the period of the most controversial gender experiment on David Reimer (born Bruce Reimer) who's penis got burnt in an accident during a circumcision operation when David was a eight month old baby.<sup>30</sup> Bruce's parents under the influence of Dr. Money raised Bruce as a girl after he was castrated when he was less than 2 years of age. The experiment was a catastrophe as David now being raised as Brenda refused to reconcile with his identity as a girl and became withdrawn, depressed and finally at the age of thirteen his parents had to tell him his true story. David describes this experience as one of instant relief and immediately started living as a boy again.

Dr. John Money's theory was that we are all born with an unformed sense of being male or female and that up to two years after birth all babies' brains are malleable, all babies are neutral, neither male nor female. This two year period is a window of opportunity to raise the

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.medindia.net/news/gender-reassignment-surgery-indias-new-budget-medical-tourism-159763-1.htm> (accessed on 20.04.20)

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.livescience.com/16110-transgender-teen-mental-health.html> (accessed on 25.05.16)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-11814300> (accessed on 25.05.16)

child as either a boy or a girl. He formulated that nurture could override whatever effects genes and hormones had in shaping our gender identity in the womb. After two years this malleability ended and the gender identity of the child was forever fixed. This was the theory of neutrality and in the case of identified intersex babies and children, doctors would then and still continue to choose now, which gender is suitable and assign the baby accordingly, which often involved surgical alteration of a child's genitals. This meant that boys born with a tiny penis were often surgically transformed into girls and raised as girls. Doctors dealing with intersex children still see this as the best solution. A child with a small underdeveloped penis would have a very small phallus and would supposedly carry a psychological burden throughout his life and doctors do not hesitate to gender assign such a child as female and perform SRS at a very early age along with hormone therapy, psychiatric support and counselling to make the person fit into the social construct of a 'woman'. There is no space for choice and agency of the individual, for deciding for oneself, for living life according to one's own will.

In this scientific and social context the study tries to understand the perception of gender amongst trans-people. How do they perceive their body? How do they perceive their gender in the context of their sex assigned at birth? Society tries to impose a gender binary as a prerequisite of human development. Trans-people form a continuous spectrum between the two poles of the gender binary. Some are comfortable with feeling as a man or woman despite having been assigned the opposite sex at birth, some of them simply cross dress or make cosmetic changes, some opt for HRT, some undergo partial SRS such as top surgery along with HRT while some transform completely and travel to the other pole of the spectrum by opting for complete SRS. This opens a spectrum of trans-bodies with a rainbow of gender expressions.

## **Section 6b: Medical perspective on gender identities – The present day practice**

The medical perspective has a two pronged approach towards transgender individuals who want to opt for Gender Affirmative Therapy. GAT includes psychiatric evaluation, HRT, real-life experience, genital procedures as a part of the surgical procedures and also non genital procedures. Tomislav Bracanovic (2016) talked about these procedures in detail. First the person opting for GAT especially HRT and SRS needs to obtain two GD certificates from two psychiatrists in order to start HRT and only after a year of continuing HRT under a

qualified endocrinologist would one be eligible to opt for the first surgery as part of SRS. I have tried to trace an overview of the psychiatric and the medico-surgical perspectives associated with transgender individuals.

Previously considered as Gender Identity Disorder in DSM-IV, transgender identities have since been replaced as 'Gender Dysphoria' in DSM-V in 2013. Gender Dysphoria is defined as a condition with marked incongruence between a person's ascribed gender at birth and the person's self perception and expression of gender. The change from 'Disorder' to 'Dysphoria' is significant. In the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD 11), Gender Incongruence has been removed from the 'Mental Health Disorders' chapter (Chapter 6) and included in a newly created chapter (Chapter 17) titled "Conditions Related to Sexual Health". This change in ICD-11 is expected to reduce stigma and at the same time ensure increased access to necessary mental health interventions. Gender Incongruence implies that there is a difference between gender ascribed at birth and preferred gender identities which identifies individual agency to determine one's own gender identity.

Hormone Replacement Therapy for one year is mandatory before starting the first surgical intervention. For the transmasculine individuals T-Shots or intramuscular Testosterone injections are given as per the dosage and frequency prescribed by a qualified endocrinologist. The changes resulting from testosterone injections are varied and some of the changes that emerged from the narratives can be listed as follows:

- Deepening of voice
- Cessation of menstruation
- Enlargement of the clitoris
- Facial and body hair
- More angular facial structure with increase in muscle mass and strength
- Atrophy of breast tissue.

For the transfeminine individuals Oestrogen and Androgen reducing medication is given. The expected manifestations are:

- Breast development
- Reduced size of testicles and erectile functioning
- Body hair being reduced

Though it may sound odd, there is nothing as a 'false or unreal life' as lived experiences of the transgender individuals are their real lives. The medical professionals instruct the transgender individuals to take a 'real life test' for twelve months in order to address the social aspect. In reality this test caters more for society than for the individuals per se. It is about coming out to partners, family, friends and community members.

SRS is a constellation of surgical procedures by which a person's physical appearance and existing sexual characteristics and functions are altered to match their identified gender. It is a part of a spectrum of interventions used for gender dysphoria in transgender people. Surgery can be understood from two different perspectives, i.e. non genital procedures and genital procedures (Bracanovic, 2016). The non genital procedures for the transfeminine individuals:

- Breast augmentation
- Feminization of face
- Cosmetic surgery of the buttocks
- Adam's apple reduction
- Hair reconstruction/grafting

The genital procedures for transfeminine individuals are:

- Penectomy/Orchiectomy
- Creation of neo-vagina and clitoris (vaginoplasty)

The non genital procedures for the transmasculine individuals are:

- Removal of breast, shaping of the areola and creation of male chest
- Voice surgery

The genital procedures for the transmasculine individuals are:

- Total abdominal hysterectomy
- Phalloplasty
- Metoidioplasty
- Testicular prosthesis surgery

In both cases the surgery can be any one of the above procedures, a combination of some of the procedures or the full transition involving all the surgical procedures.

## **Section 6: Transgender lived experiences and the question of livelihoods**

The thesis tried to explore the relationship between gender identity, gender expression and economic structures that transgender persons live in that may or may not influence their gender identity and choice of livelihood. The study tries to look at and find out how education and socioeconomic background impacts the lives of transgender people, their choices and gender expressions as well as gender transition/reassignment. Since the ability to live their chosen identity depends on their economic condition and their gender identity has an influence on available livelihood options, it becomes important to see the transgender lived experiences through the lens of economic structures. The ability to live a chosen gender identity through GAT depends on medical access which depends on material and economic conditions of life and hence these two need to be linked. Economic status also depends on livelihood, family support, availability of care and support from friends, family and community and so it becomes significant to adopt a holistic approach of looking at the trans-lives by exploring the larger question of 'liveability'. Here the research took the 'Capability Approach' as propounded by Dr. Amartya Sen and conceptualizations of 'precarity' and 'liveability' theorized by Judith Butler as its theoretical framework to understand the dynamics between one's gender identity and livelihood. The Capability Approach is defined by the individual's capability of achieving the kind of life they have reason to value. A person's capability to live a good life is defined in terms of the set of valuable 'beings and doings' like being in good health, having a good education or having loving relationships with others to which they have real access. Here 'poverty' is understood as deprivation in the capability to live a good life, and 'development' is understood as capability expansion.

The study looks at how gender influences choice of livelihood and how GAT/SRS may become an extension of the capitalist market driven economy and the extent to which it becomes a medium for the intrinsic need of gender expression vis-à-vis its role in shaping the trans-body to influence livelihood. This study tries to understand the choices of livelihood that the trans-persons can opt for and whether gender expression and later on GAT/ SRS helps or hinders their economic choices. How do economic decisions shape gender expression and how gender identity impacts one's economic decision

## **Chapter 2: Transition, Transformation or Transcendence: The Transmasculine Experience**

### **Section 1: Tracing the trajectory – Formation of the discourse around trans-masculinity**

When I first saw my baby brother in the hospital, I was in class four. I realised for the first time that I never had and neither would I ever have what he had. He was as a 'boy'. I was jealous. I knew it wasn't right, but this is what happened. It's not that I did not love him but the fact that what he attained so easily, I would have to struggle to get. It's also very strange that he was the first to accept me as I am and never questioned my gender. Ani<sup>31</sup> (21 years), transmasculine individual from South 24 Parganas.

Despite tremendous social pressure to conform to his assigned gender, somewhere the belief had always been strong in Ani that he was a man. This was until he saw his baby brother in the hospital for the first time. The realisation that he 'didn't have and would never have something that boys had' seems to have killed that belief and extinguished that hope that had supported him and kept him going. The question arises here whether the presence of an organ is more important than the actual awareness of being something that organ signifies and struggling to nurture and protect that awareness and belief from the demands of society to conform otherwise. On the basis of the theoretical understanding developed from the previous chapter this chapter focused on exploring the lived experiences of the transmasculine individuals through the axes of sex, gender and sexuality. The central focus of this chapter has been on understanding the perception of gender as developed by the transmasculine individuals by travelling through the phases and spaces of life. The chapter tried to understand the decisions of the transmasculine individuals regarding whether or not to opt for GAT, how far to explore GAT, and the perception and decision regarding GAT as experienced by the transmasculine individuals. This chapter also traced the trajectory of the transgender movement as witnessed in West Bengal and tried to understand the emergence and presence of the transmasculine identities as a part of the non-normative gender spectrum.

The 1990's were a crucial period of growth in the organising of the sexual minority groups in West Bengal. Through Counsel Club, the gay identified individuals from in and around Kolkata came together around 1992-93 supporting and counselling each other and creating a

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<sup>31</sup> Interview taken on 16.06.19 in Kolkata

support space for the community people<sup>32</sup>. The lesbian and bisexual women also started organising around the feminist movement with the aim of reclaiming the political position of 'being women' and celebrating 'differences' from heterosexual women. This motivated women to start talking about gender roles and identities beyond issues of sexuality. In 1998, the film *FIRE* by the acclaimed director Deepa Mehta was released in India, the theme of which was a lesbian relationship between two married women in a typical North Indian Hindu middle class family. There was widespread vandalism in the name of protests by right wing fundamentalist groups in many Indian cities where the film was screened. Minakshi Sanyal<sup>33</sup> alias Malabika, a queer feminist activist and founding member of 'Sappho' and later on 'Sappho for Equality', a queer feminist LBT (lesbian, bisexual woman and transman) activist forum shared:

Fire was a turning point in our lives. My partner Akansha and I used to stand outside the cinema hall where it was being screened as we watched people coming out of the cinema hall. We were searching for 'people like us' as we realised that we had to become visible, to be recognised.

In April 1999 an interview of Malabika and her partner Akanksha was published in the supplement paper of Ananda Bazar Patrika titled *CHHAI CHAPA FIRE (Smouldering Fire In The Ashes)*. The article evoked a flood of responses in the post box number provided along with the article.

We realised that we were not alone and six of us came together and Sappho was born on 20<sup>th</sup> June, 1999. In the beginning we started off as an emotional support group for lesbian and bisexual women and persons Assigned Female At Birth (AFAB), but gradually we felt that in order to make our voice heard and let other people like us come and join Sappho we created Sappho for Equality in the year 2003, said Malabika..

Sappho for Equality, a queer feminist organisation emerged from Sappho and established itself as the only registered organisation in Eastern India working for the rights and social justice of lesbian and bi-sexual women and transmasculine individuals with the aim of bridging the gap between the non-normative and normative populations in our society and positing the dialogue around gender and sexuality with the existing development discourse. Malabika added,

'T' as a category of identification has been there from the very beginning, but we were not very sure about our understanding about the 'T' component which developed slowly and gradually through interacting with individuals assigned gender 'female' at birth, coming to our drop-in-

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Pawan Dhall on 04.02.19 and Anish Roy Choudhury on 29.07.20 in Kolkata

<sup>33</sup> Interview taken on 26.12.19 in Kolkata

centre and spending time with us. I remember one individual coming to the centre used to bring a *lungi*<sup>34</sup> with him and he used to wear it in the space at Sappho and said that this was his moment of ease. At that time we used to think he was doing it just for relaxation. Till then we did not have the word to describe his identity. We only knew 'butch' and it was much later that I realised that he was a female to male transgender person.

In Parallel, NACP Phase I also started from 1992, initiating a dialogue around sexualities and sexually transmitted diseases. NACP III launched during 1999 with the promise of halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS epidemic. The third phase of the program incorporated the MSM (men having sex with men) individuals, the female sex workers and the injective drug users as the high risk groups through their TI projects all through India. In West Bengal also the TI projects gathered momentum and as a consequence the MSM practicing individuals referred to as *Kothis* and *Panthis* started coming together as workers as well as beneficiaries of the project. Along with debates and discussions around the concerns of *kothis* emerging from the experiences of the HIV/AIDS prevention and control programme, more debates and discussions started taking shape focusing on gender-transgressive behaviours. Though this was mainly in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic but with the advent of NACP III and its consequent shift to NACP IV the 'transgender' issue surfaced and discussions followed beyond that.

Despite the fact that the transgender identity got its place in the array of linguistic expressions used to describe the non-normative gender and sexuality spectrum, the term got introduced in the Indian sub-continent as an expression of the self much later during the early part of the twenty first century. Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (Dutta & Roy, 2014:326) argued that the pattern of universalisation of the term transgender as a transnational umbrella term by the state, the development sector and their funders resulted in incorporating the South Asian discourses around gender/sexual variance as nothing but merely local terms used for denoting transgender identities at a very personal and informal level. In the Indian scenario this process reinforced the overwhelming presence of the post colonial construction of identities based on the colonial forms of knowledge production. The spread through the transnational, regional and local levels by reinforcing the hierarchy between the hegemonic anglophone discourse of LGBTIQHKA+ identities recognised by the state and the development sectors and the regional or local identity categories based on gender/sexual variance. Hence the term transgender as an emergent category of identity and representation got established in the

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<sup>34</sup> A type of men's garment comprising of a large length of cloth wrapped around the lower waist like a skirt. It is worn in the Indian subcontinent worn as a casual wear or as a night wear.

Indian sub continent (Dutta & Roy, 2014: 321) by creating a gap between the funding related identity formation and the spontaneous identity reclamation as experienced by the *kothis* and *hijras* getting visibility through the HIV/AIDS prevention and control program and the activism getting shaped on the basis of the gradual visibilisation of the population. The transfeminine individuals had a traditional framework based on historical, spiritual, cultural and mythological background. The 2014 NALSA judgment of the supreme court mentions about the history of the trans-identities in India talking about *hijras*, eunuchs, *kothis*, *Aravanis*, *Jogappas*, *Shiv-Shaktis* with references to the Vedic and Puranic literature and the mythological narrative associated with each identity. In contrast the transmasculine individuals are historically invisibilised as is evident from the NALSA judgment which makes a tokenistic mention of a transgender umbrella but talks entirely about the various categories of transfeminine identities steeped in cultural roots and mythological narratives of characters such as *Shikhandi*, *Brihannala* and *Mohini* in our epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. So as a result the transfeminine individuals traverse in between the process of spontaneous identity reclamation and conscious identity formation. Thus the coinage of the term transgender somewhat subsumes the nuanced local identities the transfeminine individuals something that never occurs in transmasculine individuals due to their invisibilisation. In India the female to male (FtM) transgender community presented as a microscopic population because at that time there was no traditional framework for female to male transition.<sup>35</sup> The transmasculine identity became a self-acclaimed category of identity much later as the whole movement was based on the transfeminine narratives brought forward by the HIV/AIDS prevention and control programme. Ani, (21 years, South 24 Parganas), one of my transmasculine respondents shared,

The LGBTQIA+ movement was more driven by the transfeminine persons rather than the transmasculine persons. The movement in West Bengal was fuelled by the HIV/AIDS prevention and control project and hence the transfeminine persons became the face of the movement. The effeminate males or the transfeminine persons were considered the 'High Risk Group' with reference to this pandemic. So they spearheaded the movement and started to walk the road, spread awareness and ask for their rights.

The male to female (MtF) trans-people got visibility through the HIV & AIDS funding projects after being identified as the High Risk Group. But the FtM did not have any such history. As a result the experiences of the MtF individuals are well documented but as far as

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<sup>35</sup> Mohan, S., & Murthy, S. (2013). Towards Gender Inclusivity. Bangalore: Alternative Law Forum.

the FtM people are concerned, their existences are not recognised and their experiences are not historically documented (Mohan and Murthy, 2013:29).

Two phenomena of significance occur with the advent of a new language in the form of the word 'transgender'. The first is the shift in focus from sexuality to gender as identities such as *kothi* and *dhurani* was always in relation to their sexual role and sexual acts with reference to their male counterparts – the *parikhs*. The second phenomenon was that it provided much needed language for FtM individuals who were till then subsumed under identities such as *tomboy* and *butch*. Some of the individuals previously identified as effeminate males or the *kothis* got a new word to express themselves through the expression 'transfeminine', while the butch identified individuals in the lesbian butch-femme relationship got expression through the 'transmasculine' category. In a YouTube video, *Butch Please*,<sup>36</sup> an individual identified as a butch woman shares, "Just because there were ostensibly more butches in the fifties, more butches in the sixties, more butches in the seventies and eighties, does not mean that there were actually more butches. It means that there were no other ways for them to identify." The term 'transgender' addressed this vacuum in the vocabulary in understanding, owning up and representing the 'self' according to one's desire and preference. Shubho<sup>37</sup> (22 years, transmasculine respondent from Cooch Behar) shared, "I was not sure about my 'being'; there was no word to describe myself, my preferences and my desires. I was grappling with words and phrases. At last I got it. I feel trans-visibility has given me more words and ways to describe myself. "The borders between *kothis* and MtF trans-persons and that between butch lesbians and FtM trans-persons were becoming blurred. In this research the words 'transfeminine' and 'transmasculine' has been used predominantly in order to capture the whole spectrum of femininities and masculinities giving rise to an array of gender expressions based on unstable assemblages rather than the essentialist gender categories (Dutta & Roy, 2014).

Another way of looking at trans-visibility would be to do so through the feminist lens. Though the masculine spaces feel threatened by the presence of the transmasculine individuals claiming that space, it is still considered acceptable as the 'girl' child who wants to be a 'boy' is considered to be climbing the social ladder. But in this patriarchal society where a woman is always the 'second sex' the situation of a transfeminine person becomes doubly stigmatised.

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<sup>36</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V09C98Xt7Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V09C98Xt7Q) (accessed on 07.02.20)

<sup>37</sup> Interview taken on 01.09.19 in Cooch Behar

The preferred life that they want to live is considered a threat to the patriarchy as it is seen as a 'fall' from the social status that they are given on the basis of the 'male body' that they are born with.

According to research respondents (both transfeminine and transmasculine individuals), the reason behind the initial invisibilisation of the transmasculine individuals in the movement were multifaceted. Inhabiting the 'female' body was becoming unsafe for the transmasculine individuals who did not want to opt for surgical intervention, particularly in a patriarchal society where incidents of violence against women is a regular and common phenomenon. According to the National Crime Records Bureau,<sup>38</sup> in 2019, there was a 7.3% increase in criminal cases against women. The number of registered cases of crime against women in 2019 was 4,05,861, most of which were cases against their husband or in-laws of cruelty, followed by cases of assault, physical abuse, kidnapping and rape. In this environment of gender based violence, the situation for people with non-normative gender identities and sexuality orientations is extremely grave. For the AFAB person 'corrective rape' becomes another way for stifling their voice.

Another interesting factor surfaced when Suhani<sup>39</sup> (37 years, transfeminine individual, South 24 Parganas) an activist, actor and leader said,

The way I identify myself is totally my experience of continuous becoming. I am a confident woman. I can claim my rights and talk on behalf of myself. I feel that this confidence has come from my childhood experience of being nurtured as a boy. As a boy you get that social privilege of having the best food and having the freedom of exploring yourself. This is still true in village areas, where women are not given much importance; men are the most important part of the society. So I have grown up with all those privileges.

This social privilege a transfeminine person is born with is often not available to a person assigned female at birth (henceforth AFAB), thus making the situation for transmasculine persons more difficult. The absence of this social privilege often delays the process of coming out and taking part in the larger movement for transmasculine individuals. Research respondents Avay<sup>40</sup> (transmasculine, age 32, Howrah) and Ayan<sup>41</sup> (transmasculine, 30, North 24 Parganas) both said that when AFAB trans-persons opt for SRS and get their desired body, the family often accepts and even supports them as it is considered an 'upliftment' of status,

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<sup>38</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ncrb-data-7-rise-in-crimes-against-women-6636529/> (accessed on 15.12.20)

<sup>39</sup> Interview taken on 15.01.19 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

<sup>40</sup> Interview taken on 22.06.18 in Kolkata

<sup>41</sup> Interview taken on 01.03.19 in Kolkata

an elevation of some sort in life. But when a trans-person assigned male at birth (henceforth AMAB) changes her body and gets her desired feminine body, she faces tremendous opposition and stigma. This is like a fall from a position of privilege. The family expects a transfeminine person to bring a bride for the family, which never happens. Masculinity is always considered to be better and higher, as a result the transmasculine individuals often get acceptance from the family, as claiming to live the life of a 'man' is a promotion from a socially lower position of a woman. 61% of the narratives from the transmasculine interviews are stories of acceptance and integration of a transmasculine person in the family after initial confrontation and rejection. From the research interviews it has surfaced that to a large extent, this acceptance and reconciliation is due to the preference of their parents for a male child. Another fact that emerged from the discussion was the preference of the transmasculine persons to get married or start their own household with a live in partner. They seem to be slipping into the domain of domesticity which could be seen as a reason for their lack of visibility in the larger non-normative gender and sexuality movement. Rana<sup>42</sup> (22 years, South 24 Parganas), a transmasculine individual said,

I am not connected with the movement in real sense, I have attended some events once or twice. Transmen are not much connected...at least I have not seen them. We either get integrated in the natal family as a 'male' child or we constitute our own family with our partners. Apart from Dipto and Samudra I haven't seen anyone like me as such in the movement.

For a very long time the transmasculine individuals used to be identified as 'butch' as in a femme-butch lesbian relationship, where the partner having masculine gender codes, styles and personal appearance were termed as 'butch' and their feminine partner as 'femme'. Butch as a category of lesbian gender is constituted through the consumption and manoeuvring of masculine gender codes and signals (Rubin, 2006:472). Ishan<sup>43</sup> (38 years, transmasculine respondent from Kolkata) shared,

I examined myself again when I learnt about the term 'Butch'. Women who think of themselves like male in a lesbian relationship and behave accordingly and want to play the masculine role in a relationship are called butch. I asked myself whether I am a butch. The word 'transgender' was not yet there in my vocabulary. When I was in class eleven I got the word 'lesbian'. I thought, I was a lesbian as I was attracted to girls. But I was not sure as I never considered myself as a girl. When I got the first periods, it became even more difficult for me. I did not like to wear sanitary napkins, but I had to. I also felt discomfort with my upper portion.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview taken on 02.02.19 in South 24 Parganas

<sup>43</sup> Interview taken on 03.01.19 in Kolkata

Arbaz<sup>44</sup>, (38 years) a transfeminine respondent from Kolkata said,

In the mental health fair<sup>45</sup>, if you had ever visited the stall of MANAS Bangla organised by the transwomen, you would have heard the soft sound of a payel<sup>46</sup> or smell the sweet fragrance of flowers and perfumes, but once you would go near the Sappho stall all you would get is the acrid smell of cigarettes.

Masculine traits were considered as the behaviour pattern and preferences of the 'masculine women' or 'lesbian butch', but they were not identified as transgender persons per se. They were self identified as 'manly' woman. When it was seen through the lens of sexuality often people would have expressed their uneasiness of being identified as a lesbian woman and their relationship as a homosexual relationship. Often the girl-friend was considered belonging to the opposite gender and the relationship to be a heterosexual one. Whether through the lens of gender or sexuality there was an absence of a suitable name to be identified with. From a couple of narratives it is revealed that around 2010-11, Sappho took an initiative to bring Satya and Akshay (two transmasculine individuals who had already undergone SRS) from Mumbai, to have an interactive session with them. Samudra<sup>47</sup> (29 years, transmasculine individual from Kolkata), a member of Sappho for Equality said,

It was during 2010 and 2011, when Satya and Akshay came to Sappho, and after meeting them I was convinced that I wanted a life like them! I was awestruck seeing Satya. The journey that he went through to change his body at birth to his preferred, desired body was magical, and from then on I knew I wanted this.

At that time Sappho for Equality was aiming to work with transgender individuals and specifically transmasculine persons and was in the process of understanding the nature of this new identity category. The concept of transgender identities, specifically the 'transfeminine' and 'transmasculine' identities were relatively unknown and rarely discussed.

Though there hasn't been any historical or cultural space for initiating dialogue based on the transmasculine narratives, current works like *Breaking the Binary* by Labia, Mumbai, *Towards gender Inclusivity* by Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore, *Transvarta* by Sappho for Equality, Kolkata have contributed in making a resource pool. It is in this context that I locate my thesis and try to bring about more visibility of the transmasculine individuals through their own articulations of their lived experiences.

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<sup>44</sup> Interview taken on 16.01.19 in Kolkata

<sup>45</sup> During the early 2000s, the mental health fair used to be conducted at Antara Grounds near Baruipur, a semi-rural town near Kolkata.

<sup>46</sup> Anklet

<sup>47</sup> Interview taken on 12.07.18 in Kolkata

## **Section 2: Understanding gender: Exploring and claiming identities**

A social entity is discursively constructed and 'gender' as a crucial aspect of that social entity is discursively constructed too; hence gender in a different sense becomes both an idea construction as well as an object construction which then arrives at the conclusion where gender becomes a system of social categories (Haslenger, 1995, 2017).. Here I have tried to unearth the concept of gender as defined and redefined by the trans-experiences through forming and influencing ideas, opinions and individual lives. I have tried to understand how the concept of gender has looked at the trans-experiences and how the trans-experiences enriched the concept of gender through subverting gender norms and redefining them beyond the binary construction. Taking the narratives of my respondents as my resource pool I have tried to put forward the journey of their self revelation through experiencing pain, pleasure, anger, love, joy, anxiety, frustration and excitement. The complex process of living their self-determined gender by challenging the socially ascribed gender and gender role stereotypes and in doing so their interactions with various institutions and relations, their negotiations, conflicts, struggles and successes have been at the heart of the discussion.

Gender identity is more of a psycho-socio-cultural identity of an individual (Bilodeau & Renn 2005). Gender identity is one's experience of being who they are, flowing from their own sense of self and the ways they are perceived by others through their interaction with others. It is how they cognize their self and want society to recognize and accept them accordingly. It is the characters or trait which the person wants to present to the society he/she/they live in. The individuals want to build their social affiliations based on it. Susan Brison (Brison 2002:38) said, "The self is both autonomous and socially dependent, vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of empathetic others." According to Brison one's embodiment is connected to their selfhood, the idea of self construction is a narrative activity, stringing together one story with the other and creating a repertoire of experiences, learning and insights. Through this process an individual develops on their storied self with the audience co-constituting the process of thick story formation. Finally Brison added that the autonomous self needs to be looked through the lens of relationality as according to her self-formation and self-transformation are intimately relational. This significance of viewing the self in relational terms has been pointed out by scholars like Leslie Feinberg, Jay Prosser, Cressida J. Heyes and Alexis Shotwell and Trevor Sangrey (Feinberg 1998, Prosser 1998, Heyes 2000, Shotwell and

Sangrey 2009). The research respondents have talked about their relational self<sup>48</sup> and how their 'personhood' takes shape through interacting with others. They have also described their autonomous self and acknowledged that often the relation with one's own self goes beyond the limits of social relationships and creates a boundary to protect their selfhood and in doing so disrupts the social relationships. But often the relationship that they developed with their preferred family or support system within or outside the queer community becomes instrumental in accepting the selfhood that they were criticised for otherwise.

In the prevailing binary system gender is biologically determined, socially constructed and creates a hierarchy keeping the patriarchal status-quo intact. The trans-individuals tend to disrupt this unilinearity by removing the direct alignment of gender with the body (Shah et al, 2015:222, 223). Therefore gender identity being one of the most important axes of identity formation for the transgender individuals becomes the most challenging area created through the complex articulation of body and gender. In a world so gendered and stereotyped the transgender individuals grapple with their identities, where no alternative frame of reference exists, where the language itself is so normative that it becomes even more difficult to perceive, define and present themselves to the larger society. In developing their gender identities they either start emulating the gender binary and performing the gender norms socially ascribed to their preferred gender and often reinforce gender stereotypes. However, as the narratives of my respondents reveal, many of them question the gender role stereotypes associated with their preferred gender and go beyond the binary. Whatever be the experience their journey either gets appropriated or made irrelevant as society is strictly guided by the binary system with little or no allowance for flexibility, representation and the need for accommodating different voices. Piyush<sup>49</sup> (38 years, transmasculine person from Kolkata and pursuing his PhD research) said, "In our fairy tales and nursery rhymes there is a constant effort to reinstate the binary gender role stereotypes, like the little boy will go for fishing and the little girl will sit back home and cook for others. All our children's literature are centred around the binary."

Individual negotiation of gendering themselves and parallel negotiation with the prescriptions and ascriptions of society make the gender non-conforming children and young adults tired, irritated and frustrated. They talked about the 'dual need'; the tussle between passing society's gender norms and achieving a feeling of comfort with their own body and self image.

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<sup>48</sup> Self in relation to others

<sup>49</sup> Interview taken on 16.06.19 in Kolkata

Labani <sup>50</sup> (28years, Transmasculine individual, Birbhum) narrates,

I used to hate going to unfamiliar places. Be it a tram or a bus, or an invitation. Instantly, five pairs of eyes would start looking at me and guessing my gender, deciding on my gender, giving their opinion and then making fun of me. I could not stand it. In my locality also, I used to go out in the late evening after coming back from school to chat with my friends, who were mostly boys. For this I was criticised and labelled.

Avay (32 years, transmasculine individual from South 24 Parganas) expressed his feeling of comfort with boys as friends as he remembered his childhood. He said that when he was a child in class one or two, he was sent to play with the girls and he could never fit in. Then he started playing cricket with the boys. The understanding of the self through gender roles performed during childhood play seems to be a significant way of understanding one's gender identity. Dipto and Jammy's narrative resonated at this point and their experience coincided cutting across the intersectional differences. Dipto<sup>51</sup> comes from an upper caste, upper class, educated family with their roots in Assam and Jammy<sup>52</sup> from a lower middle class, scheduled caste background, coming from an educationally underprivileged location in a semi-urban locality of North 24 Parganas. Jammy (34 years, transmasculine individual from North 24 Parganas) said,

I had a childhood friend named, Ruma, We used to play 'household-household' and 'market-market' when we were six-seven or may be eight. I always used to take the role of the 'man' taking care of the household, or selling goods in the market. From our childhood games and play-roles I could feel masculinity in me.

Dipto (40 years, transmasculine individual coming from Assam but now staying in Kolkata) has a similar narrative in his memoirs titled '*Ek Onyo Purusher Akhyan*' published on his facebook page '*Rupantorer Swar, Dipaner Kotha*'<sup>53</sup> in which he says,

Darwin's postulate 'Survival of the fittest' is extremely applicable in my case. When I found myself gradually becoming lonely, I decided that I would play with my friends who were girls, but my role would change. I would gather young boys around me and make them a part of my team. I decided that I would become a shopkeeper and they would buy goods for their dolls from me, buy groceries from me.

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<sup>50</sup> Interview taken on 12.08.18, in Birbhum

<sup>51</sup> Interview taken on 20.10.18 in Kolkata

<sup>52</sup> Interview taken on 17.01.19 in North 24 Parganas

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[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0iaY7SNAXdCb3WKzQTbgUbQXS3pnnPoW2LiE8C3duceJn9Duf5KZiLRQmrmJZCNY11&id=100063772250406](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0iaY7SNAXdCb3WKzQTbgUbQXS3pnnPoW2LiE8C3duceJn9Duf5KZiLRQmrmJZCNY11&id=100063772250406) (accessed on 25.12.21)

There is a startling similarity in both the narratives. In both narratives being a man is being in control, the head of the household or the owner of a shop. So what is this 'Masculinity' all about? Is it an acceptance of the socially prescribed role? Is it just a label? Or is it in the lives of transmasculine individuals, a subversive act of claiming the preferred gender? Jammy's sense of self was different from what he was expected to be on the basis of the socially constructed gender performativity as per his socially ascribed gender at birth. Both Dipto and Jammy's self expressions could have been through other random acts, but as a result of their interaction with the gendered roles of their family members, they chose the socially constructed 'masculine' traits. The act of selling goods in the market or taking care of the household as the man of the household could have been any random task that we are expected to do in a household, but as gender got associated with the acts, the acts became masculine and a certain hierarchy was attached to these performances.

Expressing gender on the basis of societal expectation of gender role stereotypes becomes problematic for the transgender individuals in both the transmasculine and the transfeminine realm of identity formation. This is because the heteronormative patriarchal social order assumes a dimorphic world with a linear relationship between sex and gender with strictly defined roles that have to be adhered to. Most of the respondents shared that they could read the signs and signals of their gender identity for themselves without any problem, but the conflict arose whenever they started to express their gender in relation to the social context they lived in. The problem arose when gender identity needed to be communicated through gender expression with the aim of bridging the self and the outside world. The heteronormative patriarchal social structure that we live in is fragile and needs constant reinforcement and needs to be reiterated through what Butler describes as a stylised repetition of acts. "In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, 1999). Any deviation from the ascribed gender when expressed becomes a problem and the deviation creates inconceivability and a mainstream-periphery debate followed by otherising, alienating and labelling. Mainstream society can never conceive of transgenders as a variation but always thinks in terms of a deviation from the norm.

For dealing with these discomforts and agony of not being able to get identified the way one wants to be, there are instances where the transmasculine individuals have shared that they

tried to make their own world of fantasy during childhood, that helped them to grow up with the assurance that they were not at fault but the fault of the society they lived in. Piyush (38 years, transmasculine individual from Kolkata) said,

In my fairy tale I imagined myself as the prince. I used to get drenched in the beauty of the princess. I had a cousin brother who got all the male privileges and I used to feel bad for not getting the attention that he used to get. I was attracted to the outfits that my brother wore. I could never identify with the girls I saw around me. I could never imagine myself as a 'girl'. During my childhood when I saw the lead actor and actress singing songs of love I always imagined myself in the place of the hero. In this way I developed a world of my imagination.

This is one of the many coping strategies the gender non-conforming children developed for themselves for facing the reality, making sense of it and creating their own spaces through either appropriating like in Piyush's story or rewriting social norms in a manner that suits them. They navigate their lives as an individual and as a part of the society by traversing long and convoluted routes of self enquiry, self discovery and self affirmation. For some, this process start from a very early stage of life while for others it takes time to discover themselves in the face of rigid, water tight and binary social definitions and norms.

From the narratives I gathered three ways of looking at this process of self understanding and gendering, i.e. through gender dysphoria, through body dysphoria and through the exploration and discovery of their sexuality. These experiences are also not exclusive iron clad compartments; rather they are fluid and overlapping. Samar,<sup>54</sup> 34 years, transmasculine individual from Hooghly said,

Right from childhood I used to feel different. It was a weird feeling. I was unlike the other kids around. At that early age it was difficult for me to understand why I was thinking this way. When I was five, I was forced to wear earrings and I instantly disliked it. Why I did not like it I could not express. I said, once I grew up I would do away with them. I loved playing cricket. I was passionate about it. Seeing my passion my father took me to a cricket coaching centre. I did not like the place as it was a cricket coaching centre for girls. I never liked it and so I came out. All these cannot be explained, it was not easy to defend yourself. I also fell in love with a girl when I was around 10 or 11.

Understanding one's self through exploring sexuality has been a very significant thread in the narratives. It becomes easier for some to understand one's experience with reference to the special relationship they develop, through the attraction they felt towards someone they wanted to be close with. According to Ishan (38 years, transmasculine individual, Kolkata),

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<sup>54</sup> Interview taken on 09.07.17 in Hooghly

Initially when I was a child, I did not have any clear idea about what it meant to be a girl or a boy. As I grew up I noticed that I started feeling comfortable with boys. I was happy playing football and cricket. I was put into a girls' school in class five. I found girls attractive. I used to wonder why I was the way I was, having special feelings for girls, playing football and cricket with boys. At that time I was only familiar with the term 'homosexual'. I did not have any other frame of reference. But I became sure day by day that I was not 'homosexual'. And so as I said earlier, whether I am in a relationship or not I never liked the 'female markers' in my body, like breasts and having periods. If someone addresses me as 'brother' on the streets and asks me how I am doing, I become very happy.

Aman<sup>55</sup> (33 years, transmasculine individual from North 24 Parganas) said,

Actually I realised that I am a transgender identified person when I was eighteen years old! Before that I did not have much problem with my gender expression. I used to wear female clothing and had long hair. But I can definitely say I was not comfortable. When I turned eighteen, I fell in love with my class mate and instantly I knew that I was a man. My gender is 'masculine'. It was just like a puzzle that got solved all of a sudden, like a bulb that suddenly got illuminated. I could no more stick to that 'feminine' look. I changed it drastically and for that people started calling me names like 'abnormal, *chhakka*, *hijra*' so on and so forth. But to me the difference was that I started feeling comfortable in my own skin.

Ani, (21 years, transmasculine individual from South 24 Parganas also shared,

When I was in class eleven or twelve, I had a girlfriend; she used to consider our relationship a heterosexual one and considered me as her boyfriend. She used to love my 'masculine' appearance. To her I was more significant as her boyfriend rather than as a human being. After sometime I understood that I would never be able to satisfy what she desired from me and so I ended our relationship. Then during my college days I had a girl friend once again. This time she considered me a 'girl' and regarded our relationship as a lesbian relationship which made me uncomfortable. When she touched me as a 'girl', I used to feel very uncomfortable, as I could never feel or think of myself as a 'girl'. Then I fell in love with my teacher, a cis-woman, and this relationship continued.

According to Ani, his first girlfriend used to regard him as a boy, the second one considered him as a girl, but this journey helped consolidate his gender identity as something related to his felt sense of gender. His third girlfriend, a queer woman, who used to be his teacher as well, acknowledged him as a transmasculine person. She told Ani that she was uncomfortable with the idea of peno-vaginal sex. Going through all these experiences of self exploration and understanding, Ani now regards himself as a queer transman. On the basis of the presence of a person having the opposite gender as the love interest of the transmasculine individual

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<sup>55</sup> Interview taken on 20.07.19 in North 24 Parganas

indicates the masquerading of the woman as being the phallus and in the course of this masquerade establishing the transmasculine partner as the phallus, As Butler reiterates, the power that is associated with the phallus is reinforced and established by women, who reflect and 'realise' the social position of the phallus as the centre of masculinity and thereby the foundation of patriarchy. When Butler says that women "become" the phallus, it means that women, ironically maintain this disparity in power, which in turn, implies that if they disrupt this power hierarchy instead of maintaining it, the whole structure would collapse (Butler, 2002).

Understanding one's sexuality becomes a significant moment of consolidating a defined identity. It is like a journey of reaffirming one's own gender identity with relation to the outer world. Most of the transmasculine respondents said that they realised that they were not like other 'girls' and were attracted towards all 'boyish' things from a very early childhood, from 5 to 6 years. But they could not be sure about their understanding about themselves. It was like a trial and error, gathering evidences in the effort to acknowledge and assert one's non-conforming gender. For some individuals the process of naming and gendering one's self took quite a long time, for some the process was quick, easy and spontaneous. But the responses always talked about a painstaking process, a struggle within during the formative years of their lives.

Piyush (38 year, transmasculine PhD research scholar from Kolkata) shared his experience of negotiating and living his preferred gender where he had to hide it from others and live through the pain of being invisibilised not only by others but by him as well. He said that when he started earning, his sisters used to bring women's trousers and shirts for him to wear for office as according to them he would look smart in the attire. But it was not his choice; he never was and never wanted to look a 'smart girl' and so he continued wearing *salwar-kameez*<sup>56</sup>. Piyush's narrative is one of passive resistance in his refusal to wear the women's trousers brought by his sisters. To him, wearing the *salwar-kameez* is uncomfortable, even painful and in that pain lay silent resistance which would be lost if he wore the trouser brought by his sisters. That would have only vindicated his family's stance that he was a tomboyish girl, thereby cementing his identity which was unacceptable to Piyush. Instead he continues to weather the storm with patience and perseverance.

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<sup>56</sup> Traditional top-bottom combination dress worn by women in the Indian sub-continent

Chandan<sup>57</sup> (30 years, transmasculine individual from Howrah), shared that from class IV, he started having the realisation that he was not like the other girls. Even during his childhood it was clear to him that he was not a girl. Though he wasn't clear about what he was, but it was clear to him that he was anything but a girl. He always felt that the body he inhabited was not his body. From this narration one of the most important pointers surfaces - 'body dysphoria'. This is another way trans-individuals understand, identify and name themselves in order to get an identity and work on it. Body dysphoria is the state of being where an individual is not comfortable with their body. A common expression used by many trans-individuals is "It feels like being trapped in the wrong body". According to Bubai<sup>58</sup> (32 years, transmasculine individual from Nadia), "Periods is the only thing that shows me blatantly that I have a girl's body, so this is indeed a big problem." Ambar<sup>59</sup> (34 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) also reiterates the same pain of inhabiting the wrong body by saying, "I have never thought of myself as a 'girl', from the very beginning. I never had any doubt about myself being a 'boy'. Problems started when my physical developments started to take place. I came to realise that my bodily changes did not commensurate with my being a boy. That was the first blow to me."

Shubho's narration<sup>60</sup> (22 years, transmasculine individual from Cooch Behar) expresses it all by weaving all the three ways of realising and identifying one's self, i.e. sexuality, body dysphoria and gender dysphoria.

I was in a relationship with a girl. I was unsure about my sexuality as well. I am always attracted to girls, but I am not a lesbian and so I was confused. In class eleven I had a serious affair with a girl. My friends told me that what I was doing was unnatural but to me it was not. I could only think of myself as a boy. I used to think that I have a wrong body which I would change through plastic surgery and everything would be okay. Then I passed my Higher Secondary examination. I started to realise that the way I had grown up was not the same as the way my friends had grown. I used to wear *salwar-kameez* like them, but only I could feel the pain and discomfort wearing feminine dresses. When I was in college, I decided to come out of this pain. I decided to start living like any other girl. During that period a boy proposed to me. It was during the end of first year. I thought of coming out of the pain through this relationship. When you are in a relationship, it is quite natural that you will like to get intimate; you will like to hold hands and walk. But whenever that boy held my hand I felt uncomfortable and irritated. I used to restrain him from coming close. I could feel the dejection and understood this wasn't me. I could not live with a man. He proposed to me in March and we broke up in December.

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<sup>57</sup> Interview taken on 06.01.19 in Kolkata

<sup>58</sup> Interview taken on 25.08.19 in Kolkata

<sup>59</sup> Interview taken on 04.05.17 in South 24 Parganas

<sup>60</sup> Interview taken on 01.09.19 in Cooch Behar

Shubho narrates this back and forth roller coaster experience of self realisation with amusement along with a sense of pain and frustration. Taking all these narratives together I have tried to conceptualise the stages of gendering the 'self' in the lives of a transmasculine person as below:

- Conform–Trying to fit into the mould by conforming to the societal norms. This happens mainly in the initial part of the process. Shubho (22 years, transmasculine individual from Cooch Behar) said, "I tried to be with a boy, so that I became like any other girl, falling in love with the boy and leading a secure life. This process gave rise to so much agony, anguish, pain of not being able to live my preferred life, like a caged person suffocating one's desires forcibly."
- Reform–There have been narrations where the transgender individual said that he tries to become the 'good boy' of the family, fulfilling the need for a son. Jammy (35 years, transmasculine person from North 24 Parganas) said, "I am the tomboy in the family, the productive and efficient tomboy where the family takes advantage of my labour but will never acknowledge my gender identity and sexuality. It is painful."
- Transform–Transform comes at the end when the individual either wants to transform through bodily transition with the aim to match their preferred gender identity or performing the preferred role or transformation by exploring one's sexuality. Experiencing the processes separately or taken together one experiences peace with or without alienation.
- Revolt–In this research I have interviewed all self-identified trans-individuals. So it can be said that they have already walked the path of self discovery. Surfing through the narratives one common thing that surfaces is that each one of them had to go through conflict and chaos, and offered resistance sometimes passive, sometimes active, creating ripples of subversion, revolting against social gender stereotypes and travelling beyond it in order to create one's own space.

The lived experiences of my respondents synthesise stories of 'creation' over 'control'. All the above mentioned phases speak to each other in an effort to creating newer frames of reference. The journey is to create and claim spaces that have until now been controlled by the cis-het hegemony. When we are talking about the lives of the transmasculine persons it is evident that they (here my respondents) are walking on the path of a 'man' but their expression enriches the spectrum of 'masculinity' by defocusing the essentialist relation

between sex and gender, by changing each of the axes, mixing and matching attributes and crafting out their lives defined by their gender as they perceive and visualise. There are times when a person tries to conform to certain familial rules even after taking steps towards transformation. Subho and Jammy both tried to conform for a long time but at present they have started their journeys of transformation. Jammy hailing from a semi rural background of North 24 Parganas and Subho coming from a township of North Bengal somewhere coincide at a point where their gendered expressions start taking shape. Both of them first focused on their external appearance and changed it to suit their self concept. Their decisions of changing their appearance and lifestyle is guided by the interaction of their felt sense of their gender and the social strings and norms attached to their preferred gender demanding perfect congruity and compliance. But the one thing that is true for all my respondents is the fact that at some point all of them they have brought about moments of subversion and creation, creating their own version of masculinity. Their journeys of 'becoming' are enriched by the mingling, intertwining of free spirited desires and controlled allegiance precipitating in a sense into their 'unique gender'. The stories might be talking about appropriation but they also initiate a dialogue around accommodation and acceptance, creating new definitions of gender.

The trans-persons constantly try to bridge the gap between gender identity and gender expressions negotiation, assimilation and assertion. This is a constant process of conflict both within and without that creates physical, emotional and psychological distress in their lives. The change made in DSM-V where the term 'Gender Identity Disorder' has been changed to 'Gender Dysphoria' resonates with the journey of the trans-persons where due to the inability to adjust to the societal norms the person feels distressed and hence the term dysphoria and not disorder. In ICD 11 'Gender Incongruence' (marked and persistent difference between person's experienced gender and assigned sex) has been removed from the 'Mental Health Disorders' chapter (Chapter 6) in ICD and included in a newly created chapter (Chapter 17) titled "Conditions Related to Sexual Health". This change in ICD-11 is expected to reduce stigma and at the same time ensure increased access to necessary mental health interventions. According to Dr. Lale Say, Coordinator, Adolescents and at-Risk Populations Team at the World Health Organisation, this affirmative change has resulted in better social acceptance.

### **Section 3: Transgendering the 'Self'**

My respondents talked about several sources from which they get information about the transgender discourse. On the basis of their lived experiences and the information obtained from the internet, face book, Instagram, peer groups, activists, trans-meets, films, documentaries, YouTube videos, TED Talks, books and magazines, they develop their sense of self. A range of interesting perceptions and expressions came up when I tried to analyse the answers against the question on the current gender identity that they would prefer to identify with. 50% of my transmasculine respondents said that they prefer being identified as 'man' and 33.3% identify as 'transman'. According to them irrespective of what research has churned up and what academicians put forward and activists advocate, till now society guided by the binary gender construct only recognises two genders. And so it is better to be identified as a 'man' in order to be included in the social fabric. Getting included in the social framework becomes very important for them. Some have even expressed that they do not want to even mention the journey as a 'transgender' person as that will label them as 'deviant' and hence be stigmatised. Probably for this reason some transmasculine individuals assume a patriarchal model of masculinity because it grants them validity, approval and acceptance in society. Out of the 50% who identify as 'man', 69.2% have stable relationships with ciswomen, 15.4% are in a romantic relationship with transwomen, and 15.4% are socially and legally married. The two transmasculine respondents who have married have done so after changing their documents, continuing HRT and after having completed partial SRS (top surgery). One of them has married a post-operative transwoman while the other has married a cis-woman. Dipto (40 years, transmasculine individual from Kolkata) said, "I would have called myself a 'transman' but as there isn't any law for transgender marriage so I would prefer to be identified as a 'man' so that I can get married to a woman." Dipto got married to a post-operative transwoman following all the Hindu social marriage customs and legal formalities. Among the transmasculine respondents, 14 (51.8%) are on HRT, 13 (48.1%) have had partial SRS (mastectomy and/or hysterectomy). 13 transmasculine respondents (48.1%) have neither started HRT nor undergone partial SRS. None of the respondents have undergone bottom surgery (phalloplasty).

In the narratives we find rich stories of transmasculine individuals, who through their being, question the sex gender linearity. They consider the mismatch between their preferred gender and biological body as the site and substrate from where social norms can be questioned.

Ayan (30 years, transmasculine person from North 24 Parganas) said, "I am a man and this is my body, so this is a man's body, SRS is not for me. I am okay as I am. I don't think one needs to remove his boobs and have a penis to be a man."

The interesting point is that these decisions of either opting for HRT or SRS or both, or opting for only HRT and other non surgical methods of self expression creates disruption in the understanding of the 'male' or 'female' body by creating trans-bodies and opens up multiple possibilities by traversing either in-between the binarised boundaries or identifying with any of the boxes or going beyond the binary (Halberstam 1994, Prosser 1998, 2006, Heyes 2000). The felt sense of gender and its social construct both interact sometimes in tandem and sometimes in conflict with each other to give the person the multifarious ways of creating identity and expressing it. It is through understanding the narratives of the transmasculine individuals who were the respondents of this research it was reaffirmed that each individual has the right to express their gender in any manner that feels most comfortable (Feinberg, 1998).

Raj<sup>61</sup> (24 years, transmasculine respondent from Darjeeling District) said,

I have heard that my father left us after I was born. May be he was unhappy due to the birth of a girl child. The irony is now I identify as a boy but I will not be able to change my body as my paternal family will never accept me like that. Moreover I identify as a transman, which means I identify my gender as masculine but I have a female body and that is why I am transgender. If I change, then I will become a full-fledged man, which I don't identify with. I want to be identified as a transman, and that's it. My mother buys me men's dresses only and whenever an unknown person asks her about me, she replies that I am her son.

Priya<sup>62</sup> (28 years, transmasculine respondent from Darjeeling District) said that though he identifies as a transman his family will never accept him as he is, so he has no choice but to succumb to their needs.

I love wearing trousers and shirts/t-shirts. This is how I justified wearing my preferred clothes. Otherwise If I had told them that I am a 'boy', they would have never understood and it would have increased my problem. Even now they think that my preferences and external appearance will change. I will not be able to confront my parents. I will have to marry. I think I won't be able to adjust. But I don't want to think of it now. When I come to the DIC I feel one day we will change society, but the moment I get back home, I feel nothing can be changed. Whenever

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<sup>61</sup> Interview taken on 25.10.16 in Siliguri, Darjeeling district

<sup>62</sup> Interview taken on 26.10.16 in Siliguri, Darjeeling district

I have tried to talk to my mother, she starts crying. She thinks I will be happy once I get married.

Both of them stay in Siliguri and from both their versions it becomes clear that family norms still overpowers individual desires and suffocates them. Shubho (22 years, transmasculine person from Cooch Behar) shared that his parents think that once his menstrual cycle will become regular he will be alright. The reason behind their conviction is that once he has a regular cycle, he will get married to a man, he will become a mother and everything will be okay. Though Shubho has decided to undergo HRT and SRS but he can only start the process after getting a job, saving money and after shifting to Kolkata with his partner. There is acceptance to a certain extent, as both of them are allowed to wear whatever they want to, but gender binary social norms and the unilinear relationship between sex and gender prevails strongly which makes any progress and actual change of mindset difficult. Two of my respondents also said that they are men and so the bodies they inhabit are masculine bodies. One of them said, "I am who I am; there is no definition of myself for me..." (Ayan, 30 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas). These voices of subversion become significant in the struggle for claiming spaces and bringing about visibility.

15% of the transmasculine respondents who have gone through HRT and SRS have preferred to be identified through their journey of becoming a 'man' from a 'transman'. They want to acknowledge their journey of 'becoming'. Samrat<sup>63</sup> (28 years, transmasculine respondent from Hooghly) said,

See, I have always considered myself as a 'man, since childhood. I have never thought otherwise, but again I cannot ignore my birth history. I acknowledge it, but at the same time it is painful. As I am transforming from one body to the other, I will consider myself as a trans-person, but if you ask about my feeling I have always felt like a 'man' and nothing else.

Again Ani (21 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) said that he is comfortable to be identified as a 'queer transman'. One respondent however said that he must accept the fact that he is a transman, but it has become a shame for him as he is sick and tired of people calling him *hijra*, even his girl friend during disagreement calls him *hijra* in a derogatory manner. To him, the word 'transman' appears to be synonymous to *hijra* and so he prefers calling himself a 'man' as he can easily pass as a man after HRT. The identity

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<sup>63</sup> Interview taken on 22.06.18 in Hooghly

category of 'transman or transmasculinity' is deprived of a traditional framework in the Indian subcontinent and this community also does not have the support of the culture and tradition like that of the *hijras*. And so it becomes very difficult for the FtM individuals to claim their spaces as transmasculine individuals or transmen. So often they are equated with the MtF individuals and generalised as *hijras*. Often FtM individuals are called as '*chhele hijra*'<sup>64</sup>, finding the similarity of gender crossing and adding the adjective 'boy' as an identification of their masculine gender expression. This also has a class dimension. The words 'Transmasculinity' or 'transman' originated from the word 'transgender' as an emergent category of identity and representation. But the usage of the term started roughly around the first decade of the 21st century replicating the colonial forms of knowledge production particularly in the urban sphere. This is what Judith Halberstam also mentions by talking about the 'politics of space' (Halberstam, 1998). This politics of space works through exclusion, of which 'class' is a very significant dimension. The urban, educated, upper and middle class space might be familiar to the word 'transmasculine' and 'transman' but the rural sphere is still far away from taking advantage of the urban linguistic reference points and hence an FtM person becomes a *hijra* and furthermore the *hijra* identity becomes a derogatory identity.

From these answers against my question on how they would like to be identified on the basis of gender, two very significant aspects of 'perceiving, conceptualising, living and doing' gender surfaced. On the one hand the importance of acknowledging the journey of a transmasculine person becomes significant for opening up a voice of dissent, breaking and rebuilding the alternative gender norms which Connell has termed as 'a shift to a focus on variation' (Connell, 1987:170). Again on the other hand following Connell it could be said that the discussion on transgender and transsexual lives reinforces the notion that man or woman are not pre-decided states. It is a continuous journey of becoming, a condition actively and continuously being constructed resulting in consolidation of 'gender identity' (Connell 2009: 5). All these discussions and debates open an array of possibilities of polymorphous bodies, desires and beings. As Ayan (30 years, transmasculine person from North 24 Parganas) said, "I knew I am a 'boy' but again not that 'boy', whom we see in our roads or in our family. I was in a tussle about how to perceive my gender identity and how to negotiate with it. Through gaining knowledge I became aware and confident about my orientation."

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<sup>64</sup> Male *hijra*

## Section 4: Childhood, growing up and development of identities

All my respondents unanimously accepted the fact that the experience of growing up for them has been tumultuous. It is seen in most cases that transgender people are aware of their difference at a very early age. It is something that a child recognizes even before she/he/they learns to speak human language. Their behaviour patterns, including dressing up, patterns and forms of play typically appear by age 4-5 (Chettiar, 2015: 752) and that no amount of therapy, drugs, denial, conditioning, rejection, bribery, cajoling, nagging or anything else will make it go away. If it's only a phase then the phase lasts from age five through death. The only way out, which isn't appropriate for everyone, is surgery, changing the body to match the mind. Gender non conforming children behaving according to their preferred gender by not aligning with their ascribed gender become a focus of scolding, cajoling, humiliation, labelling, name calling, discrimination and violence. They grow up by navigating through experiences of deprivation, solitude, ignorance and alienation.

Ambar (34 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) shared,

One thing that crossed my mind was that no one understood that I am a boy. I was a child and was under the impression that they would understand once I grew up. But it wasn't long before I understood that I was wrong. As I grew up I became more and more helpless as things became clearer to me. Both my parents weren't at home as both of them were working. I used to stay at home all by myself. As a result I learnt to keep things to myself and to suppress my emotions and slowly got used to it. Whatever happened stayed within me. It would all accumulate and could not come out. I did not get the opportunity to express myself and by the time I got that opportunity it was too late, it was of no use. I wanted to say that I was being bullied, I wanted to say, but I couldn't.

Ambar said that when his family came to know about his preferred gender identity, there was a big chaos. They used to think that he was 'mad'. They used to say, "Is this ever possible? Being born a girl, 'she' wants to be a boy. Has 'she' gone mad? Consult a psychiatrist." His friends used to bully him by saying, "Hey! Don't bowl so fast to 'her'. After all 'she' is a 'girl'. 'She' won't be able to face it." Again his relatives used to make him feel low and face 'reality' by saying "Look here. You are going to give *bhaiphonta*<sup>65</sup>, aren't you? Then accept the fact that you are a girl." Misgendering was the cruellest weapon that they had in their armour. So according to Ambar he grew up in deprivation, humiliation and solitude. Only his father used

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<sup>65</sup> An Indian ritual, where a sister prays for long life and good health of her brother by putting a dot on his forehead.

to understand him and was all for his betterment and happiness. Rahul<sup>66</sup> (28 years, transmasculine respondent from Jalpaiguri District) described his childhood as full of childlike queries and negotiations that helped him shape his understanding of 'self'. He described,

I used to throw away my banyan<sup>67</sup>, whenever I felt hot, may be after playing with friends or during summer time. As I was growing up, my mother started getting angry with me regarding this behaviour of mine. This is something she has become accustomed to only recently. She used to tell me that as I am having bodily changes I must not do that. But it was not at all convincing for me. Yes I was growing up, and as my hands and legs were growing my chest was also growing bigger...I was not at all concerned. She said that she would complain to my father. I said father also roams around without a banyan often, so why won't I? But she was rigid. I talked to my father and he said that I could stay without a top or a 'banyan' when I felt hot, but that I must do it in private, inside my room, not in front of others. Father said that there are certain things we must not do in public places, because only uncultured, rowdy boys roam around like that which I must not do if I wanted to keep my status intact. But then my father only forcibly pierced my ears and made me wear small studs, which I am still wearing as he clipped it with tweezers so that I could never open it.

Rahul narrated his childhood with a warm feeling but somewhere he expressed his feeling of helplessness while talking about the earring episode. To him it was violence, but then again he loves his father a lot. Suhrid<sup>68</sup> (33 years, transmasculine person from Nadia) while narrating his childhood became emotional and bitter, he said, "Right from my childhood I never remember wearing girl's clothes. No one forced me to wear one. I have even worn my father's *lungi* and Bermuda shorts. The way my family members accepted me in my childhood surprisingly changed as I grew up."

During childhood often gender role stereotypes are not followed strictly, there remains an area of openness but as one grows up they must follow and conform to the gender role stereotypes. There it becomes a problem to assert one's preferred gender identity over the biologically ascribed one. The process of socialisation becomes very important here. Through socialisation the baby is inducted to the societal norms that comprises of a range of related behavioural expressions following the gender binary social structure based on the socially constructed biological sex. Individuals whose biological sex matches with their socially ascribed gender and gender role stereotypes are termed as 'traditionally gendered' by Bilodeau and Renn (2005). Though For transgender individuals the socialisation process starts working in the same manner, but it becomes problematic as their gender identity comes

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<sup>66</sup> Interview taken on 30.05.17 in Kolkata

<sup>67</sup> Vest

<sup>68</sup> Interview taken on 20.05.19 in Kolkata

in conflict with biological sex assignment and the societal expectations of gender expression as male or female. But in order to make them conform to the heteropatriarchal binarised ways of life, the socialisation mechanism becomes punitive at times invisibilising non-normative gender identities and expressions. This process creates a conflict between gender identity that an individual perceives and owns and gender expression or the process of interacting and negotiating with the social institutions like family, neighbourhood, school, peer groups, workplace, market place and every other place. The transgender individual is smirked at, ridiculed, humiliated, neglected, and belittled for not adhering to the societal norms. They are alienated due to being unintelligible. Following the medical model, the option is to become either male or female by opting for HRT and or SRS and matching the sexed body (which is also constructed) with the preferred gender. But the medical model provides only partial understanding of the range of ways transgender identities are expressed (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005:32).

Rana <sup>69</sup> (22 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) undergoing HRT said,

Right from my childhood, I could feel that the sex with which I was born was not matching with the way I wanted to be. My gender according to my felt sense is different. I am fond of all sorts of boyish things. I lived in a rural area and so I could not go outright for the life I wanted, as nobody would have understood. Moreover, I have always been an introvert person, so I never expressed myself and kept quiet. As I grew up the signs of puberty were taking over me and I was becoming more and more cocooned. The more I was getting hurt by the outside world, the more I was going into a shell. It was a constant struggle for me. Whenever I went out for some work I started feeling the pain of not being able to fit in and live the life I wanted. When I was in class four I watched a show in discovery channel and from there I first came to know about something called 'transgender identity' with which I could first identify myself.

The pain of not being able to get acknowledgment in family has been resonated by most of my respondents. The message they get is that they are 'wrong'. In this rhetoric of their identities being unacknowledged by the family any support from outside of it, be it virtual or real becomes very significant. Any source of support such as a newspaper report or a Facebook or Instagram post, a Whatsapp status, a documentary or a film or a likeminded person, an event or a support space giving them the feeling of being 'right' and regarding them as a variation and not a deviation becomes significant. Angshuman,<sup>70</sup> (28 years,

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<sup>69</sup> Interview taken on 02.02.19 in Kolkata

<sup>70</sup> Interview taken on 17.01.19 in Kolkata

transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) shared that when his mother used to make him wear *kajal*<sup>71</sup> and tie his hair he used to feel a burning sensation throughout his body. But the moment he would change into a shirt and trouser, it was a sense of relief. He used to cut his hair in order to escape tying it in a ponytail. The biggest blow came at the onset of menstruation. He also had to wear a brassiere as his breasts were developing. He felt uncomfortable and frustrated. But there was no way out. During class IX, one of his school friends proposed to him and said that to her, Angshuman was a boy. That was the first real validation he received and he felt empowered and liberated. Now after getting a job he is staying with his partner, he can now dress according to his preferences and live the life of a 'man'.

In order to negotiate with society, different individuals strategise differently. Aman (33 years, transmasculine person from North Parganas) shared,

My policy was never to announce it. Throughout my academic life my strategy was to take the 'moderate path', I was never vocal about my identity. I tried nothing over the top to show off. But I never denied my identity as well. Whenever anybody asked me I told the truth. It is not that every cis-gendered person goes on announcing their gender identity to every single person they meet.

A contrasting narrative is that of Dipto (40 years, transmasculine person from Assam and now settled in Kolkata), who makes it a point to make himself visible at every possible instance as part of his politics of identity. Dipto is currently publishing his memoirs of growing up on facebook titled "*Ek Onyo Purusher Akhyan*"<sup>72</sup>. In his memoir he writes, "...and thus starts the struggle of a man to become a 'man'..." Dipto talks about family, school, neighbourhood and his struggle of survival.

During the growing up period school becomes a significant site of struggle as well as exploration. Some of the respondents shared their experience of getting bullied in school and the way their self confidence was broken into pieces. Again some shared the way they were 'hero-worshiped' by other girls in school. Samar, (34 years, transmasculine person from Hooghly) said, "Even, the street children used to bully me by saying – See, a man is walking down the road wearing a sari."

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<sup>71</sup> Kohl applied on the eyes

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 60

Labani (28 years from Birbhum) shared,

When I used to go to my school, wearing the school uniform, the primary school children of the boy's school used to bully me by saying, see there is a boy going to school wearing a girl's uniform. But I was also famous in school due to my 'tom-boyish' get-up. All the girls wanted to make friends with me. They were crazy about me.

These narratives show that suppressing the 'self' all through school life, getting misgendered, bullied, alienated, wearing uncomfortable school uniform, have a long lasting effect on the mental health of the transgender individuals. These include lack of self confidence, low or no sense of self worth and blurring self image. Though incidents of school dropout among the transmasculine individuals were few in my sample size but incidents like discontinuing school for one or two years are there. In the transfeminine narratives the phenomenon of school drop-out was common due to extreme bullying, discrimination and sexual abuse.

The moment a child is deprived of education, the list of 'inabilities' as opposed to development of 'capabilities' starts and the child falls outside the circle of available opportunities that life churns up. Suhani<sup>73</sup> (38 years, a transfemale queer rights activist and actor from South 24 Parganas) commented,

In case of a transmasculine identified individual, as they have taken birth as a person assigned gender female at birth, their trajectory of growing up in society is different from that of a transfeminine person who is nurtured as a 'boy' and gets the social acknowledgment and privilege of a boy while growing up,

We will see in chapter four that in the transfeminine narratives there were responses describing the way they left their house or the way they were thrown out of their house. But this was not the case for the transmasculine individuals. As a result of inhabiting the biological 'female' body they were not allowed to leave the family and exert their rights. Instead, most of them were forced to submit to the authority. In both the cases (transmasculine as well as transfeminine) the very existence of the transgender person posed a threat to heteropatriarchal society, which with all its institutions tries to bring them back into the normative discourse. From a very early age the transmasculine individuals understood that they had to continue their studies in order to get a job, in order to support themselves. This would give them the independence to exercise their choice and express their identity. Ayan (30 years, transmasculine person from North 24 Parganas), said "I realised that only education can give me a social status and if I achieve that, then people will listen to me

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<sup>73</sup> Interview taken on 15.01.19 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

and give importance to my choices and decisions. There was no question of dropping out from school. I gave it my best and now I am what I am."

Piyush (38 years, transmasculine person from Kolkata) stated,

I had a magical belief, which I got from a Bengali movie, where it was said that if you want something sincerely you need to call mother goddess a specific number of times daily in the morning, and she will grant your wish. So I continued doing that for a couple of months, when I was in class eight. But nothing really happened. I was back to square one and promised to carry on my education sincerely, because I knew I only had my education with me and only that would help me in future.

The pain of being identified with a gender they do not belong to and the continuous struggle of hiding and escaping from the social gaze becomes immensely painful for them. Rahul (28 years, transman from Jalpaiguri) shared that he seldom used the school washroom for the fear of being labelled as a 'girl'. He used to hold the pressure and the urge and avoid going to the toilet with others. But gradually in higher classes his class mates understood his situation and used to help him a lot.

School life becomes important as it shapes the individuals in multiple ways. School being the most important socialising agent after home leaves a significant lifelong impact. Kayan<sup>74</sup> (33 years, transmasculine individual from Jalpaiguri) said that right from class II he used to get irritated wearing a girl's uniform. So his parents put him in a primary school where he could wear whatever he felt liked. In that school they used to consider him as a boy. He used to feel shy in front of girls and was comfortable with boys. He said,

I was confident about me being a boy. Then again class V came and I had to start going to a girls' school, and I was made to realise that I am a 'girl'. It came as a jolt. I used to stay alone in school. I neglected studies. From then on till class XII my life was hell. My school life was the worst period of my life. Even now I get extremely agitated whenever I think of those days. I used to be mentally tortured and humiliated. The teachers used to bully me a lot. They used to make me wear hair clips and laughed at me. Without any reason I used to get beaten up while walking, they used to beat me on my legs with the aim to 'reform' my walking style. According to them it was not womanly. I was '*Modda*' (meaning 'manly' in a derogatory form). The head teacher became supportive at the end of my school life. There was not a single friend during my school life. Not one!

There is a common pattern of school life and adolescence in almost all my respondents. All through their school life they had to suppress their feeling, feel uncomfortable and humiliated. The painful experience of adolescence left a permanent scar on their self image.

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<sup>74</sup> Interview taken on 26.11.19 in Banarhat, Jalpaiguri

This continuous struggle of asserting for one's rights and claiming one's space took away childhood happiness and comfort from their lives. Current medical ethics and guidelines do not allow SRS before eighteen. According to Dr. Jayita Chakraborty<sup>75</sup>, a Kolkata based community sensitive gynaecologist, "I personally do not recommend puberty blockers as it might have adverse effects on health. Growth gets stunted. In Kolkata we have not yet started talking about puberty blockers." So in this scenario a trans-identified person who has severe body dysphoria has to trudge along 12-14 years of life trying to accommodate in the 'wrong' body, trying to assert one's preferred identity and claim one's space. They get thwarted, humiliated, alienated and discriminated for being who they are. This is why once they cross eighteen their only wish becomes to change the body and get the preferred body. For many of them SRS becomes the only option. Considering the fact that current medical practices do not permit a person to start SRS before they attain the age of eighteen, there seems to be the need for provisions in our system to start the procedure of changing legal documents before the age of eighteen. This would enable them to start living their preferred gender and express themselves without being considered as an inconceivable subject. If there isn't any provision before eighteen then at least their environment comprising of their immediate family, neighbourhood and school needs to be aware about their issues, sensitised and conducive so that they can have a healthy physical and mental life. Otherwise this often has a lifetime impact on education, professional life and personal life as well. The following quote from *iFunny*<sup>76</sup> sums it up:

There is no medical component to a trans-kid transitioning. If a little trans-boy comes out to his parents and is like four, all you would do for his transition is cut his hair, buy a new wardrobe, and switch pronouns and possibly change names. No one is gonna put a little four year old in testosterone or puberty blockers until they are actually about to start puberty and then they give them a few years to really decide if they want to start hormones. A trans-kid existing isn't 'child abuse'. Child abuse is refusing to let your kid live their lives as they truly are and forcing them to present as a gender they aren't.

Resonating with this narration Suparna<sup>77</sup> (40 years, hijra identified queer activist from Hooghly) said that we must think of a system where a child will not be identified by the gender assigned to the body at the time of birth. The child after turning eighteen must get the right to choose their gender. Gender is a sense of being, it is the way a person perceives the

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<sup>75</sup> Interview taken on 17.01.20 in Kolkata

<sup>76</sup> Source: <https://ifunny.co/picture/there-is-no-medical-component-to-a-trans-kid-transitioning-4zHuEcwR6> (accessed on 10.02.20)

<sup>77</sup> Interview taken on 14.09.19 in Kolkata

self, and it is the combination of varied characteristics with which a person identifies with. So it cannot be assigned by anyone other than that person. The struggle and the conflict is between gender identity and gender expression, the dialogue within and the dialogue outside, the dialogue with the self and the dialogue with others. Often it is experienced that once the dialogue with the self reaches a certain kind of resolution, the need to convince others becomes less important. Again it can also be said that reinforcement from the outside world makes one reaffirm and reclaim the space through either coming out or joining the movement for rights or opting for GAT or joining a support group or making one or all of the above.

Ambar (34 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) said,

Conflict started during school life, when I was forced to wear girl's uniform. The most pathetic thing was that in school from class IX to XII, the uniform was sari and I had to abide by the rule. I felt like being tied up with a rope encircling all across my body, with which I was forced to live. I felt like being trapped, suffocated and constrained.

The same feeling was reiterated in Angshuman's (28 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) narrative. He shared,

From class eleven the uniform was sari. I was agonised, could not attend school for the first two days. Then in the third day my mother made me wear the sari. It was okay till I was inside the house. The moment I came out on the street I felt like I was walking naked on the road.

The painful experience of wearing sari as a part of school discipline came up in a couple of narratives with detailed description of feelings that my respondents experienced in that moment. One individual described his state as if he was tied up with a rope, he felt suffocated and restrained. Another one described the situation as if he was thrown into a fire, with the associated feeling of a tremendous burning sensation throughout the body. Against these narrations of agony and helplessness there were a few narratives where the suburban schools were convinced to allow the transgender student to wear *kurta-pyjama*. But from these positive experiences one thing could be said that local, not so significant, rural and suburban schools happened to be more flexible and accepting towards transgender students with respect to the uniform than the urban schools. Labani's (28 years, transmasculine individual from Birbhum) narrative talks about agency and autonomy where he says, "I used to wear 'tailor made' *salwar-kameez*, which was not like the typical girlish design, I designed it according to my choice. Like a *pathan* coat and *salwar*."

Chandan's (30 years, transmasculine respondent from Howrah) response also reinforced this experience by stating,

I had some problem with uniform at school but it wasn't that big a problem. But when I entered class XI, I had to wear a sari and that was a big problem. But my mother helped me. She met my head teacher and explained that because of ill health I would not be able to manage a sari. She also managed to convince the head teacher to allow me to wear a *kurta* and *pyjama*.

An interesting finding is the apparent understanding and support for transmasculine individuals in their rural or semi-urban environment, particularly schools. Here, I would like to quote from personal experience while visiting a Christian missionary school in the Nadia district of West Bengal some fifty kilometres from Kolkata, where I was taking life-skills workshop with the students of the school. The principal of the school, a devout Christian priest proudly shared that he has introduced 'gender neutral' uniform for the kids, which is shirt and trousers. I could not but ask him the rationale of deciding on this uniform for all. His reply was that shirt-trouser was a smart combination and would make the girls feel empowered. The association of empowerment with trousers and its linkage with men and patriarchy is so apparent. Listening to the narratives of my respondents I felt that at least the gender non-conforming kids who were assigned female at birth would have felt comfortable in a school like this. But, if it was a transfeminine student wanting to wear skirt and shirt to school, would she be allowed to do that? Empowerment is always linked to 'manliness', anything that is 'masculine', while femininity is always associated with 'inferiority' and 'weakness'.

From a couple of narrations it was found that the situation started to get better in college life as by then the respondents became better equipped and learnt to navigate better with their gender identity in the outside world. Kayan (33 years, transmasculine person from Jalpaiguri) shared,

In college life the professors did not bother much. I was not their headache. There were few friends who used to understand me. Again there were some who did not. During my tenure in college I used to work outside on a part time basis so I did not have time for friends. There was no dress code, so my life was easier in college.

## Section 5: Understanding gender through intimate relationships

Bubai (32 years, transmasculine individual from Nadia) narrated,

I appreciate good looking boys, but the feeling I have for a beautiful girl is no comparison with that. My feeling for such a girl is so different. It is totally different from the affection for father, brother, uncle or mother, sister or aunt. It is a different attraction altogether. Talking to her feels good; taking her phone number, talking all through the night feels like magic. This never happens with a boy. Good friend, that's it and nothing else.

66.7% of my respondents shared that they are in intimate relationship. Most of the relationships are heterosexual in nature. 7.4% are engaged with transwomen. Ani (21 years, South 24 Parganas) raised a very important point by saying that, "Presently what I have noticed is that transmasculine individuals are coupling with transfeminine individuals and starting up a family. May be they are coming closer to each other as they have a common struggle to share with each other." 59.2% are in a relationship with cis-women and 7.4% of transmasculine respondents are married. Both the marriages have been registered and recognised by the state. In my study I could talk to six women partners as a part of my interview. From their narrations I could gather that intimate relationship is the biggest validation that a transmasculine person receives about his gender identity which makes them feel confident. When I met with Angshuman for the first time, he had mid-length hair, he was searching for a job, he looked shaky and unsure. He expressed his concerns around self confidence and lack of self worth. Now when I talk to him, I can see a confident young man. He has started living-in with his partner, his childhood friend, a cis-woman. His attitude towards life has changed. He has got a job, he has started staying away from the toxic environment that he was in. In a critical time when they were going through a difficult phase of life he told me that their togetherness is his biggest support and with that they would fight all their battles. According to Chandan, (30 years, transman from Howrah), his partner has been the greatest support to him. Chandan's partner Nabaneeta<sup>78</sup> was also there during the interview, she said,

I know his mother is against SRS for health issues. I feel if he was physically fit, he would have definitely opted for SRS. Individuals opt for SRS for their comfort, for themselves and not for their partners. So why will I have any opinion regarding this? I don't have anything to say. It totally depends on him. If he wants he will start SRS. If he does not he won't. I am ready to

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<sup>78</sup> Interview taken on 06.01.19 in Kolkata

accept him as he is. The first time I saw him, he was like this only. Never was there any condition between us that he has to become a 'man' through SRS and only then I will be in the relationship with him. So I am comfortable with him in all forms.

A strikingly opposite version emerged from Priya's interview, when he was asked about how he felt about his body. Priya (28 years, transmasculine individual from Darjeeling district) answered, "Nothing bad, but yes when my girlfriend used to ask me to change into a 'man'...that's when I felt...she wants to stay with me no more. She was married and has a son as well. Now she wants to stay with another guy. There is no point staying with me." The uncertainty of a relationship becomes a sore spot and often makes them feel apprehensive and guarded. Piyush (38 years, transmasculine person from Kolkata) said,

I cannot stay in my preferred gender always. I am a person assigned gender female at birth so all my certificates show me as a 'female'. I am introduced as a female to the world. Though I can wear the dress I like to wear but still I can feel a nagging problem with my body. I also feel bad when people address me as madam. I look at myself and neither is my body letting me see myself as I would like to see. For all these limitations I could not even get into any relationship as well. Whenever I have liked someone and I have got signals that she also likes me, I have coiled myself into my shell. Who wouldn't like to have a husband, a child and a stable family life and I will never be able to give all these. I feel strongly trapped by my identity.

Ani's (21 years, transmasculine person, South 24 Parganas) narration revealed another aspect of viewing the 'self' through the eyes of the partner. He said, "My partner Jayanti told me that I am different from other men. She doesn't like hyper-masculine men. I am not one like them so she liked me." He explained his partner's feeling of being safe and loved with him through his understanding of the journey of a transmasculine person. Ani said that the transmasculine people have seen both the worlds. They have been reared up as 'girls', so they have traversed that path as well. They know how it feels like to be a girl in this society. So maybe they understand and that is why they are not hyper- masculine.

The 'marriage and family question' surfaced significantly in my interactions with the transmasculine individuals. Ishan (38 years, Kolkata) a pre-op trans-person said,

I have never thought of taking the path of conventional marriage. Calling the priest, taking oaths, no I never wanted to do that. I do not support the system. I was going through crises at one point of my life and then I met her on face book. She held me at that time in every way possible. That was how our relationship developed.

To Ishan the conventional institution of marriage is not something he aspires for but his partner Ria<sup>79</sup> said,

After the verdict of 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2018, when same sex marriage was legalised I approached my mother and told her that now it would not be a problem for me to get married to Ishan as we would get legal support now. This helped me to go and talk to my mother and get her acceptance. Slowly my mother also accepted it. Now all my neighbours and relatives know that I have got married to a tomboy, I am staying with him as his married wife. I don't care what others say, but to me he is male. In all my relationships with cis or transmen, I have looked at all of them as male and have got into a relationship. And so my present relationship is also a heterosexual relationship.

The model of heterosexual coupling becomes the most coveted thing for some, while some try to look for an alternative way of being together. Rana (22 years, transmasculine individual from South 24 Parganas) said,

There is no hard and fast rule that we have to marry. We will stay together and the same goes for adoption. We want to adopt but it's also okay if we don't. I haven't really thought about it. If my partner wants to marry I will marry but the important thing is to stay together.

Samudra (29 years, transman, Kolkata) depicts another aspect of family and togetherness, he said and I quote, "There are many types of families. My family comprises of people who are not my blood relations. I have become so lonely nowadays that I cling on to them. What will happen to me if they are not there for me?"

Through exploring the domain of intimate relationship, the desire of having children also surfaced in the discussions. Piu<sup>80</sup>, Subho's partner said, "Yes, we want to be parents. Shubho wants to hear his own child calling him 'father'; he wants to experience fatherhood in his own life. We will adopt a transgender child as our own. I want a family of our own."

Kayan (33 years, transmasculine person from Jalpaiguri), whose partner, Suparna is a castrated transwoman self identified as a *hijra* individual, also expressed his wish to adopt a child. He said,

I am in a relationship. Both of us want to keep each other happy. We understand each other very well as we both have a similar struggle of experiencing 'trans-ness' and living it. We want

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<sup>79</sup> Interview taken on 03.01.19 in Kolkata

<sup>80</sup> Interview taken on 01.09.19 in Cooch Behar

to have a child. We have plans. But I am worried that will it ever be possible for someone to have a good life given the child's both parents are transgender identified individuals.

Going beyond all their doubts and apprehensions, they actually adopted a child. Going beyond the heteropatriarchal gender binary system by choosing a different life and taking different decisions the trans-individuals somewhere fit into the heterosexual structure while at the same time disrupt it and try to make lives liveable.

Suparna, my 40 year old *hijra* identified trans-feminine activist from Hooghly made an interesting observation. She said,

Ciswomen believe that transmen have the potential to be more sensitive and understanding towards them owing to the misogyny they themselves have faced in the past. According to these women, the chances of being dominated and experiencing domestic violence is lesser with a transman as compared to a cis-man. There is more space for negotiations. Thus transmen find it easier to establish families and get integrated in 'mainstream' society as a 'family man'. As a result their acceptance is higher than the transfeminine individuals in this patriarchal society.

I interviewed six cis-women who were partners of transmasculine individuals and the same feeling as expressed by Suparna above was resonated in many of their narratives. Ria, partner of Ishan (38 years, transmasculine individual from Kolkata) said that she has been in relationship with cis-men previously. The relationships were toxic. She used to feel dominated in the relationships. To her Ishan is a 'better man' different from the 'men' she was with. Ishan is sensitive and understanding. Sinjini<sup>81</sup> partner of Ani (21 year transmasculine individual from South 24 Parganas) said that she has been in cis-het relationships before, where she could never come to terms with the hyper masculinity that they projected. With Ani she is having a different experience altogether. She was never comfortable with peno-vaginal sex. With Ani, she feels safe and liberated.

Jhuma<sup>82</sup> the partner of Suhrid (33 year transmasculine person from Nadia) is a married woman having children. She shared that she has been facing domestic violence from her husband for the last nine years. She has two children. Her husband has been always suspicious about Jhuma and used to beat her every day. She was searching for an outlet to ventilate her pain. Then she met with Suhrid at a friend's place. Initially they became good friends but as days pass they decided to be in a relationship. Jhuma's husband is aware of

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<sup>81</sup> Interview taken on 16.06.19 in Kolkata

<sup>82</sup> Interview taken on 20.05.19 in Kolkata

their relationship. Jhuma has asked him to give consent for mutual divorce. It will be difficult, but once Suhrid gets a job, she will file the divorce. At least now Jhuma has got someone beside her with whom she feels safe and cared for. All the six ciswomen unanimously stated that they were in a heterosexual relationship with a different kind of man.

## **Section 6: GAT and Trans-identity**

Piyush, (Transmasculine individual, 38 years, Kolkata) said,

I was not being able to express that I am a 'boy' but not the 'complete boy' either. I was not being able to come to terms with my body as well and I was not happy. My body dysphoria was increasing day by day and I was not being able to express it to anybody. My problem was to accept the lesbian identity, as all the understanding revolved around sexuality. I could never accept myself as a 'girl' so how could I be a lesbian woman? After a couple of years I met Suprobhat, another trans-person just like me at Sappho. Then gradually we met some more and started to relate with each other. Then in 2010-11, Sappho invited Satya and Akshay, and it was that eureka moment for me. I just gazed at Satya...this remarkable change, this process of changing a female body to a male one...it was amazing!

Gender Affirmative Therapy has become an effective means of resolution of the conflict within for the transmasculine individuals in order to come out of the domain of invisibilisation, inconceivability and erasure. The discourse emerging from the transmasculine narratives surfaced late but became significant with reference to what Judith Halberstam has pointed out as 'bio-binarism' (Halberstam, 1994:225). There was the existence of the transfeminine individuals and now there are transmasculine entities as well, the binary prevails. As NALSA Judgment (2014) and Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019, have talked about the right to modify their bodies, shape their identities and express their preferred gender, a significant number of transmasculine persons are opting for GAT. There is a continuing trend of being identified and then appropriated by the gender binary system in the context of West Bengal through creating a market economy based on GAT and SRS. This is facilitated by the interplay between capitalism and patriarchy. For the transmasculine individuals, when it comes to living lives beyond the sex-gender linearity the goal posts that constitute their frame of reference continues to remain the same binary heteropatriarchal society they belong to. For a transmasculine or transfeminine person it is the socially constructed, stereotyped cis-man and cis-woman respectively. The whole discourse of 'transgender' identity formation is influenced by this binary social framework and is now

even more in prominence and practice due to its automatic coupling with the market economy created by GAT. Starting from fine tuning secondary sexual characteristics to be in sync with their preferred gender to the nearest possible appropriation of the genitalia through surgery, the trans-individuals have a whole array of services for choosing and opting for. With GAT and especially SRS they can have the body they have always desired. Though it often seems to be strengthening the binary system by trying to fit into the binarised mould with a specific body, they are also trying to disrupt it by exercising their agency about what surgery to undergo, when to have surgery and to what extent, thus shaping their own desired body. Many of them are not opting for SRS and live their preferred gender through non-invasive cosmetic changes, performing gendered role stereotypes or living their preferred gender through exercising their sexual preference while many are opting for HRT along with partial or complete SRS, shaping their body according to their own choice. Using one, some or all of these available options the trans-individuals create moments of subversion. The central question remains as to how the transgender identity gets shaped by GAT.

According to Dr. Sanjay Pandey<sup>83</sup>, uro-surgeon at Mumbai's Kokilaben Memorial Hospital & Gender Clinic, transgender individuals present themselves to him with agony, anguish, pain, dilemma, discontent and desperation. He adds,

Transgender individuals are entrapped in a different body. Sex Reassignment Surgery is a process to bring the body in sync with the mind. It is a life saving, life changing, life extending and life modifying process. The reconstructive surgery focuses on creating aesthetic, functional and sensate organs. Transformation takes place in the domain of body contour, voice, genitalia and urinogenital organs, the aim being near complete approximation.

Now coming back to my respondents, they have expressed their opinions and experiences about GAT and have opened up newer ways of looking at it. "I want to go for surgery but in my own way. I won't go for surgery to attain an ideal masculine look. I will do it according to what I want and how much of it I want" said Ani, (21 years, South 24 Parganas) a transmasculine person in his twenties, studying literature in an acclaimed university. This option of choosing and deciding for self becomes liberating and reassuring for a transgender person. Ani added,

I will go for mastectomy and then hysterectomy. Let me explain a bit. May be I won't get it done now. Since I am looking at my future with Jayanti and have more or less decided either to adopt a child or to go for IVF. I haven't thought about hysterectomy now because Jayanti has some gynaecological problems. If that prevents her from carrying a child through IVF, then I will carry the child and that is why I am not thinking of hysterectomy. In that case if I have to bear the child, I will have to stop male hormones six months before that. I can resume HRT

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<sup>83</sup> Interview taken on 01.07.17 in Kolkata

again after delivery. That is what the doctor has told me. And I am not at all thinking of bottom surgery. On one hand I don't feel any significant need to do that and on the other hand the process is very complicated and success rate is low.

Ani's narrative is extremely important. Ani is shaping his body the way he wants to. He wants to keep his ovaries and uterus to enable him to carry a child for which he could use his eggs or that of his partner and use his uterus as the womb to carry their child should he choose to do so. Otherwise he and his partner could also adopt a child. This narrative breaks all notions of sex, gender, gender stereotypes, family, and parenthood and is in the process of creating something beyond the normative notions of gender, sexuality and family structures.

Avay (32 years, transmasculine person from Howrah) shared his journey by stating,

It was a tough battle to make my girl friend and my mother, understand and approve my SRS. It was nearly impossible for me to convince them. I was using binders and my girlfriend could understand that it might harm me, that I might develop other diseases as a result of prolonged use of binders. I also started HRT, and started having changes in my physical appearance. My mother could see me and my girlfriend could feel my pain and both of them understood that it was essential. The fight is for love. If there was no love I would not have fought.

Ambar (34 years, South 24 Parganas) a transmasculine person in his thirties, married with a cis-woman of his choice reminisced his battle by describing the time when his mother first realised that he was not behaving like a 'girl' and started to forcibly change his appearance. All his trouble came specifically from his mother and not from his father. She stopped him from cutting his hair. His relatives also supported her and started giving him *salwar-kameez* and girls' dresses like frocks and skirts on special occasions. They stopped giving him boys' attires as they used to think he had become like this by 'cross dressing'. They used to think if he started wearing girls' clothes, he would stop thinking of himself as a boy. It was a tough battle. Ambar said,

"I am a man; I can always stay in my preferred gender. It has been like this always, but after starting my hormone therapy, it has been reinforced. I have always felt like a man and with the changes occurring after HRT, my body is changing and I have become a man both through my felt sense of being a man as well as through my body. It is now that I am experiencing changes that one experiences during puberty. My self confidence has increased. My body structure has changed. Previously when I used to walk down the road, I knew what I am. But the passerby and onlookers used to get confused by my voice and my structure. Once I have started taking hormones, now I have started to observe that people do not get confused and do not ask me questions. People accept me as a 'male' person. This has made me more and more confident."

Ambar in his narration has talked about both embodiment and validation. He talked about the shaping of his preferred gender identity through forming discourses around his self and his body, which Jay Prosser (Prosser, 1998) has read as the effort to develop a feeling of coherence and integration between the mind and the body, between the sense of gender and the materiality of gender through experiencing the body of one's own. It is nothing but achieving bodily transformation for psychic wholeness. Ambar also talked about social acknowledgment which has been immensely important to him. He mentioned about the humiliating, discriminatory gaze of his immediate society comprised of his neighbours and relatives towards him before he started GAT and then how gradually this gaze changed into one of curiosity and query once he started transitioning and how it has now changed into surprise and bewilderment when his external appearance metamorphosed and gave him the 'wholeness' he dreamt of. Ambar also said that he was the most uncomfortable when he was taking T-shots for one year before going for mastectomy. He was aware of the external changes, but he felt tremendous pain in still inhabiting the 'female' body. Every time he had to go out, he used to look at himself critically, assessing his changes. According to him his phase of transition was even more painful. According to Jay Prosser, transition provokes anxiety and discomfort both for the person going through transition and also the person/s observing it. Transition challenges the feasibility of identity but at the same time it becomes important for the continuity of identity (Prosser 1998). Suhrid (33 years, transman from Nadia) resonated this feeling coming from 'continuity of identity' and shared that HRT brings a lot of changes. His body structure has changed. There are changes in the lower part of his body as well. His clitoris has increased in size. Within two-three months of starting HRT his menstruation has stopped. The same satisfaction flowed in Samar's (34, transman, Hooghly) response, "After opting for SRS and HRT and getting out of this dysphoria I can now understand what peace of mind I have got and how much I needed it...if I had this confidence then, I would have been able to do much better in my studies."

## **Section 7: Relationship with the 'trans-body'**

Angshuman (28 years, Baruipur, South 24 Parganas) a transmasculine identified young man shared:

Every night before going to bed I used to hope that when I would wake up the next morning, I would discover a new me. My body (at birth) would change into my preferred body. I would inhabit a masculine body. This thought used to give me a certain kind of relief. But every

morning I was left with the same body. Nothing changed. Again my struggle for a new day would start. Then when my breasts started taking shape, I understood, nothing was going to change. Nothing would happen. Only if I died would I be relieved of this pain after death.

Magical belief has been a common thread in some of the narratives. Perhaps, starting from nurturing a magical belief to coming face to face with the reality creates the juncture from where transformation happens or acceptance sets in. The hope for a miracle, for a dream come true urged them on to carry on with life, a life which was not theirs, a life with which they did not identify. In this chaotic phase of life they start developing a relationship with their bodies and start negotiating according to their needs and resources. On the basis of the in depth interviews that I conducted with my respondents, I have tried to explore the relationship between the transmasculine individuals and their gendered bodies. Some of my transmasculine respondents have not opted for SRS and have just opted for HRT, some have completed partial SRS, while some have neither opted for HRT or SRS. GAT involves a spectrum of options starting from counselling and therapy, cosmetic non-invasive changes in the body to HRT and SRS (partial or complete). So in order to understand their decisions I felt that it would be important to explore their relationship with their gendered bodies, the feeling of comfort or discomfort that they feel about their bodies. Ani (21 years, Baruipur, South 24 Parganas) shared,

From a very early age, around the time I was in class six, I used to wear double bra. At that time it was not clear to me why I was doing so, but I used to feel there was something that needs to be kept hidden. But I could feel the discomfort and pain. At that time I had self harming behaviour. Still now there are scars on my chest.

Chandan (30 years, Howrah) said, "I am not comfortable with my body. Again my discomfort is not so intense that I am not being able to live with it. But I lack confidence due to my chest. I am uncomfortable with my chest. So I have thought of wearing binders and manage that way."

In both the responses the usage of the word 'chest' is significant. In asking them about this they responded that even the thought of the word 'breast' is extremely painful for them and so they refrain themselves from using the word consciously because breast is something they do

not own, but chest is definitely a part of their body as they experience it. Arjo<sup>84</sup>, (18 years, transmasculine youth from Kolkata) also shared a similar experience. Arjo hasn't started HRT as he has just completed eighteen, and his general health is not good. He will have to consult his parents, who are supportive and also his doctors before starting HRT. But inhabiting this body is painful to him. He always walks in a crouched manner with a slouched gait. He cannot stand or walk straight because of the fear of certain parts of his body gaining prominence, parts that he disowns. He never even utters words like 'bra' or 'sanitary napkin'. He uses symbols for naming the things when those are needed. This incessant process of negotiation with the ascribed gender, with the acclamation of their preferred gender in a society that still cannot think beyond sex-gender linearity, with their family, with friends, with neighbours, with lover/s, with teachers, with colleagues and without a language that represents them becomes difficult and agonizing. Bust lines in their body become points of discomfort for the transmasculine persons and this was accepted by all of my respondents. According to them, this part of their body is visible, obnoxious, sickening and thus needs to be kept hidden or surgically removed. Double bras, binders, jackets (even in summer) and multiple layers of clothing are some of the 'odd' ways the transmasculine persons try to cover and suppress parts of their body and bust lines. Binders are expensive and for some individuals in this journey, binders become like an heirloom which is passed on by a post-operative transmasculine person to a pre-operative transmasculine person creating a strong bonding and 'brotherhood' among them.

One of my respondents, Rahul (28 years, Darjeeling district) explained,

Initially I did not have any clear understanding about SRS. The only thing I wished to do was mastectomy. It is not that I don't want to go for genital surgery. When I inhabit public places like bus/train and my bladder is full, I am always looking for a place to relieve myself. At that point I am forced to think of options that only genital surgery can give me. I also feel discomfort while being intimate with my partner. I always cover my breasts. Otherwise I do not have that much problem with my genitalia. My main problem is with the ever growing size of my breasts. I want to get rid of it. I also think that the 'male' genitalia would have given me more satisfaction. I would have achieved immense peace of mind, if I could have opted for SRS, but then we all know the adverse side effects of SRS. For managing my breasts I wear sports bras from Jockey. I have never used binders. I planned to use them but when I came to know about the side effects of binders like, skin rashes, suffocating feeling, affecting blood circulation, respiratory problem, I refrained from the idea. I have several physical ailments. I am labelled as a physically unfit person, so why would I create more problems for me? But I really want to do top surgery. Once my documents are finalised and I could arrange for adequate money I would definitely opt for top surgery

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<sup>84</sup> Interview taken on 21.06.21 in Kolkata

The same distress was resonated by Anwar<sup>85</sup> (29 years, transman, Kolkata). He said,

I want to do top surgery as I am uncomfortable with my upper part. I want to get drenched in the rain, which I cannot do now. Otherwise it is not a problem. I want to go to the beach; I want to go there without wearing a t-shirt. So I need to do it. Because whenever I would go to a beach, like Mandarmoni and I got wet, the boys would come to know that I am a 'girl', and I would feel so embarrassed. So I want to do top surgery. It is ok if I do not go for bottom surgery. Nobody will open my pants and see what is there inside. Nobody will be that much desperate. If my boobs are not visible and I am using the men's toilet, nobody would notice.

Interesting narratives of gender expression and negotiation with environment emerges from the following two contrasting narratives. Samudra (29 years, Kolkata), a transmasculine respondent said,

When you met me first, I used to talk very little, people used to think either I was very haughty or I was very shy. But I was none of them. I was only uncomfortable with my voice. I could never own up my voice, as it was feminine and unlike me. But see after taking t-shots my voice has grown deep and husky. I am no more restrained. I can speak my heart out. It has given me tremendous confidence.

For Samudra facial hair was another indicator of masculinity. He was not having facial hair even after taking hormones for a year. He was very upset, and then gradually he started to experience the change of voice as per his preferred identity and facial hair appeared later.

In contrast Chandan (30 years, transmasculine respondent from Howrah) said,

I am apprehensive of starting HRT as I know that as a result my voice will change, which I don't want. I am a good singer and don't want to lose the tonal quality of my voice. But then again to get rid of the bodily discomfort with my chest I want to get it operated and also to stop the periods I want to go for hysterectomy.

Chandan also went to a gynaecologist for hysterectomy but he was rejected and refused surgery as he has not started hormone therapy. In the above two narratives, one yearns for voice change, body hair and is impatient because HRT is not giving him the result he desires while in the second case the transmasculine respondent is not being able to start HRT because he values his feminine voice that has given him recognition as a singer but he wants to opt for surgery for other changes which he cannot proceed unless he starts HRT.

Facial hair, being the most visible marker of masculinity, many respondents said they wanted facial hair and many more said that they were happiest after noticing facial hair developing

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<sup>85</sup> Interview taken on 19.07.18 in Kolkata

on their cheeks and on their bodies that they inhabit. As far as HRT is concerned the changes vary from person to person and there is no way one can predict the changes and the time frame. For some, periods stop within a month, while some have irregular periods with intermittent spotting continuing even after a year of starting HRT. In some respondents facial hair developed first while others experienced the breaking of their voice first. Long hair is an area of concern for the transmasculine persons. Often they strategise in order to keep the hair short and escape the humiliating feeling of having long hair like a 'girl'. Angshuman (28 years, South 24 Parganas) said, "I used to keep my hair short by saying that I have a scalp infection." and Labani (28 years, transmasculine person from Birbhum) shared, "I used to keep my hair short by saying my hair is not growing, so what can I do?"

The discourse around owning up the body has surfaced time and again in my interviews. Suprobhat<sup>86</sup> (42 years, Kolkata) said,

Now I have grown old, I am in my mid forties, at this juncture I cannot think of SRS and again I am happily habituated with my body. Even with this body I feel like a man. This body is macho and smart. I feel that I have been a man always. My friends who are getting their preferred body through SRS feel like transitioning to a man from a woman. I do not feel like that anymore. Even I don't have any problem with periods. I don't take any medication, I don't use any prosthetics. I do not have any discomfort with my body. I have been a sportsperson all my life and that helped me to keep my body in shape. My body is healthy and strong. I would have felt uncomfortable if I had a partner. For the last twelve years I am single, so the question doesn't arise. I do everything by inhabiting this body, a body of a healthy and strong man."

It takes a long time to build a relationship with the body. Following the gender binary system our sexed bodies get gendered. It becomes difficult to identify one's own desire, comfort and happiness in a world predominantly guided by the gender binary system, where there are laid down rules of gender roles and constant discomfort in navigating public spaces like public toilets, queues in front of a shopping mall or at airports or at any and every place. It is like a continuous struggle for accommodation and acceptance moulding and shaping their relationship with body, their relationship with 'self' as a whole.

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<sup>86</sup> Interview taken on 29.12.18 in Kolkata

## Section 8: The idea of Masculinity

Besides relationship with bodies, the transmasculine persons also thrive on their opinions and ideas about masculinity that shaped their 'being' and 'doing'. Jammy (34 years, North Parganas who works as a bouncer in night clubs and bars) said,

I used to have many girl friends in my school days. I used to assure them that I will provide for them after marriage. To one girl I would say that I will work in a petrol pump and will provide for her, to someone else I would say something different but the assurance of taking the role of the provider was constant.

He also shared that as a 'bouncer' he feels responsible. To him this is a characteristic of a man. "I am a man; I cannot afford to break down. This feeling is yet another reason for me to love this job" said Jammy. Ayan (30 years, transmasculine person from North 24 Parganas) stated, "To me masculinity is to live life with self respect, to portray myself without any inhibition. It is about respecting women, not protecting them, but making them strong enough so that they can protect themselves. This is what masculinity; means to me." The roles of the provider, nurturer and protector gives them the reason to live but again at times also suppresses and controls them creating a suffocating feeling.

There were other markers of a positive relationship with their body merged with their perception of masculinity that were talked about, like, Ani (21 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) stated, "I like my body to be slim and trim. I don't like obesity. I work out regularly and I am on a strict diet. I have lost five kilograms in one week." Kayan (33 years, transman from Banarhat, Jalpaiguri) also shared that to him an ideal male body means 'slim body and biceps.' Against this craving for inhabiting a slim, muscular male body arises the discourse around 'toxic masculinity'. Samudra (29 years, transman, Kolkata), one of my respondents in order to develop a fit physique got himself enrolled at a local gym but could not continue for long as according to the other 'men' visiting the gym, a man must follow a very strict fitness regime for becoming strong and powerful. This notion of power was somewhere not convincing for Samudra and he left the gym. In this manner Samudra is rewriting the normative and gendered social scripts by creating his own script in his own space and not following something or trying to be someone which is not him. As far as the notion of 'toxic masculinity' is concerned, Suprobhat (42 years, Kolkata) a transmasculine person in his early forties said that in the present time the younger transmasculine persons are showing toxic masculinity. They are preserving the patriarchal status quo by controlling their

female partners, 'boozing off', making misogynist comments and inflicting violence against their partners and other family members.

These are few of the many ways by which the gendered role stereotypes were challenged and strengthened on the basis of the belief that there is no singularly defined role of a man or a woman today.

## **Section 9: The medical gaze**

The medical practitioners involved in different stages of HRT and Surgery, like the psychiatrist, endocrinologist, gynaecologist, plastic surgeons, obstetricians, urologist, ENT specialist and speech therapist need to be sensitised and made aware about the journey of the trans-individuals, their preferences, desires, comforts, discomforts, expressions, plans, and decisions. In an interview, Dr. Jayita Chakraborty, a Kolkata based leading gynaecologist said,

When we studied medicine these things were not taught to us. I am a woman who has always ticked boxes. It's not that I understand everything but as a doctor I am sensitive. Initially I used to think that this was due to certain hormonal imbalance or maybe traumatic experiences in childhood but now I try to understand what extreme pain a person is going through to be willing to go on taking injections throughout life and subject oneself to multiple surgeries. It would be best if the surgeries could be avoided but the mental agony is such that for the well-being of the trans-person, GAT/SRS is the only option. I think this should now be introduced into the medical curriculum and doctors and medical staff should be made aware and sensitised."

It becomes difficult for the doctors to understand the dynamics challenging the unilinear relationship between sex and gender. It becomes difficult for them to go beyond the gender binary. It is important to look at trans-experience from an affirmative approach and not through a lens of deficit. SRS or HRT are not modes of 'treating' the trans-person. There is nothing to treat. There is nothing 'abnormal'. The need is to facilitate their well-being by minimising the gap between their sense of who they are and the materiality of their bodily existence.

Dipto (40 years, transman, Kolkata originally from Assam) narrated his experience,

One day after talking to me, my parents took me to a psychiatrist. The doctor advised me to start thinking of myself as a 'girl'. He said, if I continued this for six months, I would become a girl. The psychiatrist also told my parents to remove all boyish belonging from my room and that's all that was to be done and I would become a girl. It was simple. I was also given some

medications which I used to hide and throw them away. Those were difficult times. I was forced to keep my hair long; I was forced to wear girl's clothing. It was just before the secondary examination, so I was not allowed to go out. It felt like dying. I went into depression. I used to keep quiet. I made a world of myself and withdrew myself in that world. After completing my higher secondary examination, I went to Shilchar for pursuing graduation. I started earning. I started to work in a newspaper office. I used to write for the newspaper. With my earning and my father's help I used to buy shirts and trousers, I chopped off my hair. From Shilchar I started living my life my way. I completed graduation.

Ambar (34 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas) shared his experience of facing a gynaecologist who was suspicious about his decision. He said,

My mother even took me to a doctor. The doctor was a gynaecologist, who asked me, "Why are you like this? Don't you know the society does not accept this kind of behaviour. We cannot do whatever we want to. Do whatever your parents are asking you to do." Then I went to another gynaecologist on my own to get guidance about SRS. How to proceed? Where to go? I was 25 then. The doctor not only discouraged me, but also said that one day this 'madness' would get off my head and then I would regret it. It was alright to wear boy's attire but that did not make me a boy. My physiology is that of a girl which I could not ignore.

Dr. Sanjay Pandey, who is a urologist practicing in Mumbai put it beautifully "Gender dysphoria is not about treating the mind, but to treat the body, to bring the body to the mind" This statement talks about SRS as an intervention, an enhancement and an affirmative technique but not a treatment. Transgender lived experience is not a disease to be treated but a state of being to be facilitated and supported. Where the medical gaze pathologises, a much more humane and understanding approach is needed through gender affirmation from the medical community. The body is modified in order to match the preferred gender. This seems to bring body essentialism through the back door, but as the narratives start talking on behalf of their lived experiences, the negotiation, selection and affirmation give way to agency and autonomy where individuals question the sex gender linearity and disrupt it.

## **Section 10: GAT/SRS and the decision around legal document change**

Decision regarding HRT, SRS and legal document change <sup>87</sup> depends on the educational level, job profile, financial status, social support system and medical (physical/physiological)

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<sup>87</sup> Legal document change is the process of changing the gender and name in Identity documents through legal procedure. Till now it was being done on the basis of the NALSA Judgment. But as now we have the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 it will be done on the basis of the rules and regulations prescribed in the act.

status of the individual. 51.8% transmasculine respondents are into HRT and 48.1% have undergone partial SRS (all of them have completed top surgery and none of them have undergone bottom surgery), one year of HRT being a pre-requisite for SRS. Nine (33.3%) of the respondents have said they will not opt for HRT and SRS. It has been their conscious choice of not undergoing SRS. Two (7.4%) have decided not to opt for HRT and SRS as according to them their masculinity does not depend on their biological body, four (14.8%) will not opt for HRT and SRS for health concerns, three (11.1%) do not want to undergo SRS due to family pressure, two (7.4%) might opt for mastectomy and hysterectomy but not HRT as they do not want to have facial hair or change their vocal quality. Interestingly one of these two individuals will not change his document as well as he wants to continue receiving his father's pension retaining the status of the 'unmarried daughter'. In case of transmasculine individuals, change of documents and the extent of undergoing GAT/SRS are influenced by concerns around legal, financial, pension and inheritance related issues. The transmasculine person concerned about his vocal quality is a singer and does not want to lose the tonal quality of his voice under HRT. Four out of 27 individuals (14.8%) have plans to opt for HRT and SRS later and the reason for not starting yet being their status as student right now, financial issues and unemployment.

Jammy (34 years, North 24 Parganas), a transmasculine individual decided not to opt for HRT and SRS but said that he appreciates and respects those who opt for SRS. He is 35 years old and according to him is young no more. He is apprehensive about how much his body can withstand. He is not physically well. He has a pain in his leg. Jammy recalled his childhood days and shared,

We were very poor. I used to go to school with an empty stomach. Then after coming back from school I used to just have a morsel of rice at two in the afternoon. So at that tender age I was staying without food for very long stretches. The nutrition I had was insufficient and it caused a lot of damage to my body. It was not that our parents were ignorant. They used to meet our needs, though we did not need much. My mother used to make 6 to 7 Kilos of pulse fritters everyday and sell it in the local markets. We went through a very tough time. The most important thing that bothers me now is that I am having tremendous pain in my legs. I can feel the pain when I am walking. Coupled with this there is a financial constraint. The money that I am saving now is for my future. If I opt for SRS then all my savings will get used and I won't have anything for managing physical ailments in future. Moreover, the nature of work that I am associated with is field based, it demands physical fitness. My family members also do not want me to go for SRS. I will not even go for HRT as without top surgery the effects of hormone therapy will look weird. I am happy this way. I need a girl friend and that will solve all my problems.

Jammy also said that the way his life is taking shape, it won't make any difference whether he will change his documents or not. He is not doing a government job and neither will try for one. He doesn't feel the need to change his documents legally and he is not waiting for the government to offer him any reservation or subsidy. He said with a confident but painful smile that he has never asked his father for help and so there is no question of expecting help from the government. He has no expectations from anybody. He wants to walk his path alone. The only thing he wants is the freedom to enjoy the independence.

Ayan (30 years, North 24 Parganas) another transmasculine individual who is a lawyer practicing in Barasat court said,

If I were not diabetic, I would have started HRT. But as the days pass I am feeling that people need me. For helping people fulfil their needs my needs must be side tracked. It is important for me to be healthy so that I can work and stand beside them, it is not only for the community people but for anybody who would need me. I can mix with people, I can help them, I can give them a space where they can share their suffering, I can also guide them. I have these strengths. But again I have physical ailments which I cannot ignore, so I cannot take hormones.

Besides one's own decision of not opting for SRS and HRT the family pressure also often moulds their decisions and choices. Ishan (38 years, transmasculine person from Kolkata) stated,

It is not possible, mainly due to my mother. Though she has accepted me as I am, but she does not want to make it public. She has asked me to live as a 'girl' in front of others as long as she is alive. My neighbours have always known me as a responsible girl. They identify me as a 'tomboy'. They appreciate my attitude. But they do not have any idea about my identity. Now if they come to know that I am a transmasculine person and I will bring a bride for me then I will become 'bad' in their eyes.

For the transmasculine individuals their responsible attitude, proactive nature, zeal to earn money, decisiveness and 'smartness' construct the figure of the 'masculine entity' who is loved, admired appreciated but this acceptance always has a limit. The extent of such a limit could differ from person to person, geographical location, caste, class, religion and ethnicity. Anwar earns his living and is not dependent on his father. Anwar has a girl friend, Anwar's mother supports him. His extended family members love him as he is. He is a Zumba instructor and a dance teacher. He is settled in his life. He wants to opt for top surgery but he knows very well that his religion will not allow legal document change. If he opts for it there would be harsh resistance from his community.

As far as legal document change is concerned Anwar (29 years, transman, Kolkata) shared,

As of now I don't want to change my documents. I only want to have a legal paper stating that I have changed my name to Anwar from Yushra Khatoon. I won't mind not changing my gender. I want my name to be Anwar Sheikh. I don't want any other changes. If there is an 'F' in my document, it won't bother me as long as my name is changed. Where do I have to show my gender? When I show my I-Card with my name and gender written on it, nobody questions me. They are okay with it. But when I want to use the washroom it becomes problematic. If I try going to the female washroom, they would not allow me, as I look like a boy. Then I have to show my ID. So it will not make much of a difference even if I 'keep my gender' as it is now or change my gender according to my preference. But with my name I face a problem. If somebody calls me 'Anwar' then no one notices, but if somebody calls me 'Yushra', then people become curious."

The entire spectrum of GAT starting from cosmetic changes, prosthetic use, hormone replacement therapy till partial or complete sex reassignment surgery is like a complete range of choices from which the transmasculine person chooses his options of GAT and legal document change. The liberating thing is the component of choice which comes in a big way whenever we are talking about legal document change for Transgender individuals. These processes at times seem to reinforce the binary and at times seem to disrupt it, but whatever be the case, whether one is getting boxed in the binary structure, whether one is staying away and reaffirming their life and living as a trans-person or whether one is 'customising their identity' by choosing certain services through a multipronged multidimensional approach, the most important and significant thing that holds true is the component of choice, choosing and deciding according to one's ability and need. It increases the possibility of going beyond the societal norms through a creative process that I have named '*Gender Creativity*' in my thesis.

The need for 'real life experience' that the therapists and doctors talk about with reference to GAT has not been anything new or alien to my respondents. They are always experiencing the real world around them, where they are at times understood, most of the time invisibilised, deeply discriminated, labelled and alienated. Coming out to partners, family, friends and community members thus becomes a tricky affair. For this they need to become aware of the interpersonal negotiations that create familial, educational, vocational, economic and legal challenges. In order to be able to address these challenges the transmasculine individuals unanimously identified the need for education, financial independence and support network.

On the basis of my interaction with the transmasculine individuals a significant point surfaced and that is that all of them have opted for some form or part of GAT, like using

binder, voice therapy, preferred dressing, exercising, HRT and/or SRS. Again as far as surgical interventions are concerned they are mainly opting for non-genital procedures like removal of breasts, shaping of a 'masculine' chest and hysterectomy without external genitalia reconstruction. One individual has also expressed his desire for just top surgery while keeping his ovaries and uterus intact should he and his partner decide to use his uterus to carry a child of their own.

According to feminist, postmodern, and queer theoretical approaches, significant alternatives to medical perspective on gender identity have been discussed in depth, by stating that gender identity is not necessarily linked to biological sex assignment at birth, but is created through complex social interactions and influenced by the dynamics of institutionalized power inequalities (Butler, 1990, 1993; Halberstam, 1994, 1998, Prosser, 1998, Heyes, 2000). Developing my argument on this premise and on the basis of the narratives I have received from my respondents for this thesis it can be said that medical perspective on gender identity has been important as it opens up another option amongst many. Having said that, their socially ascribed locations, social interactions and inherent power inequalities ingrained in social structures and institutions have played a role in shaping their positionalities regarding gender expression, decisions around GAT/SRS and livelihood. Social acceptance, social intelligibility, 'passing' and performativity on the basis of the terms of social normativisation becomes the most important aspect of the lived experiences of the transmasculine individuals. Without any historical and cultural frame of reference, the transmasculine individuals felt the need to establish their presence by creating a visibility around their 'being' to socially pass and receive social acceptance. With this in mind, all of them (irrespective of whether they have gone for HRT / SRS) have opted for different ways of expressing their preferred gender and communicating it to society at large.

It was a conscious decision to write this chapter on transmasculine narratives before the transfeminine ones because the transmasculine identities have been invisibilised for a very long time until recently when transmasculine persons started coming out. Little is mentioned about them even in the NALSA judgment of 2014 and I thought it would be prudent to start with their stories of subversion and resistance. The next chapter deals with the transfeminine stories and it has been exciting and interesting, reading their narratives against that of my transmasculine respondents in this chapter.

## Chapter 3: Transition, Transformation or Transcendence: The Transfeminine Experience

### Section 1: Tracing the trajectory – Formation of the discourse around trans-femininity

"We were working enthusiastically in the TI projects but we could never imagine that our identities and lives would become so much important in the discourse!" said, Suhani<sup>88</sup> (37 years, South 24 Parganas), a queer rights activist working with the transgender community in West Bengal. Quoting Suhani, I hereby start this chapter by unfolding the journey through which 'Transgender' as a category of gender identity came into being. I would be exploring the trajectory of the formation of transfeminine identities by tracing the HIV/AIDS discourse. Unlike the transmasculine identities which had been invisibilised and started becoming visible and claiming their rights in the last ten to twelve years, the adoption and the process of self identification of transgender/transwoman/transfeminine individuals by *kothi* started much earlier through the politics of HIV/AIDS funding. Here I would like to quote Anuradha<sup>89</sup> (38 years, North 24 Parganas), a transfeminine queer activist, where she narrated her journey of becoming a part of the LGBTIQHKA+ community. Anuradha shared,

During my adolescence, when I was in class VIII/IX, I had nobody to share my feelings with. I could not confide in anyone, I was feeling lost. Then one day when I was coming back from my tuition class I noticed some individuals chatting in a group in Dumdum station. They were so much like me. The way they talked, the way they walked, their coloured lips, their interaction pattern told me that they were my people. I started talking to them. I met Sushanta da there, and for the first time I felt at home. Till then we were not familiar with the term 'transgender or transsexual'. We only knew *kothi*, *dhurani*, 'homo'. There were differences of opinion but we all resonated at one point and that was our lived experiences of our non-normative gender identities.

The chapter tries to unfold the various ways transfeminine individuals experience and perceive their gender identities. The chapter focuses on the childhood experiences of the transfeminine individuals and the various phases they have passed in their journey to adulthood. The role of educational institutions is also discussed here. The ways the transfeminine individuals relate to their bodies, their perception of femininity, their decision

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<sup>88</sup> Interview taken on 15.01.19 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

<sup>89</sup> Interview taken on 04.12.19 in Kolkata

regarding gender affirmative therapy and document change have been discussed in this chapter. This chapter focuses on the transfeminine narratives with the aim to understand their lived experiences and explore how the larger society and trans-individuals interact and interplay with each other. How society imposes its norms on the transfeminine individuals and how they influence the 'mainstream' society by introducing newer ways of understanding and claiming gender as a spectrum of identity formation.

During the late 1990s, an NGO in Kolkata called New Alipore Praajak Development Society, funded by Department for International Development (DFID) started campaigning for safer sex by concentrating on the various cruising spots in Kolkata such as Dhakuria Lake and Minto Park. They asked gay identified individuals and *kothi* identified people to work for the HIV/AIDS campaign. Many of them wanted to shift focus from HIV/AIDS to rights-based activism and separately started building their own identity. One such organisation was Pratyay Gender Trust which was formed in 1998.

In 2000, Solidarity & Action against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) came into existence as an NGO helping other NGOs or CBOs through training, networking, information dissemination and technical assistance. PRANTIK Bongaon (North 24 Parganas) started in the same year comprising of local *kothis*, *dhuranis* or transgenders. CBOs like *Swikriti* (Dumdum), *Gokhel Road Bandhan*, *Kolkata Rista*, *Koshish*, *PLUS* (People Like Us), *Amitie* (Chandannagar) started working and got registered between 1999 to 2003 in Kolkata and its suburbs. Every time groups like these were formed their motive was to come and bond together, sharing each other's pain and supporting each other. The push factor was to find like-minded friends with familiar lived experiences. Initially often the organisations' rooms were used as shelter spaces for them. At that time the projects started getting sanctioned and project based outreach programmes, community mobilisation, HIV & STI awareness generation and advocacy became their mode of activism. Shelter spaces started to become drop-in-centres.<sup>90</sup> Community people started coming together and standing beside each other by helping each other, sharing resources and increasing their visibility in mainstream society.

In order to trace the discourse I have made the HIV/AIDS prevention and control project the starting point of my quest in the backdrop of the advent of HIV/AIDS prevention and Control, Targeted Intervention Projects (1989/90) which initiated huge discussions around

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<sup>90</sup>A place run by a welfare agency or charity where people may come (or call) casually for advice or assistance without prior intimation

sex, gender and sexuality all over India by politicising the personal and thawing the inhibitions regarding sex, gender and sexuality. The TI projects started to talk about MSM while gay identified individuals started a discourse around sex, gender and sexuality which was previously tabooed and suppressed.

Around 2002, WBSAP&CS allotted a large amount of money for HIV/AIDS targeted intervention. At that time several CBOs had sprung up in various districts. The second phase of NACP II recognised MSM as a 'high risk group' for HIV infection. Subsequently WBSAP&CS wanted to make a grant to a single organisation targeting the high risk MSM population. Eight CBOs from all over West Bengal (Mitzu-Darjeeling, Prantik-Bongaon, Amitie Trust-Hooghly, Swapnil-Burdwan, Swikriti-North 24 Parganas, Pratyay Gender Trust-Kolkata, PLUS-Kolkata, Astitva Dakshin-South 24 Pargans) came together and formed MANAS Bangla (MSM Action Network for Social Advocacy) in 2003, a network of CBOs from several districts in West Bengal.

The vision and mission statement of MANAS Bangla stated that –

Through its members, MANAS Bangla reaches out to MSM with various shades and hues of self-perception, many who have adopted transgender identities like *kothi* and *dhurani*, others who identify as gay, and yet others as bisexual. Equally significant is the vast section of MSM who do not adopt any specific gender or sexual identity at all.

Identifying MSM as a behavioural category in the HIV/AIDS discourse started since 1990 when it was labelled as a high risk group. The objective of the TI projects was to manage and control high risk behaviours by disciplining the 'high risk' groups. This in turn stigmatised same sex behaviour among men even more as 'deviant' and 'promiscuous' which resulted in the lack of social sanction getting justified. Controlling sexual behaviours and sexualities reinforced the pathologisation of same sex behaviour. Being an identity-free term, MSM tends to avoid cultural and social connotations, and has nothing to do with the epidemiological investigation of the disease. Moreover as it implies that behaviours, not identities place individuals at risk to HIV infection.

In the process of identifying potential vulnerable groups based on their sexual practices and health conditions, *kothis* gained visibility as through them both their *parikhs* and other *kothis* could be reached at the various cruising sites for lube and condom distribution and awareness generation. Although many *kothi* identified individuals felt uncomfortable with the term MSM and asked for a separate TI focusing on their requirements as not 'men' but

'transgender' identified individuals with their specific needs and vulnerabilities. During the FGD at Baruipur<sup>91</sup>, it surfaced that during the HIV/AIDS TI projects till NACP III, the *kothis* were identified as sexual subjects, MSM, effeminate males, partners of *parikhs*, playing the bottom role and being penetrated. Many of the FGD participants said that they were not comfortable with this labelling as they felt that it was their sexual practice and thus their behaviour and not their identity. And so many of them started to identify themselves as woman and the transgender discourse provided them the language to express themselves. NACP III (2007 - 2012) revealed that transgender individuals needed a different approach in HIV prevention and care strategy than gay identified or MSM individuals which was acknowledged and worked out comprehensively in NACP IV. Hence exclusive interventions were initiated by Department of AIDS control in 2012. This was followed by WBSAPCS announcing Transgender Targeted Intervention (TGTI) separately for the transgender community and Association of Transgender/*Hijra* in Bengal (ATHB) starting to observe Transgender Day in Kolkata from 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2010. And thus in the second decade of the new millennium the LGBTIQHKA+ movement in India took a new turn, with transgender emerging as a prominent category and transgender individuals spearheading the movement and playing an important part in the development sector. Subsequently the term transgender entered the NACP vocabulary. According to Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (2014:326) "Transgender emerged as a prominent category in the Indian LGBTIQ movement and development sector relatively recently, roughly around the late 2000s in the third phase of the National AIDS Control programme as yet another high risk group."

Transgender created an umbrella term while engulfing and assimilating the multiple regional identities. This blurred the pre-existence of regional identities like *Kothi*, *Dhurani*, and all the local and regional transfeminine identities got subsumed under a universalising rubric (Dutta & Roy, 2014:327) and thus transgender became an emergent category of identity and representation. The term *Kothi* gradually became limited and restricted to intra-community usage while transgender became the coinage for public representation with transnational, cosmopolitan and universal connotation. Pratap<sup>92</sup> (33 years), one of my transfeminine respondents from Kolkata identifies herself as a *kothi*. When asked about whether she identifies herself as a transgender individual, she replied, "*Kothi* is my '*daak naam*' (pet

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<sup>91</sup> FGD held on 29.05.16 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

<sup>92</sup> Interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata

name) I use within my community, while transgender is my formal name I use when funders come to our office." The words of Pratap resonated with Deepa<sup>93</sup> (30 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata) where she said,

I have *Hijra* friends, according to them I totally look like a woman. I pass well. This is a big complement for me. But I will never call myself a complete woman. Rather I will like to define myself as a *kothi*. I have heard this term from the very childhood. I feel more comfortable to be identified as a *Kothi*. I can relate with the term well.

*Kothi* remains to be that 'loving pet name' for the transfeminine individuals connecting them to each other but 'transgender' as the umbrella term gave the community people that important 'label' making them intelligible to high level networks of large NGOs, transnational funders and the state (Dutta & Roy, 2014: 323). According to Aniruddha Dutta<sup>94</sup> (enabler and ethnographic researcher, associate professor in the departments of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies and Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Iowa),

The term 'TG' has more political and empowerment potential than MSM. It is a trans-nationally recognised term with a political edge. TG should have been understood more intersectionally, which was never done. The main thing is to open the boundaries and allow individuals to choose from the options in the spectrum.

## **Section 2: Understanding gender: Perceptions and possibilities**

In this section I have tried to understand the different ways through which the transfeminine individuals develop their sense of gender and focus on their identity formation. This journey of self revelation needs to be contextualised. At the individual level self realisation from different perspectives and different layers can be empowering and enriching, but when it is contextualised against the androcentric, heteropatriarchal social structure it gets labelled by the structure as subversive and hence 'problematic'. The moment the social structure starts to match the person's identity with the societal frame of reference, mismatch begins. Some transfeminine individuals have talked about the need for social validation to confirm and express their gender. Some have shared their experiences of adapting to stereotypical gender roles following images of women constructed by patriarchy. Yet some have explained gender through their 'being(s)' and 'doing(s)' as a much more complex phenomenon, a dynamic

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<sup>93</sup> Interview taken on 04.09.16 in Kolkata

<sup>94</sup> Interview taken on 20.08.19 in Kolkata

experience establishing the fact that there is no one way of expressing gender. The conversations around multiplicity of gender are the result of transformation and revolt.

Gender expression could just be as simple as applying nail enamel for one person while another person could find her expression by just draping herself in a sari while for some the expression could be achieved through undergoing GAT, specifically SRS. The fight has always been against boxing individuals into iron clad compartments of either woman or man on the basis of their biological sex, on the basis of which most people believe that if you have a vagina you are a woman and if you have a penis, you are a man. Women continue to exist in the patriarchal society as marked bodies (Butler 2002). As sex is implicated through the binarised reification, the repetitive gendered acts performed by the sexed bodies tend to consolidate heterosexuality. Therefore gendering and sexing of bodies both lead towards establishing heterosexuality. By negating, questioning and challenging this rigid framework the transgender identities get structured. The trans-identities are constantly structured on the basis of 'not thisness'. Our identities are constantly structured on the basis of 'I am not this.' We are because of what we are not (Butler, 1993, 1999). By claiming a separate space the trans-individuals can at last talk about their rights, capabilities and desires. In such a context in order to navigate the world in one's own gender identity, transgender individuals go on creating newer reference points or newer frames of references by giving meanings to their apparently socially transgressive ways of life. Anuradha<sup>95</sup> (38 years, transfeminine North 24 Parganas), a performing artist and one of my respondents associated with the queer movement for more than a decade said,

To me gender is a fluid concept, and gender is nothing but a performance. Who, where, when and how, will enact which gender is so unpredictable and full of possibilities. It is changeable. That doesn't mean that it will always be volatile, but it can be volatile as well.

Anuradha hasn't opted for SRS yet, she wears her preferred dresses, she is free to live her life as a woman, she told me with a smile that, "One day your children will tell you that they have an aunt with a moustache and a beard."

Suparna<sup>96</sup> (40 years, Hooghly), activist, self identified as *hijra* shared,

I vividly remember, I was in class four, I never used to wear anything other than a frock. So one day I was wearing a frock as usual and sat in the washroom to pee. My father saw me and instructed my mother to change the way I used to dress up. I had to stop wearing my favourite

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<sup>95</sup> Interview taken on 04.12.19 in Kolkata

<sup>96</sup> Interview taken on 14.09.19 in Hooghly

dress. This was a moment when for the first time I realised that in this social setting understanding and expressing my 'self' was a challenge. Because society is based on the binary gender system where there are socially constructed differences between a boy and a girl, a boy can do this, a girl can do that. A boy will wear jeans of a specific design, a girl will wear a different cut, a boy will wear this t-shirt, a girl will wear that t-shirt...all these things made me think a lot about myself. I did not think about all these boxes, I was more concerned about the human being I am. I was sure that I was not a boy...but I was not sure whether I was a girl... and the 'human being' inside me was suffering a lot.

Suparna was assigned male at birth to which she could never identify herself. Her preferred lifestyle was that of a woman but she was not very sure about it either. She struggled against these stringent socially constructed binarised norms which did not open any other option for self realisation and expression. The struggle with self and others helped her to navigate her way through. Suparna wanted to give herself a new life which she did only after delinking from her biological family and constructing herself. To her it was like a second birth. She identifies herself as a transfeminine individual associated with the *hijra gharana*. She feels proud for identifying herself as a *hijra* identified person and considers it as her politics to create awareness about *hijra* identity.

Suparna took a lot of pain in talking about her childhood, her childhood was not her's, it was the childhood of the 'elder son' of a Hindu, upper caste affluent family, with whom she could never identify with. She was a shameful existence for her family members due to which she left her family and created her own identity. She created her own history of 'being' through which she thrived and achieved a life where she could think of giving a happy childhood to a baby, that she has adopted. Through experiencing 'motherhood' she wants to satisfy her need to be cared for. She chose this as her healing process. On the contrary the narratives of two transfeminine respondents, Nipa<sup>97</sup> (27 years, Kolkata) and Pari's<sup>98</sup> (23 years, Cooch Behar), gave a glimpse of a happy childhood struggling in a poor, lower caste, lower class family where the desire to follow the social rules and maintain a social status was not the guiding force, where the question of basic survival was the main concern. Nipa said that during childhood she was not aware of all this. But she never liked to play football or cricket; she was fond of playing '*ranna bati*' (kitchen games) with the girls of her own age group living in the same slum area. In another narrative Pari said that they were not financially solvent when she was a child and so they had limited dresses. But when her mother used to make two

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<sup>97</sup> Interview taken on 13.05.16 in Kolkata

<sup>98</sup> Interview taken on 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar

pigtails with her hair she used to feel very happy. My mother used to buy cheap rattles from local stationary shops and made her anklets, she felt happy. She remembered that once in the local go-as-you-like competition she was dressed up as an old woman by her mother and sister-in-law and won the first prize.

This restricted binary based perception of 'gender' was challenged by most of my respondents where they believed that gender is a social construction as well as it is a sense of self which is integral to our identity. It depends on individuals to define their gender irrespective of whatever body they have. Chhuman<sup>99</sup> (36 years, transfeminine individual), my respondent from Darjeeling district said with conviction that she considers herself as a woman, because she feels like a woman from within. She loves wearing lip colour but as she inhabited a 'male body' she could not always do it in public, but she carried her femininity seamlessly as an integral part of her 'being'. She is both the nurturer and provider of the family. She feels blessed to be a strong woman capable enough to balance both the roles with same ease. The same conviction resonates in Deepa's (30 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata) response. She said, "Starting from my childhood I have a very clear idea about myself ? I have never thought of myself as a transgender person; I have always known myself as a woman. What others think about me has never been important."

In the narratives there were voices claiming space as women and there were voices claiming space as transgender persons as well. While there was a visible trend to re-establish the gender binary, there was also a prominent effort for going beyond the binary as well. Starting from calling gender a social construct the narratives also suggested that sex is also a social construction. The bodies are sexed on the basis of the social construction of sex and then the sexed bodies are again gendered. This is reflected in the narrative of an activist associated with LABIA, a Mumbai based queer feminist group, shared in *Towards Gender Inclusivity*, a report by Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore (Mohan and Murthy, 2013) which talks about the construction of gender being the precursor of the construction of sex and about people's bodies being marked by gender. In this sense according to Judith Butler, gender is a time constructed identity which is continuously repeated in an effort to consolidate. It is not an eternal identity and its cycle of repetition can be broken and changed through acts of resistance and subversion (Butler, 1988: 519).

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<sup>99</sup> Interview taken on 25.10.16 in Siliguri, Darjeeling district

If gender identity is considered as a performative accomplishment influenced by social do's and don'ts, then the very performative gender itself would be more than enough to contest gender's reified status. This idea of multiple possibilities of polymorphous gender identities get reinforced by the lived experiences of the transfeminine individuals rising from their association with a two decade old movement that started with their politics of identity. This claiming of their identity was facilitated by the HIV/AIDS Targeted Intervention projects which were bringing in funds and creating livelihood for many of them. "From claiming of identity the movement now has shifted to claiming of rights and entitlements," said Suhani (37 years, South 24 Parganas), a self identified, transfemale individual, an activist and an actor. The movement through its understanding of feminist theory that critiques the naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality reinforced the question - Is there anything natural about sex, gender and sexuality?

Rosy<sup>100</sup> (40 years) transfeminine respondent from Darjeeling district said,

"I had this from my childhood. Earlier I used to hide this, but I started doing it openly from the age of fifteen. When my elder sisters were not around I used to wear their clothes in secret apply lipstick and *kajal* secretly. I practiced for a number of years to walk like girls so that my mannerisms were like that of girls. So I groomed myself for many years and today, as I walk, everyone considers me as a woman. Everyone calls me 'madam' or '*didi*' and I work here as a woman. I feel satisfied as people treat me as a woman and I am able to interact with them as a woman. But even now the biggest problem for me is that I have to move around very carefully near my locality, because till now my neighbours continue to harass me in different ways."

Rosy's narrative describes how gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body which is expressed through the mundane day to day habits and behaviours, like bodily gestures, movements and enactments of different kinds that constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1988: 519). Rosy's narrative describes the process of 'becoming a woman' (Beauvoir, 2011: 330), where a person taking birth in a 'male' body also becomes a woman. Again to be female or to be male is also discursively created, socio-culturally constructed. Having a body with a vagina is given the sex 'female' and then the sexed body gets gendered as 'woman' and having a body with a penis is sexed as 'male' and gendered as 'man', and having an organ which cannot be readily named a vagina or penis is forcibly sexed by surgical intervention and gendered on the basis of it. When certain bodies whether with a

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<sup>100</sup> Interview taken on 25.10.16 in Siliguri, Darjeeling district

vagina or a penis, refuse to abide by the gender ascribed to them, they are identified as transbodies and transgender identities. The process of sexing and gendering has a history. To be a woman is to have become a woman, to have become a cultural sign through a sustained and repeated corporeal project, failing to conform to which one must face a punitive reaction. In order to avoid it the gendered being goes on establishing its necessity and naturalness by concealing its genesis (Butler, 1988). In case of the trans-persons this 'necessity' and 'naturalness' of sex-gender linearity is challenged and gender takes the form of an 'inner core', creating yet another essentialist approach. The question thus arises is that where people have certain bodies and the bodies are continuously written by gender (Mohan and Murthy, 2013:29), how can we envision a gender neutral society? A society that can go beyond gender, a society where an individual will be able to select their own gender if they want to or can do away with gender altogether. How can we disassociate gender from our daily living? Is it at all possible to do so? Is it at all possible to change the language which is so heavily loaded with gender?

A very important aspect of understanding gender was narrated by Anuradha (38 years, transfeminine respondent from North 24 Parganas). She said that initially it was the lens of sexual orientation through which they used to see 'gender identity' but then the focus shifted from looking at gender identity through the lens of sexuality to viewing at it as a separate category that may be related to 'sexuality' but is not always associated with it. There were narratives talking about childhood sexual encounters with male identified persons like relative, neighbour, teacher, employer and experiencing attraction for the 'opposite' gender and becoming sure of one's gender identity through expressing one's sexuality. Chhuman (36 years), a middle aged transfeminine respondent from Darjeeling district said,

I had an elderly friend during my childhood. We used to play together. He used to touch me; he used to ask me to undress. He pulled me by my hands and asked me to go to the river to bathe. Then, during my adolescence, I started having sexual feelings. At that time I joined a hotel as a 'helper', my employer used to stare at me and I could feel butterflies dancing in my stomach. I had sex with him for the first time.

Chhuman identified herself as a homosexual transfeminine person. The sexual act helped to reassure her about her gender identity as on the basis of societal norms it is 'natural' and 'expected' for a woman to only feel attraction towards a man. She considers herself as a 'woman' and identifies as a 'transfeminine person'. Chhuman challenged the societal way of looking at gender on the basis of one's sexed bodies and also defined herself as homosexual person on the basis of her sexed body and attraction stemming from that body. She

categorically separates herself from a cis-woman, but identifies herself as a homosexual person on the basis of her attraction towards a cis-man. Somewhere the lived experiences of the transfeminine individuals were strengthening the social norms, somewhere it was challenging it, breaking it and initiating a new way of looking at it in a discursive manner. There were narratives of getting sexually abused during adolescence which helped the transfeminine individuals discover their gender identity and sexual orientation. There were narratives where my respondents have said that though they were unsure about their gender identity, slowly and gradually through exposure to the opposite gender and through intimate relationships or friendly explorations they came to know themselves better. Pari (23 years, transfeminine respondent) from rural Cooch Behar said,

I had no idea about gender or sexuality when I was a child. I think nobody understands these nuances at that time. Gradually when I reached my teens I could feel that I was being attracted towards boys. If I ever caught a glimpse of the rim of their underpants with the brand 'Cosco' written on it, I used to feel excited. I never felt the same for girls.

Echoing Pari, Jhumko<sup>101</sup> (33 years, transfeminine person), her friend from Cooch Behar said,

All the *kothis* share certain common childhood experiences. The time when the boys play football or cricket in the field, *kothis* prefer sitting indoors, playing with their doll, helping in household chores...my childhood was also not an exception. When I was in class five, I developed some ideas about sex. I also started to feel sexual desire in my body. From then onwards I could understand that I was unlike other boys. I used to feel aroused by sitting beside a boy, but there was no such feeling while sitting beside a girl. My first sexual encounter was with my father's friend. He was in the army. One day he came to our house. Nobody was there. He seduced me and did anal sex. I was also made to do oral sex with him. That was the first time I had sex and I even enjoyed it.

Anuradha (38 years, transfeminine person from Kolkata) resonated with Jhumka and said,

I used to identify with women figures I grew up with, like my mother, aunts, sisters and other women in the neighbourhood, I used to follow their lifestyle. I could never identify with the male family members. I could not understand the reason behind this. Gradually when I was in class eight or nine the time came for getting involved in special relationships. When my friends were falling for the girls I realized I was getting attracted to boys.

In several instances sexual encounters in childhood has surfaced as medium of realising one's gender and patterns of sexual intimacy. As far as The Protection of Children from Sexual

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<sup>101</sup> Interview taken on 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar

Offences Act 2012 (POCSO 2012) and feminist discourse on child sexual abuse is concerned these are supposed to be punishable offences. But in case of a child who is confused and faces internal conflict about their 'being', sexual intimacy and exploration has often helped them consolidate their identity and orientation. A baby is happy with a cuddle and a kiss on the forehead or on the cheeks. A baby feels secure in the hands of their caregiver, a baby when hungry, cries and stops crying after being fed. As the baby grows up they experience different tastes, smells and textures and their need for warmth gets satisfied by physical warmth and touch. During childhood a baby feels loved with a kiss on the forehead or cheeks or a hug but as they grow up the form and nature of physical touch also changes. A transgender child takes time to understand their pattern of intimacy and only through exploration and exposure can understand their need and ways of gratification. This is the reason why quite often sexual exposure during childhood and adolescence becomes significant in the trans-narratives. At times they feel validated, at times, loved and cared for, at times encroached and abused. But often it helps them to get an understanding about their sexuality.

Another transfeminine individual Jolly<sup>102</sup> (29 years, Cooch Behar), from the same region, also shared a similar understanding of gender and getting reassured about her identity through her sexuality. She said, "Though I inhabit a male body, I love to dress up as a woman. I believe that I am a woman. I feel like a woman, I want to live the life of a woman. I found satisfaction through sexual intimacy with men or through self masturbation."

Many narratives expressed that playful exploration, sexual encounter, romantic intimacy and even sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence has helped them to develop their sense of self and become confident about their own preferred gender identity. As heterosexuality continues to constitute the frame of reference for formation of romantic-erotic relationships and womanhood is consolidated through forming a romantic-erotic relationship with a man, often individuals tend to identify their gender on the basis of their relationships. There are narratives where the trans-persons have said that in order to fit into the heterosexual mould they have tried to get into relationship with the person belonging to the opposite sexed body by following the social norm. But in no time they realised the mismatch and consolidated their identity as trans-person practicing homosexuality or heterosexuality. Gender sexual

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<sup>102</sup> Interview taken on 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar

identities like trans-lesbian, trans-gay have evolved through exploring one's sexuality and challenging the social norms. But then again there has been a tendency to assign gender roles in same-sex relationships as well, like femme-butcht, *kothi-parikh* and husband-wife. However, in recent times, after declaring Section 377 as unconstitutional, individuals both from the community and outside the community (especially youngsters) have started to define themselves as bisexual, pansexual and asexual fiercely challenging the heterosexual hegemony which in itself is a strong statement.

There were narratives talking about being raped during early adulthood and how it was pushed under the carpet in order to hide gender identity as parents were not comfortable accepting the fact that their child was a transfeminine person. An interesting aspect emerged from Deepa's narrative. According to Deepa (30 years, transfeminine respondent from Kolkata), her parents have accepted her relationship with her male partner, but they are not at all ready to accept the fact that she is a transgender person. For them it is more important to be a man in society, a man who could be homosexual or heterosexual, but the most important thing is to be a 'man'. In their opinion, their 'son's' self acclamation as 'Deepa' by renouncing 'Dipak' is a social fall. It is not important to talk about her sexual orientation to others, it is her personal affair. However, when it comes to gender identity it becomes a public issue that needs to be socially validated.

Different narratives pointed out the experience of imbibing gender roles by observing the female members of the family or the locality. The thin lines between gender identity, gender role and gender expression all became blurred at this juncture. The cycle of self revelation could be framed in a model. First an individual starts sensing something about her/his/their gender, through a process of observing one's self from inside-out, and through this observation a person develops a gender identity. When a child starts identifying with the preferred gender not ascribed by society the child knowingly or unknowingly becomes the rebel, subverting gender norms by adapting to the gender norm of the preferred gender. In our present social binary the individual will have to identify with either man or woman. When a gender non conforming individual chooses from the two options, she/he/they succumb to the binary gender based role stereotypes. In order to become visible the person is forced to occupy any one of the two spaces. Upon being asked about her understanding of gender, Purba<sup>103</sup> (40 years, Bardhaman), a transfeminine individual replied,

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<sup>103</sup> Interview taken on 23.06.19 in Kolkata

If I had been asked earlier I would have answered 'boy' or 'girl'. But now I know that it is something vast. Apart from a boy or a girl, someone can identify oneself as transmasculine person, or as a transfeminine person or as a *kothi*, a *hijra* or a gender non-conforming or gender fluid person. As in my case, I have a male body but in my mind I am a complete woman, but society finds it difficult to accept and acknowledge it. Dr. Nayek said something beautiful to me. The doctor said that there was no surgeon on earth who could dissect my mind and change it. But there were procedures in place in medicine that could change my body and match it to the thoughts, emotions and felt sense within my mind. This statement got stuck in my mind.

### **Sec 3: Gendering the Self**

In this section I have tried to unfold the various identities that my respondents talked about, inhabiting a continuum of identities, expressions, desires and non-binary positionalities. Today we have a 'shared vocabulary'(Shah et al:2015) that has grown over time with diverse nomenclatures like transgender, transmasculine, transfeminine, FtM, MtF, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, gender questioning, gender variant, gender queer, non-binary, pangender, intergender, agender<sup>104</sup>. This vocabulary helps the gender and sexual marginalised individuals to choose a specific name or a couple of names for themselves. This is an emancipatory moment for self identification. Being a psychological counsellor as I work with young adult individuals I see them using the vocabulary for self expression. They prefer using open ended terms where they can experience and express possibilities. They are using terms like gender fluid, gender non-conforming, pansexual, bisexual, demisexual and asexual. The millenials and zillennials are trying to be informed about their locations in the spectrum and create awareness around them. But this is not the scenario everywhere. Access to discourses in other languages, like in this case in English is usually a matter of class privilege and privilege of geographical location (near or far from urban domain). In far off rural areas or in urban slum areas people are familiar with terms like *kothi*, *dhurani*, *chhakka*, *mauga* and *hijra* for transfeminine identities and *modda meyechehele*, *chhele hijra* for transmasculine identities. The local and indigenous terms are used in most community spaces for reflecting multiplicity of experiences and expressions.

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<sup>104</sup>source: 58 gender options for facebook users, website:  
<https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/02/heres-a-list-of-58-gender-options-for-facebook-users> (accessed on 18.06.18)

Now coming back to my respondents, I have interviewed 33 transfeminine individuals from Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar. 15 (45.45%) have self identified as transgender, four (12.12%) have self identified as transwomen, eight (24.24%) identified as women, two (6.06%) identified as *Kothi* (effeminate male) and two (6.06%) preferred to be identified as *hijra*, one (3.03%) have identified as transfemale and one (3.03%) have identified as human being. There were individuals who used the word female and transwoman interchangeably. Thus in my study as well 'transgender' surfaced as a significant rubric of identity formation and gendering self.

Man	14 (51.85%)
Transman	9 (33.3%)
Transman-man	4 (14.81%)

Transgender	15 (45.45%)
Woman	8 (24.24%)
Transwoman	4 (12.12%)
Kothi	2 (6.06%)
Hijra	2 (6.06%)
Transfemale	1 (3.03%)
Human being	1 (3.03%)

Table 3.1 and 3.2 illustrates the varied ways in which my transfeminine and transmasculine respondents have identified themselves. It is interesting to note that 45% of transfeminine respondents have identified as transgender while none of the transmasculine respondents have done so. This is probably due to the HIV/AIDS funding

politics that brought visibility to the transfeminine individuals under the transgender discourse and as a politics of identity it is also associated with livelihood as many of the transfeminine individuals work in NGOs that work on transgender issues. The transgender identity also reflects a journey, a battle against social oppression that the community continues to fight under the transgender umbrella. Another interesting thing to note that while the transmasculine identities are limited to man or transman with one individual identifying as a man who is a transman, there seems to be an intense affinity towards 'man' the identity sought by the transmasculine respondents. This could also reflect the social privileges that patriarchy offers to the construction of 'man' as an identity and an intense desire to reverse the patriarchal oppression faced by them inhabiting the 'female' body. The transfeminine spectrum adorn a multitude of identities and expressions reflecting the diverse ways in which transfeminine individuals adorn and express themselves and negotiate their expression in a heteropatriarchal society. Interestingly Deepa (30 years), my transfeminine respondent who describes how she thinks of herself as a woman and adorns herself in many ways according to her desires, when asked how she would like to be identified, promptly replied that she would just like to be identified as a human being. The plurality of transfeminine identities emerging from this study reflects the rich history and socio-cultural context in which the transfeminine identities have evolved as compared to the relatively modern emergence of the transmasculine identities.

It could be assumed that development sectors, state machineries and legal processes demand this nomenclature in order to bring different people under a big open-ended umbrella term as an expansive category for all gender variant practices and identities for making it intelligible in the eyes of the mainstream binary based social structure. The Report of the Regional Transgender/*Hijra* Consultation in Eastern India prepared by SAATHI in collaboration with UNDP defined the term transgender as representing MtF and FtM model of identity and the affirmation of one's womanhood or manhood through some form of transition from one sex/gender to another (SAATHI, 2009:19). The definition by itself is limiting and restricts the transgender identity by tethering it to biological sex which is an essentialist approach. Thus while it trying to be an all encompassing definition of various gender expressions it contradicts the same discourse of gender variance that it tries to integrate. In the absence of options of transitioning (which are now available after the emergence of GAT/SRS), narratives in the

transfeminine spectrum speak of improvising and creating a wide range of trajectories of feminisation some of which are sartorial, cosmetic or behavioural which does not always identify as 'being a woman' but rather express different gendered subject positions. Deepa (30 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata) shared her choice of dresses, colours and textures. She said,

I prefer light colours; it goes well with my personality. Wherever I go I carry my attitude. People show me respect for being a dignified woman. But I never consider it as my responsibility to make others accept and understand me as a woman. It is my life. I wear woman's clothing as and when I feel. I also wear pant and shirt, whichever suits me. I haven't changed my identity documents as well. There it is written as 'male', I want to make a mark by positing my struggle. I want people to know that I have chosen to become a 'woman'; I have created the 'woman' in me. I don't want to mould myself in any of the boxes. I am a transfeminine person and I am proud of it. As long as the society would try to identify one's gender on the basis of the sexed body, it will fail to understand our politics. Once society starts giving importance to our self acclaimed gender identities it will follow the right track."

Sruti<sup>105</sup>(30 years, transfeminine person from Hooghly) resonated with Deepa by saying,

I used to keep my hair bit longer than other boys. It was a struggle against my father. Slowly I started wearing the round neck unisex t-shirts. Now when I walk along the road, I attract crowd attention. I have heard them wondering whether I am a 'boy' or a 'girl'. This confusion is quite satisfactory. I enjoy it a lot.

In some of the trans-narratives like in the case of Sruti the core of their trans-identity lies in the unrecognisability and confusion that they create in their narratives of subversion that challenge patriarchy. A new discourse of trans-womanhood has arrived for which gender affirmation surgery is not necessary. This creates new avenues of identifying oneself socially and also personally which in turn through gender affirmation is changing lives for many trans-individuals (Dutta & Roy, 2014: 323). These descriptions of self constructions are intimately a narrative action. Through narrating their lived experiences they create thick stories and traverse from the problem story ascribed by the society to the preferred story created and lived by them through connecting their embodiment with their selfhood. Both Deepa and Sruti have talked about an audience, who are staring at them, gazing at them, talking about them and also co-constituting their 'storied' self.

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<sup>105</sup> Interview taken on 07.09.16 in Hooghly

Here I have explored the various ways that individuals prefer identifying themselves which at times seem to be restrictive within the binary and again at times seem to have going beyond the binary, spreading out and encompassing many layers of identities which are often not socially identified and accepted but give them the feeling of a space or an identity they finally belong to. Krishnachura<sup>106</sup> (21 years), a young transfeminine respondent from Birbhum, shared,

I can always be in my preferred gender. I consider myself as a complete woman. I crave for a feminine body, which will complete a full circle. I am not for surgically modifying the body; moreover it is not possible for me to opt for SRS as my heart is very weak and so I will not be able to take the risk. But society won't let me live this way. They will always consider me as a boy, which I am not. If society had accepted me as a woman in this body I would have been the happiest. I don't have any problem with my body as such.

Experience of harassment and humiliation is an ongoing experience that surfaces in most of the narratives. These experiences have been present starting from childhood continuously tormenting till adulthood. It is a relentless fight for getting social recognition on the part of the trans-individuals and resisting the majoritarian social structure. Jhora<sup>107</sup> (42 years, transwoman, North 24 Parganas), the second transgender woman in West Bengal to have completed full SRS, transitioned from a male body to a female body and became one of the faces of the trans-movement in West Bengal narrated her childhood experiences in school.

I studied in a co-ed school till class four. But from class five the students got divided on the basis of boy's education and girl's education and were shifted to two different schools. I was 'naturally' sent to the boy's school. The girl's school was adjacent and opposite to the boy's school and I used to stare through the window just to catch a glimpse of my friends enjoying themselves in the girl's premises. I never had a single friend in the boy's school. I was harassed a lot and was even molested a couple of times, but I could not share it with anybody. The boys used to think that they had the right to harass or molest me as I was feminine and hence to be subjugated and made available to them. They also believed that it was their responsibility to 'correct' me for my 'transgression.' One day when I was in class I, I was staring at the girl's school, and the class teacher entered the room and scolded me for staring at the other school. She said either she would ask my parents to arrange my marriage with a girl or else she would send me to the girl's school once I became a girl myself. She tried to ridicule me but I got my answer. I thought that was exactly what I wanted for myself.

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<sup>106</sup> Interview taken on 19.04.19 in Birbhum

<sup>107</sup> Interview taken on 01.12.19 in Kolkata

Jhora's actions and behaviour were not accepted by the teacher, as her conduct was not aligned to her assigned gender. Jhora being different and unintelligible was constantly ridiculed and humiliated. But however painful and humiliating the situation was she reassured herself about claiming her preferred gender and later on surgically affirmed her gender through 'reconstruction' processes. This method of gender attribution that her teacher tried to do has been a common phenomenon.

The craving for social recognition has surfaced as a significant issue in the lives of the transfeminine individuals, which is often expressed in their decisions to opt for GAT and more specifically SRS or performing the gender roles to the extent possible. Rosy (40 years old transfeminine respondent from Darjeeling district) shared that the feeling about being in the preferred gender role comes from within. She also adds "In order to convince society the performance has to be exact". Here Rosy made a significant differentiation between 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' on the basis of one's 'gender role.' She said that she was not brought up like a woman from childhood. Slowly, as she grew older she could feel the incongruence. Though she understood it much later but once she identified herself from within as a woman there was no looking back. She started understanding her gender identity during adolescence. Before that she just had the interest to dress like a woman but there was a continuous and constant feeling of sadness inside, the lingering thought that if only she had been born a girl. Self identification came a bit late but when it came, it was so comforting. She has now reached a point where if people looked at her as a man, she feels very bad about it. This is unacceptable for her. In order to get social acceptance she has tried hard to adapt to the ways of a woman. She always practiced when she was at home, the way a woman walks, her mannerisms; the effort was always to make it perfect, the way she talked, the way she smiled, everything had to be accurate. When she watched the advertisements on television, she did not just watch but she practiced hard to try and give the expression that was shown on screen. It was as if the burden of proving one's self identity was totally on the individual, and gender identity alone was not sufficient. It called for 'authentic' gender expression as well. Narratives like these limit and restrict the spectrum of transgender identities and reject non binary possibilities. According to Dutta and Roy (2014), even inclusive definitions of transgender identity formation often imply a singular, consistent and bio-essentialist model of gender identity, excluding any other non binary possibilities practiced by many '*kothis*' and '*dhuranis*' as a part of their self

expressions. There is often a social pressure of thinking and expressing in binaries with no scope for overlaps or fluidity, suppressing voices of subversion as required by the state and its institutions.

While writing the thesis I have felt the emergence of two different streams of narratives, stories of core and periphery emerging with the distinction between rural and urban areas on the basis of their closeness to the queer movement and hence accessibility to new and varied experiences and exposures. Individuals talking about preferred gender identities coming from a background of being in the LGBTIQHKA+ movement are in a better position or better equipped to talk about gender fluidity beyond binary existence. Badal<sup>108</sup> (34 years, Kolkata), a transfeminine member of a LGBTIQHKA+ rights group active in Kolkata said with conviction, "I consider myself as a woman, and that's it. That is enough for me." Mana<sup>109</sup> (28 years, transfeminine person from Kolkata) said, "I identify myself as a transgender identified person. I look like a boy, have taken birth as a boy, but I feel like a girl, so according to my understanding I am a transgender person". Bubu<sup>110</sup> (23 years), another young transfeminine respondent from Kolkata, shared,

I want to be identified as a transgender identified person only. I could be a woman but I am not one and I will never claim myself to be a woman. I do not want to surgically affirm and transition through SRS. I want to change my documents by choosing the 'other' option in the voter ID card as it opens a space for claiming gender identity beyond the binary.

Individuals living far away from the urban activist spaces often consider their experiences to be isolated events different and distant from others. They grow up with this feeling of isolation and alienation. The urban spaces provide the politics of new vocabulary such as 'Transgender' that came along the advent of HIV/AIDS projects and funding leading to NGO-isation of the movement. This led to a gradual shift from welfare to rights based movement and the term 'Transgender' became an umbrella term for claiming visibility and rights. Transgender as a rubric of identity perhaps reached the urban space before the rural spaces and spread in the rural areas through the HIV targeted intervention projects. The term gave exposure and newer ways of identifying and expressing one's self but it also blurred the many layered and nuanced South Asian gender identities and gender expressions. The process of

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<sup>108</sup> Interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata

<sup>109</sup> Interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata

<sup>110</sup> Interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata

'Transgender' identity formation came up in all the narratives. Suparna (40 years, Hooghly), a LGBTIQHKA+ activist narrated her journey by tracing her childhood experience. She said,

I remember wearing eye liner regularly to school for which I was scolded, warned and punished. I have fond memories of my father scolding me but he never beat me. My brother on the other hand hit me trying to make me conform to socially accepted gender norms. My parents were never bothered by all this. My father knew about my first relationship and when it broke he rescued me during consecutive suicide attempts. Concepts such as transgender had still not arrived but he used to give me books on same sex love. My parents later on were under tremendous pressure from brother's in-laws. I had to leave my family to ensure my brother's well being. My parents cried and cursed but did not ask me to stay. No one tried to stop me from leaving. It was so painful.

Suparna identifies herself as a '*hijra*' identified person. According to her, when she was grappling with her life without any support system, she got in touch with a friend who had joined the *hijra gharana*. She realised that as *hijras* are the most visible part of the community. In order to start working on community issues, focussing on the issues of the *hijra* identified individuals could be an effective starting point. She then identified herself as a *hijra* and started working on the concerns of the transfeminine individuals involved in the *hijra gharana*. She has established a project based intervention programme with transgender individuals and together with her friends is trying to challenge the social binary based do's and don'ts head on. Suparna's co-worker and friend Joyee<sup>111</sup> (38 years, transfeminine individual from Hooghly), stated,

To me cross dressing does not mean keeping long hair, wearing bra, wearing jeans and top or wearing hip pads for making the contour prominent. I think wearing whatever suits me and whatever makes me feel comfortable is my dress. See now, I am wearing a cotton pant, which is generally not preferred by men, so this is cross dressing to me. There had been incidents when due to my participation in *lagan*<sup>112</sup>, I had to keep my hair pretty long and the moment I came back I cut off my hair. This is my way of negotiating gender expression. In this Srirampore-Uttarpara belt I am known as a *hijra*, a *hijra* in pyjama and t-shirt. I need not have to wear a padded bra to prove my womanhood. To me make up is fair and lovely and face wash!

In all these narratives the identities that my respondents have talked about explain 'transgender' as a range of identities. Transgender came as an umbrella term to include a spectrum of gender identities. It made individual identities intelligible and identifiable thus facilitating political representation and project funding. Gendering 'self' becomes

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<sup>111</sup> Interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly

<sup>112</sup> Working as a migrant labour for seasonal dancing in Bihar and UP

important in order to claim one's identity against the politics of invisibilisation. Identity politics here becomes the tool working through representing the 'unheard voices'. However, a large part of the transfeminine community continues to prefer the term *kothi* in day to day use. The term is still more comfortable and relatable for many transfeminine individuals who only use the transgender umbrella for their politics while the *kothi* identity is still an integral part of their day to day living. *Kothi* is a term used to enhance the 'we-feeling' among the transfeminine individuals. *Kothi* is the glue that keeps them connected to each other because *kothi* is a term used as a slur, *kothi* is a term used for showing love, *kothi* is a way of humiliating each other and *kothi* is a way to feel at home

Suhani (40 years, transfemale from South 24 Parganas), narrated her story of her 'being' and 'becoming'. She identified herself as a transfemale. In her narrative she further added "I prefer to be identified as transfemale and not as a transwoman. When our society attains gender equality I will claim my space as a transwoman but not before that. I have changed some of my body parts into female body parts". She has surgically affirmed her body as a female body for which she identified herself as transfemale. Suhani talked about the difference between body dysphoria and gender dysphoria. According to her she has body dysphoria. She was not at all comfortable with the body she inhabited and as a result has surgically removed certain body parts and created some. She has not opted for breast augmentation. This is the reason she calls herself a 'transfemale'. Now, after surgical affirmation, she loves the body she inhabits. She has never wanted to claim either of the gendered boxes. She wants to break the boxes.

#### **Section 4: Childhood and growing up**

Developing a sense of gender has its own trajectory. Individual subjecthood is discursively constituted; developing a sense of gender is a part of that constitution. It has a history of its own. The way an individual identifies, expresses and lives a life of either a 'man or a 'woman' talks about a history of socialisation and growing up. In case of the transgender individuals their history of growing up never coincides with their preferred life course. There have been instances where my respondents have often talked about their effort of fitting in the binary mould as they grew up by compromising, negotiating and adjusting to the societal expectations. Keeping not more than shoulder length hair, wearing unisex dresses, hiding desires, trying to have girl friends and keeping connected with local boys were some of the

many ways they have shared of trying to fit into the assigned mould of 'masculinity'. But these 'trying to fit' modes could never be continued for long. There was an intense craving for living the preferred life. Jaan<sup>113</sup> (30 years, Hooghly), a transfeminine person said, "I have even tried to be in a romantic relationship with a girl. We were very good friends, but neither I could get that satisfaction from her, which I received from my present 'male' partner, nor could I give her that fulfilment." Jaan stopped disregarding her sense of gender and started living it acknowledging her desires. Not only do trans-persons have to hide their past but often they have to create a past that is new (Kessler, Mckenna 2000:22). In order to start afresh by creating a new past in convergence with their new life two of my respondents bought ownership flats before changing their body through surgical affirmation. The transgender person who is not changing their sexed body by surgical affirmation and matching their preferred gender with their transitioned body but living their gender through a range of expressions like changing names, using make-up and prosthetics, dressing according to their wish and comfort and most importantly not shifting to a new location are often addressed as 'crazy', 'weird', 'deviant', 'mad' or face verbal abuse from the local people in their immediate surroundings. They are labelled, stigmatised and invisibilised due to their inconceivability in society. Rosy (40 years, transfeminine respondent from Darjeeling district) said,

They used to call me 'hijra'; they used to make offensive sexual gestures because I am wearing a woman's dress, so I must be doing 'bad' things. I am travelling on a bus when the conductor misbehaves with me. I want to board an auto but I am not allowed. It is due to lack of awareness about non normative gender and sexuality and disrespect towards 'femininity'. So many people did not accept me as I am. They told my sister, that your 'brother' has turned 'mad' and needs treatment. So I always have to be very cautious. So I have to keep these 'ladies' stuff inside secretly, where nobody can see my belongings as if the objects I am carrying are illegal and immoral.

Bubu (23 years, transfeminine person from Kolkata) resonated the same pain as Rosy. She was also labelled as 'mad' by the head-master of her school. This ploy of labelling a person as 'mad' has been there for ages, and the societal responsibilities of 'correcting' the deviant being are executed through corrective rape, electro-convulsive shock therapy, social shaming, slut shaming, shunning, marginalising, invisibilising and alienating. Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* makes it quite clear that the disease 'madness' is a social 'disease'. There are times when our own existence becomes disturbing, especially when we look into

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<sup>113</sup> Interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly

ourselves and become so distressed that we project this disturbance onto others trying to get away from certain moments of our own 'being' (Foucault, 2016).

According to a report of the Alternative Law Forum human society cannot accept arguments based on what a trans-individual says or identifies or even look like. Society needs proof through biology and the trans-individual is asked to prove through their biological organs. (Mohan and Murthy, 2013:22). When a trans-person opts for Gender Affirmation Surgery and gets their legal documents changed it becomes difficult for them to look back at their history of becoming and talk about their childhood and growing up which did not match with their preferred and achieved identity. According to them their sense of gender stays unchanged only to experience their gender inside a preferred structure they opt for through Gender Affirmation Surgeries. "Surgery doesn't change one's gender – It changes the body in which one experiences that gender..." shared Jhora (42 years, North 24 Parganas), the second transgender woman in West Bengal opting for GAT and completing SRS during the early nineties. They might have had to change their place of origin in order to start afresh in a new location where people would accept them according to their preferred identity. Often they are not allowed to visit their family and neighbourhood as their relatives and neighbours feel uncomfortable to accept and acknowledge their transitioned identity. Often while revisiting their natal families they are forced to inhabit the societal spaces in the garb of their assigned gender at birth in order to save their families from humiliation. This sense of humiliation comes from the fact that as far as non normative gender and sexual identities are concerned it challenge social norms, disrupts the social status-quo and in the process destabilises patriarchy as patriarchy needs the institution of compulsory heterosexuality and the binarised social framework to continue unhindered (Menon, 2005). Here I argue that firstly, gender and sexuality unlike the other axes of differences like class, caste, and race are self acclaimed, self identified and self determined. One can achieve a class-based identity by birth or by the work one does, caste and race are produced by birth, but gender and sexuality, especially when we talk about non normative gender and sexuality, implies individual choices and preferences that threatens patriarchy, hence is regarded as something dangerous frightening, disorienting and rebellious. Secondly, IPC Section 377 was declared unconstitutional (Supreme Court verdict on 06.09.18) but still it has permeated different social settings, like the medical establishments, media, family and the state. Thus even after being declared as unconstitutional it has become a part of the social fabric and hence law reform in itself cannot be the solution without bringing about the desired social change. There could be a multitude

of legal reforms but without social change it will increase marginalisation even more (Narrain, 2009).

A common line of belief comes up as Bradley expands Simon De Beauvoir's quote (Beauvoir, 2011:330), to argue that our bodies born unmarked, are assigned or marked with a gender identity, either male or female based on the presence of a penis or a vagina respectively. However the becoming of a man or a woman happens within a socio-cultural framework and spacio-temporal understanding of femininity and masculinity through social interactions (Bradley, 2007). This 'becoming' is directly and indirectly influenced by our immediate environment, starting from the family we are born in and spreading across our society we experience as we grow up. The role of socialisation in the lives of the transgender individuals becomes dynamic at this juncture. The motivation of developing one's self identity differently from the societal perception of gender or going through the journey of transitioning from one's 'given' gender to the 'taken' gender creates the revolutionary moment of claiming gender as something integral to our being, something we develop as a part of our personality. By tracing the trajectory of growing up I have tried to understand the various experiences that helped my respondents to understand and feel the discomfort of coping with the societal ways of living and growing up as per the assigned gender vis-à-vis their preferred gender and marking the moments of identifying one's self and claiming one's position in society.

When we are talking about the motivation of developing in one's own way step by step from childhood to adolescence, young adult and late adulthood, two different types of motivating factors, namely extrinsic and intrinsic is focused on following the Self Determination Theory (SDT) of human motivation developed by Edward Deci & Richard Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The intrinsic motivation is based on our internal drives, our intrinsic needs which could often be in conflict with the external motivating factors based on external approval which in turn is based on socially accepted norms. The SDT model also describes our three basic needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness which are innate and intrinsic. Gender identity and gender expression seems to be shaped by the dynamic interaction between the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors and our basic needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness. In most of the narratives autonomy is compromised, competence is not fully expressed and perhaps this arises from the need for relatedness – to love and be loved. According to Brison (2002), many

trans-narratives talk about how self formation and self transformation is deeply relational. As the term itself implies relatedness needs a relation to be formed and that relationships in our social structure becomes difficult to be formed when gender identity is fluid and inconceivable. It needs an identifiable and 'solid' gender identity that falls in line with our binary social structure. Hence the need for transgender individuals to choose between the male-female binary, to be 'authentic' in order to be accepted in their preferred gender identity opposite to that assigned at birth, they need to be 'precise' in the performed gender role. On the contrary it can also be said that as self formation and transformation both as distinct processes are relational, there ought to be a two-way interplay between the 'self' and 'others'. The narratives talked about how 'others' have influenced the process of self transformation, but it is also true that lived experiences of the trans-individuals have also influenced other people's experience of themselves by shifting the meaning of gender in overt and subtle ways (Shotwell & Sangrey, 2009:59).

Manisha<sup>114</sup> (30 years, transfeminine individual, Kolkata) shared,

My realisation came very early; I could understand that I am a woman, even if I have a 'male body'. But I neither had the language, nor had the courage to share it with my parents. Then I got associated with the HIV/AIDS prevention and control programme. I came to know about sex reassignment surgery...and decided that when there is a way, I must make the best of it. I started sex work along with working as an outreach worker in the TI project. Saved money and went through all the procedures. First I opted for silicon implant. After having beautiful breasts I increased my rate, again saved money from that and did bottom surgery. I also booked a flat so that my parents did not get humiliated in their locality. I started afresh as Manisha and deleted Manish forever. The local club members of my natal locality appreciated me by saying that after surgery I have become 'proper' previously I was 'improper' or 'inappropriate'. I have 'taken' my preferred gender.

The gender binary is continuously shaped by our family system, education system, media, religion and socio-political institutions of the state, the legal system and also the medical system. Moreover these institutions join hands to perpetuate this gender structure deeply rooted in patriarchy. As a consequence individuals learn very early what is expected in terms of appearance and behaviour of their assigned gender (Shah et al, 2015). Nivedita Menon argues that the 'disciplining' of thoughts through school, family, media, education and religion work in tandem to establish what is 'normal' and thus 'natural'. Menon writes, "If

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<sup>114</sup> Interview taken on 30.08.16 in Kolkata

'normal' behaviour were so natural it would not require such a vast network of controls to keep it in place." (Menon 2005:37)

In the transfeminine narratives all of my respondents unanimously shared their experiences of humiliation, ostracisation and abuse. Abuse on transfeminine individuals by the male members of their family, locality, school, college or workplace was rampant. According to Jhumko (33 years, transfeminine respondent from Cooch Behar), her younger brother hates her and has threatened her by saying that she must not interact with her friends or he would throw her out of the house. The transfeminine individuals are a source of 'shame' for their families in our society. Either they have to be rectified or they have to be invisibilised as if they never existed. The existence of the transgender identity disrupts the established understandings of gender dichotomy or its mapping to sexual dimorphism (Heyes, 2000:171), which thrives on the basis of unequal distribution of power which Connel explained by noting a 'fit' between hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity which connotes the maintenance of practices that institutionalise men's dominance over women. (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Krishnachura (21 years), my transfeminine respondent from Birbhum district said that as a child grows they are clothed by their care givers as they cannot be kept naked and while growing up the child develops a comfort level with the clothes. According to Krishnachura the moment of realisation for her came as she started to feel uncomfortable wearing boys' dresses. She used to throw a tantrum demanding to be dressed up in girls' attires. Even if her caregivers made her wear 'pant-shirt' or cut off her hair, she could never think of herself as a boy. From class five she was forcibly restrained from wearing her comfort dresses. She faced questions like "Why would you wear girls' dresses? "Why would you talk like a girl? Why would you want to wear a *bindi*?" Throughout middle school this continued and the list of questions became endless. Her school asked her parents to take her to a counsellor, who would 'fix' the 'problem. The government counsellors concluded that her 'idiosyncrasies' were nothing but fantasies; she must start talking like a boy. According to them all this was due to the gush of hormones kicking in during adolescence. She could not make them understand that it was not possible for her to talk like a boy. The question was even if she did start talking like a boy, would she become a boy? Would her femininity vanish? Some 'well-wishers' came to her parents and asked them to confine her and beat her up saying that all her tantrums would fade.

Some told them to starve her to death so that she would forget all this. But nobody could restrain her from being 'herself'.

On the basis of the lifespan approach placed by D'Augelli (1994), as discussed by Brent L. Bilodeau and Kristen A. Renn (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005), I have tried to trace the trajectory of growing up of the transfeminine individuals as gathered from their narratives through the following steps:

- Exiting ascribed gender
- Developing a sense of preferred gender
- Developing an identity on the basis of the preferred gender
- Expressing one's identity based on the preferred gender through their 'being' and 'doing'
- Becoming a LGBTIQHKA+ community member
- Exploring intimacy on the basis of one's choice of partner/s

All the stages operate independently and are not ordered in stages. Each stage might be exclusive and distinct from the other. With the aim to understand the journey through these stages in whatever order they come and go, I tried to observe the experiences with the different institutions that we experience in our life course. Family (whether biological or preferred, whether given or created, whether ascribed or achieved) is the primary institution we experience from birth to death. Other institutions like school, college, workplace, community space, neighbourhood, all exert very strong influence on a person.

Among my 33 transfeminine respondents, three (9.09%) have never gone to school due to poverty. Seven (21.21%) had to leave school at a very early age due to financial crunch. 22 (66.67%) of my MtF respondents shared that school was the most oppressive space where they were bullied, abused, assaulted and stigmatised. Five (15.15%) have shared that the teachers used to bully them as well. They were non-cooperative and extremely negative in their attitude towards them. The teachers deducted marks without any reason, humiliated them in front of classmates, instigated others to bully and reasoned misbehaviour by saying, "You are like this, so you deserve this." These are some of the ways the teachers used to harass and humiliate the trans-identified students. School being a significant part of the 'vast network of control' (Menon, 2005:37), an important tool for disciplining through socialisation and socialisation being the process of initiation to the social do's and don'ts, the role of the

teachers in the institution that is school is to maintain the social order. When I talked to the headmistress of a well known school in South Kolkata and asked about her opinion about interacting with gender non-conforming students, her instant response was that as long as the child was studying and being regular with the assignments, she had nothing to comment in this regard as school was only for rendering education, and other issues could be taken care at home. An environment of ignorance and lack of awareness prevails in our system of education. In the transfeminine narratives the phenomenon of school drop-out was common due to extreme bullying by both teachers and students as faced by transfeminine individuals. This gender based inequality impacts the subjective experience of the transfeminine individuals making them a 'lesser human being'. It is like claiming membership as a woman even after taking birth as a man in this phallogocentric society divided on the lines of hierarchies and discriminatory gender roles.

Two transfeminine respondents (6.06%) dropped out from school due to bullying and humiliation and three (9.09%) never went to school due to poverty. In both the cases there continues a story of deprivation. Krishnachura (21 years), the young transfeminine person from Birbhum said she was severely discriminated in school. The teachers used to emotionally abuse her. They refused to help her with the studies; deducted marks from her class work without any reason. It was an invisible battle that she had to face day in and day out. The boys often abused her sexually. On one occasion after being assaulted in a village fair she went to the police station but got no redress. The police officer said, "Your friends have shown their affection for you and nothing else." Even after all this, she had to stick to the school as the only way to establish herself was through education. She had nobody beside her to take the responsibility. She said that she used to feel miserable in the school uniform. It was like she had been set ablaze in the masculine attire. It was extremely painful. Only one individual talked about a supportive school teacher who helped them get adjusted to the school environment.

Alpana<sup>115</sup> (43 years), another transfeminine respondent from Kolkata who had studied in a reputed school in Kolkata narrated,

We had an effeminate arts teacher in school who was constantly harassed by the students. Seeing this I felt even more afraid to express myself. If after being a teacher one faced such harassment what would my friends do to me if they knew my identity. I did not have any

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<sup>115</sup> Interview taken on 09.08.16 in Kolkata

friends in school. I kept to myself. I never had the courage to unwind and express who I was. I was constantly suppressing my desires.

Alpana saw her 'effeminate' teacher getting harassed for their soft and graceful attitude by other colleagues and students as well. This was unnerving for her and she could never express her desire and preferences to others. The fear of getting harassed and humiliated never allowed her to live freely. She got cocooned and started living the life of a 'family man' in order to continue getting respect from society. The visual memories of her art and craft teacher getting harassed by others remained etched in her memory and marked her life forever. Alpana being my friend came out to me for the first time. She felt secure and understood by me, but during her sister's wedding, Alpana could not invite me, as she could not take the risk. It is like fighting with one's own shadow, continuously, relentlessly and compulsively.

When the larger society does not recognise them, transgender individuals start looking for people and places where they would get acceptance. With this desperation in mind, many had tried to identify with the most visible gender non-conforming group of people - *hijras*. Badal (34 years) a transfeminine respondent from Kolkata said, that she could remember that *hijras* used to come to their locality when she was a child. She felt very afraid to see them, but from within she used to imitate them a lot, like playing the *dhol*,<sup>116</sup> wearing sari and clapping. Her father tried a lot to make her a 'boy'; he put her in a karate class then in a cricket coaching centre. But nothing worked for her; she continued playing with dolls and utensils. She also used to play hide and seek with the local girls. Badal feels angry. This deep rooted anger and frustration has made her believe that finally her life is nothing and she is not good enough. She said,

Neither could I start working in a big organisation nor could I finish my education. School life was okay, but there were some who used to take advantage of me as they used to think that I am an effeminate person, a weakling and hence I am available. I was sexually assaulted by school seniors. But then I also started liking it as at least from these exposures I was somewhere feeling at par with my feminine self.

During childhood, adolescent and young adulthood incidents of sexual abuse are common in the transfeminine narratives. Deepa (30 years, transfeminine respondent from Kolkata) shared her childhood experience with her father's friend who used to sexually abuse her by

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<sup>116</sup> *Dhol* is a double sided barrel drum

discussing inappropriate content with her with the hope that she would understand his signal and accept his proposal of getting sexually intimate with him.

My father's friend used to flirt with me. His dialogue was filled with sexual connotations. The sexual act of elephants, positions of horses during sex, so on and so forth. I wanted to tell him that I understood his signals but I was not available. Being trans-identified did not mean I would be ready to share my bed with him.

Jhumko's (33 years, transfeminine person, Cooch Behar) narration sums it up. She said,

I developed some ideas about sex when I was in class five. From class six, I developed special feelings towards boys. I realised that I was unlike other boys of my age. I used to feel goose bumps while sitting beside boys. I loved talking to boys than girls. I realised I never felt anything special for girls.

Jhumko narrated her experience of being shifted to Cooch Behar from Kolkata. She was not accustomed to the place. She had no knowledge that there were so many *kothis* like her in Cooch Behar. She said that if she had the knowledge beforehand she would have never married. She would have left the house and fled somewhere else. She also reiterated the fact that sexual assault was rampant in the lives of the transfeminine individuals. She said that during her childhood she was initiated into sexual act by an army man, who was her father's friend.

A feeling of confusion and conflict guides transgender individuals while growing up. It is like trying to get hold of something concrete about 'self' and 'others'. One of the feelings that has surfaced from the narratives is one of getting lost, drowning deep down into the sea without an anchor. There is dearth of love and care. It might so happen that they get a feeling of 'warmth' from their 'abusers'. The actions were that of abuse, as those were age inappropriate and were based on power hierarchy, but ironically the dearth of warmth was satisfied by the 'abusers.' Narratives like these reveal stark realities of transfeminine lived experiences. Sexual exposure with adult males at a very early age is common. 18 respondents out of 33(54.54%) have talked about early sexual exposure during childhood and adolescence and Nine of these 18 respondents (50%) were sexually abused by elderly men. Seven out of the nine individuals (77.78%) said that the experience was traumatic while two (22.22%) recounted that they realised their sexual orientation through the experience of being abused by elderly men. Those who got into sexual exploration with friends said that it was casual exploration and wasn't traumatic. One respondent shared her experience of being abused by a

neighbour who was a woman. Whoever be the initiator in sexual act, it brings a mixed bag of feelings leaving the child confused and guilt stricken. A child who is already struggling with their gender identity reacts diversely to this underage sexual exposure. Often the child feels guilty and unclean; often the guilt is due to a sense of pleasure from the experience. From the narratives one painful realisation shared by two respondents is that this sexual encounter in the form of child sexual abuse acted as a catalyst in understanding their sexual preference which consolidated their gender identity.

The transgender individuals tend to identify with either woman or man and as Kessler and Mckenna (2000) argued, that they by doing so continuously reinforce the fact that there are two and only two gender categories, 'woman' and 'man'. This surfaced in many of the transfeminine narratives as the respondents said that though society labels us as deviant we follow gender stereotypes as laid down and conform to the accepted norms of our preferred gender. From my experience as a researcher somewhere I also had this feeling that it was possible that my transfeminine and transmasculine respondents were reinforcing the gender binary by developing, identifying, expressing and practicing their gender identity as a 'woman' or a 'man.' However, after delving deep into the experiences and perceptions about their gender identities I have started identifying and appreciating the other narratives that run together, at times crisscrossing, overlapping each other and at times moving side by side parallel to the narratives where the trans-individuals were reinforcing gender binary. A vast spectrum of gender identities and expressions surfaced from the narratives of 60 transgender individuals I interviewed and interacted with as a part of my field work. There were individuals who wanted to change their bodies to match their gender and went through surgical affirmation choosing from an array of Gender Affirmative Therapies. Most of them have changed their physical bodies on the basis of their discomfort with a specific body part, or their preference for a specific body part or the extent of their affordability. In all these narratives they had shown their agency in deciding about their lives. There were narratives of not opting for GAT. Some of the respondents said that they did not have the money to opt for the therapy while some said that they did not want to change their bodies which could imply that they had gender dysphoria and not body dysphoria. Some individuals talked about pleasure and desire and how these had influenced their decision about GAT. Some even raised the very political question that gender is not dependent on the sexed body that we inhabit. Gender is a social construct, gender is also performativity and above all gender is the way we perceive ourselves, that is the way we identify ourselves. According to Joyee (38

years, Hooghly), one of my transfeminine respondents, "Gender is an intimate experience about myself, about who I am, what are my preferences and how do I want to express myself to others. Gender is my relationship with myself." Narratives such as Joyee's reveal that gender is not directed by biological essentialism, it is something quite different and much more abstract.

Childhood and growing up of a transgender person is often influenced by the social gaze. Gender is a concept that is spread across all our interactions and all our activities. All the social interactions and activities are heavily gendered, stereotyped; it is like a process of continuous gender accomplishment through every interaction (Kessler, McKenna 2000:12). In our society the binary based conceptualisation of gender is till now the majoritarian mainstream framework. Often it is seen that before 'exiting their ascribed gender' the transpersons try their best to identify themselves with the 'mainstream' way of life. Joyee (38, transfeminine person from Hooghly) reiterated that during her adolescence when her male friends were exploring their sexuality she started identifying that her preferences were not like them. But she used to consistently mingle with them so that her gender identity could never surface. She used to tease boys who were effeminate. She tried to fit in but it was painful for her. Joyee said in her interview,

Maybe I was not confident enough. I was myself phobic. Now I know what I am and now I am comfortable with myself. I identify myself as a transgender person but never felt the need to wear a sari or use make up to show off my femininity. I had to struggle a lot to gather courage and be what I wanted to be all through my life - a transwoman.

Alpana (43 years, Kolkata), a transfeminine respondent who is a married 'family man' with a wife and a child reminisced,

I was four or five; I had a cousin sister around my age. She used to share her dresses with me and I used to feel very happy wearing her dresses. She had a gown and one day she made me wear that gown. When I was coming down the stairs in that gown, everybody was staring at me, some laughing, some appreciating, some surprised. When I was a toddler my mother used to take me out for a walk, and the neighbours used to ask weird questions like "Is this your son or daughter?" My mother used to answer, "Son". Then the neighbours would continue,, "No, no, we can understand she is your daughter, you had the desire to have a son, so you make her wear a boy's dress." My mother used to get irritated and angry. One day my paternal grandmother saw me wearing a sari that I wore secretly in my room. She accidentally banged open the door. She was very angry and scolded me a lot. Whenever I look at my childhood and growing up I can feel the urge of growing up as a woman, which has been there always. I have always

wanted to be treated as a woman. Due to my effeminate nature I was bullied at school and ragged in college as well.

Her life experiences taught her how to safeguard herself, and now according to her, she can guard her desires so well that she passes quite easily as a cis-man. This ability to act 'straight' and guard herself has played a big part as her survival strategy. Along with Alpana others also shared their self protective measures in order to safeguard themselves from social antagonism. Two transfeminine respondents (6.06%) have said that they used to move in groups of likeminded people in school or in the neighbourhood, in order to give support to each other. Some talked about becoming quiet and shelled with the objective of not getting into social interactions and protecting the 'self' from unwelcome curiosity. In addition to this strategy of 'becoming shelled', respondents talked about strategies like becoming rebellious and protesting as a useful self protective measure. Becoming secretive and alienated from family and friends was also identified as a strategy to face the harsh world outside. Forced sexual encounters with elderly students in exchange of protection also came up as a survival strategy.

While talking about social gaze the need for 'passing' becomes a very significant survival strategy in the lives of the transgender individuals. According to Kessler and McKenna (2000:18), all of us in our process of 'doing' gender are trying to create an impression of being one gender or another and in that sense each one of us are trying to 'pass' and this poses a conceptual problem of thinking of 'passing' as an act, a strategy employed by trans-individuals.

Deepa's narration complements this understanding of 'passing', where Deepa (30 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata), said,

Actually my choice of dress totally depends on my state of mind. One day I can dress up totally like a woman, another day I can wear something masculine. But I could never think or consider myself as anything other than a woman. People also call me 'Madam' in any public places. I pass so well, that nobody questions.

In order to pass transgender individuals always need to abide by the societal norms of leading a heterosexual monogamous life through either getting into a couple relationship with a person inhabiting the sexed body different from them or a person of the opposite gender. The social conditioning about coupling, sexual intimacy, and romantic relationship is followed in

order to 'fit in' and get socially accepted. But in doing so the politics of establishing non-normativity and challenging the heterosexual hegemony gets blurred. Joyee (38 years, transfeminine person from Hooghly) said, "The more people will see individuals like us, the faster they will become aware about the issue. For this to happen we have to increase our presence in public places and make ourselves visible and noticeable. The more you will be visible the less the next generation will suffer."

But not everyone thinks like this. Some of the respondents said that all they want is to live a peaceful life with their partners. They do not care about the LGBTIQHKA+ movement as it seems really difficult to get social acceptance even after the NALSA Judgment, the Privacy Bill and the Supreme Court judgment decriminalising homosexuality in 2018. Sofia <sup>117</sup> (38 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata), sums it up when she said,

I am not quite happy about reading down Section 377 and the acknowledgment of the third gender as an established category acknowledged by the government as nothing can change the social mindset. There could be umpteen numbers of laws and policies but as long as society remains closed nothing can be changed. Still now when I board a bus the seat beside me stays empty. Whenever I am commuting by metro people stare at me, when I walk down the roads people stare at me as if I am a 'joker' or an 'alien'. This is the social gaze which needs to change from within, which no law can change. Our struggle continues and it will continue...since 1995, when we started to visit Rabindra Sarobar Lake with our friends our struggle started and still continues to this date.

## **Sec 5: Negotiations within intimate relationships**

Among the 33 transfeminine respondents I have talked with, 16 (48.48%) said they have partners. Three transfeminine respondents (9.09%) have transmasculine partners. The understanding behind getting into romantic relationship with transmasculine individuals has been the semblance of life experiences and the confidence that it would be easier to understand each other. Four respondents (12.12%) were in marital relationship with women of which three have opposite gender partners with whom they have romantic relationship out of marriage and one shared a homosexual relationship with another transfeminine individual. In all these four cases, my respondents continued to be in the marital bond as they shared a functional relationship with their wives and all of them have children. Their wives were aware about their gender identity and sexual orientation. Jhumko (33 years, transfeminine person from Cooch Behar), a 'father' of two has a workable relationship with her wife. She

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<sup>117</sup> Interview taken on 16.01.18 in Kolkata

has always been in same sex relationships. Even after knowing everything her family forcibly got her married to a woman with whom she has two children. Jhumko said that her wife is like a friend to her but they do not share any physical relationship. She saves money for her children as well. She said that she loves caring and providing for them. She also has a partner who is much younger to her. She has managed to get a contractual job for her wife in the railways where Jhumko also works as a contractual employee. Both of them have different shifts. At night when her wife finishes her work, she asks her husband to come to the railway station and pick her up. To her Jhumko is a responsible 'husband'. Jhumko said,

My wife is my friend. She rebukes me a lot for my gender identity, but then again also safeguards me from others who taunt me. If anybody calls me a *hijra*, she protests and says, even if 'he' is a *hijra*, so what, being a *hijra* 'he' provides for the family. Whatever 'he' may be, 'he' is ours and others need not have to poke their nose in this.

The role of the provider gives them a better position to bargain for themselves. The married female partners or other family members also tend to ignore/invisibilise the gender-sexuality aspect of their identity, but it is always dependent on their capacity to provide for the family. It is always conditional. The construction of masculinity through the role of the breadwinner is seen in Sumit's narrative as well. Sumit<sup>118</sup> (32 years), is a transfeminine individual from Kolkata identifying as *hijra*, but not included in the *hijra gharana* as she is married to a cis-woman and cannot leave her parents, wife and child. She shared that her role as the provider of the family is the only way she receives familial support and shelter. She earns by doing sex work and seasonal dancing. Sumit's mother<sup>119</sup> said,

My son is different; I know he is like a *hijra*. But as he earns we are having a better life. We are getting two square meals a day, we are getting clothes to wear, we are enjoying electric connection, previously we used to light up *hariken*<sup>120</sup>. He is working that is why his son is going to school. Whatever he is, he is my son, and my responsibility. Nobody has anything to say.

Sumit maintains a LIC policy for her son so that he can do higher studies when he grows up and wants to arrange everything for her son. She doesn't know how long will she live. She is HIV positive and feels sad at times. But her resilience is indomitable. Sumit shared that her wife is well aware of her orientation and her *parikh*. Sumit has physical intimacy with both her wife and her *parikh*, but she shared that she gets sexually engaged with her wife for meeting her wife's desire. She never gets aroused by wife but she understands that it is her

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<sup>118</sup> Interview taken on 18.05.16 in Kolkata

<sup>119</sup> Interview taken on 18.05.16 in Kolkata

<sup>120</sup> A kind of kerosene lamp

responsibility to keep her happy. Sumit said she could only express her desire to her *parikh* and no one else. Three of them go to UP and Bihar for *lagan*<sup>121</sup>. Sumit's wife goes with them as her *parikh's* wife. "It is complicated but doable", said Sumit said with a mysterious smile. This is how she negotiates with both the relationships. There is transparency and mutual support. Their family is a socio-economically underprivileged family. Sumit's *parikh* is alone. He came to Sumit after both of his parents died. Sumit has a son. Sumit regards her wife as her colleague, co-earner, co-parent and friend. Both of them are dependent on each other, financially as well as socially. Sumit depends on her *parikh* emotionally and her well-being is directly linked to him and her wife acknowledges that. It is their way of negotiating with each other. The neighbours and relatives know about this. Coming from the same socio-economic class her neighbours understand that for poor families like them, survival is the most important concern, where socio-cultural norms blur and fade. Here also Sumit's role as the provider has helped her to live her life her way. Upon being asked whether she would have accepted her wife if she was in multiple relationships, Sumit answered in affirmation and added that she has no idea about how the society would react to it. Sumit identifies as a woman but for her family members and neighbours she is the 'man' of the family, but interestingly her masculinity created by the role of the provider exists as long as she continues providing for her family.

Another respondent Alpana (43 years, transfeminine person from Kolkata) said, that her wife shares her jewellerys and saris with her but have asked her not to wear it in front of her. In her interview Alpana said,

I am a transfeminine lesbian. I have a partner outside marriage who is a transwoman and we sometimes meet at a hotel. At times I enjoy intimate moments with my wife but only when she thinks of me and treats me as a woman which is often not possible for my wife. We have a son and my wife does not want him to know that his father is different.

Arbaz<sup>122</sup> (38 years, from Kolkata) identifies herself as a transwoman in a married relationship with a cis-gender woman. Arbaz has become a family person and only engages with *parikh*s for sexual gratification. In the interview Arbaz said,

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<sup>121</sup> Working as a migrant labour for seasonal dancing in Bihar and UP

<sup>122</sup> Interview taken on 16.01.19 in Kolkata

I am a person assigned male at birth (AMAB), born with a 'male' body. But when I started to know and understand myself, I felt myself to be much different from a man. I felt that I was not a man, nor a woman; a man's body with a woman's soul. I thought of myself as a woman and wanted a man as a partner. I had to marry a woman due to social pressure, had to perform the duty of a husband and had to enter the role of a father. And so sometimes being in a woman's role and sometimes in a man's, my sexuality is fluid along with my gender.

For Arbaz, Alpana, Sumit and Jhumko being able to give birth to a child was the most important thing in order to fit into the social structure. Marriage was forced on them and then in order to save that marriage child birth was mandatory. Now that she has a son she is happy. From the narrative it emerged that Arbaz is doubly content. Firstly she is relieved from the societal pressure of proving potency in a marital relationship, feeling 'complete' performing the role ascribed by the heteropatriarchal society and producing able bodied citizen subject for the nation state. Secondly she loves the feeling of nurturing her child through which she feels free to express her femininity in a socially acceptable way.

In order to understand the dynamics of sexual orientation and intimate relationships of the trans-persons, one must try to look at sexual orientation and gender separately. Here Arbaz as a transwoman is attracted to a man, but she is married to a cis-woman and has to perform the socially prescribed role of a 'man.' So here, from the social perspective Arbaz is in a heterosexual relationship with 'his' married partner. The in-marriage imposed heterosexuality is not her preference. She feels happy in the out-of-marriage intimacy with her *parikh* which is also aligned with her gender and sexuality. On the other hand she also experiences a different kind of intimacy with her married partner who is also extremely important in her life. It is important to look through the lens as suggested by my respondents.

Chhuman (36 years), my transfeminine respondent from Darjeeling district coming from a rural, low income group background stated,

I consider myself as a transgender identified person. But as I inhabit a male body and have sex with another male bodied person you may call me homosexual as well.

Intimate spaces often play a very important role in affirming one's gender and sexuality. How I see myself and how my partner perceives me are two interrelated aspects that help in consolidating my self-concept. Gender and sexuality are two very important aspect of self-concept. Through living their relationships individuals often get to know the 'self' better and

develop a sense of self regarding their preferences, choices and desires. In a relationship if the partner of a trans-person is affirmative of their gender identity it becomes comforting and reassuring. In Deepa's (30 years, Kolkata) case her partner Saranya<sup>123</sup>, a cis-gender man, said,

Initially when we met, she had short hair; she used to fight for her rights all by herself before we met. So in order to fit in her ascribed gender role she used to keep her hair short. After I came in her life, she started to express herself confidently. She started keeping long hair; she opted for laser treatment as I never liked the roughness of her facial hair. She started expressing herself more openly and more vividly.

Deepa's partner also felt good to see her taking care of all the 'feminine' duties for his family. When his sister was hospitalised she took care of her little daughter. When the little one grew up and started having periods, she was the first person to know about it and brief her about using sanitary napkins. Through various interactions and incidents her preferred gender identity was affirmed by her partner. This made Deepa feel happy and confident.

Intimate relationships play a very role in making decisions regarding GAT. Badal is a 34 year old transfeminine person from Kolkata. Her partner a cis-man does not want Badal to opt for SRS. He said he is used to her body and he loves her in this manner only. Any change would be shocking for him. Badal said,

My partner used to understand me and my situation. He used to love me and accept me as I am. See I have 6 ear piercings, I used to wear stone studs, I used to wear smudged *kajal* and he used to love me like that. When I told him about castration he said that once I would go for it I must intimate him and he would never meet me or talk to me after that.

Another respondent Manisha (30 years, Kolkata), a post-opt transgender woman coming from an urban middle income background shared; "In a couple of sexual incidents I enjoyed the sexual act where I felt the sensation in my penis. But then I understood that getting satisfaction through my womanhood in relation with a man would be more satisfying for me and being a woman, this penis is an organ I don't want in me."

Sexual exposures often help in exploring bodies, desires and preferences and deciding whether or not to opt for GAT. In Manisha's case, though she enjoyed sexual act by using the 'penis' but being a woman within she decided not to keep penis as a part of her material body. There were responses, where my respondents have said that they wanted to keep their 'penis' as is it the pleasure point. Again some said that keeping the penis intact means greater

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<sup>123</sup> Interview taken on 04.09.16 in Kolkata

flexibility and choice in sexual act. Mana (28 years, Kolkata), a transfeminine respondent who is a sex worker and also works in an NGO said,

I am a transwoman with certain masculine traits. I have never been able to play the bottom role and I feel myself versatile playing the top role. Many of my customers love me as a 'she-male'<sup>124</sup>. During my school days I was known as CD-Top or Cross-dresser Top.

Rosy (40 years), my transfeminine research respondent from Darjeeling district, coming from a middle income group background, planning for GAT and having already started HRT shared her sexuality by saying that she has feelings for both men and women. She came to know about this through her experience of sex work. She said,

I realised my orientation through sexual exposure with both the sexes. But I will decide about all this after sex change. Then only I will be able to understand whom I am more attracted to and comfortable with. If after sex change I find it towards a woman, it could be a woman life partner... there is no problem in that.

Self revelation happened through many layers. There were responses where the individuals have accepted the fact that through child sexual abuse, they came to know about their orientation after going through a host of contradictory feelings stemming from the age inappropriate sexual exposure, feelings like guilt, anger, pain and pleasure. Again another person shared that the genital has always played a very significant role in sexually engaging with another person and has blossomed as the magical pleasure point that she would never want to change or remove through surgical intervention. Though she identified as a woman, she felt no conflict in inhabiting a body with a penis and at the same time inhabiting a woman's mind in the same body. 'Biology is not destiny', is reinforced time and again through these narratives trying to create multiple reference points that challenge the rigid binary reference points of a heteropatriarchal monogamous social structure. Whenever we are talking about trans-experiences we are talking about difference, about something new, about change, whether it is transgression or transformation or transcendence it is always different from the norm, always challenging the norm.

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<sup>124</sup> She-male is a term primarily used in sex work to describe a transgender woman with male genitalia and female secondary sex characteristics usually including breasts from breast augmentation and use of hormones

Suhani's (37 years, South 24 Parganas) who identified as a transfemale, challenged monogamy by stating confidently issues concerning her relationship with her three partners. All the relationships are placed separately with transparency and consent. She said,

I have three partners, all of them know about each other. They are also married. One has a stable relationship as well. I identify myself as a transfemale. I prefer bisexual men. If they have other partner that never bothers me, and likewise my multiple relationships also do not bother them. I maintain my relationship with mutual respect, mutual space and mutual trust. If I ever had three children, I would have loved them all. If they bled, my heart would have bled in the same way for each one. I have the same feelings for my partners as well. They know everything. I see relationships as an open space of exploration, engagement and bonding. I do not believe in staying as husband and wife under one roof, serving for the husband once he comes back from work, sleeping with him at night...I cannot live like this.

Chhuman (36 years, transfeminine respondent from Darjeeling district) said she does not have a stable partner. She has multiple sexual partners. They come when she desires and vice versa. It continues on mutual grounds.

In stark contrast, Bubu (23 years, transfeminine person from Kolkata) said that she has a *parikh* who loves her a lot. They go out for vacations. Her *parikh* is the biggest support she has. She also had a dream to adopt a child but now she has changed her plan as she doesn't want to bring a child and give an identity which would not be socially acceptable. So now she wants her *parikh* to get married and she would then take care of her *parikh's* child together with his wife if at all the wife allows. But she can never think about having multiple relationships. She is happy and content with her *parikh*. For some respondents monogamy in their intimate relationships was non-negotiable while for others it was an issue of mutual consent and an area of constant negotiations like Suhani. For others still these are shifting spaces, some have a political take, others an emotional and experimental approach and yet other have both. In the narratives around intimacy the marriage question continues to surface. Bubu said she wants her *parikh* to get married because she will not be able to marry him as the law of the land will not allow it, but because of that her *parikh* cannot be deprived of a family. Others like Bubu who have not changed their gender category to 'woman' have said that their transgender identity has been acknowledged by law, Section 377 of IPC has been declared unconstitutional, and in the process non normative gender identity and sexual orientation have been 'normalised' but the expression of their love hasn't been socially approved till now. Through this apparently progressive stance of depathologisation,

decriminalisation and normalisation people are motivated to come out of the closet but in the process another closet is created. The new closet is the 'domain of the private space'. Through reading down Section 377, sexual acts other than peno-vaginal sex have been decriminalised but always, 'in private, with consent and between two adults'. It has been pushed to the 'bedroom' (Hekma, 2004) and the public sphere continues to be the sacrosanct domain of heterosexuality. Section 377 is no more there, NALSA has established individual right to self determine one's gender identity, The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016 has been translated to an act in 2019 but the marriage or civil union question has remained untouched. Gert Hekma talked about a socio-sexual change that is necessary for challenging and changing this heterosexual public culture. Dipto<sup>125</sup> (40, transman from Assam now settled in Kolkata) who married his partner Jhora (42, transwoman, North 24 Parganas) said,

I would have kept my gender identity as 'transgender' as I don't want to hide it, but as we wanted to get socially and legally married, I had to change my gender to 'man' as trans-marriages have not yet been legalised. There is no mention of civil union as well. This is against human rights.

Dipto had to choose one of the two boxes in order to be acknowledged as intelligible citizen subject and then only got the sanction to get married to his partner Jhora. Dipto opted for top surgery, hysterectomy and hormone replacement therapy. Dipto's partner Jhora, a post operative transfeminine person opted for complete SRS. In contrast Bubu (23 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata) did not choose any of the two socially ascribed boxes and wanted to live her politics of being a trans-person so she could not even dream of getting married. Bubu who is on HRT does not want to opt for penectomy and vaginoplasty as according to her,

Whatever I do I will never be considered a woman, I will never be able to give birth, so what is the point? Moreover I would never join the *hijra* clan, so it would not matter even if I keep the penis. I have been accustomed to this body for the last 23 years. So I don't want to change it. I am comfortable the way I am.

Whatever approach each relationship takes it ends up breaking many of the rules made up by our society creating transversal communication and newer ways of engaging with each other. Gender and sexuality issues become more intertwined and complicated with the rise of multiple gender positions (Hekma, 2004:278). A trans-person can have a homosexual

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<sup>125</sup> Interview taken on 20.10.18 in Kolkata

relationship or a heterosexual relationship, a trans-person can be monogamous, polygamous or polyamorous, a trans-person can also be asexual, pansexual, demisexual, bisexual, whatever suits their preference, their polymorphous preferences disrupts the conventional understanding of gender and sexuality.

Alpana (43 years, Kolkata), an individual, publicly identified as a cis-man, but privately identified as a woman stated her desires deep down by saying,

I would have been happiest in a lesbian relationship. I feel excited when she touches my areola; I have given her this feedback as well. When we are intimate she tries to make me feel good by touching my areola, sucking it. But she is also not aware of all the acts involved in a lesbian sexual intimate moment. But time and again in our relationship I am forced to take the masculine role, I am the one who penetrates. This is irritating for me.

Through sexuality and intimacy, the body became the site of struggle, celebration and revelation for each transgender identified individuals. For the transgender individuals sexuality becomes even more important as their experiences post-operation change dramatically. Purba (40 years, transfeminine respondent from Bardhaman) said,

I used to enjoy sexual act with my penis, but I never liked it being a part of my body. It was complicated. But now after my vaginoplasty, I am getting used to a new body part. Till now after 2 years of my surgery I have to use a dilator for at least one hour thirty minutes every day. But at last I am at peace with my body.

Connected with intimacy the marriage question also came up in a prominent way. Jhora (42 years, North 24 Parganas), a post-SRS transfeminine individual married to a post-SRS transmasculine individual said that after meeting her partner she craved for marrying him and start a family together. She said, "I stay with my mother, younger aunt, uncle and my babies. I have 12 cats, six dogs, an aquarium full of fish and two turtles.

Marriage is for many a coveted life option but there are many individuals who do not want to get into such a social binding. Krishnachura (21 years), the young, transfeminine individual from Birbhum said,

I don't want to get married; in our society there isn't a single man who would like to start a family with a transwoman. I get attracted to many men but I know they would never stay with me. They would enjoy me and then they would discard me and leave me behind. Moreover I believe getting married with conch bangle and vermilion is nothing but a symbol of subjugation for a woman. I don't want to get into a life of 'bondage'. I am a self reliant woman and want to live my life as a free woman.

Along with the desire to get married and start a 'home' together, narratives like this also surfaced where the gradual unfolding of the free spirit of a sensitive and self-reliant woman is seen, who is questioning and challenging the patriarchal mores and standing strong as a symbol of subversion all by herself.

Coupled with the marriage question, the desire for 'mothering' a child also surfaced from several narratives. Suparna, (40 years, Hooghly) who identified herself as a hijra identified individual and is in a relationship with a transmasculine individual has already adopted a child. She along with her partner and her friend, a queer woman and an activist are parenting the child. Here the concept of legal parenting is mingled with social parenting giving it a queer shape as legal and social parenting for this child comes from an arrangement of three individuals tied by love and friendship. There were two respondents who wanted to opt for adoption, but later on thought of not getting into it as according to them they did not want to bring children and make their lives miserable by making them a part of the socially inconceivable lives that they live.

Krishnachura (21 years, transfeminine individual from Birbhum) said,

I dreamt of adopting a child and feel motherhood by giving the child a good life. But then I thought, for my happiness I do not have any right to jeopardise another life. I am a transgender person, I am neither a man nor a woman. When my child will start going to school if other friends ask who is there in their family, how will my child answer? Will my child say they stay with their mother or their father? There won't be any specific answer. The child will feel bad. Our society hasn't changed yet. Our society hasn't been that much progressive till now.

Creating preferred family spaces gives the trans-individuals a sense of belonging, emotional security and connection. It is not that they are always disconnected from their natal families but they always create their own spaces with their people that they call family.

Six transfeminine individuals talked (18.18%) about intimate partner violence as well. The root causes of these incidents of partner violence were mainly possessiveness, greed, patriarchal mindset and absence of legal binding. Jhumko (33 years, Cooch Behar) said that, "We *kothis* tend to spend a fortune for our *parikhs*. I have spent a lot behind them, like for one of them, I bought a two-wheeler." But the point that surfaced from her narrative and resonated in other narratives also was the fact that for tying their *parikhs* to them, the *kothis* often spent as much money as possible, thinking that material goods can secure the

relationship. It is like compensating for her inabilities, inadequacies. Jhumko also talked about intimate partner violence which resonated with Pari's narrative where she talked about losing her partner as a result of not being able to provide for him. Pari (23 years, Cooch Behar) said, "Unless and until there is a legal binding on us, our relationships would continue to be fragile and temporary."

In intimate relationships roles continue to remain fluid and changeable as identities are never linearly defined. Trans-masculinities and trans-femininities are played through dynamic permutations and combinations. Some of my transfeminine respondents wanted to have a stable married life, some wanted to be in multiple relationships, some wanted erotic partners without any interest for romance and some were forced to get married with women while having preferred partners outside of their marriage. All these options and preferences talk about a 'queer presence' that threatens the heteronormative social structure creating cracks and fissures from where fresh stories spring out as parallel stories of change. In this space of intimacy and exploration the transfeminine individuals try to know their 'self' better and are in a constant state of negotiation in their intimate relationships, within and without marriage, to live their gender.

## **Section 6: Relationship with the body**

In the research trans-narratives have challenged binary determinism and biological essentialism through trans-articulations of the bodies. In this section I have tried to explore the various ways in which the 'body' is perceived by the transfeminine individuals as an intimate space of 'being' and 'doing'. According to Manisha (30 years, transwoman from Kolkata who has completed full SRS), in the first consultation with her plastic surgeon, her doctor, a well known plastic surgeon practicing in Kolkata said that a woman must have an hour glass figure and only then will breast augmentation look good. According to her surgeon, as a transfeminine person starts taking hormones, her body structure slowly changes and the pelvic girdle becomes thinner and then only does he approve breast augmentation and not before that. On the contrary an article published by National Centre for Biotechnology Information on breast augmentation states that though not mandatory, it is recommended that trans-individuals take external hormones for a year before breast augmentation surgery. The hormones increase breast tissue mass and gives better cosmetic results after the surgery

(Bekeny et al 2020). The position of Teesta in the Bengali film '*Shunyo E Buke*'<sup>126</sup> helped us understand the obsession with women's breasts as a site of awe and male gaze. The debate of opting for silicon implant presented in the film questions the need for valourising the male gaze. Is it aligning one's body with one's gender or is it aligning one's body to the male gaze? The question needs to be pondered upon. Manisha shared that initially she had opted for silicon implant. Then her doctor asked her to go for breast augmentation by invasive surgical procedures. She opted for it in order to get more customers as an escort woman. She said that by showing her fuller and bigger breasts she could get good customers willing to pay more. With that money she did her penectomy followed by vaginoplasty to become that 'authentic' woman. But she has never labelled herself as a woman, instead describes herself as a 'transitioned woman.' She accepts the fact that her heavier breasts has made her weak, she can no more run faster, she has lost the vigour that she used to have. But still her breasts bring her money which she could never have earned before.

Using the beauty of body parts for increasing income is a common phenomenon for trans-individuals because most of them have to struggle to sustain their livelihood. However, the existing legal and medical framework has little understanding and introduces a form of gate-keeping based on social constructions of ethics and morality. Aniruddha Dutta, (Associate Professor, Iowa State University, ethnographic researcher and enabler) in her article "Gatekeeping Transgender" dated October 4, 2016 talks about gate-keeping.<sup>127</sup> She mentions an incident where a transfeminine individual approached a Kolkata based queer friendly psychiatrist and told her that she was in need of a 'Gender Dysphoria' certificate. She informed her that she wanted to start HRT and then she would opt for breast augmentation. This was important for her as she wanted to start working as a 'she-male.' This approach was not familiar to the psychiatrist and she refused to give her the certificate as according to the psychiatrist it was unethical to furnish a GD certificate to support her livelihood choice. According to Aniruddha Dutta,

SRS needs to be easily available and psychiatric counselling for Gender Dysphoria certificate needs to be exploratory and need based. Medical scholarship is hierarchal and the understanding of medical practitioners is binary centric. I know of a doctor who told a transwoman that her hand movements were not feminine enough. It's always about the male gaze and male desire by which standards many cis-women would also not qualify as woman. Even livelihood is defined by the male gaze where the job market is also becoming gendered.

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<sup>126</sup> *Shunyo E Buke* (Empty Breasts) is a 2005 Bengali film directed by Kaushik Ganguly. The film deals with the psyche of men and women and their physical relationship.

<sup>127</sup> <https://raiot.in/gatekeeping-transgender/> (accessed on 12.01.19)

The conflict between the queer narrative of gender and the medical gaze at gender is summed up beautifully by Dr. Ranjita Biswas<sup>128</sup>, queer feminist, activist and psychiatrist, when she was asked if there was a conflict between her queer feminist self and the psychiatrist in her following a binarised training and protocol when issuing a GD certificate. Dr. Biswas replied,

Yes, it is a serious dilemma. On the one hand, I as a queer feminist activist do not see any role of a psychiatrist in the certification of anyone's gender identity. The NALSA judgment also specifies that every person has the right to their self determined gender identity. And yet, I as a psychiatrist have to on the other hand issue a certificate of dysphoria that is the only way a person can start the process of legal medical transition or gender affirmation. So basically my psychiatrist self is constantly challenging and undermining my queer feminist activist self. It only leaves me the option of being a "sensitive and helpful, queer friendly professional", perhaps not a queer affirmative one when I am writing out the certificate.

Mana (28 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata) shared that she would only opt for SRS for breast augmentation as she wanted to start working as a 'she-male.' I also talked to Manisha (30 years), transwoman from Kolkata who has completed SRS, who said that after breast augmentation her income as a bar dancer and a sex worker has increased. The situation has changed and at present a transfeminine individual might not face any problem obtaining GD certificates as understanding about the lived experiences of trans-persons has increased. The medical fraternity must take into consideration the determination of the trans-individuals and their journey of self revelation and acclamation. Not all transfeminine individuals would want to work as a 'she-male.' The reasons for choosing a vocation through which they can express their femininity must be understood by empathising with their lived experiences and not by being judgmental from a hierarchal position of power. The agential role of the trans-individuals in deciding for their lives has to be acknowledged.

However, the way the medical and legal professions look at the surgical affirmation of gender seems to give more weight to the unilinear relationship between sex and gender based on the binary model guided by the 'ideal' construct of the 'authentic' woman promoted by the beauty industry. Though the need of matching one's sense of gender with the preferred male or female body seems to be a 'lucrative' way of life, trans-individuals through their lived experiences have challenged the ways gender and sex are conceived and practiced. The trans-individuals are creating new reference points through which individual desires and gendered sense of self can be shaped and reshaped and subjects are discursively constituted (Ewing and

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<sup>128</sup> Interview taken on 19.01.19 in Kolkata

Taylor, 2018) where the body becomes the sight of reconstruction, modification and ornamentation. In my discussion with the transfeminine respondents the main factor that they have talked about in their relationship with their body was their comfort level with it. Krishnachura (21 years, Birbhum), a young transfeminine individual shared,

I feel disgusted with the penis I have. If I did not have it, I would have been the happiest person. That organ time and again reminds me of my biological sex as a 'man'. I hate it. I would have felt more comfortable and at ease without it. But at the same time I love my body. I want to express my femininity through this body only. I don't want to opt for SRS and make it go wrong as my body cannot take too much stress. But if I get an opportunity to opt for it, first and foremost I would be done with the penis. I don't need that organ. Then I would love to follow the entire procedure involved. I want to take hormones so that my body becomes soft and feminine. But all these can be materialised only if my body is ready for all the strain. I don't want to overdo it. I want and I believe that I can express my femininity in this body only.

This extreme rejection of the body gives rise to extreme suffering. It's not that whoever wants to opt for surgical affirmation will be able to do it. There could be so many reasons such as lack of money, social pressure, livelihood related problems, relationship dilemma, ill health, inaccessibility of resources, lack of support system or no support system at all. The phrase, 'trapped in the wrong body' becomes the reality for those who inspite of wanting it badly cannot go for SRS.

In my research voices have continuously surfaced which question the unilinearity of sex and gender through their own lives. Deepa, (30 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata) who is a creative person with her own boutique said,

If I had six fingers in my palm, I would have accepted it as it was. If I had a mole and if surgical removal of it was risky, then wouldn't I have lived with it? It is a part of my body and it would not have bothered me at all. And if you say that this is not like that of a woman then I would say that many women in spite of having everything are unable to give birth to a child. So if you look at it in that way then post menopause, no woman would remain a woman. So will they commit suicide? So I have started thinking that I am a woman whose body is like this and that's all. I also never think of this body as a male body because I have never thought of myself as a boy. I am a woman and I have got this body by virtue of my birth. But that does not mean I would use this body as boys use it. I can never think of using my body like that, never. And so I do not wish to be a woman through SRS or by implanting a breast. And right now I am so busy that I do not have the time to go through that sort of a medical process. And I can see that I have never had the need to do so and so I don't bother. I was only uncomfortable with my facial hair and I removed that through laser therapy.

Deepa's narration is confident, full of conviction and it stems from a solid understanding of the queer life. This is directly linked to her class, caste and education level. The confidence with which Deepa has accepted her 'self' has its roots in her privileged socio-cultural-economic standing which cannot be compared with the lived experiences of many others who are coming from low socio economic background and who stay far away from the mainstream queer movement.

There are stark differences between the lived experiences of a rural trans-individual and an urban trans-individual. In the urban sphere accessibility to SRS is better than the rural areas. The individuals residing in a city can access medico-legal services more easily than a rural individual. This could probably be the reason why none of my rural respondents have said that they have undergone SRS. Transfeminine respondents after coming and starting to live in the city for some time have gradually accessed SRS, but those staying in villages of Darjeeling, Siliguri, Cooch Behar, South 24 Parganas, Bardhaman and Birbhum have not even thought of taking this big step forward. They have looked for many different ways through which they could express their femininity, like Jhumko (33 years), from Cooch Behar said,

I prefer wearing body hugging suits so that my body curves are visible and the tenderness of my breasts can be seen. I have a feminine body. It is soft and tender. Drivers come from UP and Bihar, they like me a lot. I have had sexual relationship with a couple of them.

## **Sec 7: The idea of femininity**

From my thesis it could be said that transfeminine individuals often expressed their femininity by following or imitating their childhood role models, the popular 'female leads' of Bollywood films like Rekha and Sridevi. By imitating them they feel closer to the feminine side. The frame of reference of the 'authentic woman' a term that has often cropped up in many of the narratives is the patriarchal construction of femininity as represented in art, literature, films and in the print and electronic media. In the absence of alternate non-binary constructs the transgender discourse seems to follow the binary gender stereotypes but it also indicates something beyond following gender stereotypes. All these icons have represented courageous female characters through bold dance sequences and unforgettable songs celebrating their desire and sexuality. Following their bold and graceful moves many transfeminine individuals have celebrated their womanhood by embodying their sexual excesses. Dancing to the tunes of Bollywood numbers helped them express their femininity in

a society that condemns and invisibilises them. According to Dr. Kaustav Bakshi,<sup>129</sup> Associate Professor, English Department, Jadavpur University, "Dancing is an important vehicle of protest within queer communities. Since dance allows rage to find expression in furious motion, queer people often dance to resist and assert themselves." Dancing provided that language, which allowed them to protest as well as enact their deep erotic desires. Suhani, (37 years, Baruipur), who identifies as transfemale describes her association with the Bollywood beauties through an engaging memoir,

I had a wonderful childhood with my neighbours being my extended family and a couple of very good friends. The stories we used to listen and the movies we used to watch had a very strong influence on us. I used to identify myself with heroines I loved to watch. Like I used to imagine myself as Rekha and fantasise a love affair with Amitabh Bacchan. My friends used to act like Sridevi and Jaya Prada. Later on when *Beta* released I used to picture myself as Madhuri Dixit and danced to the tune, "*Dhak Dhak, Karne Laga.*" I used to swish my bosom and butt and feel excited. So we grew up together happily. The first doubt that crept into my mind was when we were seven or eight years old. My friends started developing breasts. I was sure that I too would have breasts like them. But it never happened. That was the first reality check for me. For the first time I realized that biologically I was not a 'girl'. I started praying to god, to give me my preferred body. Every night when I went to bed, I had the belief that when my mother would come to wake me up the next morning, she would discover a 'girl' lying on the bed and that would be me. But it never happened.

The practice of assigning gender to bodies at birth and thereafter living the gendered bodies is guided by the socialisation process where the socio-legal structures and boundaries play a very important role in constructing the individual entity. Amidst this majoritarian discourse of gendering bodies and constructing subject-hood personal histories of reclaiming these bodies and talking about liveabilities without fear, shame or hatred have always disrupted the patriarchal discourse. The journey of reclaiming these bodies, inscribing meanings to them, becoming comfortable in them and feeling content in their 'real selves' created moments of victory. Some of my respondents have talked about expressing and experiencing their femininity through ornamentation, yet some have laid importance to gendered activities in order to express their femininities while some have focused on the importance of sexual exploration in understanding and exploring their femininities. The perceptions around femininity were also represented through a range of ideas and expressions as respondents identified their femininity in multiple ways differentiated by fine distinctions. Identifying as a 'woman' also means going through individual negotiations with the gendered expectations of the body imposed by society. Often it seems that expressing femininity is profoundly a

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<sup>129</sup> Source: <https://thewire.in/film/sridevi-dancing-queen-queer-icon> (accessed on 15.07.21)

'performativity'. Rosy (40 years), transfeminine respondent from Siliguri narrated her experience,

I practiced for a number of years to walk like a girl, so that my mannerisms were like that of girls... so I 'toned' myself for many years and after going on practicing, today as I walk, talk and behave, everyone consider me as a woman. Everyone calls me madam or '*didi*' in my support group and at my workplace. So I have a satisfaction that people treat me as a woman and I am able to interact with them as a woman. But even now the biggest problem for me is that I have to move around very carefully near my area... even now people harass me in different ways. I think of myself as a woman but people who have known me from my childhood behave with me as if I am a man. When a male person comes and embraces me, I have a very bad feeling. I feel that I did not get my due respect from him. The respect that I deserved, the respect that a woman gets, I should have got that respect but I did not get it. A host of such behaviours, like a bad joke, one that a man might say easily to another man but I don't like hearing it, I feel encroached, disrespected and misgendered.

Suhani, (37 years, transfeminine respondent from South 24 Parganas) comes from a rural background. She is also an actor and an activist. She shared,

You know after SRS, the main change that I have felt was the change in my state of mind and my thought process. Previously I used to think that once I would change my body I would start doing more and more sex work. But now I am not being able to indulge in it. I have become protective about my body. It is not for everyone to touch. I have also started having motherly feelings whenever I see a child. I have changed a lot.

Here femininity gets directly linked to respectability, that 'respectability' which is given to a '*bhadralok*' and a '*bhadromohila*'. The construction of the term *bhadralok* is commonly referred to the social category of the Bengali middle-class urban educated male; in other words, it means, most of all, gentle folk or 'respectable man' (Chatterjee 1993, Banerjee 2010, Chattopadhyay 2014, Sarkar 1989) which was coined during the anti-colonial nationalist wave in the nineteenth century as a response to the 'disciplining mechanism' imposed by the British colonial rulers. The figure of the '*bhadramohila*' developed as the suitable counterpart of the '*bhadralok*'. Women were groomed in order to reflect the rich heritage of the homeland. They were educated, trained in soft skills and kept as a trophy who would carry the tradition with her and show the British colonialists that Indians never needed their guidance to take care of their women and culture, they were enough equipped themselves to do so. This construction of the figure of women with sophisticated behaviour and refined taste was made to resist the Western gaze of colonial rule as the 'civilising machine'

(Chatterjee, 1993). This concept of the respectable, finely cultured, dignified, domesticated woman has been carried forward to this century as well in order to keep the cis-het status quo intact. As far as my research respondents from West Bengal are concerned, this construction of the figure of '*bhadramohila*' guided the idea of femininity to a greater extent.

Femininity is also linked to the wish to adorn oneself in such a way that men would get interested in them. Krishnachura (21 years, transfeminine respondent from Birbhum) said,

During class IX, I started cross dressing. During that time I used to observe that the girls were roaming around with boys. I realised I was also being attracted towards boys. I used to crave for a boy who would love me just like a boy falls in love with a girl. I used to crave for that boy to turn again and again and see me. I wanted to make myself attractive in the eyes of the boys. I wanted to become beautiful in their eyes. Till now when I adorn myself I want to become attractive to boys.

Construction of this femininity directly stemmed from the '*bhadralok-bhadramohila*' discourse of colonial Bengal later on depicted, reinforced and promoted by the film industry. One of my respondents, Badal, (34 years, transwoman from Kolkata) shared that the transfeminine persons in order to replicate the tinsel town divas often 'make it louder', they walk with swishing hips which barely any cis-woman would do. They would try to imitate their way of dialogue delivery that would not be anywhere close to the mundane exchange women do with their family members, colleagues, friends or other acquaintances. Here we can notice a dichotomous understanding of the '*bhadra*' discourse. The becoming of that cultured, self reliant, polite '*bhadramohila*' often talks about a class aspiration, an aspiration to become that respectable woman whom nobody will question or humiliate. On the other hand by becoming that woman who talks loudly, claps loudly, laughs loudly, smokes cigarette and walks 'loosely', they subvert the same '*bhadra*' ethos. It is like a slap on the face of heteropatriarchal society that negates, discriminates, otherises and invisibilises their existence. And in-between these two stands there emerges multiple locations with multiple negotiations and representations that continue to disrupt the cis-het statusquo from within, creating fractures and fissures, giving rise to multiple expressions and identities.

Coming back to talking about the competition for being that 'dream girl' the transfeminine persons often become frustrated as most of the time they are not accepted as 'woman' in society. Suparna (40 years, *hijra* identified transfeminine respondent from Hooghly), said,

There is no limit to feminization. I can go to any extent to achieve that coveted level of feminization but even after that if a stranger makes a gesture to me, all my efforts of becoming that 'socially respectable woman' suddenly goes in vain. For me then it is way better to be the way I am, which is better than to bear the responsibility of 'maintaining' myself through botox surgery, continuing hormone therapy and continuously managing this recurring expense. It is difficult. People engage in sex work out of frustration. Just to earn more and more money to maintain the outer façade. There is no end to achieving authenticity. Where will it end? Where will I reach like this?

Here the feminist discourse on cosmetic surgery gets linked to SRS. In between two extreme locations of viewing cosmetic surgery as either life empowering and self caring or self mutilating and self hating, scholars like Victoria Pitts-Taylor (Pitts-Taylor, 2009) and Melanie Latham (Latham, 2008) tried to search for a third way of looking at it. Cosmetic surgery is without confusion influenced by the contemporary beauty trends and gender norms but it also gives one the tool for exercising one's agency of inhabiting a desired body. It in a way gets appropriated by the heteropatriarchal social norms and at the same time also creates disruptions in it. It is post-essentialist in a way as it refuses to valorise an 'authentic, natural' female body or a proper female subjectivity and at the same time it tends to see a body as a zone of 'perfectibility' (Eve Ensler, 2004). Both these locations of either viewing woman as oppressed or as liberated create single stories, which become problematic. From my experiences of working with the transfeminine individuals, the importance of reading the narratives in an inter-subjective manner (Pitts-Taylor, 2009) becomes significant. Their narratives, irrespective of whether they are getting appropriated by the patriarchal norms, significantly show the importance of autonomous choices and self determination. My respondents while talking about their experience of SRS expressed the importance of ongoing counselling, informed consent and continuous dialogue with the medical professionals while undergoing the procedures. This is what is termed as 'relational autonomy' by Melanie Latham (2008). Though my respondents have talked about continuous dialogue, informed consent and counselling, still their choice for SRS and the desire to inhabit the coveted body is often influenced by the cultural and social pressure on women to maintain normative standards of feminine beauty. But then again the component of being a trans-person and changing one's body to match the preferred gender is by itself an act of subversion that always creates something new and unique.

The unanimous expression that surfaced in most of the narratives is the felt sense of femininity that they hold within. It is like assimilating the feminine traits as an integral part of their existence. Two respondents said that they want to inhabit the soft, fair, round and tender

body of a woman, the body that their sisters inhabit. Some have said that they idolise the mother figure, that could be the biological mother or other female care givers who have played an important role in their growing up. Some respondents also talked about their identification with the simple, naive, rural married woman adorned with bright vermilion on their forehead and anklets on their feet. Two respondents have also said that according to them only the power to give birth defines femininity, a transfeminine individual can go to any extent to get the desired body in sync with their preferred gender, but one would never be able to carry a child. So they find no use for SRS. However these opinions were directly implying specific roles stereotypes of women, like 'mother', 'daughter', 'sister', 'home-maker', 'lover', 'wife', and to certain attributes like, 'beauty', 'softness', 'submission', 'selflessness', 'hard working', 'nurturing', 'honest', 'faithful', 'patience' just to mention a few that came up from our discussions, problematising it and reinforcing the patriarchal construction of womanhood. But then again by disrupting the status quo and challenging the unilinearity of sex and gender the lived experiences of the transfeminine individuals also opened a wide spectrum of self expression, self exploration and self discovery.

## **Section 8: GAT and trans-identity**

According to Ewing and Taylor (2018), LGBTIQHKA+ rights discourse builds up on the assertion that there are people in society who have different sexual orientations and gender identities that arise from within. They need to be autonomous and need to have the freedom to fulfil their desires and embody their personal, preferred, lived selves by making choices unrestricted by tradition or biology. With the ever increasing spectrum of Gender Affirmative Therapy (GAT) the components of choices are reinforced. GAT opens up a range of options and alternatives for self expression through gender affirmation for the transgender individuals. Trans-individuals, in order to realise and live their hopes, desires and preferences may or may not opt for gender affirmative therapy or GAT as an effective means through which they could increase their well-being. Also they might opt for GAT in degrees. It depends on their conceptualisation, perception and preference of the bodily representation of their gendered self. At times their choice of GAT indicates the reinforcement of the binarised way of understanding gender; sometimes it opens up a plethora of expressions and experiences. According to Kessler & Mackenna (2000:13), the medical and legal perspective of transgender and the transgender identity through social interactions creates a reality that is limited to only two genders. The first part in Kessler and Mackenna's statement has been my

experience too while interviewing medical professionals for my research but as far as the second part is concerned my experience has been different with my respondents. Through reading the narratives, especially the narratives of the transfeminine persons, I felt that the gender identities of transgender individuals are extremely diverse. Starting from the fixed binary woman / man for some it becomes fluid and exploratory for a great many. In this thesis among the thirty three transfeminine individuals that I have talked with, 45.45% have claimed their gender identity to be transgender keeping an open space for exploration and expression. The basic substrate of identity is the body and my respondents have shaped their bodies to match to their gender expression in a myriad ways. For many respondents partial or holistic medical intervention played a crucial role in shaping their bodies for embodying and expressing their desired gender expressions. The extent of transformations and medical procedures also vary and often challenge the sex-gender binary, questioning it and going beyond it. For others changing their bodies to match their gender identities through surgical procedures is not an option. They want to go beyond it and express their femininities through using prosthetics, applying cosmetics, wearing preferred dresses, taking laser therapy, opting for speech therapy to get the preferred experience and feel happy and content about it. In this section I have tried to understand the trans-individuals' opinion and experience about GAT and how it helps in embodying the preferred gender and communicating it to others through creating newer narratives and hence newer frames of references.

The trans-individuals often are keen to access a range of medical and surgical interventions that help them in two ways. One, it enables them to pass in their chosen gender in society and get assimilated in the social fabric and secondly it helps them to achieve a certain degree of comfort with their own body and self image. As Jay Prosser argues that the transgender individuals opting for GAT gets motivated by an initial absence of and striving for the feeling of embodiment and the desire for transformation of an "unliveable shattered body into a liveable whole" by minimising the gap between the material body and the body image (Prosser, 1998:7). Prosser asks to read trans-individuals as authorial subjects recreating their own 'living spaces' (Prosser, 1998: 9) As Prosser talks about 'authorial subject', J. Murshak (Murshak, 2017) talks about the transgender individual's agential role in recreating their preferred identity. Here in this section I argue that the trans-individuals opting or not opting for GAT are creating newer frames of references through creating newer narratives, and navigating newer avenues, newer routes and newer 'bodyscapes.'

Here it becomes important to mention that there has been strong feminist critiques of transgender discourse where they have either considered transgender individuals as 'deviant', 'cheater', 'invaders', 'mutilators' (Daly, 1978,, Raymond, 1979, Jeffreys, 1990). Their opinion being as feminism has always critiqued the social construction of the binary gender system; transgenders are re-establishing the iron clad compartments of gender binary through changing their bodies and documents to one of the two gender categories. Ashwini Sukthankar in her article "Complicating Gender: Rights of Transgenders In India" said that the movement for rights of transgenders in India would reinforce a narrative that in order for two women to live together as partners, one of them would have to transition into a 'man' for social acceptance and recognition (Sukhtankar, 2005:164). While SRS gives one the option to adorn one's body in a variety of expressions it also raises the question, quoting Ashwini Sukthankar that "SRS reifies the rigid definitions of gender – what it means to be a man or woman that feminists have always sought to question"(Sukthankar 2005:16). This raised the question in my thesis - What is SRS truly for? Is it an expression of something personal that breaks the gender construct or does it socially codify it even more strongly? Following this the obvious question that comes in mind is that "Are we going towards body essentialism?" This divide amongst radical feminists led to the emergence of 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism' (TERF) in the late 2000s, which has been discussed in the 5th and final chapter.

Here, through reading the narratives I have tried to challenge this point of view and construct the figure of the trans-individuals as re-authorizing, re-forming, re-claiming and remembering their 'being' in the society and creating newer frames of references. Often the transgender respondents have to wait for years before opting for surgical affirmation for their own internalised conflict regarding whether or not to opt for surgeries. The transgender individuals choose from an array of medico-scientific methods in order to get their preferred bodies on the basis of the practicability of the procedures and their affordability. They are quite aware of the restrictions of the procedures and limitations of the bodily transitions. They know very well that the outcome will be non-normative and will bring forth visibility of a wide range of effects on their bodies. Through this process where they exercise agency and embody bodies that are incomprehensible socially, sexist and gender stereotypes are broken. (Connell, 2012:873).

How far would one go to achieve the 'right' body aligned to their sense of being, differed from individual to individual and from situation to situation? The varied narratives of my

respondents regarding their opinion and experience of GAT are discussed in this section. The question of being comfortable with the desired body can be explained through referring to Jay Prosser's reading of the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's concept of Skin Ego (Anzieu, 2018). As Prosser explains it, the skin is the interface between the body we possess materially and our desired body which makes up the body image which becomes the major site of conflict for the trans-individuals. If the skin is the site of physical experience of body image and the surface upon which is projected the psychic representation of the body, then one can only feel at home in one's skin (Prosser, 1998:72). SRS is not a construction of a body that has a history of existence. It is the construction of a body re-membered, a body that should always 'been', a retrieval of what 'was not' (Prosser, 1998:84).

In this section following the trans-narratives, the materiality of the body becomes the focal point of discussion. The societal conventions and expectations around the body are rigid and people tend to get so much habituated with it that anything different from the norm is considered as 'deviant'. All the respondents of this study through their narratives have unanimously stressed on the point that they are different or variant and not deviant. The narratives talked about the desires and aspirations of the transgender individuals, how do they want to see their body, how much change they want to bring about, how much change they feel is feasible to bring about. Here they take an active role in deciding for themselves and at this point their body becomes a site of exercising agency through deciding what to do, when to do, how much to do as far as GAT is concerned. The trans-individuals' struggle for bringing both body and mind together, their fight for becoming visible and claiming their rights opens up possibilities for varied expressions traversing within and transcending beyond societal norms. Their experiences of being and becoming create newer meaning for understanding gender in a new light.

As Maurice Merleau Ponty suggests, subjectivity itself is achieved through the construction of a body image by constituting a whole. According to Merleau Ponty body parts are not objects but potentialities. The body is instead, "a nexus of living meaning", gaining these meanings through "proprioception", the primary but un-locatable 'felt sense' that allows a body to be experienced as a coherent whole rather than a collection of disparate parts (Merleau Ponty, 1968). As we are talking about the material body and the body image, it might not be considered as the philosophical accounts of embodiment that is based on a dualistic approach of mind/body or self/body or outside/inside. Maurice Merleau Ponty in his

phenomenological understanding of trans-individuals proposes that the bodies we inhabit are inseparably enmeshed with both ourselves and the world in which our bodies are situated. Bodies become material only through relations with other, bodies get meaning through social interactions. Hence, when the larger society invisibilises these bodies, the entities inhabiting the bodies gets 'marked' and their meanings get misinterpreted and misrepresented. People have certain bodies and the bodies are continuously being written and rewritten by gender. Our gendered bodies are perceived and interpreted through social norms around gender role stereotypes, legal standards and political structures.

Though trans-femininity is comparatively more stigmatised and often considered as social degradation, falling from a privileged position, hence either an act of 'craziness' or an act of intentional encroachment in the 'feminine' space, from my research it can be said that families coming from socio-economically underprivileged locations are more tolerant towards transgender identities. The reasons behind this are two pronged. First, the daily struggle and financial scarcity become so pronounced that for them it is the question of survival. The transfeminine respondents coming from urban slums, like, Bubu (23 years, Kolkata), Badal (34 years, Kolkata), Nipa (27 years, Kolkata), Sumit (32 years, Kolkata) and Mana (28 years, Kolkata) shared that because of the fact that they are earning and providing for the family the issues regarding their non normative gender identities gets sidetracked. Mana said that whether they are feminine or not, that ceases to be a concern for their parents as they are the one who is providing two square meals for them. The role of the provider has its association with masculinity, so it is possible that on the basis of that association they get better acceptance and their feminine self is 'tolerated' and does not get suppressed. The second reason could be the fact that those coming from a privileged socio-economic location come from an 'educated' background. The education provided to us is a colonial legacy with deep rooted patriarchal notions of gender/sexual performativity of structure and order that gets disturbed and unbalanced in the narratives emerging out of the trans-identities. The transfeminine persons coming from the rural areas of Bolpur, Cooch Behar, Hooghly, South 24 Parganas talked about their profession as seasonal dancers. Dancing in social events like private ceremonies and religious gatherings is socially accepted but along with it there is also marginalisation. Transfeminine individuals coming from middleclass families face the worst kind of humiliation and stigmatisation, which has its roots in the 'middleness' of the middleclass families. This middleness demands 'respect' from others without which it feels threatened. Purba (40 years, transfeminine person from Bardhaman) said that through the

process of self identification, self expression and self respect she has walked quite a long path. Her decision of opting for GAT was met with uproar from her parents and siblings. Her mother said that Purba might be a 'bad son' but she has never been a bad mother. Suparna (40 years, *hijra* identified from Hooghly) shared that her parents told her to leave their house as they never wanted their 'normal' son to suffer for his 'deviant' elder 'brother'. Sruti (30 years, Hooghly) said that her parents asked her to leave their house as they did not want their daughters to suffer due to her presence. They were afraid that her presence would jeopardise their possibility of getting married to respectable families. Here 'middleclass respectability' needs to be questioned.

The bodies are given meanings on the basis of the dynamic interaction between the bodies and the socio-political institutions, which are guided by the heteropatriarchal hegemony. These gendered bodies as a personal and social space become the site of inscription and resistance as well. My respondents identified their gender in multiple intricate and nuanced ways. In this section I have tried to explore and understand experiences, opinions and decisions of the transgender individuals about negotiating their gendered selves with their sexed bodies that they inhabit. The relationship they have with their bodies, the multiple ways they choose to express their bodies in order to align with their preferred gendered selves, the transition thereafter from one's given gender/sex to one's taken gender/sex (Mohan and Murthy, 2013).

There is no limit of becoming more 'female like' to most 'female like'. This transition from comparative to superlative has a very significant impact on the natal family also. Family members accept the trans-individuals only when they do not look ambiguous. Suparna (40, years, Hooghly) my *hijra* identified respondent shared,

One day in a gathering an elderly woman came to me and said that there's no way one can understand looking at you... I instantly retorted back to her that you say this because you 'can' understand. You wouldn't have said this otherwise. The visibility of a transwoman is much more than a transman. Place a transman within a 100 cis-men and you won't be able to identify who is cis or who is trans. A transman after transition has a moustache and a beard, changes his location, gets married and gets lost as his past gets erased. A transwoman on the other hand can never erase her past. The prominent jaw line and structure is always a give-away.

Transitioning transgenders often re-form their bodies as fully as possible to reflect the 'natural' male or female body reinforcing the socially constructed binary gender through

medical intervention. It is like bringing back biological essentialism through the backdoor. But the responses that I got from my transfeminine respondents talked about different experiences and perspectives. Only three amongst 33 (9.09%) transfeminine individuals have opted for full surgical affirmation, one individual (3.03%) has undergone partial surgical affirmation and another one respondent has undergone castration. The remaining 25 (84.8%) have not opted for surgical procedures for aligning their bodies with their preferred gender. Ten individuals (30.3%) are only taking hormones. They express their femininity in multiple ways, in multiple layers. Some of them even talk about getting used to their bodies, accepting the struggle of inhabiting the body which is not the 'preferred one' and even at times feeling comfortable in their own skin. Their experience of the transition, 'fully' or 'partially' or not at all, not only challenges many aspects of normativity but it also indicates the multiplicity and in that sense the queering of desires (Shah, et al. 2015:220). Body becomes one of the most significant markers of difference between varied gender expressions.

Often a continuous discord arises between the preferred gender or the sense of being and the body, creating body dysphoria. There are people who identify themselves as transgender individuals and have problem with the socially ascribed gender but their feeling of discomfort with their biological body is lesser than the discomfort they feel due to the gap between the assigned gender and preferred gender. For them distress stems from gender dysphoria a psychiatric classification mentioned in DSM V. There are transgender individuals whose discomfort with their bodies or specific body parts gives rise to body dysphoria. In my research I came across trans-individuals who have talked about negotiating with their bodies and preferred gender identities through coming to terms with the materiality of their bodies, its social construction and minimising the gap between the physicality of the bodies and their preferred self by accepting reality and moving forward with their identity devoid of the given physicality. This to me is a rewriting of physicality with their preferred gender markers by subverting the theory of biological essentialism. There were also respondents who said that they could never come to terms with certain aspects of their bodies, which reflected the intensity of the discord they felt between their preferred gender identity/ies and the bodies they inhabited by birth. Some of my transfeminine respondents were keen in accessing a range of medical, surgical, prosthetic and cosmetic interventions that would enable them to pass in the chosen gender in society as well as to achieve a degree of comfort with their own bodies by creating their own self image and being comfortable with the preferred sense of

self. How far one would go to achieve this 'preferred' body varied from person to person and had a spatio-temporal context.

The 'reconstructive surgeries' were mostly opted by few individuals due to its high cost, which made it restrictive enough to make it out of reach of people who required them the most. Doctors also lack adequate information and are guided by biological essentialism and the beauty myth. There was lack of information and awareness about the procedures as well. Only a handful of people who managed to access the necessary information about the procedures and its side effects and had the affordability were able to make informed choices more easily and confidently. Rosy (40 years), my transfeminine respondent from Darjeeling district said that she used to watch *Taboo*, a TV show featured in National Geographic channel, regularly. There she came across one episode named "Lady Boys" where lived experiences of boys who used to stay as girls were portrayed. The episode mainly dealt with experiences from 'Lady Boys' living in Thailand. Rosy identified with them and got interested in learning more about the 'Lady Boys'. She started to collect news paper clippings about familiar subjects like SRS, court orders regarding SRS, stories about transgender people, verdict of Delhi High Court and Supreme Court, and any article about the LGBTIQHKA+ community and movement. The search was to find familiar stories; the search was for information, inspiration and motivation. She used to keep all the paper cuttings in a file. It was for her knowledge. Rosy (40 years, Siliguri), shared, "Good or bad, I keep everything so that I have the knowledge about various experiences and expressions. This helped me to develop a general idea, starting from laser therapy to hormone therapy, orchiectomy and various other aspects of sex change."

Here, the question arises whether discourse precedes identity and do we have identity without knowledge of that identity? What constitutes the process of identity formation? There could be times when we search for stories, experiences, narratives and discourses where we can find bits and pieces of us. It is possible that when we are not confident enough with our understanding and experiences, discourse gives us that anchorage through which we feel grounded and confident enough to create and claim our spaces. For Rosy the discourse around 'lady boys' opened up the possibilities of changing the body in order to match the mind. For Rosy this information was her strength. With all this information Rosy consolidated her identity as a transfeminine person and took a conscious decision of starting GAT. Resonating Rosy, Jhumko (33 years, transfeminine person from Cooch Behar) said, "I

will definitely opt for HRT and breast augmentation. I have promised it to myself." No doubt GAT has created a vast domain where one can explore and experience the 'self'. It is like you have a sumptuous, elaborate spread in front of you from which you can choose and pick." However, in stark contrast to Rosy and Jhumko, Anuradha (38 years, transfeminine person from North 24 Parganas) questioned the trend of Gender Affirmative Therapy which according to her is biologically essentialist. Anuradha mentioned about the NALSA judgment which had said that for a person to claim their gender identity they did not need to undergo surgical affirmation.

There are trans-individuals whose perception of gender identity is fixed, either woman or a man. For others it is a never ending journey of self-exploration, self-discovery, self-description and transformation. Pangender, polygender, genderqueer, genderfluid and gender non-conforming are some the terms claimed while describing the self with the help of the constantly evolving language. In all these gender identities the body becomes a significant component giving shape and substance to the unfolding of the gender chosen to be lived. Medical intervention therefore often becomes crucial in approximating, if not accomplishing, the body-ideal that satisfies one's sense of gender. It is important to note that such medical interventions are not optional but becomes extremely necessary for the persons opting for surgical affirmation, to be able to achieve a satisfactory physical existence aligned with their chosen gender identity. However, the extent of desired body transformation/medical-surgical intervention may vary from person to person and may not conform to the 'normal' unilinear understanding of the sex-gender binary. The whole question around GAT opens up discussions about a spectrum of technologies which can be opted for making the body a better place to live in. It has been like a dream-come-true for many trans-individuals. Some have the financial affordability to materialise their dream, some get solace by living in their dreams and again some experiment with their dreams in order to align their bodies with their preferred gender. For some the decision arises from their felt sense of being trapped in the 'wrong' body, which they changed for inhabiting the preferred body, for some they could never escape the 'wrong' body due to social pressure, financial constraints and inaccessibility of services. Yet for some the search is for 'new' bodies that allow them to explore, experiment and express through modifying, restructuring and reclaiming the 'marginal' body as the 'new body'. On the whole GAT gives trans-individuals a certain confidence about their non-conforming existence. However, surgical affirmation also creates a gap between those who can afford and those who cannot. It has the potential of creating a hierarchy and a

marginalisation within the marginalised. The therapeutic planning for Gender Dysphoria needs to be individualised and need based. While some individuals need both hormone therapy and surgery to alleviate their Gender Dysphoria, others need only one of these treatment options and some need neither. Often with the help of psychotherapy, counselling, some individuals integrate their feelings of being a trans-gender person into the gender role they are assigned at birth and do not feel the need to feminize or masculinize their body. They negotiate their lived reality with their deep sense of gender dysphoria and create a sense of self which is a mixture of the societal expectations and preferred gender expressions. For them, bringing some changes in gender role and gender expression are sufficient to alleviate Gender Dysphoria (A Good Practice Guide to Gender Affirmative Care, by Sappho for Equality).<sup>130</sup> For Raji<sup>131</sup> (33 years, Hooghly), a transfeminine beautician and entrepreneur whose preferred pronoun is 'they', expression is all about presenting oneself, decorating oneself, beautifying oneself according to one's wish. It is all about reinventing and also reinforcing non-normativity. Raji hasn't opted for any transition nether will they ever do it but they express their gender through beautifying others and also maintaining themselves through regular exercise, facial, hair care and balanced food and fluid intake. Raji believes that gender is not an identity but an expression, which is flexible and creative.

Chhuman (36 years), my respondent from Darjeeling district said,

I always keep my body fit and fine. I regularly follow an exercise regime. I want my body to look feminine. But I have never used *dharki*<sup>132</sup>. I do not need any of these prosthetics. Once I used massage oil and had some medicines. My friend told me that these medicines would help me to develop breasts. But nothing remarkable happened so I stopped. I went to consult a doctor for deciding whether to start hormone treatment or not. The doctor de-motivated me by saying it might have bad side effects. I only use make up and as I am a dancer I express my femininity through dancing and I am happy."

Others like Joyee (38 years, transwoman, Hooghly) have a different reason for not undergoing GAT. She said,

Society will never acknowledge me as a woman, so why will I try to become one? I have never used padded bra, then why will I opt for breast augmentation and vaginoplasty? I am a transwoman and a free entity. I have always played the versatile role in my relationship so now why will I restrict myself in a specific body?

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<sup>130</sup> <http://www.sapphokolkata.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/GAC-Guideline1.pdf> (accessed on 26.01.19)

<sup>131</sup> Interview taken on 18.03.20 in Hooghly

<sup>132</sup> Padded bra

Anuradha (38 years, transfeminine respondent from North 24 Parganas) reiterated the same standpoint by saying that nobody can force a person to go for SRS in order to match their preferred gender identity. This is wrong and illegal. If a person chooses SRS on their own it is okay, but no one can be forced into it. It can be an option but it cannot be the only way out. Femininity and masculinity cannot merely be understood by the presence or absence of a vagina or a penis. It is way beyond and must be perceived in abstraction.

Anuradha shared a few lines from a poem –

"যোনি দিয়ে তৈরি হয় নারী

কপাল ঠোঁট চিবুক সবই যোনি

চক্র হাতে তুমিও গিরিধারী

শিল্পকেই করেছ তর্জনী!<sup>133</sup>

Anuradha reclaimed her point of view by repeating,

This politics of becoming more feminine to most feminine, by owning the 'vagina' as a signifier of femininity, to become that 'ideal' woman by inhabiting that 'ideal' female body is problematic. It is the same as making 'penis' the signifier is detrimental to feminist politics. This expressional pattern is a trap in itself. It is like an unending endeavour. SRS can be an option and nothing else; it can never become ones compulsion.

The trend of becoming most feminine or most masculine gives a metaphor of climbing a ladder, which has no end. Here this vertical metaphor might not help as the ladder will go on getting taller and the climb will never end. An effective metaphor could be something horizontal like the things or activities that we can do in order to express ourselves or how we can adorn ourselves to feel good and confident. Horizontal metaphors give enough scope for self expression and corroborate with the idea of an ever expanding spectrum. Anuradha added from her own life experience that she has never felt the compulsion to change her body to suit her gender identity as she has never felt body dysphoria. So she has never thought of opting for SRS. But in her relationships many a times her male partners have offered, "Go get your SRS done, I will sponsor that!" These instances have made her sit back and think, whether

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<sup>133</sup> Vagina is what makes a woman. Her forehead, her lips, her chin, all of her is traced back to her vagina. O' *girdhari*, (on whose finger resides the mountain) wielding the *chakra* (the discus), the penis is your signifier, the social index pointer

her body is becoming a hindrance or not. She has developed a mixed reaction to it. She has thought time and again whether SRS is for her own satisfaction or for someone else's wish. She could never think of being offered on a platter for her suitors. But she also does not want to say that whoever is choosing SRS is doing so only to make their male partners happy. Till now she doesn't have any desire to change her body as she is comfortable with her body. But the ground reality is often different. The urge to change one's biological body in order to match the preferred gender and get rid of the extreme pain of body dysphoria is a reality for many. For them it is the most important way of being in their own skin, being who they are, being in their preferred gender. This is more so as SRS has been validated through The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019, which makes SRS mandatory for legal recognition and change of documents into the preferred gender. As our society is not very comfortable with 'inconceivability', in order to get social approval, more and more trans-people seem to be opting for SRS for becoming socially comprehensible. Chapter III of The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Acts 2019<sup>134</sup> deals with recognition of identity of transgender persons and Section 7 under Chapter III of the Act is about gender change. The process is quite complex. It involves the transgender person to make an application to the District Magistrate (DM) for a revised Gender Change certificate from the DM after he/she/they have undergone SRS. The application has to be accompanied by a certificate from Medical Superintendent or Chief Medical Officer of the hospital/medical institution where the trans-person had undergone SRS. Along with the application, the transgender person needs to surrender the Transgender Certificate that had been previously issued by the DM. The Act states that the DM after being satisfied with the correctness of the medical certificate which in other words implies 'correctness' of the surgical procedure of transition undergone by the trans-person, issues a certificate endorsing change in gender. Only after receiving the Gender Change certificate can the transgender person apply for and get their official identity documents and all relevant certificates changed to their preferred name and gender.

Though the act has been vehemently criticised by activists for its potential to contribute to discrimination, stigma and further transphobia and directly violating the spirit of the NALSA judgment of 2014 that advocates for self-identification of gender identity, it becomes important as the Act acknowledges that SRS helps many to pursue their dreams

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<sup>134</sup> <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/13091/1/a2019-40.pdf> (accessed on 01.12.21)

of inhabiting the desired body. But then again as it gives rigid instructions of steps through which the trans-people would be 'certified' by the district magistrate to have their identity recognised, it is highly problematic for introducing 'gate-keeping' and control by the State. The ground reality is that SRS has become another privilege like class, caste, education and livelihood that creates discrimination and hierarchies among identities creating further marginalisation. To some it is reinforcing 'body essentialism' while to others it is creating fissures and cracks in the mainstream understanding of sex-gender linearity as individuals are choosing from an array of GAT procedures.

### **Section 9: Decision regarding SRS and document change**

What determines the extent of GAT depend upon a number of indicators, the most significant being the level of one's degree of discomfort, one's financial capacity, support system, state of physical and mental health and choice of livelihood. In this segment I have tried to understand the dynamics of the decision making process with regard to SRS through which trans-individuals seek to reconstruct their body according to their desire. Through GAT and more precisely SRS, freedom and choice have moved beyond the realm of consumer goods and the garments on display on the racks at clothing stores to the body itself. SRS has been perceived as a host of surgical methods through which a trans-individual alters the body they inhabits to bring it in sync with their preferred gender. Only five (15.15% (transfeminine respondents out of 33 have opted for SRS in some form of which three (9.09% (who prefer to be addressed as 'woman' have completed full SRS) breast augmentation, orchiectomy, penectomy, vaginoplasty). One respondent who is *hijra* identified has undergone castration and another respondent has undergone bottom surgery (orchiectomy and vaginoplasty). 10 respondents (30.3%) are on HRT. 23 respondents (69.7%) have neither been on HRT nor had any surgery and they have talked about their self expression of gender through using make-up, wearing padded bra, using packing as a method of hiding the 'often unwanted' private parts, wearing preferred dresses, undergoing laser therapy, opting for voice therapy and changing their gender roles and patterns of livelihood. Seven respondents (21.21%) have said that they are saving money and would opt for SRS in future and 12 respondents (36.36%) have said that they would never opt for SRS. The various reasons that my respondents have shared for not opting for SRS are:

- I am not a woman so I don't want to run behind the mirage of becoming one. I am what I am.

- I don't want to take the exhaustion of multiple surgeries.
- I don't have money for SRS.
- I love my body as it is, I love my pleasure points and I don't want to lose it. Only if I decide to become a she-male can I opt for SRS.
- I am a woman and this is my body. There is no need to have that socially defined 'authentic' body for being a woman.
- I want to express my gender through my work; to me for expressing my femininity my passion for work is more than enough.
- I cannot do it as society will not accept me after that.
- A woman's body becomes the site for satisfying male sexual desire; I don't want to inhabit that body. I am a woman with my body, I play a versatile role in my relationships with my partners, I am happy with it, I don't need SRS.
- My *parikh* doesn't want me to go through SRS, he is happy with what I am.

Among the 33 respondents, four (12.12%) said that they seldom use make-up as they do not get the conducive space to express their femininity without inhibition due to the pressure of the societal role as a 'man' and the 'provider' that has been thrust upon them. But again the role of the 'provider' gives them the confidence of being a 'working woman,' something which they cherish a lot.

SRS gives the opportunity to the transgender individuals to realise their dreams of changing the body in order to align it to their preferred gender. Here according to some trans-individuals gender becomes invariant. According to them, their sense of gender is unchangeable and is an integral part of their existence. Jolly (29 years), one of my transfeminine respondents from a village in Cooch Behar district said, "I am a woman and I have always been one, I have a different body, I want to change my body fully, i.e. reconstruct my genitalia, to match my preferred gender. I will start HRT once I start earning adequately to support myself." With the help of SRS they can now change their body, especially the physical markers on the basis of which society assigns specific gender identities on individuals. This is a moment of victory and celebration for them. But the practice of 'fixing' the genitals to be the 'right' ones to go with the gender helps create a sense of the 'practice' that genitals are the essential sign of gender (Kessler & Mckenna, 2000:13), which becomes problematic and brings back biological essentialism through the back door.

The positive thing about GAT is that it has opened a wide range of services that one could choose from in order to match their body to their preferred gender. It is like reconstructing one's body for reclaiming one's gender and reliving one's identity/ies. An individual could choose from a lot of options, which is in a way empowering and an act of subversion as well. However by reading the narratives the fact that surfaced is that among 33 respondents, 27 (81.82%) have talked about a mixed approach of combining various therapies and procedures in order to embody their inner femininity thus opening up a free space of experimentation that gives rise to a range of polymorphous bodies. The possibilities of polymorphous bodies surfaced in Jhumko's (33 years, transfeminine respondent from Cooch Behar) narrative where she said, "I would definitely go for breast augmentation and hormone replacement therapy once I save enough money to start the process." Suhani (37 years, transfemale from South 24 Parganas) talked about her level of comfort with her changed body where she said, "I have not done top surgery, I am taking hormones and I can feel two tender and swollen rounded fleshy masses on my chest and I am happy. I have done bottom surgery and I can now see myself in the mirror without inhibition." Yet again Badal (34 years, transfeminine respondent from Kolkata) expressed her wish for a different body in which she would feel comfortable. She said, "I will only go for castration. I have seen after castration the skin becomes glowing and soft. Facial hair also becomes less. I can afford castration. SRS is a big decision, I won't be able to afford it."

The decision of SRS has been shaped by this craving for social acceptance. This emotional need also has a link with family acceptance. Evidence shows that a transfeminine individual post transition starts embodying 'feminine beauty' and in some cases the family starts accepting her as a woman. Jhora (42 years, North 24 Parganas), a post-op transfeminine person actively involved in activism, shared her experience by saying, "Parents also accept the transitioned person once the person starts becoming beautiful and so much beautiful that nobody could ever believe that their child was at some point of time a 'boy'."

Krishnachura (21 years), my young transfeminine respondent from a village in Birbhum painstakingly shared her inner feeling

My inner self is that of a woman's. But when I see a woman, I can identify the difference between her body and my body. Like my hands are not that rounded. My breasts are not like her. I can go on convincing myself that my breasts are that of a woman's, but society will not accept me that way. Society looks at me as nothing but a male bodied person. And thus continues the conflict within me. At this moment a wish comes in my mind, just like a dream of

inhabiting a complete feminine body. It is very difficult to live with this conflict. I can no more sustain this. That is why though I am afraid of mutilating this body, but there is no other way I can live my life. Society will not let me live.

Maya<sup>135</sup> (30 years), one of my transfeminine respondents from Hooghly said, that one needs to be identifiable as either a man or a woman or a *hijra*. Society identifies *hijra* due to their visibility and fixed identity expressed through their demeanour, behaviour and action. Moreover the transfeminine individuals who join the *hijra khols*<sup>136</sup> are tied up by strict rules and regulations, all of which constitute the *hijra* identity making it an identifiable and conceivable identity easy to 'recognise', easy to 'otherise' and easy to 'marginalise' in order to keep the centre-periphery binary intact. But others, who do not take membership of the *hijra gharana*, remain unintelligible. Maya negotiates her role in her family by amalgamating the role of the 'provider' and the 'nurturer' together, making herself indispensable for her elderly parents and dependent sister. Maya said, "Often people from the community also call me 'Maya da'<sup>137</sup>, and I enjoy it. I have made myself important to my family as well as to my community and hence I am standing strong." This raises certain interesting questions. In many of the narratives, the transfeminine persons interviewed have identified as woman/transwoman with the preferred pronouns being she/her and at the same time have said that they did not mind being addressed as 'da' after their names or by the names given by their parents even after having a preferred name. Three of my transfeminine (AMAB) respondents in this study (Arbaz, Pratap and Sumit) have not changed their 'dead names'<sup>138</sup> which I have intentionally kept in the AMAB form while changing their names for use in my thesis. Misgendering is an extremely common and casual practice in society faced by transgender individuals. Transfeminine individuals seem to take it in their stride whereas it causes immense suffering in transmasculine individuals for whom it is unbearable and unacceptable. From my understanding of the trans-narratives, the transfeminine individuals have certain privileges of the ascribed gender given to them by the patriarchal social structure they are born into. Their childhood is a story of humiliation, bullying and stigma as society views their transition from their ascribed gender of 'power' to their preferred gender of 'submission' as a 'fall'. However, they have also experienced this power and agency in their childhood which the transmasculine individuals have been socially denied. This awareness of power and privileges associated with their ascribed gender could be the reason for many

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<sup>135</sup> Interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly

<sup>136</sup> Place of commune living of *hijras*

<sup>137</sup> 'da' short for 'dada' in Bengali means brother.

<sup>138</sup> Name in the assigned gender which trans-individuals change usually to a similar name in preferred gender

transfeminine individuals being 'ok' with being misgendered in contrast to the extreme distress in transmasculine individuals who seem to be constantly reminded of their 'powerless' status stripped of any agency.

The politics of visibilising the journey of the transgender individuals by remembering the gender assigned at birth and celebrating the preferred gender at the same time creates a moment for self assertion. These moments of assertion also motivate individuals in not opting for SRS and claiming the trans-existence by nurturing the 'not aligned' body and mind together by creating possibilities for a strong trans-movement by questioning binary-centric essentialism. Raji, (33 years, transfeminine respondent from Hooghly) a successful business person from Hooghly, a responsible 'son' to the family and a *kothi* shared,

I will never change my documents nor will I opt for SRS. I have taken birth as a boy and that is my politics. How can I ever forget my journey? If I ask society to box me and define me, they will become very happy, but for making others happy I cannot forget my journey. If I abide by social norms, I will get boxed and defined. I will never let that happen to me. I don't want to get boxed. I don't want to erase my past. Society has to stop gendering by looking at one's genitalia only. The concept of gender is the way one wants to live their lives, it is beyond the bodily experience of being a girl or a boy or something different.

Involvement in the queer movement played a very important role in facilitating decision making about one's life by not being influenced by the societal do's and don'ts. Studying and learning about sex, gender and sexuality as a part of activism helped individuals in becoming more and more confident about their journey from the socially assigned gender to the self identified preferred gender. Deepa (30 years, transfeminine respondent from Kolkata), said,

I would never want to subject myself to a life threatening situation. Penis is just like that wart, or the sixth finger that I could have had. It's a part of my body and that's it. It never bothers me. Now if you tell me that a woman can never have a penis, then I would say a 'complete' woman with all her organs at place might not be able to give birth to a child. Then would you not consider that individual as a woman? If you take things on the basis of the genitalia and its functions then after menopause a woman can never be considered a woman! So then would they commit suicide? I consider myself as a woman, whose body is like this, period! That is why I do not want to opt for SRS and become that 'authentic' woman'. I don't need it. I have never considered my body as a 'male' body, because I have never thought of myself as a 'man'. I am a woman and I have got this body by birth. But I could never think of using this body as men use it.

However, for those having extreme discomfort with their body SRS is like a boon. Like Purba (40 years, transfeminine respondent from Bardhaman) wanted to live a fuller life and that was the reason she opted for SRS. She had gone through a lot of pain, humiliation and alienation but she is happy now. Finally she feels good about herself. Without doing SRS she wouldn't have survived. For her life, SRS was indispensable. Jhora (42 year old transfeminine respondent from North 24 Parganas) who has completed full SRS also shared a similar experience. She shared that, along with gender dysphoria she had extreme body dysphoria. She had never touched the penis, she had never washed it after urination. She could never feel or see it as it was repulsive to her. The feeling was so strong that she remembered trying to self mutilate herself on one occasion. Suhani (37 year old transfeminine respondent from South 24 Parganas) who has done partial SRS said that she never had pronounced gender dysphoria, but she had body dysphoria at the highest level. So she had to opt for SRS but she did it on her own terms. She has done bottom surgery and is on HRT but has decided not to go for top surgery. She has taken laser therapy. She said she might go for facial surgery as she is an actor and wants to seriously pursue her career in acting. Selecting affirmative procedures on the basis of livelihood choices has been a significant insight developed through the research. This has been discussed in details in the chapter on livelihood.

Some significant points that came up from the narrative analysis were that six transfeminine respondents (18.18%) said that they did not want to opt for SRS as they did not want to jeopardise their professional life. All of them were quite established in their professions and were happy and content about it. They have achieved what they wanted on the basis of their trans-identity only and they did not feel the need to establish their womanhood in any other way. They feel satisfied with what they have. 12 respondents (36.36%) expressed that they did not want to change their body through surgical affirmation as even after transitioning, society would always tag them as 'a girl who used to be a boy' or a '*hijra*'. There would be no chance of erasing that history. Things could only be different if one could altogether change the locality where they have grown up and start afresh with the preferred identity at a new place, which is not a feasible option for all. Two respondents (6.06%) who have not initiated SRS, expressed their wish to opt for castration as according to them castration yields better result in creating the feminising process in the body as it reduced the production of hormones like testosterone. They wanted to opt for castration and keep the penis intact, which would give them better flexibility in sexual activities and the pleasure point would stay intact as well. Among the transfeminine respondents 14 individuals (42.42%) do sex work on a part

time basis. Nine out of these 14 individuals (64.28%) have said that if they undergo partial SRS and keep their penis intact, this would help them in pursuing sex work as all of them play versatile roles during sex work, which is more profitable and enjoyable as well. Two amongst the 14 individuals doing sex work (14.28%) have said that they would only do breast augmentation as their objective is to work as she-males and that is their motivation for SRS. From the narratives of my research respondents it is very clear that the deciding factor for SRS for many of them is livelihood. The next chapter discusses in detail the question of livelihood in the lives of both the transfeminine and the transmasculine individuals.

## **Chapter 4: Capabilities, Liveabilities and Livelihood**

"Now I am happy after a long time because now I have a full time job. I was always working but those were small assignments, nothing to rely upon. One thing we all need is a job, a proper long term job", a Kolkata based actor who is a transwoman coming from Murshidabad said in a television interview taken after her appearance in a TV mega serial focusing on the lives of *hijras*.<sup>139</sup>

According to reports published on the internet on December 23rd, 2020,<sup>140</sup> the crew members of *Firki* were informed by the channel on 18th December that the last shooting for the series would be held on 24th December and the show would go off the air with its last episode set to be telecast by 2nd January 2021. According to the report a survey conducted on the channel showed that the viewers switched channels because of the portrayal of the 'third gender' in the serial. This was the reason provided by Zee Bangla for its decision to eliminate the show. The aim of the production house of *Firki*, Acropolis Entertainment, was to portray the side of the 'third gender' (read *hijra*) being equally respected as the other two genders. Even the presser, which was conducted regarding the show, was titled 'equal respect for everyone', specifically claiming equal respect for all genders. But this 'noble' idea soon fizzed and the show got off the air because the final driving force is the market which is also guided by the majoritarian heteropatriarchal discourse.

As a part of the data collection process, four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Baruipur (South 24 Parganas), Sreerampur (Hooghly), Siliguri (Darjeeling) and Kolkata. These FGDs focused on the questions around livelihood which was the central concern faced by transgender individuals that surfaced during the FGDs. The issue of livelihood has been always there as the central concern for the trans-individuals even before the lockdown and more so after the Covid pandemic and ensuing lockdown. The situation has never been conducive to the transgender population of West Bengal irrespective of whether there is a pandemic lurking around. With more and more coming out of the transgender individuals the need of the hour has been to rethink livelihood options. The pandemic has only pushed the community to the brink, fighting for their very survival. The transfeminine individuals, those

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<sup>139</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvogk0\\_jIOI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvogk0_jIOI) (accessed on 20.06.21)

<sup>140</sup> <https://bangla.aajtak.in/cinema-and-tv-serial-news/television/story/zee-bangla-serial-phirki-shooting-has-stopped-viewer-does-not-want-see-transgender-people-story-256204-2020-12-23> (accessed on 20.06.21)  
<https://www.anandabazar.com/entertainment/phirki-has-been-closed-suddenly-dgtl-1.1247802> (accessed on 20.06.21)

who used to stand at the traffic signals or go from door to door blessing new born babies or asking for groceries from market places or doing sex work have started thinking of skill enhancement and exploring other job options along with the traditional vocations they are in. This research also indicated the trend of earning from multiple sources of livelihood. This is especially true for the transfeminine individuals, for whom getting and maintaining a job as a 'not a biological woman' in this society becomes a struggle every day and they have to strategise and explore multiple vocations for their livelihood.

The NACO report on 'Skilling for Livelihood Opportunities for Transgenders in India'<sup>141</sup> (2017) states that according to the 2011 census the transgender population in India is 4.9 lakhs out of which those working in the transgender community is much lower (only 38% as compared to 46% in the general population). According to the report this scarcity of livelihood options unfavourably impacts their socio-economic well-being which is characterised by poor access to education, housing and food security. The report further states that the literacy rate among transgender people in India is only 46% as compared to 76% in the general population. This report only talks about the transfeminine persons not mentioning a single word about the experiences of the transmasculine individuals which only reinforces the trend of invisibilising them from the time of the discourse of HIV/AIDS intervention where transmasculine individuals, lesbian and bisexual women have always been excluded and invisibilised and the umbrella term 'transgender' only being equated with the transfeminine rhetoric. Even in the NALSA Judgment the definition of 'transgender' oscillates between two broad divisions. On the one hand identifying 'transgender' as an umbrella term encompassing variety of gender non conforming behaviours and practices and on the other hand restricting the definition based on *hijra* and transwomen identities. Gender rights activists and community members from transmasculine communities have critiqued the judgment by saying that it has insufficiently represented the transmasculine identities (Dutta 2014), only mentioning the gender identity in a couple of pages (Pgs. 35 and 61). The media representation that we perceive around us also suffers from invisibilisation and skewed representation. Media also spreads wrong information about non-normative gender and sexuality. In Megh Chandra's News18 article "NALSA Judgement of 2014 was 'Pathbreaking'. But Has It Really Made India More Trans-inclusive?"<sup>142</sup>, it is clearly

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<sup>141</sup> <https://www.undp.org/india/publications/skilling-and-livelihoods-transgender-community> (accessed on 20.06.21)

<sup>142</sup> <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/nalsa-judgement-of-2014-was-pathbreaking-but-has-it-really-made-india-more-trans-inclusive-2800541.html> (accessed on 09.12.20)

mentioned that hermaphrodite is the biological term for the transgender/transsexual, whereas the term 'hermaphrodite' is no more used in the discourse as it is considered to be derogatory and insensitive. Brook Bond Red Label tea showcased a *hijra* individual offering tea to individuals stuck in a traffic jam.<sup>143</sup> The tagline says, 'turning prejudice into acceptance'. The advertisement directly links transgender identity to *hijra* identity. In advertisements also only '*hijras*' are shown to be representing the transgender community. In a recent advertisement<sup>144</sup> showing the efficient service of Pathkind Lab a *hijra khol* is shown from where they call for the services of a laboratory technician for blood sample collection. It is shown that the *hijra* individuals have brought a little 'girl' with them as she was abandoned by her parents for being like 'them.' *Hijra* identity is being connected with biological essentialism. At the end of the add it shows that "98% of transgenders are either abandoned or given away." The media representation in this add is doubly problematic, it is generalising transgender as an identity by equating it with *hijra* identity and then it is equating *hijra* identity with intersex identity biologically essentialising the *hijra* identity. In all these spaces there is a single story about transgender identity, the story of equating it with *hijra* or transwomen and as a consequence transmen being invisibilised.

The focus of this chapter is to look at translives and transgender persons' lived experiences, both transmasculine and transfeminine, through the lens of the 'Capabilities Approach' as propounded by Professor Amartya Sen to understand how capabilities influence their liveabilities. Capabilities are the conditions of life that sustains life and enhances liveabilities. Liveabilities can be thought of as the capacity to maintain a functional social life in a social and political environment of precarity. In my thesis, non-normative gender identity is linked to precarity. The trans-bodies become abject bodies and the translives become unrecognisable (Butler, 2009). We question about what makes lives liveable because it refers to conditions when it is not and we make distinctions between forms of life that are liveable and forms that are not. This chapter focuses on capabilities that enhance liveability thereby reducing precarity. The chapter also focuses on the relationship between livelihood choices and decision regarding GAT for both transfeminine and transmasculine individuals. The chapter has tried to explore the various ways through which transgender persons' gender expression, bodily transition and livelihood choices impacts each other and influence their liveabilities.

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<sup>143</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYwmoiCUZPE> (accessed on 15.06.21)

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.campaignindia.in/video/pathkind-diagnostics-pledges-to-treat-everyone-in-the-same-vein/470136> (accessed on 15.06.21)

## **Section 1: Trans-lives and the question of Capabilities**

According to Professor Sen, capability approach sees "human life as a set of 'doings and beings' - we may call them 'functionings'- and it relates the evaluation of the quality of life to the assessment of the capability to function" (Sen, 1990:43). Following this approach the focus should be on the freedom of people to be and to do and not on what they can consume or on their incomes. Thus the capability approach has enormous potential for addressing feminist concerns and questions (Robeyns 2003: 62). Hence the 'capabilities approach' has been used as the theoretical basis of this chapter. Translives start with social obstacles from the moment a transgender person identifies and expresses her/his/their preferred gender and questions the assigned gender at birth. She/he/they start being discriminated, humiliated and ostracized for not conforming to the binary sex-gender construct and thus begins the onset of 'limiting capabilities'. Their marginalisation creates a sense of internalised deprivation and forces the trans-individuals to make adaptive preferences. Thus the chapter has made an effort to find out whether the transgender individuals receive equal opportunities with regard to their livelihood or whether they are forced to make gendered livelihood choices. Here capabilities become significant in the absence of which rights cannot be exercised properly. Right to free and primary education is a right for all, but for the transgender people even if there are government schools for actualising this right, education as a capability cannot be always identified due to lack of awareness about trans-issues, discrimination and invisibilisation. All the fundamental rights as defined in our constitution i.e. right to equality, right to freedom, right against exploitation, right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights, right to property and right to constitutional remedies can only materialise if individuals can have the opportunity to develop their capabilities. Capabilities influence liveabilities and livelihood being one of the central capability in translives, assumes great significance in this thesis. The chapter explored how the livelihood choices of transgender people impacts their decision to undergo GAT, the extent of transition and how the transitioned body affects their livelihood.

According to Professor Sen, development is the process to improve the quality of human life and the central process of this development should be the expansion of human capabilities which in turn translates to the expansion of real freedom that humans should enjoy to pursue the way of life they have reason to value. So expansion of capabilities gives us the freedom to be what we want to be and to do what we want to do. The kind of capabilities determines the kind of freedom we can have. In all societies we find different kinds of inequalities on the

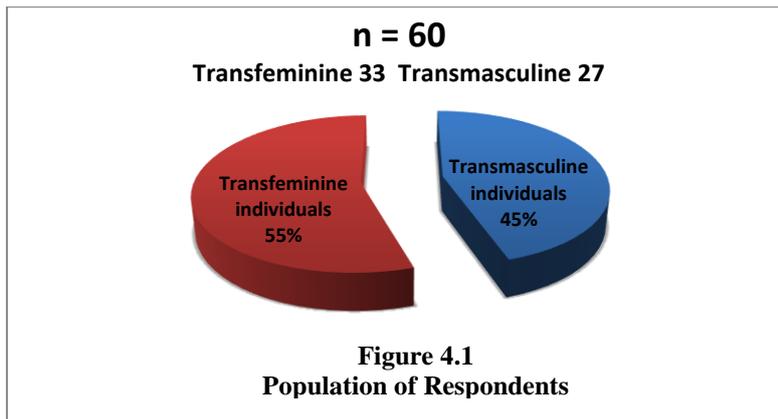
basis of caste, class, sex, gender, ethnicity, religion and to bring about freedom, these inequalities need to be addressed.

This chapter has aimed at understanding the inequalities on the basis of class (education and income) and gender, through the lived experiences of transmasculine and transfeminine individuals. In the patriarchal society we live in, gender becomes an important axis because when we start looking at lives through the lens of gender, the experiences differ. The process of development does not have the same fallout for transgender individuals, women and men. Even within transgender community, their experiences cutting across class, caste and gender ascribed at birth are different and in my thesis I have tried to consider the intersections of gender incongruence with caste, class, religion and patriarchy. How the experiences of transgender individuals tend to be homogenised under the transfeminine narratives within the transgender discourse.

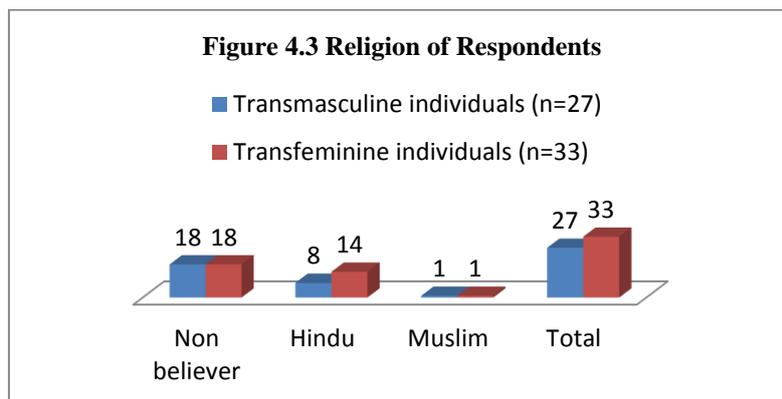
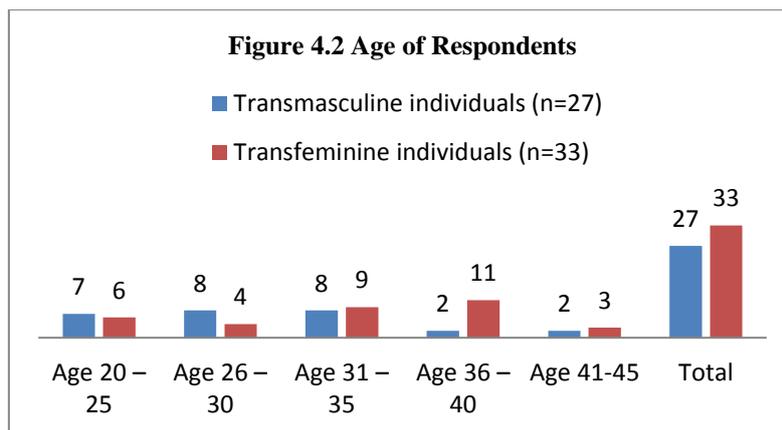
Taking the narratives as the resource pool the chapter has tried to understand whether transgender persons are being able to exercise and realise their capabilities and if so how are they negotiating their lives vis-à-vis social and cultural norms, laws, health, education and employment opportunities and available infrastructure provided by the state for its citizens. In order to study how gender inequality impacts the livelihood of transpeople in eight districts of West Bengal (the urban and semi-urban areas of Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Nadia, Birbhum, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar), I have chosen education, employment and health (physical and mental) as the capabilities to be explored in this paper as the FGDs and interviews surfaced these three capabilities again and again as the principle factors that influence the well-being of the trans-individuals.

## **Section 2: Demography of the research respondents**

This chapter analyses the data from the interviews of both transmasculine and transfeminine respondents and thus the demographic information of gender, age, religion, caste, education, occupation and income of my respondents is presented to understand the various factors that may or may not impact capabilities and liveabilities of my transgender respondents. In my study the total number of transgender individuals interviewed is 60 with 33 transfeminine and 27 transmasculine respondents.

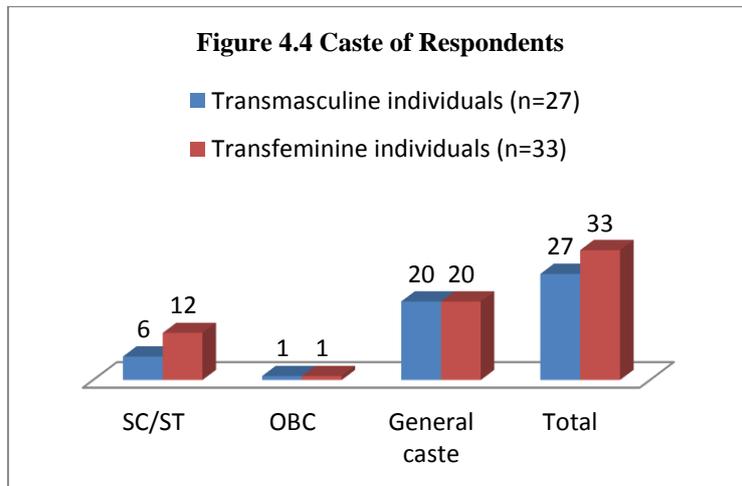


The concentration of transmasculine individuals in the study has been in the age range of 20 to 35 years. 23 individuals (85.2%) represent this age group. 19 transfeminine individuals (57.6%) represent this age group of young adulthood and early middle age. 14 transfeminine individuals (42.4%) come from the late middle age and the number of transmasculine individuals in this age group is four (14.8%).

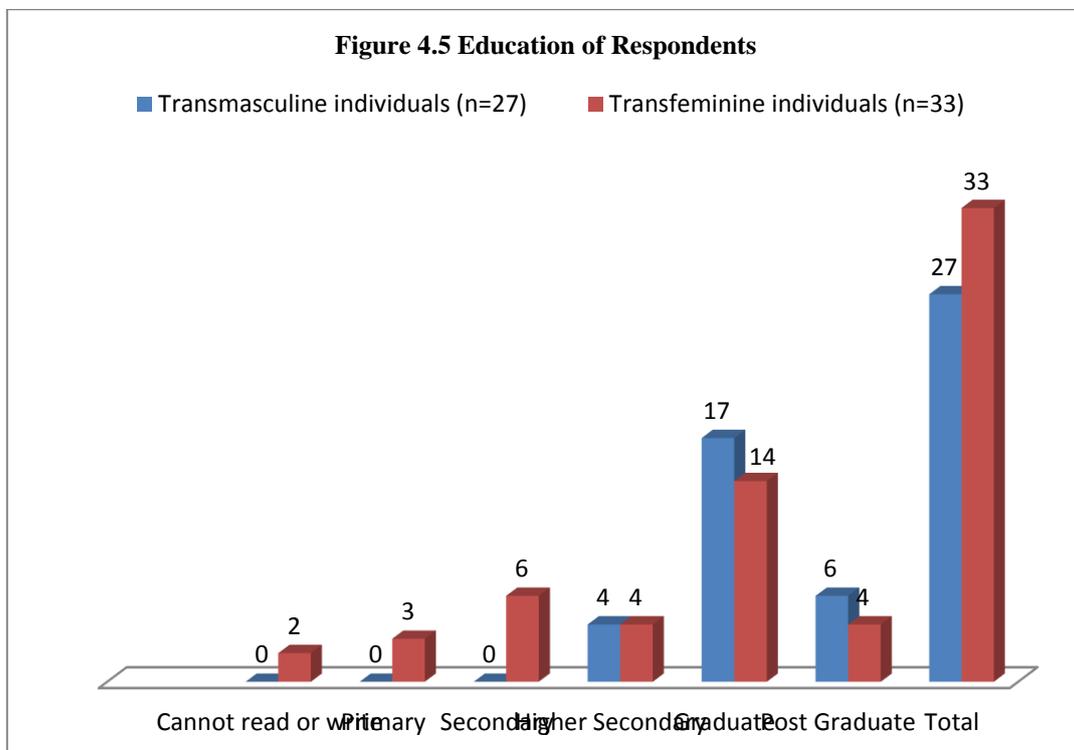


Majority of the respondents (66.7% of transmasculine respondents and 54.5% of transfeminine respondents) do not believe in any religion, one respondent each amongst both

categories are Muslim while all the remaining respondents have described themselves as Hindu.



74% transmasculine respondents and 60.6% transfeminine respondents belong to the general caste, 26% transmasculine and 39.4% transfeminine respondents belong to SC/ST or OBC category.



All the transmasculine respondents are literate and all of them have passed the Higher Secondary examination. 17 transmasculine individuals (62.96%) have done their graduation

and six (22.2%) have done post graduation. Among the 33 transfeminine respondents two (6.06%) respondents cannot read or write, three (9.09%) have gone to primary school and could not go beyond it, six (18.18%) have cleared the secondary examination but stopped there, four (12.12%) have studied till Higher Secondary examination, 14 (42.42%) have completed their graduation and four (12.12%) have studied till post graduation. Education has been a challenge for the transfeminine individuals due to bullying at school, school drop-out and social humiliation. The intersections of caste, class and gender interact and produce complex narratives. School is the first stepping stone in our lives. It is where an individual first interacts socially with the environment outside their immediately family and it forms the foundation of an individual's life for receiving knowledge and skills that enhance their capabilities and makes them equipped for livelihood. After their immediate family, school is the next site of violence in trans-lives. The dropout rate before completing class X of transfeminine individuals is 15.1% as compared to nil for transmasculine individual. The dropout before completing class XII increases to 33.3% for transfeminine individuals while in this study there is no dropout before completion of class XII for transmasculine individuals. The biggest problem highlighted by transmasculine individuals has been 'the school uniform' while for transfeminine individuals it has been abuse, both verbal and physical. In the documentary film *Bioscope: Non-Binary Conversations on Education and Gender*<sup>145</sup> produced by the Nirantar Trust, Rajarshi, Assistant Professor of History in a college in Kolkata said,

It is natural for anyone to revolt if they are faced with repression. When the kids revolt, they don't end up changing their situation or the system because the system is much more stronger than them. In the end they are left with no choice but to leave school. And gradually their life goes astray.

For the transmasculine persons the situation is different as according to Suparna (40 years, transfeminine *hijra* identified individual, Hooghly),<sup>146</sup> "A transman grows up in a closeted protective lifestyle as a result of being assigned gender 'female' at birth but a transwoman grows up out of the house often without any support system." Moreover according to Suhani (37 years, Transfemale, South 24 Parganas)<sup>147</sup>, "As a person assigned gender 'male' at birth, I grew up with the male privilege of being able to do whatever I wanted to. Nobody stopped me from doing anything but as I grew up, my immediate society felt it difficult to engage

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<sup>145</sup> *Bioscope: Non-Binary Conversations of Gender and Education*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfxjrMYxs7E> (accessed on 08. 01. 22)

<sup>146</sup> Interview taken on 14.09.19 in Kolkata

<sup>147</sup> Interview taken on 15.01.19 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

with me. I got alienated." It implies that a transfeminine person has to become able to provide for herself from a very early age and due to lack of support system they are driven to fend for themselves. As a result they often cannot finish their education. On the other hand as far as the experiences of the transmasculine individuals are concerned, being a 'daughter' to the family as a result of taking birth as a person assigned gender female at birth they are often controlled and pulled into the family structure and groomed for becoming a 'good daughter' hence education to a certain extent is achieved with the help of the family support system.

**Table 4.1 Occupation**

Occupation / Livelihood (Overlapping / Multiple options )	Transmasculine individuals (n=27)	Transfeminine individuals (n=33)
Teacher	3	0
NGO/CBO worker	0	16
Service in private sector	6	4
Government employee (contractual)	3	1
Self employed	6	4
Sex worker	0	12
Bar dancer	0	1
Seasonal dancer (launda, songjatra, gajon, madali)	0	5
Hijra practices	0	2
Make-up artist	0	3
Part time jobs/Freelancing	3	3
Chef in a food joint	0	2
Fashion Designer	0	1
Consultant in development sector	0	4
Performing artist	0	5
Unemployed	6	0
Student	3	0

The variety of job experiences is more in case of transfeminine individuals than the transmasculine ones. The transmasculine individuals are either engaged in formal sector or

they are self employed. One striking finding that has surfaced is that among the transmasculine individuals three (11.11%) are students and six (22.22%) are jobless at the time of the interview. But not a single transfeminine person that the study came across is jobless and there were no students in the transfeminine population of this study. The transfeminine individuals are involved in different professions starting from development sector to beauty sector, entertainment industry and sex work. The range is wide and varied.

**Table 4.2 Income**

Income	Transmasculine individuals (n=27)	Transfeminine individuals (n=33)
No income	6	0
< Rs. 5,000	2	8
Rs. 5,000 - Rs. 9,999	5	10
Rs. 10,000 - Rs. 14,999	7	6
Rs. 15,000 – Rs. 19,999	1	3
Rs. 20,000 – Rs. 24,999	5	6
>Rs. 25,000	1	0

As far as income is concerned, three out of 27 (11.1%) of transmasculine respondents and four out of 33 (12.1%) of transfeminine respondents do not have a stable income. Among the transmasculine individuals those who are earning between Rs. 20,000 to 25,000 are from the organised sector. 22.22% of the respondents in this group are associated with the corporate sector or government institutions. One respondent is self employed having his own coaching class. The experience differed in the transfeminine narratives. All the individuals in the higher earning group, i.e. the range being Rs. 20,000 to 25,000 are self employed, six out of 33 transfeminine individuals (18.18%) belong to this group. The transfeminine individuals in this group are graduates with only one individual with a post graduation degree and one having studied till Class XII, whereas in this income segment in the transmasculine group the respondents were all graduates and post graduates with one individual pursuing his PhD. Percentage of respondents from the lower earning group (Rs.1,000 to Rs.10,000) is 54.54% in case of the transfeminine individuals and 25.9% in case of the transmasculine individuals. This difference is quite striking. This has been discussed later in Section 6 of this chapter under "The capability to have a certain livelihood and income".

### **Section 3: Reading the narratives through the lens of capabilities and liveabilities**

In this section, I take the opportunity to discuss the three significant capabilities as propounded by Prof. Amartya Sen. These three capabilities are directly linked to liveabilities and the discussion on education and health is directly linked to livelihood. Education has a direct link with livelihood as access to good education opens up a range of livelihood possibilities. Health, both physical and mental health is also linked to livelihood. Good health improves livelihood which in turn improves health (both physical and mental) forming a closed loop. Mental health being a significant marker of good health and well-being, it becomes instrumental in the lives of the trans-individuals as well. As overlapping social, cultural, legal and economic factors contribute to pushing the transgender individuals to the margins (Campuzano, 2008) the discussion on the capabilities that they might develop or acquire become important. Absence of capabilities restricts them from developing family associations, whether families by birth or families they create (preferred family) and societal membership (larger society or community support group). This happens as they tend to drop out of education, have limited employment opportunities and even if they are employed, face discrimination at the workplace and encounter several problems in health care facilities as well (Cornwall, 2006). Here it is important to mention about the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 where a portion on anti-discrimination is written in Chapter II of the Act - Prohibition against Discrimination<sup>148</sup>. This portion states that there cannot be any discrimination against transgender individuals that denies them access or treats them unfairly at educational institutions. It further puts a ban against any sort of discrimination at workplace or while getting access to health care or any public amenities such as transport, communication etc. including renting, lodging and purchase of property. The Act prohibits any kind of discrimination against transgender individuals at private or government institutions.

Hence it is quite clear that on the basis of our constitution and The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 mentioned above, the transgender individual's capabilities (health, education and income) are supposed to be secured and adequately taken care of. But the ground reality is quite different cry and very grim. Thus an exhaustive understanding of the three capabilities becomes significant with reference to my thesis.

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<sup>148</sup> <https://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/TG%20bill%20gazette.pdf> (accessed on 20.07.20)

The capabilities discussed here are as follows:

- The ability to lead a long and healthy life (mental and physical health)
- The ability to acquire education
- The ability to have a certain income which can satisfy an individual's main requirements

I am a teacher. I run my own coaching centre. I teach pass subjects (humanities) for graduation and I also prepare my students for competitive exams. I had some 90 students before my transition. Now that I am in the process of transition, the number of students has dropped to 50. People have started talking about my identity and a significant number of parents have stopped sending their wards to my tutorial. (Ambar, Transmasculine person, 34 years, South 24 parganas)<sup>149</sup>.

Ambar is an individual assigned female at birth (AFAB). Ambar is a post-op transmasculine person and identifies himself as a 'man.' He is a private tutor, running his own coaching centre. Ambar comes from a general caste, suburban, middle class background. He has completed his Masters degree in English and runs his own coaching centre. Ambar is married to a cis-woman and now leads a 'normative', 'mainstream', 'heterosexual', 'monogamous' and 'straight' way of life with a conventional vocation (private tutor) by positing himself at an oppositional position with reference to transness. Ambar's identity is structured through refusals i.e. "I am not this". Through disavowals, denials and repressions, identities get structured. It is like, 'we are because of what we are not.' Similarly, through an array of 'not thisness' Ambar navigates, negotiates and represents his preferred identity as a 'straight family man'. This in turn gives him the social power of continuing his livelihood even after being questioned about the 'authenticity' of his gendered being. But then again his student base decreased as he started talking about and exercising his gender choice; here the main issue of inequality became his 'preferred gender'. His caste and class also could not 'save' him from being labelled and humiliated. In this case his negotiation was through marrying a cis-woman and becoming her opposite sex partner. By relating himself with a woman in a heterosexual relationship and continuously representing his 'happy married life' through social media he successfully left behind his journey, erased his history and created a new narrative in his preferred gender and thus managed to carry on his livelihood.

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<sup>149</sup> Interview taken on 04.05.17 in South 24 Parganas

I am less qualified and my social positioning is quite low and so is my office post. So I can never aspire for a better way of life. Somewhere I have to fit into all this. I do many types of odd jobs. I work as a part time beautician. I also dance during festivals like *Chhat Puja*<sup>150</sup>. The day of the *Chhat Puja* is mine. I wanted to be a *hijra* in my childhood. I consider myself biologically male, an effeminate male, but I don't want this organ between my legs. I identify myself as a *kothi*, what do you say in English...yes transgender. I want to go for surgery but I don't have the money. People like me don't have any options. Either you join a *hijra khol* or do *khajra*<sup>151</sup> on the streets. I don't have any rights or opportunities as a transgender person. What is the transgender board doing? (Badal, Transfeminine person, 34 years, Kolkata)<sup>152</sup>

Badal was assigned male at birth (AMAB) and identifies herself as a transfeminine person. Babu comes from a disadvantaged urban socioeconomic background, she lost her father at a very early age, and her mother reared her by working as a domestic help. She used to work as a drop-in-centre assistant at a NGO working with people of marginalised gender identity and sexual orientation. Badal has studied till Secondary level and according to her has no other way but to try and earn from different sources, be it working in a project, sex work or dancing in the *Chhat* festival. She feels that transgender people like her can never opt for a job in the mainstream job market, because of their 'social disability.' Badal considered her location as a 'disabled' person and the reason she cited was due to not having a membership to the socially intelligible group of cis gendered people and therefore not being able to work anywhere other than the development sector, where awareness about non normative gender and sexuality is present to some extent. At present Badal works in a NGO. She manages one of their projects with psychosocially disabled women. According to Badal the component of 'disability' binds them together. In spite of belonging to the general caste category Badal's gender preference and class position stigmatises her doubly gives the status of a disadvantaged minority.

I am a social activist and consultant working with gender and sexually marginalised people. Initially, I had thought that I would do sex work after transition. I have done bottom surgery but am not going to go for breast implant. I don't want large breasts. But after transition my 'feminine' instincts are aroused and I can't think of doing sex work anymore (Suhani, Transfeminine person, 37 years, South 24 Parganas).

Suhani's position seems to be suggesting that 'good women do not indulge in sex work'. This stance reinforced the stigma associated with sex work. In doing so it negates the sex worker's struggle for getting the acknowledgement as a worker. Suhani submits to the patriarchal gaze

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<sup>150</sup> *Chhat puja* is a religious festival dedicated to the Sun and his wife Usha. It is mainly observed in states like, Bihar, Uttarpradesh and Jharkhand

<sup>151</sup> Sex work

<sup>152</sup> Interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata

by taking pride in her 'feminine' instincts. But again when asked about her sexuality she shared that she has multiple partners and she is transparent about her relationships to her partners. On one hand Suhani is not reconciled to doing sex work while on the other hand she is happy to have multiple partners. Through her narrative she is constructing a different 'femininity', where it is going beyond the societal norm of monogamy and yet identifies with a kind of femininity that believes in the 'sanctity of the body of the woman', thus shunning sex work as something that would violate her body. Suhani is a LGBTIQHKA+ activist and is also exploring her career as an actor after getting her desired body through GAT. She is a B.Com graduate and by virtue of being a veteran activist is a well known face and is earning quite well doing consultancy work. Suhani comes from a semi-urban, middleclass socio-economic background belonging to the general caste category. Suhani talked about her 'feminine' instincts a number of times during the interview where she equated femininity with sobriety and motherhood. The social construction of 'femininity' is always associated with the social construction of the 'good woman'. This association is performed repetitively through stylised acts in order to establish the criteria for becoming a 'good woman'. 'Woman' in our society is always identified as the embodiment of patriarchy. Female body becomes the patriarchal body and the male body is disembodied (Butler, 1999).

All the above narratives clearly indicate that the question of livelihood is intertwined with liveability which is yet again influenced by the capabilities that an individual human develops. If that human being locates themselves in a marginalised position their struggle becomes more difficult. In the case of Ambar, (34 years, transmasculine individual, South 24 Parganas) even after having the required capabilities, his livelihood is challenged by 'mainstream' society and only marriage gives him the opportunity to claim a socially conceivable identity and a social status by getting appropriated by the social structure. Badal (34 years, transfeminine individual from Kolkata) continues to live with her identity as a transgender person and restrains from becoming a 'woman'. Her association with a NGO and her work as a caregiver gives her a certain validity as a good worker which is a pre-requisite for membership in society. Though Badal identifies as a transgender person, she inhabits the in-between, neither identifying as a 'woman, nor a 'man.' Suhani (37 years, South 24 Parganas), identifying as a transfemale, 'unapologetically' talked about her 'transgressive' choices. While at one point she is abiding by societal rules, again from another perspective, she is breaking social norms. According to her, as she was born and brought up as a 'male', she has enjoyed the privileges of an AMAB person and as a consequence developed an

intense sense of self confidence, which in turn helped her claim her position in society. The relation between capabilities, liveabilities and livelihood is complex and dynamic.

In the following sections I have tried to understand liveabilities as understood by Judith Butler through the lens of Capability Approach as propounded by Professor Amartya Sen. Life needs an environment to sustain and nourish life (Butler, 2009). The concept of liveability emerges as factors that ensure that life is nourished and continues to thrive amidst social and political precarity (McNeilly, 2016). Liveability is influenced by basic needs such as shelter, food and warmth. Non-normative gender and sexual identities make the trans-individual socially unintelligible who then becomes unrecognisable as a subject that counts in the heteropatriarchal binary social framework. And so what we think makes our lives liveable are socially ascribed 'conditions of normativity' that needs to be fulfilled for 'life to become life' (Butler, 2009, 2012). Here I argue that liveability depends on certain capabilities that make life worth living. Following Professor Sen, here I have tried to explore the three basic human capabilities i.e. health, education and livelihood and see those against the lived experiences of my research respondents. How the capabilities are influencing the liveabilities of the trans-persons is the central question of this chapter. Here liveability is fundamentally linked to a wider political question of social transformation, a rethinking of life so that its conditions for flourishing are enhanced and normative discourses of intelligibility and precarity through which life is currently apprehended are critically engaged.

#### **Section 4: The capability to live a healthy life**

The component of mental and physical health is directly linked to livelihood. The narratives clearly indicate that mental health is a big challenge for the transgender individuals. Ever since the period in their childhood when they start to express their preferred gender identity by not adhering to the gender assigned at birth, the gender non-conforming children become stigmatized and ostracized. All efforts are made to 'correct' them and 'normalise' them by forcing them to adhere to the binary gender construct where the relationship between sex assigned at birth and gender stays linear. This tug of war between the children's desire of being in their preferred gender and the family members' compulsion of pushing them to abide by the gender norms prescribed by society creates mental health issues in the children.

Dipto,<sup>153</sup> (40 years), a transmasculine research participant coming from Assam but now married to a transwoman and settled in Kolkata shared,

My mother used to get dolls and cooking sets for me, I was never interested in playing with them. I was rather interested in my brother's toys. My parents would force me to play with dolls. When I did not get the scope to express my gender identity as a 'boy' at home, I tried to get support from the boy's group of our locality. They were also not interested to play with me. I could not play with the girls as I could not identify with them, so I withdrew and made a world of my own. I became lonely, I became alienated and I became aggressive.

Along with this mental agony often body dysphoria surfaces where the gender non-conforming children become uneasy with their body. It gives a feeling of being 'trapped' in the wrong body, a feeling of alienation. This process of withdrawal and alienation has the potential of creating mental health problems like deep sorrow, anxiety, frustration to pathological traits of psychiatric illnesses like mood disorders, schizophrenia, clinical depression, obsessive compulsive disorder and many more. It manifests in self harming behaviour, suicidal ideation and social alienation which becomes an integral part of their lives. In this study it has been seen that during middle childhood (6 to 12 years, as narrated by 78.8% transfeminine and 55.5% transmasculine individuals), the felt sense of gender develops which comes into conflict with the socially ascribed gender and thus starts their struggle. The difference in percentage between transfeminine and transmasculine individuals is significant and the reason for this difference as perceived from this study is the fact that social acceptance towards preferred gender expression of the transmasculine individuals is higher than acceptance towards the transfeminine individuals. Trans-femininity is more visible and more unacceptable as patriarchy can never allow the 'fall' of a man. The self is both autonomous and socially dependent or relational. The relational aspect of selfhood has the ability to make the individual vulnerable by inflicting violence upon them and negating their selfhood. Then again the autonomous self struggles to reconstruct the individual identity with the help of resources (human and material) in hand (Brison, 2002, 38). Self formation and self transformation is deeply relational (Feinberg, 1998, Brison, 2002, shotwell and Sangrey 2009). This conflict between the autonomous self trying to open up and claim the space and the relational self trying to create their own identity on the basis of how they are perceived by others creates a gap which in turn creates hurdles in getting education, employment and having healthy social relations and thus hinders well-being.

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<sup>153</sup> Interview taken on 20.10.18 in Kolkata

**Table 4.3 GAT (HRT/SRS) Data**

Gender	Total respondents	HRT	Surgery Partial or Total	Neither HRT or Surgery
TM	27	14 (51.8%)	13 (48.1%)	13 (48.1%)
TF	33	10 (30.3%)	5 (15.1%)	23 (69.7%)

In order to match the body with their preferred gender, trans-individuals often seek SRS as a part of GAT. SRS being an expensive affair, the decision to opt for it depends upon one's financial status, livelihood choice and existing support system. Seven out of thirty-three transfeminine respondents (21.21%) said that they were not being able to opt for SRS as they did not have the money. four transfeminine respondents (12.12%) said that they were unable to give SRS a thought and proceed due to family commitments, obligations and family pressure. Those who were unable to opt for SRS talked about expressing their preferred gender by dressing up, using make-up and keeping long hair. They also said that they are able to express their preferred gender identities through their choice of profession. Through earning from seasonal work like *launda* dance<sup>154</sup> and dancing during *chhat puja*, doing dance performances, doing sex work or joining the *hijra khol* they get the opportunity to be 'in their own skin' without being questioned as their profession demands them to look feminine and express their femininity to the outside world. Among the transfeminine respondents 10 (30.3%) are on HRT, three respondents (9.09%) have undergone full SRS, two respondents (6.06%) have undergone partial SRS of which one respondent who is *hijra* identified has undergone castration and the other person has done bottom surgery (orchietctomy and vaginoplasty) and does not intend to do breast augmentation (she is satisfied with the results of HRT). 23 transfeminine respondents (69.7%) have not had any surgery and are also not on HRT, 12 transfeminine respondents (36.4%) said they would never opt for SRS. Seven transfeminine respondents (21.21%) said they had plans for SRS and would undergo SRS

<sup>154</sup> Ancient folk dance of rural Bihar and UP where *kothis* (effeminate boys) dance dressed as women wearing make-up and costumes

after they had enough savings and four of them (12.12%) said that apart from financial problems they were unable to proceed due to family obligations.

Three transfeminine individuals out of 33 transfeminine respondents (9.09%) have completed the process of SRS. One of them is an activist and a consultant and working with individuals having marginalised gender identity and/or sexual orientation, one works as a bar dancer and another works as an accountant and stock keeper in a district private nursing home. The two individuals one of whom has done partial SRS and the other having undergone castration are both involved in queer activism, both of them are development consultants and one works as an actor as well. Here employment and health becomes intrinsically linked with each other, which impacts their decision whether to opt for SRS or not. If they cannot opt for SRS due to financial scarcity, their mental health gets jeopardised. If they can, it starts a journey into the unknown; a lifelong process of hormone therapy, phased surgeries, lifestyle restrictions, and continuing medical follow up. One of my transfeminine respondents has opted for partial SRS. Another transfeminine respondent has just undergone castration. Both of them have had surgical intervention performed on their bodies on the basis of their need and choice. They have adorned their body according to their wish. They never wanted to become a full fledged 'woman' they only wanted to express their self according to their wish and their comfort. Striking relationship between livelihood and SRS has been observed through reading the narratives, specially the transfeminine narratives. Seven of my transfeminine respondents (21.21%) shared that they are opting for GAT because they think their changed body and appearance would help them to get better clientele for their vocation. The vocations that these respondents talked about are associated with the entertainment industry mostly guided by the patriarchal male gaze, where they give immense importance to a woman's body and by adorning that feminine body they expect to have a better career either as a she-male or as a sex worker or as an actor. One individual said that she will be opting for partial SRS due to professional reasons as she wants to do sex work as a 'she male' Being a she-male she needs to inhabit a body that has breasts and penis together and hence her decision to only opt for breast augmentation. All the transfeminine individuals who have undergone SRS (partial or full SRS or castration) mentioned that they felt peace after getting the feeling of inhabiting their desired body.

Among the transmasculine individuals 14 (51.8%) are on HRT, 13(48.1%) have undergone partial surgery after completing one year of HRT (all of them have done top surgery and none of them have done bottom surgery) and 13 (48.1%) have neither undergone any surgery and

are also not on HRT. The transmasculine individuals who have opted for SRS either have a stable income (two of them are teachers, two work as physiotherapist, one is a banker, one is working in media as a graphic designer, one works at an international cultural and educational institute in Kolkata) or have very supportive families (25.92%). So it is self reflective that once you have a stable source of income or a supportive family you can take care of your health and well-being.

Nine transmasculine respondents (33.3%) have said they will not opt for HRT and SRS. It has been their conscious choice of not undergoing SRS. Two (7.4%) have decided not to opt for HRT and SRS as according to them their masculinity does not depend on their biological body, 4 (14.8%) will not opt for HRT and SRS for health concerns, three (11.1%) do not want to undergo SRS due to family pressure. Two transmasculine individuals (7.4%) might opt for mastectomy and hysterectomy but not HRT as they do not want to have facial hair or change their vocal quality. Interestingly one of these two individuals will not change his document as well as he wants to continue receiving his father's pension retaining the status of the 'unmarried daughter'. Five transmasculine individuals (18.52%) will go for SRS in the future and are saving money for future surgery. The discussion on health is significant here as 'health' both physical and mental is a very important component of liveable lives.

HIV/AIDS and other STIs are also an issue of concern predominantly for the transfeminine individuals. According to the NACO report "Skilling for Livelihood Opportunities for Transgenders in India,"<sup>155</sup> livelihood vulnerability directly increases risk and susceptibility to HIV. Where the National HIV prevalence is 0.31%, the HIV prevalence among the transgender community is estimated to be 8.2% (NACO report, 2017:10). The health professionals at government ICTCs are judgmental and have very little awareness of issues concerning non-normative and marginalised sexual orientation and gender identities.

Often their desire to have a feminine body coupled with lack of money and resources and a medical system that is insensitive and discriminatory drives transwomen to quacks for castration or compels them to have drugs such as I-PILL<sup>156</sup> to enhance their breasts. These non-professional and arbitrary medical procedures and medications have serious health risks. Badal, a transfeminine research participant (Kolkata, 34 years) said,

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<sup>155</sup> <http://www.in.undp.org/content/india/en/home/library/poverty/skilling-and-livelihoods-for-transgender-community.html> (accessed on 20.06.21)

<sup>156</sup> Hormonal emergency contraceptive pill containing progesterone

I want to opt for castration, I don't even think of formal sex reassignment surgery by registered doctors because that is expensive and I will not be able to afford it. If someday the Transgender board can help us to have SRS free of cost in government hospitals, I can still think of doing it in a proper way.

Castration by quacks poses life risks and long term urinogenital complications. Silicone injections and implants by non-medical persons to cut down on costs can be contaminated, cause infections and other diseases. Sex work, dancing at festivals and marriages exposes transfeminine individuals to acts of violence such as group sex, their trans-bodies becoming the focus of male aggression. They are subjected to gang rape, burns, lacerated wounds which they have to accept as a part of their work hazard. Transgender individuals (both MtF and FtM) suffer from depression, anxiety and other mental health problems. Some of the common responses from the transgender individuals that have come out in the FGDs are:

- "I feel ashamed of my body when I look at myself in the mirror."
- "During intimate moments with my partner I cover my genitals. I feel ashamed."

Transmasculine individuals speak of intense trauma during their periods. Self harming like slashing wrists is common. The response to hormone therapy varies from individual to individual based on the person's physiology and metabolism and while some transmasculine persons report the complete stopping of periods and a noticeable change in their voice quality immediately after the first dose of testosterone injection, others continue to have spotting even after several months of hormone therapy and are forced to opt for surgery which they otherwise wouldn't. This increases their anxiety which in turn affects their hormone response in a vicious loop. Their depression increases and many transgender individuals have suicidal ideation. Substance abuse, alcohol dependence, smoking are common in transgender persons which affects their general health and increase their risks to lung, liver and heart disease. Not enough studies has been done on the incidence of cancer due to hormone therapy and though there is no direct evidence yet, the link between long term hormone therapy and cancer cannot be ruled out.

Developing urological problems is a real threat in the lives of transgender individual and is more so in the case of transmasculine persons. "I don't use public toilets when I am out. On days when I have to travel, I drink less water and I always try to visit restaurants and shopping malls with unisex toilets or washrooms which have multiple closed lavatories apart

from urinals in the washrooms." says Samrat<sup>157</sup> (28 years), a transmasculine person from Hooghly. The problem is more in the case of transmasculine individuals because very few of them opt for bottom surgery after completing mastectomy. Metoidioplasty and phalloplasty are much more complex surgical procedures than vaginoplasty and have higher risk of failure and require multiple surgeries to get it right. Thus the incidence of transfeminine individuals undergoing vaginoplasty is much higher than transmasculine persons having undergone metoidioplasty or phalloplasty. In my study, none of the 27 transmasculine individuals have undergone metoidioplasty or phalloplasty as against three transfeminine individuals out of 33 respondents having undergone complete SRS including vaginoplasty.

Prolonged urine retention leads to urological problems such as urinary tract infections which constantly affect the lives of transmasculine persons and their capability of leading a healthy life and as a result their liveability gets adversely affected which may or may not get directly linked to livelihood choices. But ill health in any form can have the possibility of impacting life choices. Labani,<sup>158</sup> (a 28 year transmasculine respondent from Birbhum) shared that his first office was a congested place so it was difficult for him to use the toilets. Labani's physical appearance is 'completely like' any other young man but as he has not changed his name and gender in identity documents, he had to use the women's wash room, which was confusing and uncomfortable for both his women colleagues and him. Labani said he was there for six months and he could count the days he used the washroom. He restrained from using the washroom for avoiding unwanted curiosity. It was unhealthy. So he had to start searching for job and after leaving this office he joined a big multinational company. The office was spread across several floors which helped him to use the washroom discretely.

The constant use of binders in transmasculine individuals severely restricts their physical and mental well being. Samudra<sup>159</sup>, a transmasculine individual (Kolkata, 29 years) shared "I cannot stay without the binder. I have to use it all the time except perhaps when I am alone." This prolonged use of the binder result in a host of medical complications including rashes, allergies and severely constricted lungs, respiratory problems and prevents them from having a healthy life. The study has revealed that most transmasculine respondents opted for mastectomy along with partial or complete hysterectomy and none of my transmasculine

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<sup>157</sup> Interview taken on 22.06.18 in Hooghly

<sup>158</sup> Interview taken on 12.08.18 in Birbhum

<sup>159</sup> Interview taken on 12.07.18 in Kolkata

respondents has opted for metoidioplasty or phalloplasty. The practical reason here is that it is a complicated surgery and advanced surgery methods are not available in India. It seemed that for the trans-individuals, the external and visible markers of gender assume primary importance. A transmasculine person would like to have a flat chest and cannot bear the emotional trauma of having periods, while the transfeminine person creates breasts through the use of padded bra or implants. The type and extent of GAT is influenced by the extent of the individual's body dysphoria, support of family, surrounding social structures, cost of therapy and questions revolving around livelihood of the individual. When a transfeminine person embarks on a journey of Sex Reassignment Surgery she/they must look at anything between rupees three to five lakhs for the surgeries. For a transmasculine person the cost becomes rupees four to eight lakhs for surgeries and for both transmasculine and transfeminine persons rupees fifteen hundred to two thousand for monthly dose of hormone. The planning for SRS must keep adequate time for getting the desired body spaced out across three to four years.

The sequence and order of the steps followed by transgender persons undergoing GAT / SRS are outlined below:

- Psychotherapy/counselling for self exploration and decision making (3 to 4 sessions)
- GD certificate from two psychiatrists and/or clinical psychologist
- Hormone Replacement Therapy for at least one year
- Starting the first surgery
- Healing time post first surgery (it differs from individual to individual)
- Second surgery

The transgender person constantly negotiates all these factors, weighing them against his/her/their capabilities and making adjustments and compromises in an effort to improve the quality of their lives. "I used to have lots of women clients whom I visited to give physiotherapy. Ever since I started my transition my client base has shrunk. I might not go through the complete process as I do not want to lose my earning." said a transmasculine person (South 24 Parganas, 30 years) during a Focus Group Discussion.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> FGD taken on 26.05.18 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

In the same FGD, a transfeminine person (Kolkata, 28 years) said,

I have undergone top surgery. I wanted breasts. I don't want to go for bottom surgery. I want to keep my penis. I like being a she-male. It gives me pleasure and it's also good for my profession. Many of my partners and clients like it this way. I know about many of my friends who have completed full surgery after which their *parikhs* have left them. They now wish they had not opted for full surgery and there is no going back. I can never be 'that woman' and so why should I try being one. I am a woman, a woman with a penis.

Many transgender persons opt for full surgery so that they can be 'that man' or 'that woman' in their partner's eyes and can give them 'full' pleasure during sexual intimacy. Some of them after full SRS feel that it would have been better if they had not opted for full surgery. For transfeminine individuals getting the surgery done for sex work leads to a marked increase in their income but many of them are not satisfied even after going through the process and wish they could reverse it.

According to the preamble of the Constitution of the World Health Organisation (WHO), health cannot be limited to just absence of any illness. It is a condition of well-being which encompasses the physical, mental and social aspects of an individual. Irrespective of differences in gender, class, race, religion, socio-economic or political belief right to good health is a basic right of every human being.<sup>161</sup> The right to health is not a fundamental right in the Indian constitution. The Supreme Court of India has interpreted the Right to Health as an implied right under Article 21 (right to life). The ability to lead a long and healthy life (mental and physical health) is thus a central capability and transgender individuals find this capability restricted and constricted by a patriarchal society with oppressive norms and gender stereotypes. She/he/they cannot approach a health care system which is biased, discriminates and stigmatises transgender individuals who try to access it. Most medical practitioners (including psychiatrists and allied mental health professionals) do not have the professional training to attend to transgender individuals. Most of them are insensitive and phobic to the issue. This is coupled with a medical culture that treats the human genitourinary system as the reproductive system meant for procreation only instead of considering them as sex organs which also have a role to play for pleasure and emotional well. Tamil Nadu is the first state in India to provide free SRS to transgender persons but the surgery provided is only for MtF individuals. In general, medical practitioners are extremely reluctant to provide SRS

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<https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution#:~:text=Health%20is%20a%20state%20of,belief%2C%20economic%20or%20social%20condition> (accessed on 21.12.20)

to transmasculine individuals because to them removing the uterus would be like removing a fertile womb meant to bear children.

I had mediclaim. But the insurance company would not pay for my hysterectomy which was the first surgery in my transition to be a man. Luckily my endocrinologist sent me to a gynaecologist who was sensitive to my cause. Her prescriptions made it look like I was having my surgery due to excessive bleeding from a polycystic ovary and I was reimbursed by my insurance company. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to afford this surgery. (Samudra, 29 years, transmasculine person from Kolkata).

Ambar, another transmasculine individual (Kolkata, 34 years) said, "My parents took me to a psychiatrist who prescribed medications and advised me to try and block my mind from these ideas and to focus and forcefully think of myself as a girl for the time-being. He said that there was a possibility that my condition could be cured." In this environment of phobia, discrimination and stigma attached to transgender persons, the capability of attaining the highest standard of health which is a fundamental right in the constitution of the World Health Organisation and an implied right in the Constitution of India can never be fulfilled in the lives of trans-persons. For them it is a constant struggle to survive, negotiate with power structures in an attempt to attain the other capabilities of education and livelihood that I attempt to explore next.

## **Section 5: The capability to acquire education**

The right to education is a fundamental right under Article 21A of the Indian constitution enacted by the Indian Parliament in August 2009. Section 3a of Chapter 2 of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 prohibits discrimination of transgender persons which includes denial, discontinuation or unfair treatment in educational institutions. However this does not translate in real life for the transgender people who are often denied of this right. This is due to lack of awareness of school teachers, school authority, parents and society at large and this directly gets linked to livelihood opportunities and choices, that gets adversely affected without proper education. When the right to education is either not practiced or inadequately practiced, livelihood gets affected and in turn impacts on the liveability issues of the trans-persons. Bubu<sup>162</sup> (23 years, Kolkata) a transfeminine person shared her experience.

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<sup>162</sup> Interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata

Often we cannot complete our education due to stigma, discrimination and bullying in school. We became the focus of ridicule and harassment. Friends start calling us names, like *chhakka*, *mauga* and *ladies*, it feels painful. When I was in school I got sexually assaulted by my seniors. I could not walk properly, I was afraid of getting labelled, I started bunking classes. I tried to pass the secondary examination, but failed to do so. My education got disrupted and I stopped going to school.

This is a very common experience for transfeminine individuals. It is like even after having a 'male body' (which is considered a privilege) expressing the gender as feminine is considered a fall and a threat to patriarchy and hence the transwoman become the source of fun, scorn and humiliation. Continuous bullying and harassment often alienate them at school and they become drop-outs. The experience of going to school is also traumatic for transmasculine individuals and one of the most significant reasons for this is the school uniform. Ambar, my transmasculine respondent (34 years, South 24 Parganas) shared that gender specific uniform becomes a source of discomfort, uneasiness and creates lack of interest in going to school,

The most pathetic thing was that in school from class IX to XII, the uniform was sari, and I had to abide by the rule. I felt like being tied down by ropes all across my body with which I was forced to live. Even if I wanted to free myself I could not. At that time I could see other boys enjoying among themselves, which I could not, I felt like being trapped, suffocated, constrained. That was a crisis situation for me.

During the pandemic infused lockdown situation, where online class and work from home become the 'new normal' it gave a sigh of relief to the transgender students as the lower part of their uniforms were not visible on camera and they could wear clothes that they were comfortable with. Negotiating with the public space is tiring, challenging and at times risky too. The problem with school uniform has surfaced in all most all the transmasculine narratives. The transfeminine individuals shared their experiences of getting bullied in school, experiencing sexual assault and consequently dropping out of school or otherwise invisibilising the real self and creating a self image on the basis of societal expectations. But in the transmasculine narratives, significant stories of negotiations emerge. Six transmasculine individuals (22.22%) coming from rural or suburban locations, said that their school authority have been open to discussion and they had been given permission for wearing 'pant-shirt' as school uniform. But none of the transfeminine individuals could share a similar experience. Wearing pant-shirt is considered a unisex choice, but wearing sari or *salwar-kameez* can never be considered a unisex choice. It cannot be a choice at all and meets with a violent response from the patriarchal society which quashes such expression.

Parents of Arjo<sup>163</sup>, an 18 year old transmasculine individual from Kolkata shared their feelings during his interview,

It would have been better if we had admitted our child in a girls' school instead of a co-ed school. At least he would have been able to bridge alliances with other girls, participate in sports and other activities. The school has only reinforced the binary. When asked to write an essay about their favourite sport, teachers ask girls to write about badminton and boys about soccer. Our child did not go to the toilet at school. The other children ridiculed him and the only question he was confronted with was "What gender are you?" However we tried to make the school principal understand his discomfort when she asked us why Arjo was so shy in school. When we tried to put forward the issue concerning gender non conforming children, her convenient answer was, as far she is concerned, the child is studying and as long as the child is studying, she has nothing to say. She was very busy and she did not have time to go through the links that we sent her for generating awareness at Arjo's school.

School is supposed to be the second most important environment for children just after home, where the children go through the socialisation process and develop their sense of self and the outside world. Indifference and disinterest coming from the school about a child can have significant impact on the child's well-being. It seems that the school authorities who are comfortably happy with the binary structure are not at all keen to take the extra effort to understand concerns around gender non conforming children and hence the children gets invisibilised, bullied, humiliated and discriminated for the longest time of their life. Education can be double edged in many ways. Like other mainstream institution it schools us in the binary but it also gives us the tool and language to critique and question that binary (Shah et al 2015: 69). The school curriculum and syllabus is gendered, patriarchal and heteronormative. It feeds the binary structure with no room for gender expression. The curriculum needs to be inclusive with queer narratives (stories, poems) and queer representations (including transgender/other as a gender category in admissions forms or other forms) that individuals with alternate or marginalised gender expression and/or sexuality can identify with. During this critical phase of development of the body and the mind, when the child is in the process of maturing into an adult, they suffer from discrimination, alienation and invisibilization at school. They need to be reassured that their feelings are as 'normal' in the context of the binary structure they see around them, helping them to not suffer from guilt and estrangement.

Another critical problem faced by transmasculine individuals at school is the issue of accessing the school toilet. Schools have no awareness on these issues and there are no

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<sup>163</sup> Interview taken on 21.06.21 in Kolkata

provisions for unisex toilets. As a result, most transgender individuals refrain from using the school toilets or do so during class hours when the toilets are almost empty. There is no space for anything other than the binarised identities. The option of unisex toilet is never considered an option as a separate toilet for women/girls becomes the symbol of patriarchal protection from harassment and assault they might experience from men/boys. Male and female toilets are the symbol of reinforcing the binarised social system. The absence of unisex toilets or trans-affirmative toilets clearly reflects the exclusion of transgender individuals from public spaces. The ploy is to invisibilise transgender individuals from the public domain, from education and livelihood. It is a story of exclusion, marginalisation and invisibilisation that tells them that as long as you do not fall into one of the two binary boxes available, you do not exist. In such an environment of ignorance and indifference the ability to acquire education becomes a distant dream and as a result it becomes even more difficult to get a job. Furthermore, according to the NACO report on 'Skilling for Livelihood Opportunities for Transgenders in India' (2017),<sup>164</sup> it is seen that transgender persons often leave home at a very early age, due to non-cooperation from the family and as a consequence their education becomes discontinued. Findings of this study also support the fact stated in the NACO report of 2017. Five out of 33 transfeminine persons (15.15%) left their house during adolescence and hence could not continue with their education without the structural support from their family. Three out of 27 transmasculine persons (11.11%) left their home, but they did so at a later age during young adulthood after completing basic education. The report says that most employment opportunities seek individuals who have completed education up to class ten or twelve. Applications get dismissed because of lack of education of the applicant. Comparing the data on the levels of education achieved by transmasculine and transfeminine persons reveal that 85.18% of transmasculine individuals have studied till graduation and above as compared to only 54.54% in the case of transfeminine individuals. All transmasculine persons have studied till class X and above with zero drop outs before class X as compared to 10% transfeminine individuals who dropped out before class X. There is a marked rate of drop outs in education in the case of transfeminine persons as compared to transmasculine individuals and the narratives have revealed some interesting insights. The first and most obvious reason that emerges from the narratives is that the level of discrimination and stigma associated with transwomen is much higher and this seems to be due to a sense of demotion and fall when a AMAB individual leaves her 'position of

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<sup>164</sup> <http://www.in.undp.org/content/india/en/home/library/poverty/skilling-and-livelihoods-for-transgender-community.html> (accessed on 20.06.21)

privilege'. Also in play is the construct that the 'woman' is an object of male pleasure, household work and hence there is no need to study so much while a man has to establish himself, take responsibility and earn. Bubu (Kolkata, 23 years), my transfeminine research participant said,

I got very poor marks in my secondary examination, so I discontinued further education. Now I am working in a call centre, I earn Rs. 5000 a month, but I do not have to think of it much as my *parikh* takes care of my expenses and I am happy.

Whereas Jammy<sup>165</sup>, a transmasculine respondent (North 24 Parganas 34 years) said,

Both in school and in college I faced discrimination. I was different from others, so neither the girls nor the boys included me in their group. It was a loner's journey. There was pressure mounting at home. In college the situation became more difficult and I knew that I would have to complete graduation. Otherwise, I would not get any employment and I wouldn't be able to get out of this situation.

Two (6.06%) transfeminine respondents were unable to read and write whereas all the transmasculine individuals were literate. Another significant point that came up from the narratives was that all the transfeminine persons were working at the time of the interview, but two (7.41%) of the transmasculine respondents were studying in order to prepare themselves as better professionals and four (14.82%) were studying and also working for supporting themselves. The transfeminine individuals do not have any option other than getting into a job as early as possible. Some said that due to their gender identity as women they take the role of the 'nurturer' and fend for others. But due to their history of inhabiting a male body they are forced to earn and support their families. But in case of transmasculine individuals as they have taken birth in a female body, the parents become protective about them. This patriarchal way of looking at transgender identities on the basis of the biology is problematic, it takes away all agency from bodies that are marked as female to assert power and control.

Here, I would like to mention the recent debate around introduction of transgender issues to make teachers and other staff associated with education gender sensitive, taken by the National Council of Education and Research and Training (NCERT). NCERT is an autonomous body established by the Government of India in 1961 to develop and support a

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<sup>165</sup> Interview taken on 17.01.19 in North 24 Parganas

national and common education system in India that takes into account the diversity and plurality that is India. In October, 2021, NCERT introduced a training manual titled *Inclusion of Transgender Children in School Education: Concerns and Roadmap*<sup>166</sup>. The manual was designed by eminent professors of NCERT, Delhi University, Ashoka University from the Department of Gender Studies, Department of Adult Continuing Education, Department of Biology, Psychology, by eminent researchers, academicians, activists and NGO workers working on human rights, rights of people with marginalised gender and sexuality and its aim was to sensitise teaching staff about the needs of gender non-conforming children and integrate such children into 'mainstream education' and ensuring that such children did not drop out of school and continued to have access to education that was so vital in enhancing their capabilities. The manual recommended having gender neutral toilets at school, option of wearing gender neutral uniforms for children, removing gender stereotypes by not segregating activities and sports at school based on such stereotypes and also advocated teachers to discuss options of puberty blockers with children who were in distress due to body dysphoria. The manual seemed to open a Pandora's box and sparked off a huge row. There was tremendous backlash to the manual, particularly from the core elements of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)<sup>167</sup> that formed the backbone of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the right wing, Hindu nationalist government ruling India since 2014. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) took Suo Moto action and sent a notice to NCERT based on a complaint it had received from Vinay Joshi a member of the RSS. The notice asked NCERT to take appropriate action to rectify anomalies in the manual quoting the complaints it had received which alleged that the manual traumatised children, removed the binary system that ensured equal rights for children, talked about puberty blockers. The notice also questioned the qualification of the people who had drafted the manual. The notice had its desired effect as it led to the immediate withdrawal of the manual and the transfer of the senior faculty members in the department of gender studies in NCERT to other departments. This incident only highlights how difficult it is to fight against a heteropatriarchal hegemonic system that enforces a gender binary framework with rigid boundaries and norms with sheer ruthlessness. Even a sincere attempt to bring about the slightest change in the system is quashed swiftly by the system. Education is a major hurdle for the transgender individuals who face constant

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<sup>166</sup> [https://clpr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Inclusion\\_of\\_Transgender\\_Children\\_in\\_School\\_Education.pdf](https://clpr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Inclusion_of_Transgender_Children_in_School_Education.pdf) (accessed on 12.01.22)

<sup>167</sup> RSS is an Indian right wing, Hindu nationalist extremist organisation that has the agenda of propagating radical Hindutva in India and creating a 'Hindu Rashtra' in India

discrimination and humiliation. Alienated, unable to identify with the gendered world around them they gradually become depressed and frustrated with life. These emotions are so overwhelming that they find it difficult to concentrate and continue with their education and so the capability to receive education remains unfulfilled for many and this leads the discussion to the next capability that is so interlinked with the capability of achieving good education - Livelihood.

## **Section 6: The capability to have a certain livelihood and income**

In the late 1990s with the HIV pandemic creating havoc in the country, came the HIV/AIDS prevention and control projects targeting the MSM population in India. As a result of these Targeted Intervention projects *kothis* got visibility and job as outreach workers, peer educators and peer counsellors since no upper class gay man was ready to walk around public cruising sites to distribute condoms and disseminate information about safer sex to MSM people (Gupta, 2005). HIV/AIDS project brought visibility to the transfeminine persons and gay identified community, clubbing them together under the umbrella term 'men having sex with men' or MSM and identifying them as a high risk group in contracting HIV. Approximately 500 individuals got job in the Targeted Intervention network named '*MANAS Bangla*' catering to 12,000 people through 8 drop-in-centres across West Bengal (*MANAS Bangla Annual Report 2008-2009*). But conflict surfaced as transfeminine individuals refused to identify themselves as 'MSM' identified individuals, as they did not want to recognise themselves as 'men' and they felt comfortable in the identity of a 'woman' or a 'transwoman' and their specific health needs were not being able to addressed by the project that focused on same-sex sexual act among 'men'.

Once the Targeted Intervention (TI) projects got terminated, the transfeminine individuals were faced with the stark reality of joblessness. Moreover *MANAS Bangla* had helped them come out with a worker's identity. It had also given them social exposure due to their involvement in the TI projects and the same social exposure in the absence of *MANAS Bangla* resulted in stigma and social humiliation. For the *kothis* who later on changed into the transfeminine identity in the late 2000s, *MANAS Bangla* had been like a small island and they now faced joblessness and also started suffering from a crisis of identity. At the same time, when this was the situation for the transfeminine research respondents in 2011/2012, the transmasculine individuals had just started to claim their visibility through community

based organisations. The journey from the sexuality based identities to the gender based identities took place through the advent of the term 'transgender'.

In 2014, the Honourable Supreme Court of India in its landmark NALSA judgment spoke about the rights of transgender people in India, particularly about their right of self determination of gender. In 2019 the Transgender Person's (Protection of Rights Act) came into force. While it incorporated some changes in the definition of the term transgender as suggested by members of the trans-community after the bill had been placed earlier, the other principle demands such as self determination of gender irrespective of GAT/SRS and reservation in education and employment for transgender individuals were completely ignored. There was not a single mention of any employment reservation or any scheme to facilitate employment of transgender persons. Moreover in Section III<sup>168</sup> of the act, where 'Prohibition against Discrimination' is discussed, the whole section seems to be unfamiliar about what is being practiced in reality. Discrimination against transgender persons in educational institutions and in livelihood is rampant. This section tries to unravel the question of livelihoods and liveabilities as experienced by the transfeminine and transmasculine research participants.

The transfeminine persons as mentioned before due to low education level, lack of social acceptability and identifiability are either concentrating in the development sector in community based organisations as there they have a chance of being understood and less ridiculed or getting pulled into sex work. The transfeminine individuals opting for sex work, bar dancing, *launda* dance<sup>169</sup> or *hijra* profession do so for getting the chance to be able to live their preferred gender without getting questioned as the nature of job is congruent with their gender expression. 12 out of 33 transfeminine respondents (36.36%) shared their involvement in paid sex work. Seven individuals out of 33 (21.21%) are involved in dancing professions like *launda* dance, *chat* dance, *madali pujo*<sup>170</sup> and *songjatra*<sup>171</sup>. These are all seasonal in nature. One respondent said that she is a bar dancer. 20 transfeminine individuals (60.6%) are service holders out of which one is a contractual government employee and four are working in private sector. These four individuals are graduates and got their jobs on the basis of their

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<sup>168</sup> Source: <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/13091?locale=en> (accessed on 01.02.21)

<sup>169</sup> Launda dancers are young effeminate male bodied (transfeminine) individuals who dance at religious and social festivals primarily in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, migrating from West Bengal and Maharashtra

<sup>170</sup> Often in marriage ceremonies *kothis* play an important part. The male bodied persons, usually dress up like a woman and take part in certain feminine rituals for bringing luck to the newly wed. This is called *Madali puja*. It is all about making fun of the transfeminine individuals and getting gross enjoyment out of it.

<sup>171</sup> A traditional folk theatre form in Bengal

educational qualification and all of them worked in the formal sector with contract letter and fixed salary. Two among these four individuals are not 'out' in their workplace as a result of phobia and lack of awareness in the workplace. The remaining 15 of the 20 service holders (45.45% of my total transfeminine respondents) worked in the development sector with working contract and fixed salary and have come out with their identity. Eight (24.24%) transfeminine individuals work in the informal sector (local *pice hotels*, *hijra* profession, legal clerical assignments, bar dancing and sex work) and four (12.12%) individuals were self employed working as beautician, fashion designer, model, and performing artist. Concentration of transfeminine individuals in the informal sector like local hotel, family business (family labour), sex work, dancing profession do not give any security and increase their vulnerability. Besides the five respondents working in the formal sector all the transfeminine individuals are involved in more than one profession be it in the informal sector or the development sector for earning as much as they can for themselves and providing for their families. Dancing professions like *launda*, *madali*, *songjatra* and *chhat* are not even acknowledged as 'work'. These are associated with the entertainment industry, where the 'feminine entity' is objectified, disrespected and abused. Still the transfeminine respondents involved in dancing profession shared that they look at it as an opportunity of living their preferred life at least for a brief period, when they are out of home and when their preferred gender goes hand in hand with their professional role and is not questioned or ridiculed. In this period nobody would ask them about their gender orientation, or try to stop them from being who they are, from becoming the best version of themselves. Though these professions are risky and unsafe they decided to take it up as their profession predominantly for self expression. Five (15.15%) transfeminine individuals shared that they work as development consultants in the NGO sector working on issues related to gender and sexuality. All of them came from activism background, with their experience and expertise they have achieved the status. Three transfeminine individuals are heading district level organisations and creating job opportunities for other transfeminine individuals belonging to their community.

Out of thirty-three transfeminine individuals none are without work. Each one is fending for herself. Five (15.15%) were thrown out of their natal families when they were in their adolescence and from then on they are supporting themselves. Twenty seven (81.81%) out of the thirty three respondents said that they are looking after their natal family and playing the role of the 'provider' for their parents. Performing their social role gives them the security of

staying in a family structure and for fourteen (42.42%) transfeminine individuals, their stay at home is directly associated with their ability to contribute to the family income. If at any point of time they fail to contribute they might be pushed out of the house. Purba<sup>172</sup>, a post operative transwoman (40 years, Bardhaman) said, "We are never accepted for what we are, but are only tolerated for the money we contribute."

Transfeminine individuals as mentioned above are concentrated in the development sector. 15 out of 33 (45.45%) are working in the development sector, be it a CBO or a NGO, where the issue is familiar to some extent, where they will be better accepted and where they might be less discriminated. On the other hand, among 27 transmasculine respondents, only one (3.7%), works in the development sector. Concentration of transmasculine individuals in the private sector is striking. 10 transmasculine respondents (37.03%) work in the private sector, whereas only four (12.12%) transfeminine individuals work in the private sector. The reasons behind this stark difference are 'social passing' and 'educational status.' Those who have a degree and can pass well in the preferred gender without creating any visible discrepancy and have a better chance to get a job in the private sector. These 10 transmasculine individuals are also 'out' at their workplace. It is not that everything has been very smooth from the beginning but since some of them have started HRT while working so their colleagues have witnessed their change. Some of them are yet to change their official document to their preferred gender but their appearance is totally different from their previous appearance in their existing photo ID document and do not conform to the expected norms of their ascribed gender and hence their 'coming out' in their workplace. A couple of concerns surfaced while analysing these narratives. One very important issue that came up was 'passing'. One of the respondents said that as he is not tall and has a 'soft' demeanour, he is not taken seriously. He is not considered as a 'responsible' worker ready to take work pressure. This person has never talked about his transition to potential employers during job interviews but due to his 'innocent', 'school boy' type looks he is not getting a job. Our society is not comfortable in accommodating differences. It is guided by the collective unconscious like the body image of a 'responsible' worker, especially a male worker. He must look strong, tall, serious and 'manly'. This definition works through exclusion just like the 'beauty myth'. A person must have conceivable features in order to be identified, acknowledged and accepted as a part of 'mainstream' society. The identity as a 'worker' takes a back step and the trans-body becomes the sole focus. If the body is identifiable then only the gaze becomes non-threatening but

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<sup>172</sup> Interview taken on 23.06.19 in Kolkata

otherwise the trans-body is mutilated, stigmatised, objectified, sexualised and then invisibilised. Dipto, a transmasculine individual (Kolkata, 40 years) said, "Being a transmasculine individual, our opportunities are far better than the transfeminine persons."

The mainstream job market does not have the language to include the transgender people in their work force. They are predominantly guided by the gender binary system, leaving very few or practically no scope for the transgender persons to get involved as economic agents. Either they have to fit in socially prescribed boxes or be ostracised for not being identified as 'intelligible beings' (Butler, 2001). For society 'unrecognisability' of one's gender becomes the reason for 'unrecognisability' of one's personhood. This invisibilisation of their personhood also creates an environment where their ability is questioned again and again.

Mr. Parthasarathi Basu<sup>173</sup>, Principal and Managing Trustee, Sri Aurobindo Bal Mandir, a school for children in South Kolkata when asked about giving employment to transgender persons in his school said,

Yes, as a personal decision, I would keep the transgender person in consideration if the person can prove his/her competence. Here the competence and efficiency of the person in the area of work, as an employee, is of paramount consideration. His/her contribution and fitness to the vision of the organisation has to be seen first rather than his/her being a transgender.

On face value, this is an encouraging statement indeed but it is interesting to note the choice of words in the response when he uses the phrase 'as a personal decision'. Whether this implies that the institutional or organisational decision could differ from his personal decision remains unclear. The difference is subtle but significant and is similar to the tokenistic gestures in laws, programmes and policies for improving the lives of trans-individuals such as The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 by the state. A more candid response came from Nilanjan Majumdar<sup>174</sup> the proprietor of Clinic & Laboratory, a pathological lab in South Kolkata when he said,

I am aware of transgender and by that I mean transfeminine and transmasculine identities. I take driving tests in the 'Sakha' wing of Azad Foundation, the organisation that trains women to become professional chauffeurs. I have come across several transwomen and transmen at Azad and have taken their driving tests. I have found them

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<sup>173</sup> Interview taken on 12.01.22 in Kolkata

<sup>174</sup> Interview taken on 22.01.22 in Kolkata

to be competent. I could think of employing such individuals in my laboratory if they are qualified. Employing transmasculine individuals is easier as many of them can 'pass off' as men or sometimes customers would think of them as smart tomboyish women which is socially acceptable in these modern times, attributes that are also at times appreciated. But employing transwomen in my laboratory could be difficult even if such a person is qualified. At the end it all depends on how my client base / customers accept them. Such people are often too visible and in general people would not entrust them with collecting their blood sample doubting their capability. That would be detrimental for my business and would be something I would have to think a lot before employing such a person.

The above interviews clearly point towards a mindset towards trans-individuals that doubts the capability and efficiency of such individuals. This bias seems to be much more towards transfeminine individuals who are associated with *hijras* and it seems the mindset is much less forgiving towards socially ascribed male individuals who have given up their privilege and have 'fallen' into their preferred gender of a woman that is always considered inferior to a man. On the contrary the journey of the transmasculine individual is from a socially inferior locus to one of superiority and thus such a person seems to be more acceptable and credible.

Jaan<sup>175</sup> (Transfeminine individual from Hooghly, 30 years) who has completed her Diploma in Medical Laboratory Technology shared,

I am a lab technician and have also completed MSW. I am working as a lab technician in ICTC and earning Rs. 13,000 per month. I have faced discrimination in interview boards. I have a very good result with a first class degree but then also due to my gender identity I was discriminated, humiliated and not given a job. After passing DMLT, I went for an interview; they asked for a reference letter, I submitted one. But they did not give me the opportunity as they thought as I am effeminate I will not be able to work. They made fun of me and my gender identity. Why would this happen? Why would anyone judge me on the basis of my gender orientation? As far as the question of getting a job is concerned the employer needs to see my certificates and judge me on the basis of that and if needed can take a test of my working prowess. It seemed to me that the general public associate femininity with lack of productivity and this mindset is amplified along with stigma associated with a transfeminine person. I finally had to quit and pursued my Masters in Social Work through correspondence as I felt that my best chance rests in Community Based Organisations working with people like me, where I will not be questioned or judged.

According to Jaan femininity is looked down upon and not given much importance and when a person ascribed gender male at birth 'transgresses and embraces femininity', she faces

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<sup>175</sup> Interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly

double stigma, first for her femininity which is considered inferior to masculinity and secondly for her 'fall.' Another transmasculine respondent said that 'cis-men' being the 'first sex' in this heteropatriarchal system question the audacity of the transmen. It is like transmen by 'dressing up as men' are claiming their position as men and shrinking the opportunities for the cis-men in an already shrinking 'organised job market'. The development of an inclusive language is yet to materialise which can give visibility and legitimacy to trans-persons as political and economic subjects. This becomes crucial as the language we use in our daily lives is heavily gendered and either misrepresents or does not represent the trans-person at all. The language is binarised. The pronouns are gendered. The names that we have are also gendered. When we read a book, watch a movie and come across a new character (whether real or fictional) in our life, such a character is inconceivable to us without the knowledge of gender of that person. This is generally not how we think of when we see an animal or a bird or an insect, but with humans gender becomes an integral part of who we are.

A significant issue that has emerged from all these narratives is that wherever the trans-individual is sharing their journey of transition or not, the person is not getting a job, or is being bullied at workplace or is being sacked. An important decision of self acclamation like transition is considered to be an act of craziness, irresponsibility and deviance. For transwomen their identities were associated with vices, weakness and incapability. For transmen their appearance (without revealing their identities) was often accepted as 'cool' and 'smart' but the moment their identities got revealed it posed a question on their efficiency, capability and integrity. For getting a job one needed to fulfil the state prescribed criteria for becoming a 'legitimate citizen subject'. Their question of liveability is at stake due to the component of unintelligibility within the heteropatriarchal binary framework of any identity that lies outside this binary. For being legible one needs to follow the state prescribed way of living.

Dipto, (Transmasculine individual, Kolkata, 40 years) who was undergoing HRT but hadn't changed his documents at the time of his interview, shared

In my previous office, I used to get harassed. There were a couple of friends but other colleagues used to humiliate me. Because of their ignorance and patriarchal belief they questioned how I looked like a boy being a 'girl' by birth and how dare I claim the position and privilege of a boy? As a consequence I got fired from my job.

Dipto, after going through SRS and document change as well couldn't get a job as he didn't want to hide his identity as a transmasculine individual. According to him, the private

companies that he approached for obtaining a job were not ready to even consider the idea of trans-possibilities. Either the companies refused to employ him after knowing his journey or went on delaying the process indicating subtly that they are not interested in hiring him. The procedural delay in procuring legal documents and the necessary time needed for spacing HRT and the surgical procedures also creates problem for the transgender persons in order to get social acceptance. When a transgender person having the necessary legal documents in place inhabits a pre-op body, they get stigmatised and humiliated at their workplace as their body does not match their preferred gender as endorsed in their legal documents. Again, in case of the opposite situation where the identity documents are yet to change but the surgical procedures have started, they get humiliated for their preferred gender inhabiting a body not in sync with socially ascribed gender norms which cannot be defined by the unilinear understanding of the sex-gender system based on binarised reification of the human body. Here again the trans-body becomes the centre of repulsion and the identity of a worker becomes blurred. Three transmasculine respondents (11.11%) could not manage to get a job due to this 'discrepancy' factor. This violates the spirit of the NALSA judgment that advocated self determination of gender without any screening and irrespective of whether the person opted for SRS. Due to this contradicting social stance with validation from the courts and nullification by mainstream society, many trans-individuals navigate their identity with pragmatism. Jammy (transmasculine individual, 34 years, North 24 Parganas), working as a 'bouncer'<sup>176</sup>, restrained himself from sharing his personal experience in the office but continued to get validation as a 'man' through his work, attire and role. Jammy shared,

See, it is not always possible to talk about your gender identity at the work place. There I have to introduce myself as a 'girl'. Because there they have known me as a 'girl' and given me the job as a 'girl', so if now I go and tell them that my name is 'Jammy', they will be surprised to know that. They will ask me the reason. I don't want to create a situation like this, provided, I can wear clothes according to my choice, I can move around according to my choice, both in public and private spaces. Previously I used to wear round necked banyans and now I wear '*sando ganjee*' (*sando* half vest) even in front of my father. I can live my gender effortlessly. I like to work as a bouncer. I like the uniform. As bouncers we are instructed to wear safari suits and I am really very much comfortable and at peace in this uniform. Again, as a bouncer I feel powerful. I am there to protect someone. Whether I live or die, I will have to take the role of a protector that gives me immense pleasure. I feel responsible. This to me is a characteristic of a man. I can be lean but I have that confidence and stamina. I am a man; I cannot afford to break down. This feeling is yet another reason for me to love this job.

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<sup>176</sup> A type of security guard working at bars and nightclubs

This narrative highlights the fact that society at large can accept 'transgression' by transmasculine individuals who are accepted as 'tomboys' which is a promotion to someone aspiring masculinity. It maintains the patriarchal notion of the superiority of masculinity which represents power over femininity which is representative of meekness and submission. A transwoman adorning a saree is unacceptable and is far more ridiculed and stigmatised as it is a rejection of masculinity by a person assigned male at birth (AMAB), thereby questioning and challenging the validity of the patriarchal foundation of society. According to Jammy his employer sees him as a smart, sincere and brave woman. He believes that women are way more responsible than men. Jammie further added that inside a bar, where people are intoxicated, they have to be restrained from creating chaos. According to Jammy's employer, men employed might slip and booze off themselves but women wouldn't. They would take care of the space just like their home. Jammy's employer has employed a 'woman' who resembles a man, is brave like a man and dependable like a woman. Jammy said that his employer is totally guided by the 'binary belief' and would never employ an 'effeminate male' (his employer is not familiar with the term transgender). Jammy thinks that this is probably due to the fact that to his employer an effeminate male is a *hijra* who is only good for begging and dancing during childbirth and marriages. Employing such individuals was unthinkable to his employer as they would not be able to take these responsibilities and would indulge in sex work themselves. Associating stereotypes and gendered attributes make it even more difficult for the transgender individuals to claim their space and live their politics. Jammy doesn't mind being addressed as a 'woman' as long as he is getting regular assignments and payments. Living one's politics often becomes blurred against the stark reality of daily living. Jammy always wanted to chop off his hair which he was not being able to, due to family pressure. Finally I saw a picture of him which he sent to me through facebook messenger. I saw that finally he had been able to cut his hair short, he talked about his relationships; he said that at times he experiences bouts of sadness, but he is managing his life and his acceptance in his family has increased. Cutting his hair short might not be a big thing to most of us but I knew it was a huge step for him. And so with these small but sure steps which are of extreme importance in the lives of trans-individuals they advance in small increments towards their dreams and aspirations. It is a tough and challenging journey as they cross one small milestone after another and finally take giant strides. It's a painful journey but also a fulfilling one.

From this study it is seen that the transmasculine individuals after completing a certain degree of education are opting for the service sector, both private and public. 10 transmasculine respondents (37.04%) service holders in formal sector, three (11.11%) were working in the public sector, eight (29.63%) were self employed. One respondent shared that he was pursuing PhD from IIT. Private tutor, graphic artist, contemporary dance teacher, lawyer, bouncer, zumba instructor and content writer were some of the professions the transmasculine individuals who were self employed chose for themselves. Ayan<sup>177</sup> (30 years, transmasculine individual from North 24 Parganas), a practicing lawyer at Barasat Court shared,

I started my career in Barasat court. People used to bully me a lot. My senior colleagues used to mock me, mimic me and humiliate me. When I used to appear for a case, they used to remark that I had come there to perform in a circus. I used to concentrate on my work and totally ignored them. My personality will talk for itself. Whenever someone tried to create a problem I kept my cool and that was my strategy. There was a time when I needed someone beside me. I got no one except my professional identity of a lawyer that gave me a sense of power and control over my life.

Ayan's self confidence and self acceptance helped him create his own identity as the first transmasculine advocate. He works for his community and has become a face of the community in the court area. He said that his uniform holds power and he uses it wisely. He helps others and represents the community so that the young transmasculine individuals get a new role model for them to follow and learn from. Anwar<sup>178</sup> (28 years, zumba dancer from Kolkata), reminisced his childhood dream of becoming a boy-scout:

My dream was to join the police force and for my interest and liking I joined the 'Black Scout', which was in Park Circus. They used to give 'gun training'. Black Scouts take charge when there is a riot. In such a situation you will even have the authority to kill should the need arise. I wanted to punish the wrong-doers. My real wish was to join the police force but due to my short height I could not even apply for the examination. I joined scout, as all that mattered was my passion and dedication. The uniform of the 'Black Scout' was a trouser and t-shirt; I liked the uniform, which was another motivation for joining scouts. The reason behind the love of uniform could be explained by the fact that uniforms label you as a professional and not as a gendered person. Again school uniforms are a source of irritation for us, as they are heavily gendered.

Anwar's comes from an orthodox Muslim family. His father did not approve of his 'daughter' joining scouts and he had to discontinue pursuing his dream vocation. Anwar now works as a dance teacher and Zumba instructor. Taking the role of a teacher also seems to give a sense of

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<sup>177</sup> Interview taken on 01.03.19 in Kolkata

<sup>178</sup> Interview taken on 19.07.18 in Kolkata

control and authority that helps him feel confident and more comfortable. To him dance is a very soulful thing, it comes from within. For him being a dance teacher has been an enriching journey of self revelation and gender role integration. He said that he has never faced discrimination at work for being AFAB. His students always regard him as 'sir'. Anwar dreams of making his own dance studio and a play house for kids with dance classes as an integrated part of the curriculum. The identity of a 'worker' transcends 'gender' as an identity, and it also gives a sense of purpose to life. The status of a 'worker' also gives a certain respect to an individual.

Avay<sup>179</sup> (transmasculine individual, 32 years, Howrah) shared that he is a teacher. His students understand his situation. According to him due to media coverage so many things are coming to the forefront now, things that were previously ignored and invisibilised. "They might not understand the nuances of my gender expression, but they can obviously understand that they have a 'Sir' who is different from others." His workplace has accepted him. He was never in a hurry to force the school authority accept him. According to him, "I have never made anything apparent. I have never felt confused about my identity and this has helped me to get acceptance. My confidence has helped me a lot." Moreover in Avay's case as he is a government employee he could show them the NALSA judgement and his identity documents which he had changed to his preferred gender on the basis of NALSA. This helped him gain acceptance as the school authority got convinced about the legality of his identity.

Rana<sup>180</sup> (Transmasculine individual, 22, South 24 Pargnas), another respondent who was also a teacher said,

The children experienced the changes in me. I have asked them not to call me 'didi'. I have asked them to call me by my name or initials or my surname. They have got used to it. I have even called their parents and informed them about my transition and asked them whether they have any problem sending their children to me. The children coming later directly started calling me sir or 'dada'.

In both cases the transmasculine individuals were able to change their legal documents on the basis of the NALSA judgment. The current Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 has thrown out of contention this quick, effective and uncomplicated method of changing identity documents for transgender individuals. Before this act, based on the

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<sup>179</sup> Interview taken on 22.06.18 in Kolkata

<sup>180</sup> Interview taken on 02.02.19 in Kolkata

NALSA judgment, a transgender individual could change their official document quite easily through a GD certificate from a psychiatrist and self declaration of gender in the form of an affidavit before a magistrate and later newspaper and gazette notification of this change. With the advent of this act the NALSA judgment has become nullified and changing of document is a complicated process which involves at first applying for and obtaining a transgender certificate from the district magistrate. This is followed by validation of their transition through surgery and getting the same endorsed officially by the district administration which would then enable the individual to make the change in their document. This process has created a lot of confusion and transgender individuals now find themselves in a quagmire with all avenues closed to officially assume their preferred gender (without SRS) which is thus having a huge impact on their lifestyle and livelihood.

In this study three transmasculine individuals and one transfeminine individual have been found to be working in the public sector where they are not discriminated. Kayan (Transmasculine individual, 33 years, Jalpaiguri) shared his experience working in the public sector which was positive. He narrated,

I have never dreamt big. From my childhood I have always aspired for a job where I would be able to wear clothes of my preference. I wanted to stand beside my parents and sisters. When I was in class XII, my family was faced with extreme financial hardship. I had to take up a job for continuing my study and supporting my family. So I started to work on a part time basis. I got my job in WBSEDCL in the year 2010 just after I completed my graduation. I never faced any problem due to my gender identity. Even my colleagues have very well accepted my transition. They have asked me to throw a party after my transition. All my colleagues address me by my name, 'Kayan'.

I talked to three of Kayan's colleagues, who unanimously said that they have always considered Kayan as a 'man' and now as he inhabits the body of a man they feel happy for him and vouch to stand beside him through thick and thin. Kayan has helped them to be aware and sensitive to non-normative sexuality and gender expressions which have increased the ambit of their knowledge and experience about human lives.

The HIV/AIDS prevention and control projects have set the ball rolling for increasing the awareness level and discussion around non normative gender and sexuality, which has been taken forward by an array of acts and judgments between 2014 and 2019, especially the Supreme Court judgment of 2018 declaring IPC Section 377 as unconstitutional. There is now an urgent need for inclusive policies and programs both in government as well as in the NGO and corporate sector for including the LGBTIQHKA+ community people in every

aspect of life. As Parmesh Shahani, head of Godrej India Culture Lab during the occasion of the launch of 'A Manifesto For Trans Inclusion In The Indian Workplace', mentioned that, "If your company is not inclusive, it will wither away and die,"<sup>181</sup> At present big corporate names like Godrej, TATA Steel, Infosys, Lalit Sri Hospital, Medica Super Speciality Hospital, Intel, Wipro, Deloitte, Capgemini, IBM, Cognizant, Tech Mahindra have their queer friendly policy in place. A report written by Perna Sindwani<sup>182</sup> said, India has nearly 5% to 10% queer employees in its workforce. Over half of them have reported discrimination at work. The 2016 World Bank report suggests that India recorded a loss of \$32 billion due to homophobia. All these reports paved the way towards positive inclusion. But things have not changed much; the reality is still not a very positive one. Dipto (40 years, transmasculine respondent from Kolkata) shared his experience with another corporate house (a leading jewellery house in West Bengal) just after it had announced its 'inclusivity' policy for transpersons. When he went for an interview he was blatantly told that the authority could not ensure cooperation from colleagues as his documents and his appearance did not match. They said that in case of any workplace harassment he would have to fight it from within and he could not ask for redress outside. Dipto did not follow up with the job as he felt unsafe and disrespected.

In another narrative of corporate abuse and humiliation Suhrid<sup>183</sup> (33 years, transmasculine respondent from Nadia) said,

I had applied for a job in a reputed BPO call centre at Salt Lake. They wanted to see my documents all of which had already been changed to my preferred gender except for my school certificate which still retained my previous name. They immediately pounced on me and said that I was a 'fraud.' I protested and said that I was a transman and narrated the story of my transition which led to the whole office crowding around me and making fun as if I was a clown.

Corporate tokenism is hard to challenge and address and more so in this environment of right wing politics and imposed nationalist fervour. In October, 2021, Dabur India had to remove their Fem India advertisement showing a lesbian couple celebrating '*Karva Chauth*'<sup>184</sup> and in another incident in October 2021, Sabyasachi removed the advertisement campaign for their

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<sup>181</sup> Source: <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/iRTcQo4LtMIBgg5orMnG3I/The-year-of-transfriendly-workplaces.html> (accessed on 24.04.21)

<sup>182</sup> Source: <https://www.businessinsider.in/careers/news/tata-steel-joins-the-small-but-growing-list-of-companies-like-accenture-capgemini-which-are-lgbt-friendly/articleshow/72454325.cms> (accessed on 24.04.21)

<sup>183</sup> Interview taken on 20.05.19 in Kolkata

<sup>184</sup> A festival celebrated by married Hindu women in Northern and Western India four days after Purnima or the full moon in the month of '*Kartik*' in the Hindu lunisolar calendar. The women fast from sunrise till they can view the moon after moonrise for the long life and well being of their husbands

luxury '*Mangal Sutra*'<sup>185</sup> launched as the Royal Bengal '*Mangal Sutra*' 1.2 as a part of their jewellery collection.<sup>186</sup> In the advertisement Sabyasachi had shown a woman wearing a black brassiere along with the *mangalsutra* in an intimate position with a bare bodied tattooed male model. There were other promotional photographs showing models of 'non-normative' gender identity and sexuality posing solo or intimate with their partners. The campaign led to an outrage on social media particularly from right wing trolls who termed it as lingerie or condom advertisements tarnishing Hindu culture and the purity and sanctity of marriage and the *mangalsutra*. Dr. Narottam Mishra, the incumbent home minister of the right wing BJP government in Madhya Pradesh threatened legal action if the *mangalsutra* advertisement was not removed within 24 hours. Sabyasachi removed the advertisement with an apology. In case of both the '*Karva Chauth*' as well as the 'Sabyasachi' advertisement there is also an insider debate within the community critiquing the appropriation of the Queer movement by right wing forces and patriarchal institutions.

Public sector organisations are owned by the government, run by the government and operated with money raised from public taxes; these organisations are bound to abide by government policies and frameworks. The framework here for transgender individuals is built around the Supreme Court judgments of 2014 (NALSA), 2017 (Right to Privacy) and 2018 (decriminalising homosexuality) and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019. The strength of this framework gives the transgender individuals job security in the public sector. Whether happily or not the co-workers and authorities are bound to accept them as a part of their work force without discriminating against them. Four among the 60 transgender respondents (6.67%) in this study are working in the public sector and are not under the constant threat of losing their job. But in the private sector the situation is different. There is always the threat of being fired and this threat of losing one's job and livelihood looms much larger over transgender individuals. The findings from this study indicate the fact that the job scenario is comparatively better for the transmasculine individuals than the transfeminine individuals. Association with activism, connection with NGOs, expertise to start a business or flexibility to join traditional livelihood like seasonal dancing and sex work were the prominent avenues for transfeminine individuals to get into the job market, hence the concentration of transfeminine individuals continues to be in the informal and

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<sup>185</sup> Necklace worn by married Hindu women along with sindoor or vermilion as a mark of being married

<sup>186</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/fashion/sabyasachi-mangalsutra-ad-campaign-netizens-reaction-7594975/> (accessed on 15. 01.22)

unorganised sector. The study shows that the job market is better equipped to include the transmasculine individuals. Businesses, jobs in the formal sector, both public and private sector are identified as livelihood domains for the transmasculine individuals in this study.

A major difference in the transmasculine and transfeminine narratives was highlighted by Suparna, (40 years), my *hijra* identified transfeminine respondent and activist from Hooghly. She said that as far as the transfeminine discourse is concerned, medical intervention is unable to brush off their past and they carry that burden wherever they go. They are commoditised, objectified and advertised. A transman grows up in a closeted lifestyle but a transwoman who grows up with the independence and privilege of their ascribed male gender at birth finally becomes used as a commodity in their preferred gender of a woman. Suparna further added,

The transwoman walks the ramp wearing pencil heels, gets inside a car, gets intimate with an unknown person and comes out with Rs. 20,000. There is no space for negotiation. Will a cis-man ever marry someone like her? Will he ever have faith in her? That is why a transwoman cannot have a household of her own. Visibility becomes a very important factor here as well. As she is visible, her parents have thrown her out of the house, society has isolated her, people call her *chhakka*, but then again this visibility is her strength, her ability. This is our battle ground.

Suparna's narrative is interesting and it highlights one of the biggest weaknesses as well as strengths of transfeminine individuals, their 'loudness'. This loudness, this visibility is perhaps best highlighted in '*Katha*' or '*Monologues*',<sup>187</sup> a short documentary film made by film director Debalina Majumder for Sappho for Equality and Pratyay Gender Trust. The third monologue is the story of a transfeminine individual. At the end of the film the transwoman says,

I love to dress up. When I adorn myself I get a lot of peace as I feel that I am in my true identity." (The film then shifts to shots of 'the male gaze'). Tell us why we will remain silent and tolerate this ridicule and humiliation; and so all of us together started clapping in front of the boys. They got scared and ran away. They started to fear us and that's when I realised this could be a weapon. Does my dress and adornment harm anyone? They are afraid of our clapping. They don't understand the meaning of the clap. If needed we will protest and this is how we will live. Should I clap louder?

The film ends with a volley and thunder of the '*thikri*'<sup>188</sup>. Suparna talks about this loudness or visibility which on one hand makes the transfeminine individuals vulnerable while on the

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<sup>187</sup> Majumder, D., & Selim, N. (2008). *Katha Monologues*.

<sup>188</sup> The loud disruptive clap used by '*hijras*'

other hand makes them incomprehensible and whatever is incomprehensible instils fear and is used by the transfeminine individual as a form of protest. The clap is literally a tight slap on the face of the heteropatriarchal social structure that stigmatizes and oppresses them.

Suparna further added,

A transman opts for surgery, starts taking hormone, grows facial hair, after that he has no extra expenditure except the regular dose of hormone. He will manage to get a job and then get married to a woman and start his own domesticity. But a transwoman will have to go on maintaining her 'visible/external feminine attributes' all through her life. She will need to maintain her skin, her hair, her figure. This calls for a recurring expenditure. Her cost of living will be too high. Who will take her responsibility? People do sex work out of frustration, no one does so willingly. Nobody wants to stand at the traffic signal. They do it out of compulsion. But you look at a transmasculine person, once he gets his preferred appearance; he starts his own domesticity and breaks all the knots that pulls him back. He does not even keep contact with friends and associates let alone activism. There's no question of getting involved in queer activism. I have seen people like this. There was a transman, who was in love with a girl. Went away from his place of origin for three years, came back after sex change, sent marriage proposal to the girl's family, the girl accepted and they got married. Nobody came to know about his past. Now when they would not be able to give birth to a child, society would label the woman as 'infertile'. This is what our society is all about!"

Often the transmasculine individuals become very much patriarchal. They get married, an institution deep rooted in patriarchy, start their own family and start living as 'man and wife' happily included in the heteropatriarchal space. They often emulate the same patriarchal structure that has till now oppressed them. To them often this is a survival strategy. Anwar (28 years, transman from Kolkata) said,

Nobody will ask them to pull down their pants and see what is there in between their legs. Becoming a part of the cis-het social structure they claim their space as 'men'. The cis-gender getting married to the transmasculine person often has to take the onus of not bearing a child.

The study findings resonated with Suparna's narrative. 19 out of 33 (57.57%) transfeminine individuals are involved in multiple job opportunities including development work, sex work, seasonal dancing, bar dancing and *hijra* profession. By doing this they want to increase their income so that they can maintain themselves (especially those who have opted for either HRT or SRS and HRT both). Strikingly the majority of transmasculine narratives talked about 'one job at any given time' because of their greater acceptance in the society resulting in better opportunities for getting better paid regular jobs than their transfeminine counterparts.

## **Section 7: Livelihood and liveabilities: The transmasculine narratives**

In all the transmasculine narratives one common thread which came up is that they all unanimously identified the need to study and get a job. The most important point that surfaced was the need for achieving self reliance through income generation. Some of them felt the need to get associated with a support group for getting a solid footing. Often the transmasculine individuals preferred keeping safe distance from the movement and support groups, because they want to have their own peaceful family life and did not want to get involved in activism. Only Six out of the 27 transmasculine respondents (22.22%) said that they were associated with the queer movement and activism as compared to 15 out of the 33 of transfeminine respondents (45.45%). Activism talks about the journey and upholds the trans-rights discourse, which is something not many transmasculine respondents would identify with. After completing SRS (partial, i.e. bilateral mastectomy with chest reconstruction, hysterectomy) and with HRT continuing and documents changed it seems that the transmasculine individuals shed the 'trans' label and prefer getting identified with the socially accepted construction of masculinity and for establishing his masculinity he needs the presence of a woman as his partner, consolidating his being a 'man' and facilitating his assimilation into 'mainstream' society.

None of the transmasculine respondents of this thesis have undergone bottom surgery, namely metoidioplasty, scrotoplasty, urethroplasty, vaginectomy or phalloplasty. But as a result of HRT the transmasculine respondents have started having facial hair, their voices have broken, some of them also started having receding hairline. Bone structure also changed due to proper dosage of hormones. The secondary sexual characteristics and the legal document change give the individual 'intelligibility of masculinity'. However, the realisation that without a job nothing is possible was common to all. Samudra (transmasculine person, 29 years, Kolkata) said,

One thing I was very sure about was that I wanted to finish my education and get a job as soon as possible, as I wanted to leave this hell. So all through I wanted to focus on my education and was damn serious about it as it was the only medium for me to be able to live my life my way.

Rahul<sup>189</sup> (transmasculine person, 28 years, Darjeeling district) also mentioned in his narrative, "Once I have money I'll have a child too!" Financial independence has been considered as the greatest aspiration of all. None of my transmasculine respondents have

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<sup>189</sup> Interview taken on 30.05.17 in Kolkata

undergone phalloplasty or metoidioplasty. From the narratives it was reflected that financial independence served as a greater marker of masculinity than a penis. Money did not discriminate between cis and trans. Its meaning remained the same and it was a great leveller.

Two transmasculine respondents who have undergone SRS and document change, submitted their documents at workplace and did not face any raised eyebrows. It was not that everybody accepted them and nobody questioned but they were never harassed. Aman <sup>190</sup> (transmasculine individual, age 33, North 24 Parganas) working in a government office in Kolkata) who has neither opted for SRS nor changed his documents has not faced any harassment at workplace. Aman is a WBCS officer working at a government office "People did call me Madam at times, but they have never disrespected me for who I am, may be as I have a pretty good professional record they did not wanted to question me."

Labani (28 years, transmasculine respondent from Birbhum) has a positive experience in the job market around his preferred gender identity. He said,

In my professional life, my being different was taken positively and helped me to get the job. I have never experienced a 'no' in any of the job interviews I have appeared for. There is a stark difference between my name, since I use my 'dead name' and my appearance. So whenever my name is called, I get noticed instantly, which has helped me in my professional life.

For Labani this experience has been positive but it has been from a location where he has been considered a 'specimen' by the interviewers and got acknowledged for his 'non conventional' choice. For Angshuman<sup>191</sup> (transman 28 years from South 24 Parganas) his experience has been extremely negative. Angshuman has a shrill 'feminine' voice but his appearance matches the 'socially expected look' of his preferred gender. He was humiliated in the BPO where he used to work. His team lead once called him and instructed him to wear *salwar kameez* and not 'shirt-pant' as according to him his shrill voice 'went better' with *salwar kameez*. Angshuman was discriminated and forced to leave the job. At present he has left his natal house as they were extremely abusive towards him. He is staying with his partner. He is trying to start a YouTube channel and is also looking for a job. This thesis has tried to bring forward narratives of non-conformity that complicates, problematises and disrupts this heteropatriarchal hegemony.

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<sup>190</sup> Interview taken on 20.07.19 in Kolkata

<sup>191</sup> Interview taken on 17.01.19 in Kolkata

For some of my respondents their workplace has been accepting and supportive. Samrat (28 years, transman from Hooghly) who worked as a creative designer in an advertisement firm stated,

Yes, as it is a creative world, the exposure is different altogether. But as in the larger society there are people who fake it in order to show that they are progressive and there are people who really support the cause. In my office also the same environment exists, it is only a microcosm of the outside world. In office I will never try to know their exact standpoint, because I don't need to do that. What I am happy is that they have never mis-gendered me. They have always accepted me as I am.

The private sector locates labourers who will bring them profit by their hard work. Here 'gender' does not matter much. 'Worker' as an identity supersedes 'gender' as an identity. This brings us to the question as to how patriarchy and capitalism are related. Can capitalism at times modify patriarchy even though it reinforces it? At times it seems to be doing so. The recent shift in advertisements or the attempts to make advertisements inclusive is a move in this direction. The Close-up toothpaste '#breakthebarrier' ad released during valentine day 2017<sup>192</sup> (though sparingly seen in print or electronic media) shows same sex couples along with heterosexual couples with the tagline 'Break the Barrier'. The Vicks #touchofcare advertisement featuring the real life story of Gauri Sawant,<sup>193</sup> a transwoman who adopted an orphan child as her daughter through which Vicks publicized their brand with the tag "Family is, where care is: thereby disrupting the patriarchal notion of the family structure."<sup>194</sup>

The task was to create visibility, drive conversations with zero budget. Public Relations put to work the assets at hand. Sharp media targeting focused on seeding the video in communities which could trigger conversations. It got celebrity ambassadors to share the video on their social media pages pro-bono. The video was seeded in viral content sites resulting in thousands of views and shares in no time. Gauri's TV interviews took her remarkable story to the masses. Within 48 hours 'Touch of Care' was viral with 4 million organic views at absolutely no cost. The video tugged at heart strings across countries generating 35 million views, 116 million impressions, 3 million US dollars worth earned media value, brand recall increase by 8%, 23% increase in sales. Vicks 'Touch of Care' really touched the world.

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<sup>192</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmWxCQXALfg> (accessed on 16.01.22)

<sup>193</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zeeVEKaDLM> (accessed on 16.01.22)

<sup>194</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiRryillIOLE> (accessed on 16.01.22)

The Vicks 'Touch of Care' ad campaign is a classic example of how the markets have the final word. At the end of the day all that matters is market value and how it can influence mindsets and in the process of feeding capitalism it can make dents into patriarchy and shape/modify it to suit its needs. Unfortunately inclusive narratives like the Vicks 'Touch of Care' are few and far apart. The dominant narrative is one of exclusion, stigma and discrimination.

Among the transmasculine individuals, two are studying and five are looking for jobs. Two respondents who are studying are also earning their pocket money by giving private tuitions. Among the five individuals who are looking for jobs, three are not getting jobs due to the discrepancy between their identity documents (where their gender identity is mentioned as 'female') and their 'male' appearance in their preferred gender. Ten out of twenty seven transmasculine respondents are working in the private sector, one is a research scholar at IIT, one is a content writer and one works as a bouncer along with a contractual job. However, going beyond the public and private sector and relentless search for jobs eight individuals (29.6%) have become self employed, where their income depends on their expertise. Here also the 'trans' identity is scrutinised, labelled and socially isolated. Ambar (34 years, South 24 Parganas) has his own coaching centre. Once he announced his transition, student strength was cut down by 44.44%. Two of my transmasculine respondents work in the creative industry as freelancers. According to them the creative world is better equipped in accepting differences than any other domain of work. The transmasculine individuals prefer jobs outside the community domain as often they wanted to start a new life away from their past life. However this is not always the case. Rana (22 years, transmasculine person from South 24 Parganas), who is a private tutor and an ardent gardener has started working in an organic farming partnership company floated by people from the community. Rana works in the organic farming project, where nine more trans-individuals are working.

Another very important fact that surfaced from the narratives is that 17 of 27 transmasculine individuals (62.96%) received their parental support for living their preferred gender and parents of 25.9% respondents have directly supporting them in gender affirmation and SRS. In our heteropatriarchal society the celebration of having a son supersedes the mourning of losing the daughter. But this is not same for the transfeminine individuals. Apart from one individual, none of the remaining 32 respondents have received parental support during their journey of gender affirmation (whether, surgical or non surgical). This stark contrast clearly demonstrates the deep rooted gender bias in our society which has affected the lives of all my

trans-respondents. Ambar's mother shared that due to Ambar's gender non-conforming lifestyle they were questioned by the neighbours and relatives. They were criticised for not being able to control and discipline him. So as Ambar talked about GAT, they accepted the proposal as according to them it was better to get a full-fledged 'son', than to go on answering to the society for not being able to discipline their 'daughter.' Through HRT and SRS the physical change that a transmasculine person experiences is often magical and in full sync with the social construction of the 'male' figure and it becomes easier for a transmasculine person to get assimilated in the social fabric. But for a transwoman the struggle for getting a 'feminine' appearance based on the contemporary standards of beauty becomes difficult. The transfeminine individuals find it much more difficult to fit into a patriarchal society that is more open to welcoming and accepting masculinity rather than femininity.

From the narratives two very important needs as far as a gainful vocation is concerned surfaced. From the interviews it surfaced that the transmasculine individuals do not want job reservation but want grooming in soft skills, career counselling, job references and job security. Rahul (28 years, transmasculine respondent from Darjeeling district) stated,

Be it through counselling or from familiar sources transmasculine people must be given job references; Take my case, I will never be able to apply for the post of a school teacher as I will not be able to wear a sari, there has to be a lot of discussion and guidance also as to where people like me can go for job where they will be able to wear clothes they are comfortable with.

Dipto (41 years, Kolkata), said, "We need job security and awareness about the trans-identity in potential job sectors."

Ishan<sup>195</sup> (38 years, transman from Kolkata) flagged a very important point by saying,

Anticipating problems, I did not take a job in a school. Many of my friends started getting jobs as school teachers while doing their masters. My mother also pressed me a lot. I knew that as a school teacher I would have to go to school wearing a sari, which was not possible for me. This is a practical problem for us. In order to address this continuous advocacy is needed.

Avay (32 years, transman from South 24 Parganas) shared his experience of how slowly and gradually, bit by bit, he convinced the head-mistress of the public school he worked about his gender identity and preferences. He finally got the permission of wearing *kurta* and *pyjama* to school long before he underwent SRS and had his document changed. He said he could do it

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<sup>195</sup> Interview taken on 03.01.19 in Kolkata

as he had the support of his colleagues. Avay has his livelihood secured in a government job or in other words his capability of earning for himself has been met but mere fulfilment of capability does not ensure liveability. Avay works in an environment that allows him to live with dignity amongst friends. Here the concept of collegiality becomes significant. The same concept gets disrupted in most trans-narratives of livelihood. An interesting anecdote surfaced in one of my counselling/therapy sessions with a transmasculine person who shared his experience of working in a leading multinational IT company which supposedly has a trans-inclusive HR policy in place that believes that "every one transitions when a transgender person comes out in the workplace." When he was working from home during lockdown, the company organised an online awareness generation seminar so that his colleagues become aware about trans-issues. His company even assured him of financial assistance for SRS. But once he joined offline office after the lockdown things were not the same. He was misgendered, it took weeks to change his office identity card, and his colleagues were disrespectful. His sense of well-being at the office space was jeopardized. The office space ceased to be a safe space for him. His dignity was questioned and he could not develop friendly associations with his colleagues. In his narrative the concept of 'collegiality' was disrupted.

### **Section 8: Livelihood and liveabilities: The transfeminine narratives**

The transfeminine accounts talked about issues like the need to have specific skills for earning a living, their concentration in the informal sector and entertainment industry, some of the narratives also mentioned about their lives as migrant labour and family labour. All of the transfeminine respondents spoke about the need to be involved in multiple jobs in order to maximise earning to sustain themselves and their families. All these responses gave a wide and varied range of experiences against which the question of transfeminine livelihoods and liveabilities can be discussed.

Anuradha, Suva, Mamata, Jhora, Shruti, Pinki, Krishna, Pari, Deepa and Chhuman, 10 out of 33 (30.3%) transfeminine persons unanimously said that people like them need to have some inherent skills or expertise with which they can start earning a living. It becomes difficult for them to get a job in the 'mainstream' job market due to stigma and taboo, so often it becomes important for them to start finding for themselves either through self employment or through

some specific talents that the mainstream job market can use. In the case of Suva<sup>196</sup> (45 years), a transfeminine respondent from Kolkata, who after traversing through the NGO sector for a long time is finally doing her dream job. She has always been interested in cooking. Her dream was to have a small eatery that she tried to run from her own savings, but it was a difficult task to maintain it singlehandedly. Then she went to Delhi and worked in a big hotel where the work environment was exploitative after which she came back to Kolkata and started working in a vegan restaurant as the chief chef. She is extremely happy. Her community and activist friends have helped her get this job. Inherent skill and community support became her resources that helped her stand strong in a society where exclusion is the norm said Suva. But Suva could not continue with job due to the havoc created by Covid 19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown.

However the importance of having certain skills got resonated in Krishnachura's<sup>197</sup> (transfeminine individual, 21 years, Birbhum) narrative as well. She said,

I make jewellery and sell them in the market. There is a person who comes to me and takes the finished products for sale. I also render handicrafts training in different blocks, trainings like making cane products, jewellery making. Whenever there is a project on vocational training and handicrafts they call me and give me anything between Rs. 500 to Rs. 1200 per training. I want to become financially sound and then only I can start materialising my dreams. I want to learn Chinese language from Visva Bharati, get a masters degree and then get into the teaching profession.

Anuradha, Suhani, Mamata, Pari, Chhuman, Shruti and Jhora, 7 out of 33 transfeminine respondents (21.21%), talked about their work as performing artists which has given them a vast space to explore, experiment and express their gender and sexuality beyond the binary. As and when opportunities arrive, they perform. It is sporadic and uncertain in nature. Anuradha<sup>198</sup> (Transfeminine, 38 years, North 24 Parganas), a performing artist, narrated her experience,

I think poetry is the highest form of human endeavour. Theatre is a composite art form through which mass awareness is possible, as Sri Ramkrishna said, "It helps in *Lok shiksha* (mass education)." My friend Jhora and I have recitation and theatre in common and we use these media for awareness generation in community programmes. I want to raise two points, i.e. compromise and exploitation goes hand in hand as far as livelihood is concerned. I have seen time and again how individuals like us are harassed and exploited just because of our gender

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<sup>196</sup> Interview taken on 27.03.20 (telephonic interview)

<sup>197</sup> Interview taken on 19.04.19 in Birbhum

<sup>198</sup> Interview taken on 04.12.19 in Kolkata

identity and sexual orientation in the performing industry. We are verbally, physically, emotionally, socially and even financially exploited only because of our non-normative identities and expressions. Part payment, late payment, and even being denied payment – we are made to work in circumstances where we have no opinion, as if the industry is doing us a favour by offering us roles and as if our talent doesn't matter. The most important thing is to stop giving work on the basis of one's identity. The employers must learn to judge a person on the basis of their capability and talent. The employers must not degrade a person just because that person is a trans-identified person. Looking at trans-lives through the lens of 'deviation' won't work, in order to look at us and fathom our quality they must start looking at us through the lens of 'variation'. Otherwise this derogatory, demeaning, disrespectful and detrimental situation will not change.

Deepa<sup>199</sup>, a transfeminine individual, aged 30 from Kolkata narrated her experience by saying that from the very beginning she has thought of working in an office, with her own identity. She has never thought of joining the *hijra khol* or going for *lagaan*, as she was never comfortable. But she used to earn through sex work. She used to go to parlours, make random friends on facebook. But slowly put an end to it. There were a number of reasons behind her decision, like concerns around her safety and security. She said that nobody could understand the nature of the client only through a phone call. It might happen that you were called by one person but as you reached there you found a group of men ready to grab you. It was not at all safe.

Supriya<sup>200</sup> (38 years, transwoman from Kolkata) and Pinki<sup>201</sup> (37, transfeminine respondent from Kolkata) talked about their experience of sex work. Online appointments, video chat, hooking through dating apps, sex chats the list is ever changing. They said that sex work gave them the opportunity of earning more by investing less time. They said they did it for money and not out of choice. Sex work has its own professional hazards. There are cheaters in this profession, both in the form of sex workers as well as in the form of clients. There are transgender sex workers who negotiate an amount and then hike it; they can go to any extent to get the amount and they even blackmail the client to obtain it. Incidents of casual theft are also associated with this kind of sex racketing. Supriya said that she has stopped soliciting on roads. She only does it through online transactions, which is safer and hassle free. It is also very tough as if you got ten phone calls in a day, only one would be a genuine client and the others would be fake. As mentioned above online sex involves online video sex, sex chats,

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<sup>199</sup> Interview taken on 04.09.16 in Kolkata

<sup>200</sup> Interview taken on 16.01.18 in Kolkata

<sup>201</sup> Interview taken on 18.03.20 (telephonic interview)

phone sex. For earning money through these acts, one has to depend on the clients. There are people who do not pay for the service. As it is a virtual space, involving digital money transfer, it is difficult to get hold of genuine clients. There are clients who blabber on the phone, do not pay and do not appear again. So it is a hazardous and difficult work altogether. She prefers bringing her clients at her place, She seldom accepts out calls, because out calls are risky. Pinki, a make-up artist also talked about her involvement in sex work. She said, she gets clients through snow ball effect from one client to the other and goes to a hotel for doing the work. Those who are both in sex work and dancing profession constitute a group of migrant labourers going from one place to another and earning a living in their preferred identity. Sex work and dancing professions are not even considered as 'work' so the 'worker's' situation continues being hazardous, uncertain and tabooed. Migration in India has been present historically, but in the context of neoliberal globalisation the process becomes all the more significant for trade union and civil society (Madhumathi, 2013:45). In the first two decades after India's independence the organised sector could not offer job opportunities for the masses as it demanded workers to have technical skills. The labour intensive mode of production was replaced by the capital intensive mode of production at this juncture. This implies that due to lack of basic education and technical skills, people cease to get absorbed in the organised sector and thus the unorganised sector becomes the only viable work option for the masses. Either they have to manage getting a job in the unorganised sector or migrate for job. The job market has always been guided by the patriarchal norms, creating glass ceiling for women, where men come first as viable workers and women experience marginalisation as the 'second sex', not leaving any scope for initiating any dialogue around non normative gender and sexuality. Hence, the transgender individuals get marginalised even more. The transfeminine individuals going to Bihar and UP as *launda* dancers, migrating to other metro cities for earning a living through sex work and migrating as labour in the unorganised sector constitutes 21.21% in this research. These individuals were not even acknowledged as 'migrant labourers' by the state machinery and were invisibilised. The respondents narrated their plight as migrant workers where their safety and security were at stake. Often the 'employers', be it the band masters, the pimps or the contractors disagree to pay them their fees or withhold their fees.

According to Priya Deshingkar, certain castes and tribes have a higher propensity to migrate. Dalit, tribal and other disadvantaged groups mainly migrate, and this process is related to the generally poorer asset base and lower education levels (Deshingkar, 2008). In this study the

'caste' factor has been superseded by the 'gender based minority' and 'educational status' factor. Though in this study, 39.4% trans-feminine individuals belong to the SC/ST/OBC status, but their narratives did not indicate that due to their caste they have experienced discrimination. Their lived experience said that they have witnessed extreme discrimination due to their gender identity and lower education level. Due to lower education level and stigmatisation by the larger society these transfeminine individuals do not get jobs and are unable to support their families. The situation becomes like a double edged knife where on one hand due to their femininity they are stigmatised and find it almost impossible to get employment while on the other hand being AMAB, these individuals are considered as 'male members' of the family, whose duty is to support and take care of the family. Previously when there were Community Based Organisation (CBO) based HIV/AIDS prevention and control projects in West Bengal, they were working in these projects and had a certain social respect for being 'NGO workers'. But due to the cut down in HIV/AIDS funding, the projects got terminated. In this situation, when they fail to get a job in 'mainstream' society, doing a 'mainstream' vocation, they are left with no other opportunities but to join *hijra khol*, do sex work or get into *launda* dancing as through these work they can earn and also can live their preferred gender without being challenged by the society as *hijra* (as a profession) and *launda* dancing are accepted (though looked down upon) in the subcontinent. But due to the mobility factor the lives of these transfeminine individuals become unsafe and uncertain and also remain invisible resulting in more and more social exclusion and labelling.

Pari <sup>202</sup> (transfeminine individual, 23 years, Cooch Behar) talked about the plight of being a family labour. Pari shared that she worked as a family labour. In her own voice,

I stay at home and do the household chores and in return get two square meals a day. I am also associated with *Maitrisangha* an NGO working with people like us and our livelihood. I get Rs. 2000 for doing some office jobs. Besides this I work as a family labour by making *shitalpati*,<sup>203</sup> which is our traditional livelihood. The cis-women of the household make the *shitalpati* and the men sell the finished product in the market. The men earn and provide food for the women. The women have no voice in this arrangement. They never get any fees for their back breaking labour. The women cannot even take care of their children, the children just go astray. I am effeminate so I am also considered as the family labour. If some day I fail to perform; they abuse me for not being able to justify my existence, by not yielding results. I have to contribute money from my meagre salary of Rs, 2000 as well. I also dance as a *launda* in marriage ceremonies and earn money. I also dance in *Madali Puja* and *Shong Jatra* in woman's attires. I enjoy it a lot. *Shong Jatra* is nothing but small funny skits on husband wife

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<sup>202</sup> Interview 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar

<sup>203</sup> Handcrafted mats woven using strips of a green cane known as *Murta*

tiff or mother-in-law and sister-in-law squabbles, where male bodied persons dress like woman and dance. It is a crowd puller in local fairs like *Charaker Mela*<sup>204</sup>, *Chaitra sankranti*<sup>205</sup>. They give Rs, 300 for one performance. I get more or less five performances per year. It is not the money, but I like doing the skits for the feeling of liberty in adorning myself like a woman in public. I feel happy and content. I am also into sex work. This is not for getting any gratification but only for earning money so that I can get sustain myself. I do all these things for safeguarding myself from the wrath of my family members. My sister-in-law has beaten me up twice for not contributing to the family expense.

This trend of getting involved in multiple works in order to make as much money as they can is a common phenomenon in the lives of the transfeminine individuals. Due to the absence of proper education and job opportunities they have to look for multiple options through which they can support themselves and contribute to their families. Involvement in more than one profession gave them better earning and a space to be in their preferred gender without the possibility of getting questioned.

Jhumko<sup>206</sup> (33 years), Pari's transfeminine friend from Cooch Behar narrates,

I work in IRCTC as a contractual worker, I cook for the drivers. I get 10,000 per month. I also dance in *Charak mela* where I dance as *Parbati*<sup>207</sup>. I also take part in *Ramleela*<sup>208</sup>. Here it is a practice to hire transfeminine persons for dancing in fairs. It's a crowd puller. They erect stage for our performance, people come in large numbers to see us dance and act. We get Rs. 500 for daily performance. I am also in sex work. I like it and feel good about it.

Female impersonation is a very interesting aspect of a transfeminine person's livelihood. 7 out of the 33 (21.21%) transfeminine respondents talked about their involvement in religious and ritualistic occasions where they dress as a 'woman' and act in religious dramas or dance in ceremonies like thread ceremony for brahmins, marriage and rice eating ceremony. Hiring *launda* or 'effeminate boys' as defined by the middlemen and the customers hiring them for dancing in ceremonies believes it to be a symbol of good luck and blessings for them. It has religious, ethnic and traditional fervour to it. Dancing and acting in *Shongjatra* and *Madali Utsab* is directly linked to religion. Religious beliefs create an environment of acceptance for

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<sup>204</sup> *Charak Mela* is a unique Bengali festival celebrated on the last two days of the month of *Chaitra* in the Bengali calendar. It is also celebrated as a period of penance to the Hindu God *Shiva*

<sup>205</sup> Festival in Bengal celebrated on the last day of the month of *Chaitra*, the last month in the Bengali calendar a day before the Bengali new year begins

<sup>206</sup> Interview taken on 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar

<sup>207</sup> Hindu Goddess, wife of *Shiva*

<sup>208</sup> Dramatic enactment of event in the life of *Ram* from the *Ramayana*

the transfeminine persons taking it as their livelihood. In the garb of religious fervour and through religious sanction transfeminine individuals get the opportunity to express their femininity without being stigmatised. Many a times this becomes the sole reason for getting into professions like seasonal dancing and dancing as a part of religious ceremonies even if these professions involve health risks, both physical and mental.

Those who are not associated with either of these professions find it difficult to adorn themselves in their preferred attire. Even those individuals who earn by dancing are only permitted to wear feminine clothing in that sacrosanct realm of religiosity. The moment it ends and the actors get down from the stage or come out of the space, they are no more praised for their performance. Instead they are expected to get into their socially approved roles. Here the difference between gender performativity and performance becomes clear. The feminine characters that they showcase becomes their on stage roles and they become the performer and the moment the performance is over they become social beings controlled and guided by social norms.

Roma<sup>209</sup>, (28 years) transfeminine respondent heading a community based organisation in Cooch Behar talked about their projects for livelihood generation. She said that as they started working from 2015, they started thinking of addressing the livelihood question for the community people because she felt that they were facing extreme discrimination and deprivation from all opportunities. It was not only about the society outside; it was also about the domain of domesticity where they were getting dispossessed as well. She said,

The situation totally changes from urban to rural areas. In the city people are organising pride marches, mobilising funds through social media. In the village the scenario is totally different. The Panchayat is giving sermon; people like us are being thrown out of the village. It is not the same to wait in a queue for an autorickshaw in a small town and to wait in the airport lounge. People get discriminated and labelled because of the 'small town mentality'.

According to Roma, some of her transfeminine friends tried working in garment shops or shops selling cosmetics, but they could not continue for long, due to humiliation and ostracism. They were addressed as 'half ladies'. There were some who tried to earn their living by joining the *hijra* community. But that is also a hierarchical structure where people get controlled, dominated and exploited and some have left that life as well. Sex work is also not lucrative as one can get a maximum of Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 per client. The network for

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<sup>209</sup> Interview taken on 30.08.19 in Cooch Behar

getting clients for sex work functions through Whatsapp, Facebook and personal contact. There are flying sex workers also who mainly get clients through giving non verbal cues and soliciting on roads. Roma further added that in Cooch Behar they did not have any cruising site as such except for some in the Sagardighi area. Considering the situation they started to think and plan about livelihood options for their community people. They arranged beautician training for the first time and the trainees are now working in different parlours. One of their transfeminine trainees has opened her own parlour, one transfeminine individual has got a contractual job in IRCTC, one is working in a biscuit manufacturing company and one of them is also working as a legal clerk. Thus sporadic success stories are strewn here and there but the larger picture is grim. Due to dearth of opportunities the community based organisation headed by Roma has already started community livelihood program by using the traditional handicrafts of Cooch Behar. There are some artisans in Ghughumari area who are skilled in making *shitalpati*. They are given professional training and now they train others in small groups. They also have two bighas<sup>210</sup> of land on lease, where they grow cane trees and use the raw material for making big cane mats for covering the bed, making bags, shoes, stationary files for selling in exhibitions or local markets. A portion of the profit is kept as the organisational fund and the rest is divided among the artisans. They are also planning to start a home delivery service in the coming two or three years. They are planning to deliver food for the engineering students and for office staff. For this they will need their own space and once they get one, they will start the business so that 5 to 6 community persons can earn their living from the initiative.

According to Roma, their main concern is to help the community people stand on their feet and live a respectable life. Since 2011 they started their work of HIV prevention and control through conducting awareness camps and talking about safe sex. She felt that a transwoman is already looked down in this society and spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS with a condom in hand makes her even more stigmatised. It is like double stigma for the transfeminine person. For this reason they stopped working on this issue and have never thought of starting it again. As of now they are planning to work with the police officers of the nineteen police stations in charge of Cooch Behar. They are planning to work on issues of violence. They have also started networking with the local administration. The aim is to establish themselves as a part of the larger society, claim their visibility and create sustainable development through sustainable livelihood programs for the community people.

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<sup>210</sup> 14,348.29 square feet of land in West Bengal

On the basis of the idea of sustainable livelihood they have started a paper plate making project for community people. 10 transfeminine individuals are working in the project. Each individual is earning between Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 4,000 per month. They have also started a school for disadvantaged children where the transfeminine persons are working as care givers. Cane mattress making is a continuous project for livelihood generation, said Roma.

As Roma described their community livelihood programme in Cooch Behar, Suhani (37 years, transfeminine activist and actor from South 24 Parganas) also talked about the organic farming community livelihood programme in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas. They are farming common vegetable like gourd, papaya, tomato, bean and exotic vegetables and herbs like bell pepper, mushroom, broccoli, zucchini, parsley, thyme, oregano, rosemary and delivering it to cafes and restaurants. They are also planning to do home delivery for catering to household demand as well. Suhani said,

We have a long term plan. Along with organic farming we are also planning to create a space for community living for elderly trans-individuals and shelter-less trans-persons. Here we are trying to break the gender stereotype also. Farming is a work that anybody can do. We question the gendering of job roles. At present four trans-individuals (three transfeminine and one transmasculine) are working here. Two individuals are getting Rs. 4,000 per month, another person is getting Rs. 5,000 and the person who supervises and takes care of the technicalities gets Rs.10,000 per month. The remuneration is decided on the basis of the skill each one has and not on educational qualifications. We have also placed two transfeminine individuals in a cafe named *Chaiwala*. Our main focus is income generation. We are promoting quality not quantity. We aim at bringing 25 individuals in this livelihood project, who will be earning between Rs.8,000 to Rs.10,000 per month. We are materialising this project through a company named Pleqsus India Foundation. Our aim is to do social work through business and not business through social work. It is a business model and not a NGO model.

As of now government schemes for livelihood of women and their employment are not available for transwomen. There are no education or employment reservation schemes or schemes for life skills training or other vocational training by the central or state governments for transgender individuals. However, in the corporate sector companies like TCS, Deloitte, VMware, Intel, IBM, Infosys, HSBC, Wipro, Google, Tech Mahindra, Tata Steel are leading the way in creating trans-inclusive workspaces as has been discussed later in this chapter.

Due to globalisation and the advent of computerisation and automation, jobs have become highly skilled and employment opportunities for the unskilled labour intensive workforce have become extremely scarce in the organised sector. Thus there is a continuous flow of

labour intensive workforce into the unorganised sector. In this scenario the *kothis* find it even more difficult to survive, where they are rejected both by the *hijra* community and also by 'mainstream' heterosexual society. Due to lower education level and stigmatisation by the larger society, these transfeminine individuals often do not get jobs and are unable to support their families. A lot of these young transfeminine persons do sex work, join *hijra khol* or start working as *launda* dancers as through such work they can earn and also live in their preferred gender without being ridiculed and humiliated by society. The *launda* dancers face tremendous work hazards, like inhuman and unhygienic accommodation arrangements, deprivation from proper food, physical and sexual assault often amounting to rape and minimal pay. Though they are also a part of the migrant labour force, they are never acknowledged as one. A case study on *launda* dancers has been discussed later in this chapter.

## **Section 9: Livelihood: Privilege and Precarity**

I would like to start this section by quoting Judith Butler's view on precarity. According to Butler, performativity is directly associated with precarity. The central question as to who is a subject is answered by gender performativity which determines whether the subject is socially intelligible and hence constitutes a living entity (Butler, 2009). One has to be an intelligible subject of the state in order to be eligible. Precarity is a perilous condition induced by the socio-political environment that differentially exposes populations to hostility, intimidation, threat, bodily harm and even death. Livelihood is closely associated with the privilege and precarity as experienced by the transgender individuals. The respondents unanimously identified the 'livelihood question' to be critical.

The benefits of inhabiting a specific body, the advantages of representing a specific gender, the privilege of staying in a city, the privilege of receiving education, the privilege of getting family support, of being connected to a support group, of having a supportive partner/s, the advantages of belonging to a higher caste, the privilege of inhabiting an affluent class and in contrast, the precarity stemming from the same indicators functioning otherwise helped me to look at the livelihood question from a wider field of view.

The Transgender Person Act, 2019 and the Citizenship Amendment Act-National Register of Citizen mandate are both instruments of the state to discipline and both are exclusionary. "In promulgating these characteristics of the new nation, the place and position occupied by

alternative publics/citizenry — the “unruly” queer bodies, the “impure” caste groups, and the Muslim “invader” — are restricted, confined and surveilled to sustain power, as the existence of these groups punctures the myth of a single narrative of the nation.”<sup>211</sup> The objective of such instruments is to disenfranchise people, exert state control in filtering subjects according to a dominant narrative of Hindu, majoritarian, binary, patriarchal hegemony. Subjects are formed by the exclusionary matrix that requires the simultaneous production of abject beings, who are not subjects but constitute the 'unliveable and uninhabitable' domain outside the subject (Butler, 1993:31). In both cases the marginalised individuals are in a position of precarity and face stigma, violence and abuse with no redress. Both these acts require state subjects to prove their identities through documents issued by the state on the condition that they conform to the norms that make them recognisable as subjects. The precarity caused by acts like these are doubly compounding for trans-individuals who often are forced to leave their natal home and are not in possession of supporting documents as state citizens even in their ascribed gender at birth making the process of transition through a screening committee virtually impossible. With this understanding of privilege and precarity I have tried to focus on the understanding of 'work' as discussed by the activists I have talked with. Certain work associated with specific livelihood like *challa* and *badhai* (*hijra* way of life and living), sex work, *launda* dancing and begging as in the case of transfeminine individuals are not even acknowledged as work. Anindya Hajra,<sup>212</sup> transfeminist and transgender rights activist, co-founder of Pratyay Gender Trust, reminiscing an incident, while he was coming back from Himachal Pradesh, at Kashmiri Gate said,

It was around 6am in the morning when our bus stopped at Kashmiri Gate. A *hijra* identified individual approached our bus and started *challa* (begging). This act of begging creates irritation, pity, dejection and indifference in the public psyche as a 'source of irritation', 'way of extortion', 'begging' or 'public nuisance' but is never considered as 'work'. But this person prepares herself before coming up to Kashmiri gate and starting to beg like any other person gets prepared before going to their workplace. She clocks in time, she clocks in the out time, but her 'work' is denied the status of 'work'. This person asking for alms in the bus would work for the whole day, would have a lunch break then would go back to her home in the evening. Similarly a bar dancer or a sex worker or a dancer dancing in festivals or a migrant dancer dancing as *laundas* are all workers earning living and performing the acts of a worker just like any other worker, but their work is never accepted as 'work'. But for the community people these are definitely 'work' and an integral part of their livelihood. It is also a way of life because society does not offer any other option of livelihood.

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<sup>211</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/gyanvapi-mosque-mosque-case-kashi-vishwanath-temple-7946332/> (accessed on 02.06.22)

<sup>212</sup> Interview taken on 09.08.20 in Kolkata

As Ree <sup>213</sup> queer feminist activist and peer counsellor adds in her interview,

Transfeminine individuals from the very beginning when they come out face stigma and are constantly referred to as *hijra, chakka, moga*, which makes them feel that if that is what I am constantly being referred to, then let me go and inhabit that space which becomes a form of social existence and non-biological kinship that becomes their family and safe space. It also becomes a form of resistance to state and societal neglect. But many of them are now coming out of the *hijra* way of life and are exploring other forms of livelihood. They are also undergoing GAT, HRT and SRS to inhabit their preferred body.

In factories, construction sites, offices and workplaces, the presence of transgender workforce is hidden and not manifested. In the work register their biological gender ascribed at birth is always recorded. The reclamation of gender is negotiated at the personal level through engaging with other workers and employers but it is never manifested. This creates problem at the policy level. While making a policy, the only visible trans-bodies are of trans-individuals who can express their transness from a definitive location. For this reason the government census only identifies the *hijra* identified individuals as transgender persons leaving the vast majority outside its ambit. According to the 2011 census, there are only 30,349 transgender individuals in West Bengal (4,87,803 in India)<sup>214</sup> which is far less than the actual estimated figure. The reason for this could be many. The census was before the NALSA judgment of the Supreme Court in 2014. In all probability it included transfeminine individuals who are recognised in society as *hijras*. Pre-NALSA, most transgender individuals identified themselves as male or female or did not identify themselves as the 'other' or 'third gender'. The transmasculine population was invisible at that time and was probable excluded from this census. In India, till now, nearly all sex related data has been recorded in the male-female binary format thus excluding transgender, intersex and other non-binary identities which limits their access to social security benefits and private services such as banking. During the second wave of the Covid pandemic in May 2021, The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment announced a onetime subsistence allowance of Rs. 1,500 to each transgender individual as immediate support. Only 5,711 transgender individuals received the bank transfer and 1,229 received ration supplies.<sup>215</sup> The lack of actual data and documentation leaves a large invisible transgender population outside the ambit of state welfare policies and benefits. Because of the radical possibilities of expressing multiplicity of

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<sup>213</sup> Interview taken on 08.04.22 in Kolkata

<sup>214</sup> Source: <https://www.census2011.co.in/transgender.php> (accessed on 27.03.21)

<sup>215</sup> <https://www.indiaspend.com/gendercheck/denied-visibility-in-official-data-millions-of-transgender-indians-cant-access-benefits-services-754436> (accessed on 27.03.21)

gender identities and the ways transgender individuals inhabit their genders in multiple ways, addressing all these complexities in one policy framework becomes a challenge. According to the report of National Human Rights Commission, 96% Transgender individuals did not get any opportunity to undertake any economic activity. The work situation in the unorganised sectors, dearth of jobs, lack of opportunities, sexual harassment at workplace, absence of equal pay for equal work policy for the transgender individuals, inadequate infrastructure result in more exclusion and invisibilisation of transgender individuals in defined work-spaces.

According to the 2011 census, of the 4.88 lakh transgender population in India, 27% have completed primary education, 10% Higher Secondary, 10% High School, 27% UG and 26% PG Courses. The literacy rate finding in the 2011 census was 46% among transgender population in India, 58.83% among the transgender population in West Bengal against the 74% literacy in the overall population (Das, 2019). The employment situation for the transgender population is grim. There is hardly any scope in government sectors. However, post NALSA, there is a change in HR policy in the private sector. Dr. Ranjita Biswas,<sup>216</sup> queer feminist activist and psychiatrist talked about the trans-individuals coming to her for Gender Dysphoria certificates. She said that among her transgender clients, one of them works in the reserve bank, one client works in the stock market, some work in schools and some work in private companies. She had asked her clients about impacts SRS might have on their professional career and their work. Many of them answered that they had actually gone and talking to their superiors, HR personnel and they had been able to retain their jobs. The same was also true for those who had not come out earlier and were transitioning at present after a very long time. According to Dr. Biswas there seems to be a change in mindset with greater acceptance of transgender issues. She feels that the more the education opportunities increase for trans-persons, the more possibilities and avenues would open up for them. Those who are self employed are doing a good job. As far as the livelihood opportunities of the transfeminine individuals are concerned they are seen to be more into the care industry into care centric works like bar dancing, sex work, cleaning and sweeping work, cooking, working as office attendants and beauticians in parlours.

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<sup>216</sup> Interview taken on 19.01.19 in Kolkata

Following Dr. Ranjita Biswas's opinion about the private sector mentioned above, I approached Ms. Koyeli Dasgupta Negi,<sup>217</sup> Manager - Organization Transformation, Deloitte India, for getting a picture regarding the nature of trans-inclusivity in the private sector. Ms. Dasgupta Negi shared that some very specific positive steps have been taken by big corporate companies for trans-inclusion. According to her, in the Indian corporate space, the momentum for expanding and rethinking about inclusion of non-normative gender and sexual identity came with the 2009 Delhi High Court order revoking Section 377 of the Indian Penal code. It gave various multinationals and local companies the leeway to re-imagine their corporate programs to address concerns of LGBTQ employees in the workplace. This awareness has only grown with time. LGBTIQHKA+ inclusive policies of some of the international corporate houses are given below:

Deloitte is a signatory of the UN standards of conduct for business in tackling discrimination against LGBTQ people. The global website of Deloitte mentions specifically about including LGBT+ colleagues referring to their 'authentic selves' being acknowledged and respected at Deloitte. It mentions about all colleagues caring for each other fostering inclusivity.<sup>218</sup>

VMWare, an American software company pioneering cloud computing and virtualization technology also has an inclusive HR policy as can be seen on their website talks about including the LGBTQ+ community in their Human Resource Information System (HRIS) as part of which they have acknowledged same sex relationships at par with heterosexual relationships giving same sex partners the same benefits as received by heterosexual spouses including domestic partners. It also talks about including transgender individuals in HRIS giving them the same benefits as applicable to cis-gendered persons.<sup>219</sup>

HSBC has a diversity inclusion policy whereby it supports its customers and employees belonging to the (LGBT+) community<sup>220</sup>. The bank was the main sponsor of the Pride Parade in Birmingham, 2018. The bank recently updated its life insurance policy in Hong Kong allowing same sex and unmarried couples to be the beneficiaries in their application process.

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<sup>217</sup> Interview taken on 04.12.21 in Kolkata

<sup>218</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/lgbt-inclusion.html> (accessed on 16.11.21)

<sup>219</sup> <https://blogs.vmware.com/careers/2021/02/vmware-earns-perfect-score-for-lgbtq-equality-on-the-2021-hrc-corporate-equality-index.html> (accessed on 16.11.21)

<sup>220</sup> <https://www.hsbc.com/news-and-media/hsbc-news/hsbc-joins-the-pride> (accessed on 16.11.21)

Some of the key areas where HSBC has taken action to be more inclusive are 'Fair and inclusive recruiting', 'Building and inclusive culture' and 'Supporting an inclusive society'.

Perhaps the most comprehensive inclusive policies for transgenders has been taken by the Tata group of companies. Tata Consultancy Services has changed its health insurance policy to cover same sex partner of employees. The policy redefines spouse as partner which will bring the same sex partners under coverage irrespective of marital status thus benefiting its LGBTQIA+ employees. Under the same policy up to 50% of the cost of SRS (up to a maximum of Rs. 2 Lakh) would be covered by insurance<sup>221</sup>. The same policy has been incorporated by Tata Steel which launched a diversity group called 'MOSAIC' in June 2015 and 'WINGS', a LGBTQIA+ resource group in 2018. Under the expanded Diversity and Inclusion Policy the benefits for LGBTQIA+ employees include medical benefits, work leave with pay during adoption or becoming a new parent and for child care. They would also get financial aid for SRS with a month long leave post SRS.<sup>222</sup>

It is apparent from the above discussion that the grey area around the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in the corporate sector is being addressed, especially with a number of companies taking a strong stand not only by creating support groups and allies, but also by revising their HR policies and other benefits. For many companies, one step has been to reconsider their hiring, benefits and workplace policies to make them more inclusive. LGBTQIA+ inclusion is an essential pillar for many companies whose foundation runs on diversity. Some of the best practices followed by these companies are deeply grounded in diversity and inclusion. Many of these companies have started to look beyond their four walls and are taking external actions that promote LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the communities they operate in. However, in order to get entry into these corporate houses the trans-individual needs to get proper education and training which often ends abruptly due to school or college drop outs as a result of bullying and abuse, lack of cooperation from the family, lack of financial support, need for earning at a very early age, desertion from family which denies the trans-individual access to education and later on livelihood options. So According

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<sup>221</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/tcs-first-tata-co-to-include-lgbt-staff-for-health-cover/articleshow/72411005.cms> (accessed on 16.11.21)

<sup>222</sup> <https://www.tatasteel.com/media/newsroom/press-releases/india/2019/tata-steel-expands-its-diversity-inclusion-policy-with-new-lgbtqplus-inclusive-policy/> (accessed on 16.11.21)

to Aniruddha Dutta,<sup>223</sup> Associate Professor, Departments of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies and Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Iowa who calls herself 'Enabler', "the corporate efforts exist only as a blatant form of tokenism for the privileged part of the community."

Mr. Joy Banerjee<sup>224</sup>, a creative director working in the advertising industry said,

For appearing on screen, one needs to be intelligible and defined by the binary gender framework. If you do not fit the criteria you can work in the back stage but cannot get a screen space. The advertisement industry caters to the corporate sector and the corporate sector needs intelligible citizen subjects having disposable income and the status of a potential buyer. But still in the fashion industry or advertisement world there is acceptance for the androgynous individuals to some extent. But the poor, urban or rural transfeminine individuals has no space there. Class becomes the deciding factor for inclusion in the advertising industry.

Aniruddha Dutta, enabler and ethnographic researcher and Associate Professor, University of Iowa further added,

Trans-livelihood is also understood on the basis of the male gaze. The transfeminine persons would choose certain jobs that are defined on the basis of male desire and the transmasculine individuals would choose their jobs with the reference point created by the cis-gendered men inhabiting heteropatriarchal mainstream society. There's no escape. It's just like enacting the binary.

According to Pawan Dhall,<sup>225</sup> Founder and Editor of Varta Trust,

This should not be the approach. I think trans-persons have the same aspiration as any other individuals. Corporate job, banking, sex work, medicine, engineering, teaching, beautician, acting, *launda* dance, sales and marketing, *hijra* profession anything. So they must be asked about their aspirations. Proper surveys need to be carried on. We must at first know what are their needs and dreams and then resource allocation or policy framework could be done. It could be a corporate job, it could be working in an NGO, it could include the entertainment industry, the hospitality industry or anything but first we need to find out exactly what the ground level reality is. Then see where you can contribute. The focus here is on thinking out of the box and creating possibilities.

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<sup>223</sup> Interview taken on 20.08.2019 in Kolkata

<sup>224</sup> Interview taken on 01.01.20 (telephonic interview)

<sup>225</sup> Interview taken on 04.02.19 in Kolkata

## **Section 10: Vulnerabilities of the unorganised sector: A case study of the *Launda* Dancers**

The *launda* dancers usually migrate on a contractual basis where the period of the contract may be short and temporary for one night to a week which is known as *thika* and sometimes the contract is for a year when it is called a *sata*. Most of the *kothis* choose *thika*, as they have to serve only two to three months under one bandmaster. In the case of payment on per night basis, after few performances, they have the option to join other bands. In some cases the bandmasters do not pay the *laundas* their full share after one full season. This is the only reason why most *kothis* prefer to work on the basis of performance per night where payment is made instantly after the performance. However, in most cases, the *kothis* reported that they didn't get the full amount. Those who have the contract with food and lodging get their payment at the end of all the performances, and the amount received is much less than the amount committed to them. The rates of booking *laundas* and the number of *laundas* (one or two) to be booked in any band party depend on the economic condition of the hiring party, which again depends on the reputation of the party. They are inducted into the profession through peers who act as middlemen or pimps and elderly *launda* dancers. Before the initiation of the festive seasons the band party owners or their agents come to the railway stations like Sealdah and Howrah to contact the *launda* dancers. The band masters (owners) from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar or their agents generally come once a year to search for *launda* dancers at Sealdah station in Kolkata during October after *Chhat Puja*. Many *kothis* who have been to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar before know these masters. They are paid commissions ranging from Rs 700 to Rs 1,000 per new person they help get hired. These *kothis* work as brokers by negotiating for both the owners and the dancers. When they first meet the masters at the station, they talk to them to know their requirements and then start bargaining. The young *laundas* having 'more feminine' appearance are paid more. In such cases, the brokers are also paid more. After they settle the deal, the masters provide a court stamp paper, where the *laundas* have to sign mentioning their name and address and give their thumbprint to the document. The masters pay some token amount as advance and inform them about the date of their journey and their destination before moving away.

### **Sec 10a: Nature of work and vulnerabilities**

The *kothis* or effeminate male individuals work as *launda* dancers in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They primarily dance in wedding ceremonies. Their work starts with *Parchawan* in the

morning when the groom is taken to the temple to seek blessings. The groom is accompanied by his women relatives to the temple, the *launda* dancers dance in the procession. In the afternoon the groom starts his journey to the bride's place, which is called *baratia*. The groom is accompanied by only the male members of his family, friends, and locality. The dancers have to entertain all of them by dancing to the orchestra or the Disc Jockey (DJ). After reaching the bride's house, the dancers perform to one or two songs in front of all the guests and family members. Both men and women participate in the dance. This is called *dwar puja*.<sup>226</sup> After that the *launda* dancers take rest, have food and get ready for the night. Once the wedding rituals are done, the dancers dance in the night, being surrounded by the male family members and male guests from both the sides. All the men pander themselves in the dance party and indulge in vulgar and overt dance steps with the *launda* dancers. Most of them get drunk and lose control over themselves. The *launda* dancers also get intoxicated in order to perform till late night. Sometimes the dance continues till dawn, specially when their booking involves huge money and the dancers are not allowed to take rest. This night long torment gets worse when it involves sexual and physical torture by the drunken males. In case of small bookings the dance continues for two to three hours and then the dancers take rest in their van. The dancers get tips from the men, as giving tips signifies status and power. The band masters take a certain percentage from the tips as well. The next day the dancers dance during *vidai*,<sup>227</sup> when the bride starts her journey to her in-law's house.

### **Sec 10b: Staying arrangement and vulnerabilities**

The *laundas* are generally kept at a distant place in the outskirts of the main town area. These places are mostly devoid of any electricity and people go to sleep after dinner by 8 PM. The floor of the house where they stay is mostly built of mud and sometimes brick with asbestos roofing. The rooms are small and musty. Often for cutting down expenditure two or more bandmasters share the room rent among themselves and push five to fifteen people in the same room according to its size. They spread *khatiya*,<sup>228</sup> mat or cloth on floor to sleep. Sleeping arrangement depends on the luck of the *launda* dancer and the band master's benevolence. The dancers have said that they stay in a very unhealthy and unhygienic environment. On many occasions they are obliged to share the same room with the landlord's cattle and poultry. They have to cook in the same room or in the verandah. Often there is no

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<sup>226</sup> A wedding ritual where the door is worshipped

<sup>227</sup> Bride bids goodbye to her maternal home

<sup>228</sup> Bed made by rope extended by a frame

facility of attached bathrooms or toilets. They have to go to nearby fields adjoining their shelter to use as toilet. Sometimes they get only a part of the money to be paid as house rent and have to pay the rest themselves. For this reason most of the *laundas* want to share the same room to reduce the amount paid as rent. Often *laundas* are not paid for food and lodging. They even have to gather their fuel or dry branches from nearby woods and fields along with cooking material and utensils to cook on their own. The area where they stay is identified as the locality for *laundas*. According to Soumi Dey, most of the *kothis* informed that very few *laundas* are allowed to stay at the band master's place which is situated in town or city area, as most of the band masters belong to Muslim community and they deny entry to the Hindu *laundas* in their house (Dey, et al, 2012). In extreme cases if they are kept in the band master's house, they are forced to stay in the cowshed!

### **Sec 10c: Gender-based violence faced by the launda dancers**

The problems faced by the *launda* dancers are many. As for example, the band masters they belong to, force them into prostitution, do not give them any safety and security, and at times disagree to pay them their fees or withhold their fees. They even forcibly lock them to exert control over them. The dancers have to cope with frequent physical and sexual assaults from intoxicated clients. Young boys unable to defend themselves are sometimes gang raped by men at weddings and festivities where they are sent to dance. Due to their mobility, multiple partners and unsafe sexual practices, they are at a high risk of contracting HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). Due to this socio-cultural status of the *launda* dancers, the local people regard them as sex workers and look down upon them. In many cases, the *laundas*, desperate to experience and express the sense of their femininity and also to compete with the biological women who are entering this profession in large numbers, go through the process of castration. The castration is often performed by quacks and a majority of the dancers suffer from post-operative complications and infections for which they cannot go to government medical facilities. This at times results in death due to post-castration complications. During the off-season the *laundas* go begging in the train compartments. For them it is easy money. Some elderly *laundas* are bringing young *laundas* into the *Train Mangti*<sup>229</sup> act, increasing their vulnerability. Considering the high risks, poor living conditions and vulnerability of the *launda* dancers, and there is urgent need for intervention.

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<sup>229</sup> Begging in trains

## **Sec 10d: Globalisation, unorganised labour market and feminisation of migration**

In the first two decades after India's independence, the organised sector could not offer job opportunities for the masses as it demanded workers to have technical skills. The labour intensive technique was replaced by the capital-intensive technique. Between the years 1962 to 1971, additional jobs created in the organised sector were only 6.4 million. This meant that a huge majority had to search for a living outside the organised sector (Banerjee, 1978). Thus, the unorganised sector became the only viable work option for the masses.

Ironically following this definition the onus of not getting organised is totally put on the unorganised workers and the inability on the part of the government in creating job opportunities which are formal and structured is overlooked. The unorganised sector could not offer a living wage for the labourers; moreover, it was devoid of any kind of social security measures. According to Nirmala Banerjee, at this point of concern it becomes logical to assume that when the head of the household cannot earn enough to support the family, the family will send out supplementary earners, i.e. the womenfolk (Banerjee, 1978). Women's decision to migrate is influenced by opportunities as well as constraints and is taken principally by their family. Even if the decision is taken independently, it is not without familial and cultural concerns. In this scenario of reduced job opportunities, many men are jobless often resorting to drinking and the women have to take upon their shoulders the double burden of rearing children as well as earning money to sustain a livelihood. This has given rise to women joining the unorganised sector, like construction work, domestic work, etc. As a result of this shrinking job market, an increasing number of women are entering the profession of dancing at marriage parties especially in urban areas. This has further pushed the community of *launda* dancers to the interior remote areas which have poor communication facilities, infrastructure, and healthcare. Dey et al. (2012) in their article said that targeted embodiment of *launda* dance used to be exclusively for the *kothis*. The *hijras* never got involved, nor did women, but due to the scarcity of 'decent' work in the source area, women are migrating in large numbers and joining the practice as *laundias*. This increases competition among the *launda* dancers. The body of the 'biological woman' challenges the trans-bodies and increases the competition. But tradition of hiring *laundas* for entertaining guests is socially acceptable and devoid of risks like unwanted pregnancy and this has its own advantages as this work involves random sexual encounters with the male guests.

The dance parties are undergoing a structural change. Traditional setups of band parties are being replaced by DJ music groups which are playing at weddings. The reasons behind this shift are mainly to control costs of paying as well as feeding a group of musicians and managing individual musicians in a group. It is also due to the advent of a certain kind of fusion of Indian music with Western hip hop, rap and a blend of modern technologies with high-tech sounds and gizmos which is a direct impact of globalisation. These new structures are more exploitative and abusive, breaking down the existing support systems that had been created by the band party owners over the decades. Also dancing to the tunes of the singer gave the dancers some rest in between two songs, but with a machine playing the music, there is no question of rest. This has a gruesome effect on the health of the *launda* dancers. While previously singers, musicians, and dancers would tire and take rest, the influx of mechanised DJ robbed the dancers of this breathing space, forcing them to dance non-stop to the continuing music. The previous structure had a touch of tradition and folk art. The orchestra band including the dancers, singers, and musicians formed a symbiotic support system. Abuse and exploitation was there but there was also some support from fellow members of the band. The present DJ system gives rise to unchecked, uncontrolled, unruly entertainment which often reaches a crescendo of lustful behaviour leading to extreme abuse and sexual exploitation. The checks and balances of the previous orchestra band party are slowly fading away.

### **Section 11: Trans-inclusivity at Tata Steel - A case study**

The following is a case study of the trans-inclusivity policy that has been recently implemented at the West Bokaro division of Tata Steel which could be a very significant landmark and could pave the way forward towards trans-inclusivity in the corporate sector and open up translivelihood options for the community. The case study is based on the interview of Sudhir Kr. Singh, Head HRM, West Bokaro Division, Tata Steel.<sup>230</sup> According to Mr. Singh there was a requirement of 'manpower' to operate the Heavy Earth Moving Machinery (HEMM) at the West Bokaro coal mines. Under the gender inclusivity and gender diversity policy of Tata Steel, 17 female workers were recruited in 2021 to operate the HEMM. They are undergoing a one year training program which will end in July, 2022. Mr. Singh mentioned an incident while driving with his 12 year old daughter on the streets of Jamshedpur when he was approached by a transwoman begging at a traffic signal. His

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<sup>230</sup> Interview taken on 19.01.22 (telephonic interview)

daughter who was aware of the gender inclusivity programs he was implementing at West Bokaro had asked him "If female workers can get the job why can't they get it ?" Mr Singh recounted that this acted as a trigger and led to the inception of the idea of trans-inclusivity in the Tata Steel workforce. Vice President HRM, Tata Steel, Atrayee S. Sanyal who stressed on gender inclusivity immediately gave her approval and support as this was an opportunity for Tata Steel to show the way forward. Mr. Singh talked to the first transgender person he came across - Amarjeet from Jamshedpur. Mr. Singh described how she and other transgender friends she talked to, were excited and at the same time suspicious and apprehensive as this was the first time they were being offered a job. When asked whether they would be interested the reply was "Why not ? No one is giving us jobs. We are begging on the streets and if a company is thinking of offering us jobs, why will we not be interested." The plan was to initially recruit 14 to 15 trans-individuals and the minimum educational requirement was matriculation which was the same as that for men and women being recruited. Before advertising for the same, the management decided to create a culture of acceptance in West Bokaro. To feel the pulse of the workers word was spread by the management using the canteen as the space to initiate dialogue. The idea was discussed with the union who initially laughed off the idea and said "Do you know what you are doing?" But the idea stuck and gradually seeped in as the union became excited to be the first union to accept and pass an idea like this. The management next invited four transgender individuals to spend five days at the West Bokaro division of Tata Steel to understand the ground reality of the livelihood they were being offered. They were taken to the canteen, library, conference hall, market place, temple and the colonies/quarters to assess the level of acceptance both ways. For this the trans-persons were compensated for their time and each paid Rs. 5,000 for the five days they spent at West Bokaro. This whole process took around 4 months before Tata Steel advertised for recruitment of transgender individuals at West Bokaro. 74 applicants applied for the jobs and 38 - 40 of them turned up for the interview. There were two rounds of interviews, the first being an aptitude test and the second being a cultural compatibility test. 14 candidates were selected for West Bokaro division of Tata Steel. They underwent Initial Medical Examination or IME. Initially it was thought to test them for HIV but the idea was dropped and the IME was done as per the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS), Ministry of Labour and Employment, Govt. of India guidelines which was the same as that for male and female recruitment. Later on from the pool of 38 - 40 applicants, 12 transgender individuals were recruited for the Kalinganagar plant and Tata Steel Jamshedpur is currently going through the process of recruiting 20 - 24 trans-persons. Currently all the transgender persons

recruited are undergoing a one year training which includes technical training as well as soft skills training to be integrated into the company. The trainees are scheduled to visit the Komatsu India plant in Chennai for three weeks to receive training on operating the caterpillar machines for earth moving manufactured by Komatsu. As per the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) act of 2013 companies are expected to spend 2% of their profit on CSR while according to Mr. Singh, Tata Steel spends much more than that. This is because Tata Steel views CSR initiatives like this as good business investment as it creates loyal and committed work force that increases productivity and profit for the company. Instead of creating a transgender colony, the quarters of the transgender persons recruited have been spread apart along with the quarters of other workers wherever available allowing for social and cultural exchange. Eight special washrooms (six gender neutral washrooms and two transgender washrooms) have also been created wherever they are working with the creation of one special bed/cabin at the hospital for the transgender employees. Regarding anti-discrimination policy there is a Diversity Officer along with a Complaint Officer as part of a special cell that deals with discrimination against people with marginalised gender and sexual identity. So far the results are very promising as other companies are showing interest in making their recruitment policies more inclusive. The aim is to make Tata Steel a more inclusive space that will impact lives of trans-individuals bringing about change in the lives and families of transgender individuals, to reduce social stigma around trans-persons and bring about a change in the mindset of people that will bring about social change.

According to Koyel Ghosh,<sup>231</sup> queer feminist activist and managing trustee of Sappho for Equality, a collective and activist forum for Lesbian, Bisexual Woman and Transman (LBT\*) Rights in Kolkata, a number of companies are coming forward with trans-inclusive policies. She said that when Sappho for Equality first became aware of the advertisement by Tata Steel to recruit transgender individuals for their West Bokaro mines they immediately became interested as it was a wonderful livelihood opportunity for transmasculine persons they were working with. They came to know that one of the nodal persons for recruitment was Kaunish Sarkar who had recently formed a group called Bengal Transmen. Bengal Transmen is now an upcoming group where a large number of transmasculine persons have come together. The group has 105 transmasculine members in their whatsapp group according to Kaunish

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<sup>231</sup> Interview taken on 11.04.22 (telephonic interview)

Sarkar,<sup>232</sup> transman, activist, member of the Transgender Development Board in West Bengal and founding member of Bengal Transmen. Since Sappho worked with Lesbian Bisexual and Transmasculine (LBT) individuals, it had a large database of around 78 transmasculine individuals to whom they had been distributing free rations during the Covid pandemic and second lockdown. From Sappho resume were immediately created from these databases of the transmasculine persons and forwarded to Kaunish at Bengal Transmen. Sappho also contacted lawyers at Kolkata High Court, Alipore Court and Barasat Court and made 12 affidavits for transmen regarding their change of name and a declaration of their transgender identity and got them notarised at these courts. These affidavits were then uploaded by Sappho for Equality for the transmen to the transgender portal as part of their application to receive the Transgender Certificate from the District Magistrate. The entire cost was borne by Sappho for Equality. The uploaded affidavits were the verifiable document sought by Tata Steel as a criteria for eligibility to apply. Kaunish from Bengal Transmen handled the entire liaison with Tata Steel and eight of the transgender individuals who have been selected for the job at Tata Steel are transmen whose CV and notarised affidavits had been forwarded by us to Bengal Transmen, said Koyel, queer activist and Managing Trustee of Sappho for Equality, who also spoke about the transinclusive recruitment policy being undertaken by corporates and companies like Axis Bank, Lalit Group of Hotels and some private organisation like Worksheet Cafe and *Ichhapuron* boutique from Kolkata. According to Koyel, Axis Bank had advertised for transgender recruitment on the basis of which Dipto (40 years, Kolkata), one of the respondents of this study had applied. He was selected but was also told that Axis Bank could not guarantee a discrimination free environment and should that occur he could not ask for redress. He was also asked to produce release documents from his previous employers something which was not possible for him as he had faced abuse, discrimination from his previous employers and had been fired from work because of his gender transition. Sappho took up Dipto's case and wrote to Harish Iyer, gender fluid, queer activist and Head of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) Axis Bank who immediately responded/intervened and Dipto was recruited. And so with small strides the transgender population is slowly becoming visible as potential workers in the job market which is becoming another part of their identity. As Bubai<sup>233</sup> (32 years from Nadia), one of the transmasculine respondents of this study who has recently been recruited at Tata Steel West Bokaro Division and is currently undergoing training said in an elated voice over the

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<sup>232</sup> Interview taken on 09.04.22 (telephonic interview)

<sup>233</sup> Interview taken on 25.08.19 in Kolkata

telephone to me "Didi (Sister), I remember you very well. I am much better off now as finally reached some stability in my life. Undergoing training now at the factory. Will call you tonight."

## **Sec 12: Trans-livelihoods and liveabilities - A summary**

With the Covid pandemic and subsequent lockdowns wrecking havoc in our lives, the transcommunity's very existence is at stake and the right to livelihood is perhaps the most important right that all trans-individuals are fighting for at the moment. Senior community members and activists are working hard and taking great initiatives to bring together young individuals and exploring different livelihood options such as community livelihood, organic farming, weaving *sitalpati*, making paper plates, and reclaiming traditional livelihood such as dancing and sex work and also carrying out advocacy with corporate bodies for trans-inclusive policies and also exploring self employment options.

Gender discrimination and inequality is a harsh reality in our society which stems from a gender binary construct reinforcing the patriarchal social system. Through the word 'transgender' their journey of self exploration, identity and expression is described, but as members of this dimorphic binary society, the trans-persons also constantly feel the pressure to identify with either of the genders and fit into either of the boxes. MtF trans-person on account of being AMAB are destined to take care of the family and it becomes their responsibility to earn and fend for the family. Getting employment is difficult for them because of the stigma and discrimination attached to transfemininity. Society looks at the MtF experience as a fall from the 'privileged' position they are born with. They find it difficult to get employment and many of them resort to sex work, join the *hijra khol* or engage in other hazardous work exposing them to high risk activities, seasonal migration and working in the unorganised sector increasing their vulnerabilities to a greater degree. Starting to earn early is a reality for both transmasculine and transfeminine individuals. The transfeminine individuals due to discrimination and humiliation from family, neighbours, friends, teachers often have to give up education. In contrast the transmasculine 'gender transgression' is socially accepted till a certain age and in some instances even up to adulthood as FtM experience is considered as a form of 'social upliftment' and so most of them have completed basic educational level. 33.33% of transfeminine individuals in this study have dropped out before completing their higher secondary education as compared to

no dropouts before higher secondary education in transmasculine individuals. This break in education becomes very crucial when the transfeminine persons start to search for employment. In such a situation they resort to doing sex work, bar dancing, dancing in religious festivals, or taking shelter under a *hijra guru*.

Community Based Organisations seem to have become a 'safe space', especially for transfeminine individuals. But this also leads to a certain kind of 'ghettoisation'. In this study 45.45% of transfeminine individuals work in Community Based Organisations in contrast to 3.7% of transmasculine individuals. In my study so far, I have found transmasculine individuals working in various professions which are stable and require special skills. In the case of transmasculine persons, their 'masculine' gender expression to some extent, is tolerated, accepted and even appreciated till the onset of puberty after which they are controlled by patriarchal norms governing their family and society at large. But most of the transmasculine individuals said that as they were raised as daughters, they were controlled and were kept inside the 'safe space' of the institution called 'family' and this enabled them to pursue their education. But as they grew up there was tremendous pressure to appropriate them in the patriarchal system, where a girl must get married to protect the honour of the family. To protect themselves from this pressure they had to start earning, so that they could support themselves and their family could not push them to get married as "daughters are said to be the biggest burden on the parents".

The family often accepts the gendered labour of the transgender person but are unwilling to yield even an inch to their gender expression and desires. Angshuman, a transmasculine person (28 years, South 24 Parganas) said,

I have often heard my mother appreciating me by saying my 'daughter' is as good as a 'son'. 'She' takes care of us no less than a son would do. 'She' goes out to get our medicines, 'she' goes to the market, is working and contributes in the family too. 'She' is more than a son. But whenever I have tried to make them understand my gender orientation and desire to opt for SRS, their one and only answer has been that I have gone crazy and I cannot think of doing all this as long as I am under their control.

Their care and labour is accepted but the discourse around their rights is ignored, and rejected. On the other hand the transfeminine individuals due to break in education, low income and seasonal nature of work are forced to try out various jobs. The appearance and attire of transmasculine individuals are questioned but tolerated as it is seen as a 'rise' in social status as mentioned above (a woman can wear a shirt and a trouser and will look

smart). However, in the case of transfeminine individuals, their gender expression is condemned and so in order to live their preferred gender they choose professions like *launda* dance, dancing at *chhat puja*, bar dance, sex work, begging and blessing (joining the *hijra* profession). Here the question also arises whether mainstream discourse of work is needed at all. Many of the transfeminine individuals are involved in traditional livelihood options like begging, blessing, dancing and sex work and perhaps it's time focused on removing the work hazards associated with their profession and acknowledge their work just like any other work. The government has failed to create job opportunities in general. People within the gender binary are not getting jobs. Women are even more deprived due to the segregated job market. Then what is the reason for not acknowledging the 'work' that the trans-individuals do and have been doing since time immemorial? As far as the job scenario is concerned equal opportunity is a myth then why can't the state acknowledge the traditional livelihood options that they follow? Social norms based on the gender binary structure of our society exists and continue to thrive. There could be laws and judgments and policies but as long as their interpretation is androcentric, the capabilities of transgender individuals will always be restricted.

In this patriarchal society most of the spaces are male dominated and the larger society is androcentric. The feminist movements have long been negotiating spaces and asking for rights. Following the same path the transgender persons have also started to demand their space and rights in the face of the patriarchal rhetoric. The need to create more spaces and to act upon making life more liveable was felt for those who have been strategically forced to remain unspeaking and unseen. The aim is to make a dent in the patriarchal hegemony and challenge it head on. One of the *launda* dancer shared in the interview that after getting acquainted with the organisations working on the issue and after going through counselling sessions and group work she has started to stand up against social ostracism. Now whenever anybody sneers at her, she starts a conversation with that person with the aim to spread awareness without getting angry and annoyed. Another transgender person shared that she has tried to bring about increased understanding about the issue among her office colleagues. Negotiating rights start at the home front, which paves the way for claiming public spaces by reinforcing that trans-individuals are a real and an integral part of society. Gender bias is so much ingrained in our psyche that whenever a girl acts like a boy, by riding a motor bike, or travelling alone, society labels her as a daring lady, and give kudos to the parents for bringing up the girl child so well. But again when the girl grows up she is destined to get married,

otherwise she is ostracised and estranged. On the contrary if a boy starts behaving like a girl 'she' faces more discrimination, social stigma, physical and psychological abuse.

I had thought that the chapter on livelihood and liveabilities would be the last chapter of my thesis. I had started the thesis in 2015 after the landmark NALSA judgment of the Supreme Court of India. Since then the transgender community has come a long way with the Supreme Court judgment decriminalizing homosexuality in September, 2018 and the controversial Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 coming into existence. This was followed by a raging pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2020. The pandemic continued unabated as the second and third wave lashed across India in April 2021 and January 2022 causing unimaginable suffering to people who gasped for oxygen and stared at death. The lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 brought the world economy including India to a grinding halt and its effect on the transgender community in India has been devastating. This pandemic has brought forward hundreds of stories of love, courage and camaraderie as the community fights it together distributing rations, relief, medicines and oxygen to its members in need. On the other hand, with the rise of extreme right wave nationalism in India with a right wing radical Hindu majoritarian government at the centre and their rise all across India the federal structure of India is at stake. This seems to have created a rift, a split within the community, a political divide with the appropriation of the queer movement by right wing political parties using them as a vote bank and the corporatisation of the movement with the community becoming just another 'market' for the big booming consumer industry and the creation of the medical market for gender transition and SRS. Today we stand at an interesting juncture with some transgender activists demanding for marriage rights and a legal sanction and recognition of their relationships by the state and some resisting this 'normalisation and commoditisation' of the community with the apprehension that the movement today is losing its tooth. The concluding chapter of my thesis will look at the movement and the location of transgender individuals during this pandemic and lockdown and the trajectory of the transmovement in the current socioeconomic and political situation in India trying to understand the way forward.

## Chapter 5: Beyond the Cis-Tem - The Road Ahead

Arjo<sup>234</sup>, (18 years, transmasculine individual from Kolkata) the youngest respondent of this study said,

Transgender individuals like us challenge socially ascribed gender in the pursuit of their desired gender. So in a way we are fighting for it as well as fighting against it. So the question that arises here is whether desire creates gender or whether it is the other way round. There could be an unending epistemological debate around this but to me as a human being, all I want is to be able to walk with my head held high and to run free, as free as one can be.

And so I would like to start the concluding chapter of this thesis with a question to ponder, a question that I have tried to answer in my thesis - Can we do away with gender? Or can we have an ever widening spectrum incorporating varied gender expressions and identities? Or can we just have polymorphous bodies with polymorphous expressions, myriad of genders, eight billion people with eight billion identities? Is a world like that possible?

This concluding chapter explores ways in which the research respondents have perceived and claimed their identities as both personal and political expressions and assertions of who 'they are.' It is always important to have a conducive and dialogic space for politics to emerge. The research respondents shared that through exploration, articulation and communication the personal experiences of being 'different' often become journeys of political subversion. From identifying one's self as 'different', to establishing and claiming the position of that 'difference' against the dominant androcentric heteronormative culture and then politicising the existence of the 'different' entity/ies traces a journey. It marks a trajectory which moves from discourse formation around identity politics to claiming one's space through politics of standpoint by building up an 'oppositional consciousness' (Patricia Hill Collins, 1989).

Gender as we perceive it emerges through an interaction between gender as it is socially understood and gender as it is lived. Gender is conceived, expressed and explored from the position of an individual and also from that of others. The perception of gender is determined by their location in this androcentric society and that is why the social order looks different when seen from the margins. Transgender individuals representing one of the marginalised sections question majoritarian understandings of 'gender'. Their lived experiences underline

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<sup>234</sup> Interview taken on 21.06.21 in Kolkata

the significance of gender as it both produces and is produced by social relations. Here I would try to unfold this conflict through a cinematic moment taken from "Chitrangada"<sup>235</sup> a Bangla film directed by Rituparna Ghosh in which he also acts. Rudy (Rudra Chatterjee) the main protagonist of the film, a transfeminine person, is sitting at the dinner table with her parents and discussing her decision of moving in with her partner Partho. Rudy's mother is protective about her 'son', and does not want her 'Khokon' (Rudy) to face rejection from her partner, which had happened in her previous relationships. She advises him not to move in with Partho as she was sure that he would betray her. Rudy asks her mother, "What is better - staying lonely in the fear of being left alone or enjoying the moments of happiness and companionship?" Rudy's father declares that there's no question of being lonely since she could always consult a doctor or if needed a counsellor. He was sure that this phase would pass. Rudy informs her parents that she had already consulted a doctor regarding Sex Reassignment Surgery and had started the treatment regime which would require her to get admitted to the hospital a couple of times in the coming 5/6 months. Rudy's parents, who were initially feeling positive, become apprehensive. While she tries to reach out by informing them about her decision of undergoing SRS she is met with stiff silence and an emotional void engulfs the dining room.

This tension between one's preferred gender and the ascribed gender at birth becomes the sole point of concern and conflict when we talk about transgender persons' lived experiences in a heteropatriarchal social setting. Through the process of identity formation an individual gives meaning and purpose to oneself and differentiates the 'self' from 'others' on the basis of their identities. Creating an 'intelligible identity' becomes crucial as the conditions of power determine who can be recognised as a subject. Thus a subject is not a precursor of politics, rather it results from and is given shape and form by power (Butler, 2009). This process of creating recognisability helps develop self esteem and consolidates self identity. As shown in

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<sup>235</sup> Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish, a Bengali movie by Rituparno Ghosh released on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2012 talks about Rudra Chatterjee (Rudy), the protagonist of the film, who is a choreographer and identifies herself as a gender non conforming person, not a cis gender person. Rudy and her partner Partha, a drummer wants to stay together as a unit. Rudy wants to adopt a child. They want to create their family unit. From this desire of becoming that 'ideal' woman with the 'ideal' man they took the decision of transition. The movie poses questions like, who is the ideal woman, again who is the ideal man then? Is there anything such as an ideal woman or an ideal man? Rudy opts for Gender affirmative Therapy in order to become conceivable in the eyes of the society. Rudra's quest of what it is to be like a woman continues through their explorations. But where is the end to it, to desiring, to chasing? Rudra's experience questions and challenges the heteropatriarchal system. Rudra finally decided not to go for vaginoplasty and to remove the breast implants, and in doing so Rudra embraces their uniqueness and difference and also loses the interest of getting accepted as the partner of a cis-man. For detailed plot refer to <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/01/07/film-review-chitrangada-the-crowning-wish-2012-is-an-effort-to-look-beyond-and-within/>

the film the misrecognition and non-recognition creates confusion and they remain invisibilised and exist outside established norms for thinking embodiment and even personhood (Butler 2009). The proliferation of the movement around gender and sexual marginalisation at this juncture marks the significance of community bonding and political mobilisation. In this last chapter I have tried to tie together the questions around gender, livelihood and liveabilities.

## **Section 1: Thick story formation through exploring the trans-narratives**

Gender is not an identity. It is an expression. The problem starts when we try to form our identity based on gender. It is a journey from our body to our mind. Society has made two boxes and tries to fit us into one of these two boxes. Society has made two boxes and we are making ten boxes. People who do not fit into any of these boxes remain outside and become a minority.<sup>236</sup> (Sunil Mohan, Transman activist from Bangalore working on oral history documentation of LGBTIQ people across South India)

I started this research by trying to understand the concept of gender. Some of my research respondents agreed to the fact that gender is all about performativity which is socially constructed. Sex is determined through biological criteria based on external genitalia and chromosomal typing, gender is an act based on socially constructed normative conceptions, attitudes and roles assigned to sex categories which are constantly performed to reify "gender" and maintain patriarchy. In 1987, West and Zimmerman introduced the theory of "doing gender" which implies using distinct and well marked clusters of behaviour which as a result of environmental interactions produces performances of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This performance is held accountable by a patriarchal society which constantly needs social validation and this raises the fundamental question in my research as to what are the loci of the subjects of my thesis who have enriched me with their narratives. How do I look at their narratives and their performance of 'doing gender'. Are they doing gender, or undoing gender or redoing gender? (Connel, 2010). Or is the transgender narrative trying to go beyond gender?

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<sup>236</sup> Bioscope: Non-Binary Conversations of Gender and Education, a documentary produced by Nirantar Trust (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfxjrMYxs7E>) (accessed on 09.02.22)

The narratives of my thesis can be broadly classified into three categories:

1. 'Doing' Gender

Those who transition to identify into the preferred gender and identify in terms of gender binary with the story of their transition moving to the background. They conform to the ascribed norms and roles of their preferred gender. Narratives such as these are of 'doing gender'. And in doing gender, these narratives disturb the unilinear trajectory of sex, gender and sexuality. In a way they imitate the binary heterosexual patriarchal structure with many of them getting married or aspiring to get married and play the role of a husband or a wife. But isn't the binary gender structure and heterosexuality in itself an imitation? Doesn't the trans-imitation of gender through the process of 'doing gender' exposing this imitation and thereby unsettling the very foundations of patriarchy? Here social media plays a very important role. Ambar<sup>237</sup>, (34 years) a transmasculine individual from South 24 Parganas, who runs his own coaching centre after having completed his MA in English has partially completed transition. After starting HRT he has completed hysterectomy and top surgery. In January 2019, Ambar married a cis-woman. He is now a successful photographer and an entrepreneur running his coaching centre. Ambar celebrates their birthdays and marriage anniversaries and posts photographs of his marital life with his arms encircled around his wife in a protective posture. He has formed a close community with his trans-brothers and they celebrate *bhaiphota*<sup>238</sup> amongst the preferred family structure that they have formed within the queer community. They share these photographs on facebook, instagram and other social media attracting numerous 'likes', 'loves' and 'emojis'. There could be a debate around this. While the dominant discourse would appear to be appropriation of queer identities by the patriarchal structure through a reification of patriarchal norms, there is also a narrative of creating a support system and a contrast process of visibilisation of their own politics challenging the cis-het ways of normative living. Through repeated performativity the heterosexual identities are consolidated through imitation where patriarchy establishes the imitation as the origin and the matrix for subsequent imitations. The more the

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<sup>237</sup> Interview taken on 04.05.17 in South 24 Parganas

<sup>238</sup> Hindu festival celebrating brother and sisterhood where the sister places sandalwood paste dot on the brother's forehead praying for his long life in return for the protection offered by the brother. This is followed by exchange of gifts between them.

performative act is claimed and appropriated, the more its illusion of originality lies exposed (Butler, 1993).

## 2. 'Undoing and Redoing' Gender

Those who transition, retaining parts of their identity in their ascribed gender that feel at par and comfortable with their self, usually identify themselves as transgender or gender queer, blending masculinity and femininity in their self. "I chose between the binary because I had no other option or frame of reference. But I do not want to be that 'man' that patriarchy promotes" (Samudra<sup>239</sup>, transman, 29 years, Kolkata). Narratives such as these disrupt gender binary normativity and cultivate confusion with intent and purpose. There is a certain politics of visibility and identity here that clearly challenges patriarchy and heterosexual hegemony. Connel (2010) describes this as the 'undoing' and 'redoing' of gender.

## 3. Going 'Beyond' Gender

There is a third category of trans-people emerging out of these narratives who are clearly going 'beyond gender' as is apparent from this narrative of Ani<sup>240</sup>, a 21 year old transmasculine individual from South 24 Parganas who identifies himself as pansexual.

As I transition and in the identity of a transman certain performativity is expected of me. *Ekta opochhonder khap thekey ekta pochonder khap e fele diyechhe* (From a box that I disliked I have been placed into another box which I like). Already ostracized by the outside normative world, there is reverse pressure from within the community to perform and stick to certain norms and stereotypes. This is double stigma. I have been in sexual relationships with cis-men and I enjoyed the physical relationship, but I cannot connect to cis-men romantically or emotionally something which I can do with women and femininity. And so I cannot express and establish myself altogether. I do so in parts. I am not able to express myself within the community completely. I am always aware of a certain frown and raised eyebrows which constantly stay at the back of my mind (Ani, 21 years, Transman, Kolkata).

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<sup>239</sup> Interview taken on 12.07.18 in Kolkata

<sup>240</sup> Interview taken on 16.06.19 in Kolkata

There is a clear resistance from entering into one box from another. In another narrative Suhani<sup>241</sup> (37 years), a transfeminine individual, activist and actor from South 24 Parganas who calls herself transfemale said,

I do not call myself a transwoman. The day there is gender equality, I will call myself so. I have only changed certain body parts into female parts and so I call myself transfemale. I like bisexual men. I am into open relationships with three partners, one Hindu, the other Muslim and the third Christian.

According to Suhani there is so much gender discrimination in the man-woman discourse with no equality or equity whatsoever that she does not want to become a part of this discrimination and hence the use of the term transfemale as she has just altered parts of her body. She also talked about adopting a male child and raising him to be a gender sensitive human being. During a FGD at Baruipur a transfeminine individual said "I want to opt for partial SRS. I will only do breast augmentation. I want to keep my penis. It gives me pleasure and it is in great demand for sex work." In another narrative Suparna<sup>242</sup> (40 years), a Hijra identified transfeminine activist from Hooghly said,

To me, my gender and sexuality are both very fluid. I do not believe in a man woman binary. I don't want to be a transwoman to receive the love of a man in bed. That's why the term 'queer' has brought a lot of solace to people like us as we do not want to belong to a box. I have not gone anywhere near gender affirmative therapy, nor have I done breast augmentation or laser. Long back I was emasculated in a *hijra gharana* with consent. I have great reservation for the term third gender in the NALSA judgment. SRS is a wonderful thing. I am creating myself according to my own wish. But does that mean through GAT I will polarise myself to belong to one of two boxes. There is no in between, either a man or a woman. And the capitalist economy is also promoting this and the movement is being appropriated by the market.

All these narratives resonate with the possibility and conviction to go beyond the binarised gender system and the unilinearity of sex and gender. Through subjective experiences and expressions of gender the trans-individuals try to go beyond gender as understood by society. All these narratives are stories of resistance against patriarchy chipping away at it, disrupting it, challenging it and finally trying to dismantle patriarchal structures and do away with gender completely.

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<sup>241</sup> Interview taken on 15.01.19 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

<sup>242</sup> Interview taken on 14.09.19 in Kolkata

## **Section 2: Trans-bodies and trans-identities**

This section is written on the basis of my understanding developed through conducting three focus group discussions with 30 transgender individuals in South 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Kolkata. FGD has been used in this research as a point of discussion and analysis because as a tool it is less simulated. By using FGD as a method of feminist enquiry I tried to contextualise the discussions through the interaction among the respondents and between the respondents and the context. The problem of decontextualisation is avoided through adopting FGD as a method. I have returned to the FGDs at the end of my thesis as the FGDs in the beginning helped me to have a grasp on transgender identities, their lived experiences with the help of which I built the theoretical framework, research methodology, narrative based thematic and exploratory questionnaire which are all foundations on which my study is based. Through the FGDs, my respondents got an opportunity to share each other's experiences, and feel empowered by making sense of their vulnerability as well as agency and feel that they are not alone. Three overarching perspectives came up from the discussions; the same perspectives also emerged from the narratives of my respondents.

- Marginal body as the 'wrong body': I want to change my body fully. I want to change my body for getting that 'desired' body to match with my preferred gender.
- Marginal body as the 'my body': I do not want to change my body. I am what I am; I do not want to rip apart my body. I love my body and will never put my body in pain.
- Marginal body as the 'new body': I want to change my body according to my own terms and not on the basis of societal strictures of 'normal' and 'abnormal'.

### **Section 2a: Marginal body as the 'wrong body'**

From the interviews and focus group discussions it is quite understandable that often the transgender individuals want to inhabit that 'desired' body. For them, the frame of reference is heterosexual society where the body of the biological man or a woman becomes the reference point. Though gender is a different sort of identity and its relation to anatomy is complex, still the urgent need for some of the transwomen and transmen to get that 'desired' body surgically becomes the most important aim in their lives. Upon reaching adulthood, they decide to change their sex by hormone therapy or surgical intervention based on informed consent

(which is absent in numerous cases where the intersexed children are surgically treated). My respondents have shared that they are going for SRS with all their savings to 'look normal' even with the knowledge that it may severely compromise their lives, and lifestyle and even make them 'sexually dysfunctional' or compromise their sexual pleasure. The urge for inhabiting the 'desired' body can be understood from their sense of urgency to opt for SRS. Cheryl Chase (2003) has argued that as the bodies of transgender individuals are inconceivable to the larger mainstream society the medical profession tries to give a 'normal looking' body to fit into the social structure. Here the phrase 'normal looking' implies intelligibility.

Transgender individuals, who are going for SRS, often express apprehension with their body as to whether they will be able to satisfy and retain their partners with their body or not? Their perception about their own body is dependent on their partner's acceptance and satisfaction. Two of the 30 FGD participants said that this new body after SRS would help them to make their *parikhs* happy; two others said that it would help them get better payment in sex work. In both cases the desire for changing the body illustrates the tendency of catering to the expectations of the male counterpart, hence giving priority to the heteronormative expectation from a woman as imposed by the societal norms. Two transmasculine individuals in the FGD going through the process of SRS said that they could never accept their body as it was at birth. Experiencing the monthly menstrual cycle was like dying every time it happened. For the transmasculine individuals their shrill voice and breasts are the markers of shame and discomfort and the reason for their lack of self confidence. Similarly for individuals belonging to the transfeminine spectrum opting for full SRS, the marker determining sex is the external genitalia. The organ in between their legs is the most dreaded, most unwelcome and most 'abnormal' thing as they perceived it to be. "Every time I stand naked in front of the mirror I cannot stand the sight of the organ between my legs" said two transwomen during the FGD. "What do you feel? Is it discomfort? I asked. "No it's shame." both of them replied. They always cover their penis while engaging sexually with their partners. Thus the only option left for transgender individuals with marked gender dysphoria that causes acute distress is SRS. While SRS gives one the option to adorn one's body in a variety of expressions it also raises the question "What is SRS truly for? Is it an expression of something personal that breaks the gender construct or does it socially codify it even more strongly?" Here I argue that as the transition is never fully achieved (HRT being a lifelong process and capability of reproduction in the transformed gender is not possible in current

medicine), they also resist the binarised understanding of gender through their exercise of choice. Moreover body essentialism cannot be a term that can be used here even for refuting the essentialist approach as through the narratives we can clearly see that bodies are being shaped against biologically determined binaries. Gender Affirmative Therapy brings with it an openness of a spectrum where the trans-individuals can locate themselves anywhere in-between or can also go beyond the extreme binary locations.

## **Section 2b: Marginal body as 'my body'**

Trans-embodiments and identities do not always incorporate surgical procedures or hormone replacement therapy but involve diverse gender expressions and identities that go beyond the gender binary of male-female

In the FGD at Baruipur<sup>243</sup>, a transmasculine individual said,

I have never thought of my body as a problem. I am happy with my girl friend. My masculinity is in my feeling and belief. All the local guys are friendly with me. I play carom with them in the club. I drink alcohol with them. There is nothing to prove. I think the expression of my gender is through the work I am doing, the relationships that I am making, it is every other thing but my genitalia.

Sumit<sup>244</sup> (32 years), a transfeminine person from Kolkata, said in the in-depth interview, "I love my body, I adorn myself, I put kajal, I wear bangles, I love body piercing. At times I miss having breasts, but still I am in love with my body. I am comfortable." Sumit who earns through *hijra* profession, is married and has a son. She and her wife go together for '*lagaan*' along with Sumit's same-sex partner during which Sumit's wife assumes the identity of the wife of Sumit's *parikh*. Sumit's wife is her best friend. Together Sumit and her wife have a son. Sumit earns by performing as a *hijra*, but does not live in a *hijra khol*. To the mainstream society Sumit is inconceivable. But for Sumit it is 'her life' and she loves every bit of it. Narratives like Sumit's are extremely powerful, they do not reinforce body essentialism and go beyond 'gender', creating rich stories of human lives, multilayered, thick stories of subversion and resistance against patriarchy.

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<sup>243</sup> FGD held on 29.05.16 in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas

<sup>244</sup> Interview taken on 18.05.16 in Kolkata

8 out of 30 transgender individuals in the FGD shared that they are happy with their appearance. Among them one transfeminine research participant said that "My femininity is an extremely personal, emotional, mental and spiritual experience.....which is beyond my bodily existence." They stated that they do not want to change their body through SRS. The reasons quoted were:

- I'm ok with my body
- I love my body and I want to protect it
- I want to see myself as I am. I love to call myself Transgender
- My femininity is between my ears and not between my legs
- I am in search of a new existence....the existence of a Trans. I am neither a man, nor a woman, I am a Transgender and my material existence with my mind and body is a new body... I want to celebrate my new body....my way

### **Sec 2c: Marginal body as the 'new body'**

Along with the experiences of transgender people who are changing their body fully through invasive surgeries to match their gender, there are others who change their bodies partially through SRS or adorn their bodies through hormone therapy, laser treatment, make up, cross dressing, hair styling and using prosthetics. 14 out of 30 research participants in this FGD expressed this opinion. These experiences of adorning one's body to match the gender expression through creative ways could be considered as a moment of resistance that signals a persisting inconceivability (Butler, 2006). There are also quite a few transgender individuals who opt for partial SRS. Sruti,<sup>245</sup> (30 years), a transfeminine person from Hooghly district said,

When I was a child the people surrounding me used to confuse me by asking, whether I am a girl or a boy. I felt helpless in those moments as I was not sure about how to respond, how to answer back. Now I know that I look beautiful. I go for laser treatment regularly. I use make up; I know how to carry myself. But consciously I have not done anything to change my voice. So now whenever someone looks at me with admiration, I talk to that person in my husky, masculine voice, and the person gets confused, as to that person this is not 'normal'.

Now, according to her, it is her turn to confuse them with her mystery and inconceivability. The two transfeminine individuals who have undergone partial sex reassignment (One has

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<sup>245</sup> Interview taken on 07.09.16 in Hooghly

done breast augmentation while the other vaginoplasty/orchiectomy) have said that they probably won't go for complete SRS in future. Some limit it to breast augmentation, some to vocal chord surgery, some to hormone therapy and some to body hair removal and some even simply orchiectomy.

There were voices in the FGD, questioning the need for full SRS by asking "What is the use of full SRS? Even if my body is changed will I be able to give birth to a child?" Yet again, to some the need of child bearing is not important, the most important aspect is to feel the desired body and express their preferred gender. In this way through their lived experience they also challenge the 'politics of reproduction.' Here the component of 'choice' is also of immense importance. After the NALSA judgement, through which 'self declaration of gender identity' (without any need for SRS) had been accepted, the act of opting for SRS (partial or whole) and inhabiting the 'desired body' was the expression of agency and self determination. However, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020 have made the Supreme Court NALSA judgment of 2014 of little or no relevance as the above acts and rules have made SRS mandatory for state sanction of the preferred gender. The process is complex and vague and completely violates the spirit of the NALSA introducing gate keeping and empowering the state to define a person's gender identity.<sup>246</sup> It reinforces the binary, patriarchal social structure to which the trans-individuals need to fit in to gain official state recognition of their preferred gender identity. Eminent advocate and queer rights activist Kaushik Gupta<sup>247</sup> said,

In the olden days, religious preachers determined who is right and who is wrong. These days the garb of the preacher has been worn by doctors and lawyers. When I was born I did not take the help of the law to prove that I am a man. Then why will a trans-person have to approach the law to prove that they are transgender?

In Kolkata, a number of doctors are doing SRS, endocrinologists are giving hormone therapy, beauty clinics are improvising packages for laser treatment, gyms and body shaping centres are finding a new and lucrative market. Samudra (29 years), a transmasculine research participant from Kolkata said, "You know, for us the reference point is the heterosexual society, so we tend to follow their life style. Given a different reference point we would have thought and felt differently." However, as this research study has shown, today's trans-

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<sup>246</sup> This has been discussed extensively in chapter 4

<sup>247</sup> Interview taken on 30.01.18 in Kolkata

movement is in the process of creating a new 'reference point or 'frame of reference' through a plethora of gender expressions, sexuality and sexual preferences.

### **Section 3: Gender Creativity**

I want a good teen age life. I want a happy teen age. I am creating my gender in my own way. I want my near and dear ones to understand me and accept me as I am. I want them to support me in my effort of creating my identity.

This is the candid sharing of Arjo, who is 18 years old, bright and confident. Arjo is a transmasculine person residing in Kolkata and is about to start college. Arjo's narrative made me think about gender as an act of 'creativity' for the first time. We talk about gender performativity, where the frame of reference is the gender binary system and following Butler, we tend to understand gender as an array of stylised repetition of acts. Though 'performativity' talks about following the binarised gendered acts, performativity can also become subversive by confusing patriarchy. As I try to conceptualise 'gender creativity' the very act of creating one's own gender identity in one's own way confuses and also destabilises the very foundations of patriarchy. Patriarchy based on the binary system of gender comes face to face with a whole spectrum of identities and expressions with no fixed extremities but an open, ever changing and ever evolving space where the gender identities and expressions interact, interweave, inter align, interface with each other creating spectrums without any fixed poles. Gender creativity also talks about spectrum but not a linear one. It takes different shapes, it creates different forms, it dissolves, it multiplies and it spreads across. Gender Creativity talks about the agential role of the individual human being which has the potential to transition, transform and also transcendent. While on one hand the acts of creating gender are done upon the 'sense of self' that each of my respondents has talked about, on the other hand it can also be said that through the acts of creating gender, individuals get to explore and understand the true nature of their self which is often not a hard solidified truth but a malleable, fluid experience. The trans-individual plays multiple roles in multiple contexts and with each and every role and each and every context their identities get created and recreated. Sometimes it is their activist identities and sometimes their lived identities and at times it becomes their sexed identities. And yet again at some other places it becomes their workplace identities. In every context, each individual continues to create their identities on the basis of the nature of their interaction with the environment.

These narratives also question and go beyond the assumption that 'gender' is a social construction. The question here arises that even if it is accepted that gender is a social construct which ensures compliance from birth through socialisation but in case of the transgender individuals what is different? From the narratives it is clear that right from birth the patriarchal environment comprising of parents, care-givers, neighbourhood, and school continues to impose and enforce compliance to the norms associated with the ascribed gender through socialisation. But the transgender experiences are narratives of resistance and agency that rejects the dominant stories and shifts towards their preferred stories. "Actually I was always desperate about dressing up the way I wanted. I wore eyeliner to school. My brother used to beat me but I continued. I used to sit on the toilet seat to urinate wearing a frock." (Suparna, 40 years, *hijra* identified transwoman and activist, Hooghly).<sup>248</sup> But even when gender as a social construct is challenged by the transgender experience, it is influenced by the existing binary frame of reference and the constructed notions of beauty and aesthetics that are associated with the two available genders that the transgender individuals have to choose from which limits and restricts the transgender narratives of subversion and resistance. While the current Gender Affirmative Therapy (GAT) protocol that starts with psychiatric evaluation and certification, followed by HRT and phased 'top / bottom' surgeries are becoming a part of the lucrative 'gender trade' minting 'pink money'<sup>249</sup> which is bolstered by the current Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019, there are a multitude of stories of subversion that challenge this binary structure. There are stories of polymorphous bodies and identities shaped by desires that are dynamic and fluid, stories of individuals that adopt the transgender identity as a politics of their lives where 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969).

Labani<sup>250</sup> (28 years, transmasculine person from Birbhum) talks about the difference between gender as an external perception or attribution and gender as an inner perception where an individual identifies the self.

I keep it to the person standing in front of me about how to address and what to think of me. That person may consider me as a boy, it's okay, if it happens otherwise, then also it's okay. If they think I am a transgender, that's also okay. That will be even better in a way to know that at least they are aware about the existence of the trans-identities. Whatever be the case, I will not change, whatever the other person might think that will not change anything.

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<sup>248</sup> Interview taken on 14.09.19 in Kolkata

<sup>249</sup> Pink money refers to the purchasing power of the LGBT community

<sup>250</sup> Interview taken on 12.08.18 in Birbhum

This research indicates the possibilities of gender as an 'inner perception' through subverting role stereotypes, affirming gender identities and claiming one's position within and beyond the binary creating a spectrum of diverse expressions and identities. Labani also talks about 'social passing', where he feels very confident. His external appearance matches his preferred gender identity according to social expectations, so he does not have to reiterate his identity, it is identifiable. Instead his name creates interest in others about him and this has been instrumental in cracking job interviews. According to him the potential interviewers or employers find him interesting, smart and confident, his name denotes the 'feminine' gender but his appearance implies just the opposite that intrigues people to know more about him and once he is sitting across the interview panel, he gives his best to get the job. Thus capabilities are linked to liveabilities. His intelligibility decreases the degree of precarity and re-iterates the finding in this study that transmasculine individuals are more acceptable to society which is more intolerant towards transfemininity.

As I listened to the narratives of the transgender individuals it was reinforced that transgender as an identity category by its very existence disturbs the gender binary and the unilinearity of sex and gender, creating an open space for possibilities to emerge where the social identities like gender is located in the conflict between the social norms and the self determinants (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Here gender gets posited in the in-between locations of submitting to social norms and self determination of one's own identities.

Each one has talked about the 'sense of being' experienced internally (within) which when expressed outside becomes inconceivable against the patriarchal social framework. The 'sense of being' of an individual is not a single identity but a plethora of identities, multilayered, mingled together, complementing and supplementing each other to make up an individual. Likes, dislikes, traits, temperament, personalities, sense of food, dress, smell, touch, pleasure, attraction, addiction, sexual gratification, nature, nurture, environment, imbibed values and beliefs along with an integral sense of one's body and desire makes up the sense(s) of identity(ies), like a stream of consciousness (James, 1892) that is fluid, dynamic and always in flow. This stream of consciousness is ever flowing, ever changing, spacio-temporal, metaphoric, reflecting an inner sense of self that makes meanings of events, connects with self, others and society at large.

Patriarchal norms constantly try to control; discipline this stream channelling it into a dual track binary system of either man or woman with a set of prescribed and proscribed

behaviours and roles. Patriarchy is a scheme of power and control. This power is concentrated in the hands of few upper caste, upper class men. This is a hierarchy which is such that anyone who by sheer chance or ability climbs up the ladder and reaches the top, gets appropriated into the power structure and starts enacting the same power dynamics. The transgender identities are also a part of this power structure and are often appropriated in the patriarchal power scheme and thus get imitated intersectionally.

What begins with the sexing of bodies at birth continues with being marked with gender and becomes gendered bodies that have to perform the prescribed roles in a patriarchal social order with the only purpose of sex and gender being reproduction and procreation. The human body is the principal substrate on which patriarchy acts, marks and disciplines. From the narratives it seems that there exists in the human brain an inner sense of one's body that is out of sync with the physical body in transgender individuals thus creating body dysphoria. The sexed and gendered body performances are based on socio-political constructs created by prevailing spacio-temporal norms of dress, food, behaviour, social roles, and strict codes of conduct which constitute the culture of a society. While the cultural norms gradually change with time so does the binary gender track which shifts slightly to accommodate these changes in dress, food and other markers. Experiences in one's stream of consciousness that are in conflict with the ascribed identity have to be disciplined and failure to discipline leads to such identities not being recognized and invisibilised outside the patriarchal social order. Their 'sense of being' becomes the centre of repulsion as it cannot be identified within the two folds of 'woman' and 'man' and hence becomes unidentifiable. This is what is called 'transvaluation'. The trans-individuals get otherised once they start questioning the binarised system and the unilinear relationship between sex and gender.

A major finding of this study has been the importance and emergence of how language plays a pivotal role in creating social constructs. How our self exploration is limited by language which shapes our knowledge and our ability along with inability to understand our experiences. The defence mechanisms of distortion and denial (Rogers: 1950) arise due to the absence of language to accurately symbolise our experiences. We have found a number of narratives that have talked about self identification after finding/discovering the right vocabulary. As we evolve so does our language which becomes a powerful tool of self expression. We don't identify or explore because we are conditioned by language. As a consequence of being the 'linguistic being' (Butler, 1997) we need language in order to exist

and express. Our vulnerability to language develops as a consequence of being constituted in the frame of language. In order to stop language from hurting us, from injuring, violating and invisibilising us we need to create newer vocabularies. Language restrains us but then developing new language helps us to break social constructs and create in-between, hybrid spaces. Hence, new words and hence new language has emerged in the last two decades as a result of the movement, claiming spaces for people with marginalised gender and sexual identities. She-male is not a social construct; it is not always about social constructs. Individuals are also constructing their gender identities, their way, carving out spaces for self expression and formation of identities. Language plays a pivotal role in creating social constructs and also disrupting it. This has been especially seen in the transfeminist discourse. As for example, in the works of Vic Munoz (2012), he argues that language and gender are spaces next to actual geographical spaces. Munoz used the term 'tranced' denoting 'deconstruction'. According to Munoz, deconstructing the national boundaries indicates the need for a global feminism that is expected to perform the act of 'transing'. The discourse around vocabularies such as this, show the imposed and artificial nature of the supposedly natural boundaries and boundedness. As a consequence the prefix 'trans' in transfeminism is used as a mode of inquiry by which bounded social categories such as binarised gender is problematised, deconstructed and expanded in order to identify and include multiple gender expressions and identities.

From this thesis it comes up that the trans-identity is more in use by the transfeminine individuals than the transmasculine individuals. 84.85% among the transfeminine individuals mentioned the trans-identity to be their identity and 44.44% transmasculine individuals were okay with it. This is a significant difference and one wonder what could be the reason for this difference. The transfeminine individuals who were previously included under the umbrella term MSM were not comfortable with the term as they felt that they were being misgendered. With the arrival of the term transgender that came during the end of the first decade of 2000 (Dutta and Roy, 2014:320) through project based funding, the individuals got a word to express themselves. The term Transgender has better potential for political empowerment than MSM. MSM and *Kothi* are linked to the HIV pandemic, as if they are always, already 'diseased.' Transgender is a trans-nationally recognised term with a political edge. Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy described the word 'transgender' as unstable assemblages rather than essentialist identities, tracing the overlapping, blurring, doing, undoing and redoing genders in an open space of gender identities challenging the binary gender system. The

transmasculine individuals on the other hand mostly prefer to be addressed as 'men' and in many situations do not identify with the word 'transgender'. Some of them associated with the trans-movement have expressed themselves as transmasculine individuals who want to trace their journey of claiming their preferred gender identities but others have categorically mentioned themselves as 'men'. The masculine space is a location which gives certain privileges difficult to ignore. It has been a relentless effort of discovering, matching and creating identities at times by keeping the binary framework intact and also many a times disrupting it and creating newer frames of references.

The research respondents often talked about imitating the women or men whom they have seen from close quarters in order to express their sense of being as they felt there is a resemblance with what they see and what they feel. This imitativeness of gender as described by the trans-individuals in their daily lives and livelihoods and through their performances in *launda* dance, *shong jatra*, *madali gaan*, *charak jatra*, *chhat* dance, *behula-lakhindarer pala*, *sheetala pala*, *ma manashar pala*<sup>251</sup> implicitly proves the imitative nature of gender. The understanding of gender as performance increases the numerous possibilities of gender and its diverse proliferation beyond the woman-man binary. Saying this, I argue that the acceptance the transfeminine persons receive from the heteronormative society by dressing up and acting as *launda* or *shib-parvati* or *behula-laakkhindar* or *sheetala* or *manasha* in seasonal fairs or religious ceremonies has a two pronged approach. Either they are considered as 'clowns' or 'comedians' who are there to make others laugh in a derogatory manner or as 'pious' individuals blessed to act as deities. Through acting out of these femininities, society objectifies it and creates specific categories of 'unreal' entities that is socially acceptable and receives a social and religious sanction to explore the fluidity of gender and sexuality. There is a crossing of boundaries accentuated by the intense yearning of *viraha* [love in separation]. Further, in the intimacy of the *bhakti*<sup>252</sup> relationship, the male *bhakta*<sup>253</sup> by experiencing himself as female partner violates his primal sexual demarcation as a male (Scott, 1998).

According to Gayle Salamon (2010:95), "gender beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived, and the discipline of women's studies has not yet taken account of this". Stating what perhaps in 2017 can be read as a premonition of the times, she argues that women's studies need a greater understanding

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<sup>251</sup> Mythological folk lores of Bengal

<sup>252</sup> Bhakti movement was a medieval Hindu religious movement of worshipping god through love and devotion

<sup>253</sup> Devotee

of gender if it is to become relevant again and trans-studies need feminism for its understanding of gender as a historical category. Through focusing on 'gender' the queer movement has created important coalitions with feminist groups but at the same time it has called for a purging of 'gender' or at least abolishing the understanding of 'gender' as a significant mode of identity that defines a person's selfhood. For this to happen we must start regarding 'gender' as an 'expression' (focussing on the flexibility and fluidity of expressions) and not as an 'identity' that is fixed (Mohan and Murthy, 2013:24).

#### **Section 4: Inhabiting the body: Body as a site of subversion, safe space, self expression**

"Home, is it just a word? Or is it something that you carry within you?" (Nomadland, 2020 movie). The metaphor of 'home' has surfaced time and again. It is an interesting metaphor for often our homes are not organised to our satisfaction. Often we do not have the means to make changes or decorate our home the way we want to, yet the home is our private space of comfort, our private domain where we feel habituated and familiar with. For some of us the home is a temporary refuge where we spend our childhood with our parents. We grow out of our homes and create new ones for ourselves. Three types of responses have emerged from the narratives. Those who do not want to go for surgical intervention said that they are comfortable in their body as they have been used to it just like getting used to living in a home and they do not want to change it. They feel safe there. They find it easier to navigate and they don't want to jeopardise its stable functioning, they don't want to have any health issues due to their decision. But as they would like to decorate their home in order to make it beautiful, they might use prosthetics, make-up, preferred dresses to look good and feel at peace with their body. They might take up work that would help them to be in their preferred gender and can use the body to do that work and get satisfaction out of it. Another response surfaced where it is felt that the home that they inhabit, never feels 'home' to them and that is why they want to make a new home, where they will feel comfortable. Even if they are to live for one day they want to live in that home and not the present one that they got through birth. They want to create that 'home-body' which will be familiar and where they will feel comfortable and safe. Megh (28 years, transmasculine individual from North 24 Parganas), a young artist (painter) said,

After watching several youtube videos of transmen after SRS, I decided to opt for SRS. It is not about keeping my body alive till the age of 80; living to me is inhabiting the body of my choice. The duration of life does not matter. It is important for me to have a quality of life.

A couple of elderly respondents said, that they are comfortable in the body they inhabit, it might not be the body they desire to have or the home they feel the happiest to inhabit, but they are used to it, it has become their habit, and creating or shifting to a new body might be uncomfortable for them and difficult to navigate too. Another narrative also surfaced from the interviews where the respondents have expressed their refusal to stay in one home and discover newer homes in their journey of self reflection and self revelation. They want to disturb and unsettle the binary framework and create newer ones by confusing patriarchy, refusing to pass. Conforming to 'pass' reinforces the binarised way of looking at experiences, Sandy Stone in her seminal work *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-transsexual Manifesto*, talked about 'reading oneself loud' instead of 'passing'. Stone developed a poststructuralist account of gender identities that opened up new possibilities for transsexual individuals. Sandy Stone (2006) talks about resisting and refusing the colonisation of their bodies by the heteropatriarchal gender binary social structure and instead allow for newer reading of their bodies and their journey to challenge and disrupt the patriarchal gender norms (Stryker and Whittle, 2006:221). This 'home-body' metaphor must not be taken as any binary like soul and the body. Because when we assume this, we tend to situate gender apart from the body through which the expression of gender is presented to others and to the self, which is not comprehensible as we inhabit our body from birth to death and express ourselves through the materiality of that body. We tend to change our body only for matching with the preferred gender and feeling comfortable in one's own skin. Bodies are always shaped by the social world and understood through its history in which we are inescapably located (Salamon, 2006). So in order to make the social world understand and recognise the felt sense of the trans-experiences, SRS becomes one of the most important tools to use. As Gayle Salamon (Salamon, 2006:582) argues, "This tension between the historicity of the body and the immediacy of its felt sense is the precise location of bodily being and mapping this tension is the work of both transgender studies and theories of social construction alike." This 'in-betweenness' is not a sense of vulnerability but rather a sense of agency where one is not restricting oneself within rigid locations. It is not the fragility of not having a socially recognizable identity but creating one's own through widening the spectrum of embodiments and gender identities and expressions. At this juncture the relationship between the trans-

mind and trans-body becomes an ever evolving narrative of embodiment, expression and exploration. The materiality of the body is felt as an instantaneous veracity, situated in the spatial 'here' and the temporal 'now' and this creates a feeling of absoluteness when we feel the body and the things our bodies deliver to us. But still along with this feeling of immediacy, the body depends upon a substratum of history, which becomes an integral part of it, difficult to ignore. As far as transgender experiences are concerned there has been an effort to delete the history of the body in which an individual takes birth in order to create new history of the body created through SRS by the agential choice of the transgender individual. Here the legal and social aspects together and separately become significant while we talk about the negotiation between the historicity and the immediacy of the body. During the interview of Arjo, 18 years, transmasculine individual from Kolkata, his father<sup>254</sup> said "I do not know whether to celebrate the birth of my boy or the passing away of my girl."

### **Section 5: Changing perspectives: The legal, the medical and the social**

We have seen that certain significant efforts are being made in India to protect and promote the rights of the LGBTIQHKA+ community in the last few years. In recent times though The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 has raised several concerns but at least there is a legal framework in hand on the basis of which the transgender individuals can ask for redress against discrimination. On the basis of this act the formation of state wise transgender development boards have been initiated. It can be said that there might be dozens of legal Acts or policy frameworks but unless and until social reform is achieved which brings about a change in mindset none of these laws and acts will be effective.

The activists working on trans-issues have heavily criticised the Act. The Act has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter as introducing a form of gate keeping and for giving the state sweeping powers to recognise and certify the 'authenticity' of a transgender individual through its state machinery and more specifically this power is vested on the District Magistrate (DM). The Act goes completely against the spirit of the NALSA making SRS mandatory for receiving the final endorsement from the state to fall into the binary man / woman box as per the preferred gender of the trans-individual. Prior to the act many transgender individuals had changed their official photo ID documents based on the NALSA judgment with an affidavit and gazette notification without undergoing Sex

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<sup>254</sup> Interview taken on 21.06.21 in Kolkata

Reassignment Surgery, something which is no longer possible unless the validity of this act is challenged in court in light of the Supreme Court NALSA judgment. The act is also problematic as it makes sexual abuse of transgender individuals including transwomen punishable by imprisonment of not less than six months and extendable up to two years as against the punishment for rape against women under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of not less than seven years and extendable to life. This act clearly discriminates between women and transwomen and denies transwomen the basic rights that are legally available to biological women. Furthermore, the 2019 Act puts unnecessary emphasis on the natal family which probably stems from the patriarchal family structure and negates the alternate family structure of trans-individuals that challenges patriarchal hegemony. The Act has provisions for placing trans-individuals in state sanctioned rehabilitation centres if their natal family is unable to take care of them. The act is derogatory and takes away the rights, agency and autonomy from transgender individuals.

Dr. Kaustav Bakshi,<sup>255</sup> Associate Professor of English Department, Jadavpur University, looks at the TG Act 2019 through the lens of economics.

Any identity gets identified and recognised through the market economy. The neoliberal, aggressive, capitalist economy aims to bring the 'transgender' within its ambit through the process of being colonised by a certain rhetoric and as a result the market value of transgender individuals increase when a bill is supporting their existence. There has been a convergence of sexuality and capitalism in the trans-bill. The liminality of gender and sexuality is continuously reiterated in this act by establishing the board, the process of certification and GAT. The more the in-betweenness of trans-individuals is minimised the more the 'majoritarian' patriarchal society feels comfortable and less threatened.

Through GAT driven market economy the transgender individuals get identified and recognised in the larger society as potential consumers and hence intelligible citizen subjects. The easier the categorisation process, the easier the identification process. Otherwise the process of marginalisation and minoritisation continues, where the degree of precarity differs from person to person on the basis of their intersectional location.

The Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 and Rules 2020, has reinforced the third box for 'transgender' individuals. So for the transgender individuals there are three options now, 'transgender', 'woman' and 'man'. The act and subsequent rules say that in order to become a 'woman' or a 'man' one must go through SRS and procure a doctor's certificate to be submitted to the District Magistrate. The process is a sort of cleansing and boxing trans-

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<sup>255</sup> Interview taken on 10.02.19 in Kolkata

individuals in either the masculine box or the feminine box so that either they get converted into the folds of the heteropatriarchal lifestyle, become agents of capitalism by buying and becoming consumers, become intelligible citizen subjects with proper legal documentation and gendered appearances or they live otherised as 'transgenders' or the 'third gender' which is countable, recognizable and identifiable by the state. It becomes a point of reference and a constant reminder of what the desired body should not be.

So it can be said that SRS is reinforcing class politics with those who have the resources or can manage the resources to pay the cost of surgical transition and then apply to the state for recognition of their identity as woman or man and enter into the respective boxes created by the state through its instruments like the TG Act 2019. SRS is performed to get that desired body that is in sync with their preferred gender as per the mainstream idea of 'beauty' and aesthetics based on the heteropatriarchal yardsticks and markers ascribed to their preferred gender. These ideas of beauty and aesthetics have influenced medical science which itself has become gendered and binarised as can be seen from the interview of Dr. Sanjay Pandey,<sup>256</sup> andrologist and reconstructive urologist at Kokilaben Memorial Hospital, Mumbai, where he says, "Beauty is commonsensically understood on the basis of certain physical measurements, the measurement of the labia majora and labia minora, the length of the penis or the weight of the augmented breasts."

The GAT/SRS Protocol while on one hand opening up new possibilities for trans-individuals also restricts them to be appropriated by heteropatriarchal society to fit into the binary along with the TG Act, 2019 being the instrument of disciplining by the state. Dr. Ranjita Biswas<sup>257</sup>, queer feminist activist and psychiatrist sums it up in her interview,

The transgender identity in no way does justice to the innumerable gender expressions and identities that are experienced across the gender spectrum and the certificate is such a brutal reduction of those lived lives. The dysphoria diagnosis is a comment on the person and yet what is at fault is the binary gender structure that rules medical science that still believes in biological gender when it talks of incongruence between gender at birth and lived gender, meaning there is a linear relation between the two which this person has failed to develop.

According to Dr. Kaustav Bakshi, Associate Professor, English Department, Jadavpur University, the queer movement is in a very rudimentary stage. At this point if it disintegrates due to intra-community violence and conflict then it would be devastating. The dividing lines

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<sup>256</sup> Interview taken on 01.07.17 in Kolkata

<sup>257</sup> Interview taken on 19.01.19 in Kolkata

are centred around those who are being able to opt for SRS and those who are not, those who are transitioning and opting for 'mainstream' livelihood and those who are into traditional livelihood, those who after transitioning are entering into a 'normative' life and family structure (with one of the reasons for SRS being marriage) and those who are 'queer and questioning heteronormativity'.

Declaring IPC Section 377 as unconstitutional has been only a step towards heteronormativization. One can always have the wish to have a partner and adopt a child, to replicate the heteronormative family structure which might not be a problem for that individual but politically the movement might experience disruption from within. It is often said that trans-activism is about affirming gender and feminism is about demolishing it. In trans-movement it seems that the centre is never travelling to the margin or periphery but the margin is travelling to the centre. Desiring the centre, mainstreamisation and unequivocal integration is being made to happen. In this situation the queer movement is trying to create alternate liveabilities and family structures that question marriage and the patriarchal family structure and exists not always as an alternative but as parallel forms of coexistence. Not idealizing marriage but creating a parallel perspective, parallel structures for experiencing togetherness, love and desire. Many of the narratives apparently seem to be reinforcing the binary and emulating heteronormativity but a closer look at these narratives delving deeper have revealed stories of resistance to patriarchal structures and the emergence of parallel structures. My respondents, Jhora (42 years, North 24 Parganas, an activist and the second transwoman from West Bengal to complete full SRS in the 1990s) and Dipto (40 years, transman from Assam having settled in Kolkata and having completed partial SRS) have married in the traditional Hindu ceremonial style and live together as husband and wife since 2019. They rescue animals such as cats, dogs, pigeons, rabbits which are stray and injured. They nurse them and have adopted them and consider these animals as their children. Suparna (40 years), a transfeminine hijra identified activist from Hooghly has a partner Kayan (33years) who is also a post operative (partial SRS) transmasculine individual from Jalpaiguri. They share a long distance relationship with phases when he comes and stays with his partner. They have adopted a child. Together they are raising the child along with their common friend who is a queer woman and the three of them are co-parenting the child.

These narratives are extremely powerful stories that create a multitude of possibilities that one day may emerge as many parallel narratives like the roots of a banyan tree growing inside cracks in a structure. Slowly but steadily they create a network of roots infiltrating

deep into the structure fracturing the structure from within till one day the main structure disintegrates and many structures emerge from within. These parallel trans-narratives silently chip away in a constant effort of moving away from the dominant discourse to the preferred discourse.

## **Section 6: GAT/SRS & TG Act 2019 through the lens of Biopower and Biopolitics**

Here I have tried to view Hormone Replacement Therapy and Sex Reassignment Surgery as a part of Gender Affirmative Therapy and its co-working with the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 on the basis of the Foucauldian perspective of bio-power. Paul-Michel Foucault, in his essay - 'Right of Death and Power over Life' explains the concept of Bio-power which relates to the practice of the modern state's regulation of their subjects through "polymorphous techniques of power" (Foucault, 1998:11). According to Foucault, biopower regulates, controls and manipulates lives through 'anatomy-politics' and 'biopolitics'. Foucault also conceptualizes 'discipline' as the process focusing on the anatomy-politics of the human body centred around the body as a machine seeking to optimise its capabilities, increasing its usefulness and docility and integrating it into efficient systems. (Foucault, 1998:139). Biopolitics on the other hand focuses on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanisms of life: birth, morbidity, mortality and longevity and the regulatory control of its population. Hence the concept of bio-power provides a field constituted by more or less rationalized attempts to intervene upon the vital characteristics of human existence. These readings pave the way for viewing the TG Act 2019 and the subsequent establishment of the state-wise transgender development boards as a practical exercise of bio-power through managing and regulating the transgender population, the apparent aim being the inclusion of the transgender individuals in the web of horizontal power where power is taking form and being exercised and is omnipresent in the flexible, fluid, fluctuating networks of existence itself. The aim is to train the subjects that are both efficient and obedient and that are going through an intriguing mix of both vulnerability and of agency. Here HRT, SRS and the TG Act 2019 become the tools for facilitating the transgender individuals to identify either with the category of 'woman' or 'man' or 'transgender' by embodying either the female body or the male body or the 'transgender' bodies and in the process blurring the discourse around polymorphous, bodies and desires. Now three boxes are created instead of two and the process of 'boxing' remains unchanged. It is a process of

'consolidating' one's identity through the process of GAT, especially SRS and HRT in tandem with the Transgender Person's (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 leading to the development of 'responsible and productive citizens' through anatomo-disciplining of the body, where both bio-power and discipline are being manifested concretely in the idea of normal. The TG Act 2019 makes HRT and SRS mandatory to receive the final certificate from the District Magistrate endorsing their transition in order change their photo ID documents to their preferred gender. In this way by making HRT and SRS instrumental the market economy in a way urges trans-individuals to opt for the hormonal and surgical (genital, non genital) procedures and become that 'woman' or 'man' which is intelligible to society and hence readable. The Act being a state recognised legal document, functions as a tool of bio-power for disciplining the trans-bodies through norms based on the binarised gender system strengthening the sex-gender linearity and keeping the status quo intact.

In this research especially among the transmasculine respondents in the age group between 20 to 30 years the inclination towards opting for SRS is very striking. This is not the same for the transfeminine individuals. The transfeminine respondents in this research have mainly opted for HRT and SRS between age 30 to 40 years. 30.30% of the transfeminine individuals have opted for HRT and 15.15% have opted for both HRT and SRS. In case of the transmasculine individuals 51.8% have started HRT with 48.1% having done partial SRS (mastectomy and/or hysterectomy). To them becoming intelligible in the society is the most important step forward for achieving a social status on the basis of the socio-economic markers that are socially acknowledged and understood. The aim is to merge into the crowd and in the process become a part of the binarised crowd so that nobody could identify one as a transmasculine individual. From my study it seems that in the need of not getting identified separately and becoming an integral part of the binarised social fabric the transmasculine individuals find it instrumental to opt for HRT and SRS and become a 'man' whom nobody will question. The transfeminine individuals on the other hand find it is difficult to dissolve into the crowd and in the process of trying to make that possible there seems to be no limit to 'feminization' as so many of my transfeminine respondents have said that they do not want to become that 'authentic' woman, where the degree of authenticity based on the societal expectations is ever changing and the competition is never ending.

It is however important to mention that many of the interviews in this research study were taken between the years 2017 to 2019 before the TG Act of 2019 and the data analysed thus

reflects more transmasculine individuals opting for HRT and SRS as mentioned above. However there seems to be a shift happening as I come to the end of this study in 2022 with more transfeminine individuals now starting to undergo HRT / SRS. Nilanjan Majumdar,<sup>258</sup> medical laboratory technologist and well-being consultant, owner of a private pathological laboratory in South Kolkata who provides queer affirmative services in the form of pathological tests, counselling to queer/transgender individuals said,

In the last few years there has been a clear shift with more transfeminine individuals now opting for surgery. I provide hormone tests, free hormone injections to trans-individuals and my records show that since 2019 out of a total of 40 individuals who have tested in my laboratory or are availing hormone injections for HRT and SRS, 25 have been transfeminine while 15 have been transmasculine. Earlier, I rarely had transfeminine individuals come over to my laboratory for pre-SRS blood work. Talking to many of them who have come in the last 3 years I have learned that most of the transfeminine persons took hormones / i-pill on their own or underwent castration with quacks. But more and more transfeminine persons are now availing modern medical services for HRT and SRS for a safe and scientific transition. Around a year back, I did the complete blood work of one transfeminine person who then tested positive for HIV and Hepatitis B. Undaunted by being sero-positive for HIV and Hepatitis B she went on with HRT and has completed a year on HRT. She has in parallel started ART for HIV and also medication for Hepatitis B virus. She is currently getting tested for HIV viral load as she plans to go for SRS after reducing the viral load in her body.

The above narrative highlights the fact that more and more transfeminine individuals are starting GAT including SRS. The need to transform the body is so intense that a transwoman who is HIV positive even after being aware of the risks involved and the compromises she has to make in her lifestyle has gone ahead with GAT/SRS. The same was confirmed by Ree, queer feminist activist and peer counsellor<sup>259</sup> who said that more and more transfeminine individuals were opting for HRT and SRS following the prescribed GAT protocol. They were making informed choices and it was good that transfeminine persons who previously were subjected to health hazards were now aware and were seeking proper medical help for their transition.

It is important to note here that the discourses on sexuality are being subsumed under the discussions on gender identities as neither in NALSA, nor in the TG Act 2019 has sexual orientation/sexuality been discussed. Here sex, gender and sexuality, all the three axes become very significant to understand the lived experiences of the transgender individuals.

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<sup>258</sup> Interview taken on 22.01.22 in Kolkata

<sup>259</sup> Interview taken on 08.04.22 in Kolkata

Through GAT 'sex' is seen as the idealised construct materialised through time which gets disrupted as in the process of transitioning to the preferred gender, the body needs to be in sync for which it is surgically altered and the 'sex' (the corresponding external genitalia primary and secondary sexual characteristics) of the trans-body also undergoes transition. Individuals are enabled to find the bodily expression of their gendered selves by changing the sexed bodies in order to express the preferred gender. While talking to my respondents, identities like trans-lesbian and trans-gay surfaced in their narratives. This opens up a whole range of gender identities and sexual orientations with sexuality remaining as fluid as the other two axes, i.e. sex and gender. However, the TG Act of 2019 like the Supreme Court NALSA verdict of 2014 has failed to acknowledge this. In chapter 1 of the TG Act 2019, Section 2 (c) under 'Definitions' defines family as "a group of people related by blood or marriage or by adoption made in accordance with law."<sup>260</sup> Chapter V, Section 12 speaks about the 'Right of Residence' and here again the emphasis is on the natal family - parents and immediate family members and if they are unable to take care of the transgender individual, the person would then be sent to a rehabilitation centre. This leaves very little agency to the trans-individual. It does not recognise the alternate family structure of the trans-person including their community, friends, allies and their partner/s who are not their alternate family but who are family for the trans-individual. As Ree, queer feminist activist and peer counsellor stated in her interview, "My friend who is a *hijra* identified transfeminine activist and her adopted child are my family. They are not my alternate family. I look after my father who is very old and dependent on me but my friend and her child is the family that I have created for myself, my family of choice." Neither the TG Act 2019, nor the Supreme Court verdict writing down section 377 or the NALSA judgment of 2014 have even touched on the 'sacrosanct realm of relationships and family structure'. The Supreme Court verdict of 2018 has decriminalised same sex desire but has it acknowledged same sex relationships or the rights of same sex partners such as that enjoyed by heterosexual married couples? Both the NALSA verdict of 2014 and the TG Act of 2019 remains absolutely silent about the relationships formed by transgender/queer individuals outside the realm of natal family such as that with their partners, friends, community and allies who often are their family of choice.

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<sup>260</sup> <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/13091/1/a2019-40.pdf> (accessed on 10.04.22)

## **Section7: COVID 19 and the situation of transgender individuals**

"COVID 19 has brought us to a standstill. May be this is the point of time where we can sit back, reflect and plan accordingly about the livelihood opportunities for trans-persons", Raina Roy, founder of *Shamabhabona (Baishmya Durikaran Samiti)* a trans-led organisation in Kolkata working with trans rights since 2013 shared her view during a webinar organised by Kolkata Rainbow Carnival on 16.08.20 on "The Scope of Sustainable Livelihood for Transgender Persons".

The COVID pandemic has changed this world forever. In 2020 it brought life to a grinding halt for six months and as life was starting to limp back to normal, the second wave struck in April 2021 with a much greater intensity and ferocity than the first wave causing even greater number of infections and death. It caused the nation to impose lockdown once again and this time the transgender community who were still reeling under the effects of the first lockdown were severely affected. In 2020, the centre and state governments had announced several relief packages for the disadvantaged populations which should have included the transgender community. However, their woes of invisibilisation and marginalisation continued as very little relief trickled down to them. The biggest reason for this is the fact that there is no database available on transgender individuals, no estimate on their numbers and demographics on which state policies on welfare of this community could be planned and executed. When the first transgender development board was set up in West Bengal in 2015 to work for the development of the transgender community in the state, their first task was to estimate the number of individuals belonging to the community. Six years later there has been very little progress with a large number of transgender individuals not having any identity card as transgender or in their preferred gender identity, which makes last mile delivery of relief and benefits provided to the community impossible. The only way many of them have survived is due to the selfless, untiring efforts of local community based organisations who worked tirelessly during the entire lockdown period providing free rations and relief to people from the community in need. During the nationwide lockdown many *launda* dancers, young transwomen from West Bengal were stuck in UP and Bihar where they had migrated for seasonal dancing. Many of them were stranded in Arrah (Bhojpur district) and Chhapra (Saran district) in Bihar and Ballia district in UP<sup>261</sup>. Activists and Community Based Organisations from West Bengal raised funds and managed to bring many

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<sup>261</sup> <https://vartagensex.org/2020/05/18/missing-in-the-migrant-story-silenced-in-the-atmanirbharta-clamour/> (accessed on 12.04.22)

of them back to their homes. During the Covid pandemic and the lockdown, there were many articles in the press about the plight of migrant workers being stuck, starving and dying with the state remaining inactive and the nation watching helplessly. However, the narrative of migrant transgender community remained invisibilised as if they did not exist or did not count as workers.

Many transgender individuals are on Gender Affirmative Therapy and have started HRT which is a part of GAT. GAT facilities are city-centric with consultations with endocrinologists, urologists, plastic/reconstruction surgery options and post-op follow up available in the major metropolitan cities. Many transgender individuals got stuck in between surgeries or in the midst of their HRT protocol due to the pandemic. The lockdown prevented follow up and hormone injections which caused physical, emotional and psychological distress. Without income many trans-individuals are resorting to alternative medicine provided by quacks, while many do not have access to health services and cannot monitor their hormones, liver enzymes, blood sugar and pressure levels resulting in major obstacles in their ongoing GAT which could have long lasting irreversible consequences on their health and well-being.

There is no data on number of transgender individuals who have tested positive for Covid-19 but perhaps the worst affected sphere in the lives of the trans-community is mental health. Confined to their homes with their natal families who often are the major perpetrators of violence and abuse they are cut off from their support systems, partners, friends and peer groups who love them, understand and accept them in their preferred gender. Isolated, restricted and not being able to express their preferred gender, they are either forced to conform or are facing domestic violence and emotional abuse living with the very people who are unleashing this violence in their lives. Facing the uncertainty they are experiencing an exponential increase in already pre-existing mental health episodes of anxiety, depression and panic attacks. The number of online counselling sessions provide by psychiatrists, therapists and counsellors have increased manifold in general and have risen significantly in transgender individuals as well, due to reasons like forced coming out, backlash of coming out, relationship concerns, issues regarding on-line dating, lack of mobility, inability to live in the preferred lifestyle, conflict with biological family, facing constant misgendering, restriction in reaching out to preferred family spaces or support systems. Suparna (40 years, *hijra* identified transfeminine individual, Hooghly) added that, "COVID 19 has been traumatic to many. Mental health has only worsened during Covid-19, as the frontline

healthcare workers are not sensitised about trans-health. Gender incongruence also puts the trans-community at a higher risk of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal tendencies." The health and well-being of the trans-community has suffered decades of institutional neglect and the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified this suffering. In order to take affirmative action the first and foremost thing that needs to be done is to make the healthcare system (both public and private) more trans-friendly with sensitised and adequately trained doctors, nurses, other professionals and staff members enabled to take care of the need of trans-individuals. Government and private health care systems can think of recruiting transgender people as health workers. This in turn can pave the way for generating employment for transgender individuals as well as transgender patient's chances of getting proper care will be maximised.

With reference to the COVID 19 situation, measures to control the spread of the viral infection should include increased testing of transgender persons, tracking the testing and infection rates among trans-persons. Relief measures must aim at addressing the economic crisis by focusing on the loss of livelihood in the trans-community and providing adequate financial support, compensation and increasing employment opportunities for transgender individuals. Most importantly, the governments, both at the centre and state-level, must focus on the needs of the trans-individuals and include representatives from the trans-community while formulating policies for the transgender community.

Covid 19 and the subsequent lockdowns created a sense of urgency among the community leaders, activists and community based organizations to create livelihood options, networks with potential recruiters and conduct advocacy programmes with secondary stake holders. The situation also gave an opportunity to reflect about wedging movements jointly with the feminist movement. Coming together and holding hands has become the need of the hour. Liaising, networking and building allies are the most important tools in the hands of the community people.

## **Section 8: Movement and the discourse around transfeminism**

One of the important findings of my study has been the lack of awareness of trans-issues in NGOs working in areas concerning human rights, mental health, and gender based violence and abuse. There are also significant lacunae in empathy and understanding of trans-individuals. Many feminist organisations follow a policy of avoiding trans-issues, particularly

transfeminine narratives due to a lack of understanding of the same. Ironically the marker/signifier of a woman is the vagina. In my respondent's meet <sup>262</sup>, held at the end of my study where I wanted to share my research findings with my respondents, one of my transfeminine respondents Jhora (42 years, trans-activist, North 24 Parganas) who had recently been sexually abused, faced harassment and was blamed for being a transwoman at the local police station said,

I went on facebook live and appealed for help on social media. If what happened to me had happened to a cis-woman do you think the response would have been the same? None of the feminist organisations came forward and took up my cause."

A transfeminine respondent who had recently come to my personal chamber for counselling said,

I was facing domestic violence by my natal family and had sought help from a leading feminist organisation, a NGO in Kolkata working on gender based violence with women. They were clueless as to how they could accommodate me and told me that they would get back to me after reviewing my case and their policy. Till date they have not reverted back to me.

In a recent online event celebrating 'One Billion Rising'<sup>263</sup>, the Director of a feminist organisation working in the red light district of Kalighat, Kolkata to prevent trafficking, gender based violence and improving the quality of children and youth in these areas said that 14th of February was 'V' day, the day for women, for bodies with vagina. Ironically the OBR 2022 campaign<sup>264</sup> defines women on their website as "Women = cisgender, transgender, and those who hold fluid identities that are subject to gender-based violence." The marker for woman still remains the vagina and that of a man the penis and this brings us to the ongoing raging debate of 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism' (TERF). The roots of TERF originated in the late 2000s and its origin lay in the 1970s divide among radical feminists along the lines of those who wanted to include transwomen in feminist spaces and those who didn't. Dolon Ganguly,<sup>265</sup> feminist activist and Programme Director (Kolkata) of Azad Foundation said,

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<sup>262</sup> Respondents meet on Google meet on 30.01.22

<sup>263</sup> One Billion Rising is a global campaign started in 2012, founded by Eve Ensler to end rape and sexual violence against women.

<sup>264</sup> <https://www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign/> (accessed on 12.04.22)

<sup>265</sup> Interview taken on 24.01.20 in Kolkata

In Azad Foundation when enrolling new trainees for our women chauffeur training programme our eligibility criteria is woman, cis or trans but not cis-men or transmen. Who we will include and exclude in our programme was very challenging and the same holds true for the feminist movement as well. I have no problem in accepting that even today in the mainstream women's movement or cis-women's movement, those who are giving leadership have not opened the door and me being a representative, there is no harm in self-criticism. In a recently held women's march there was a lot of controversy with transwomen claiming that they were not being represented. When we talk from a position of privilege, we do not understand how we are hurting the sentiments of other and this is not only for trans. And if we do not try to understand and instead go on justifying ourselves, it leads to exclusion. We have opened our doors a lot but still a lot remains to be done.

The fire has been rekindled with two recent statements, the first being a tweet by J. K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter in June, 2020 and the second being a statement at a workshop in May, 2021 by noted feminist poet and activist Kamla Bhasin both of which were considered transphobic. The Rowling tweet<sup>266</sup> was as follows: " 'People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud? Opinion: Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate." Clips of Kamla Bhasin's statement from a workshop named 'Artivism 101: Sangat's Creative Workshop' were widely circulated on social media. In her statement she expressed her dislike towards the 'stupid', 'girlish' games of her childhood and the way her brother danced, stitched her *salwar kameez* and played with dolls. It was followed by a very casual remark on transgender identities, dalit and ecological activism.<sup>267</sup> It was considered derogatory and dehumanised the struggles of a large number of identities and the feminist movements centred around dalit, trans and ecological issues. Bhasin spoke "If there is feminism, then it is against patriarchy. After that there's transgender [issues], there's ecological [issues], but that's different. But feminism and gender and patriarchy are limited to the notion of male, female and gender." The above statements not only exclude transwomen but also cis-women who may not share experiences such as menstruation thereby creating an ableist notion of woman based on biological essentialism. This once again reiterates what many feminists have been saying all along that the feminist spaces in India have always been occupied by upper caste, upper class, cis-gendered women. It dilutes the struggle of the transgender and dalit movement and the politics of their language, expression and practices. It sparked of a signature campaign by feminist collectives condemning her statement. The

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<sup>266</sup> [https://twitter.com/jk\\_rowling/status/1269382518362509313](https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269382518362509313) (accessed on 12.04.22)

<sup>267</sup> <https://www.news9live.com/india/kamla-bhasin-sangat-exclusionary-feminism-activism-122677> (accessed on 12.04.22)

current Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 is just a logical extension of this phallogocentric biological essentialism that constructs notions of man and woman based on biological markers and is now trying to streamline the trans-movement to fit into the heteropatriarchal man-woman binary social structure. Kamla Bhasin's last post on instagram<sup>268</sup> before her death on 25th September, 2021 is as follows:

I would like to unconditionally apologise for hurting the feelings and sentiments of many people. We come from diverse locations of caste, disability, sexual orientation, genders, race and class and I believe in sensitivity, recognition and respect for the diversity and multiplicity of feminisms. Feminism to me is about continuous learning and listening to each and every person. I will not try to explain the clips being circulated, but rather step back, reflect, learn and understand.

Kamla Bhasin sums up the debate beautifully by acknowledging the plurality of feminism, that there can be 'many feminisms' complementing each other and the essence of feminism lies in the multiplicity of voices allowing space for the most marginalised to find expression. Perhaps Bhasin in her last post shows us the way forward.

## **Section 9: The debate around marriage**

Another raging debate that seems to have split the community and the trans-movement is the debate and rift within the community critiquing the appropriation of the 'Queer Movement' by right wing and patriarchal institutions like marriage that are considered regressive and threaten the very fundamental core of the movement based on feminist ideology. The community is being fractured on the lines of pro-marriage and anti-marriage fronts as if the State is waiting with open arms acknowledging same sex relations and approving same sex marriage as well. On the contrary the state seems to be fighting it tooth and nail. Several pleas for legalising same sex marriage is being heard by the Delhi High Court and in a hearing on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021, solicitor general Tushar Mehta told a bench of Chief Justice DN Patel and Justice Jyoti Singh, "The law is settled, either with or without the Navtej Johar case (a reference to the judgment decriminalizing homosexuality). The law is settled, personal laws are settled and marriage, which is contemplated, is between a biological man and biological woman." The stance of the Union Government of India is very clear, "Homosexuality has nothing to do with same-sex

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<sup>268</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPLVWyUHTz4/?hl=en> (accessed on 12.04.21)

marriages and a valid marriage can only take place between a biological man and a biological woman."<sup>269</sup>

Here, at this juncture, there is a tug of war between capitalism and patriarchy which otherwise walk hand in hand. Patriarchy condemns same sex marriage for breaking the sex gender unilinear principle which ultimately leads to procreation and a repetition and re-enactment of the patriarchal family structure, as such an union between individuals would not being able to produce children. Capitalism however tends to take a different stance as marriage as an institution feeds capitalism by creating potential consumers. As far as the stance of the Union Government is concerned there is no scope for transfeminine or transmasculine persons to get their marriage recognised by the state. This implies that they need to become 'man' or 'woman' by opting for sex reassignment surgery and legal document change. From these perspectives it seems that the State has no space for the rights of individuals of marginalised gender and sexual identity to get married as long as they do not fit into the opposite binary boxes that have existed for eons. The merits and de-merits of marriage can be debated, the institution can be critiqued but the question remains whether the option to marry and enjoy the benefits of marriage or state recognition of relationships as partner/s (in terms of loans, accounts, insurances, mediclaim, jobs and inheritance) that is available to cis-het individuals be available to individuals belonging to marginalised gender and sexual identities who do not fit in to gender binary boxes of man and woman.

## **Section 10: Challenging the Cis-tem - The road ahead**

My PhD thesis started in 2016 when the trans-movement was picking up momentum in Kolkata. It gave a new language and a new identity to many individuals who were uncomfortable being identified in the heteronormative language on the basis of their sexual preference as *Kothi* or 'Butch'. Transgender gave them the language needed to express their inner feelings, desires and sense of who they really were, interacting with societal gender norms creating an identity out of the interplay between individual sense of self and relational self hood. Towards the end of my thesis at the end of a pandemic and lockdown that brought life to a standstill there seems to be a new language and a new identity emerging in the horizon - the language of 'Trans Non-binary'. I recently came across a post (dated 23 April at

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<sup>269</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/samesex-marriage-plea-only-marriage-between-man-woman-valid-says-centre-in-delhi-high-court-101635188830742.html> (accessed on 15.01.2022)

22:58) on the facebook page of my friend Dr. Bhaskar Das,<sup>270</sup> medical practitioner from R.G. Kar Medical College identifying as Trans Non-binary. The post goes like, "Well, I thought Coming out was a one-time thing. But here we are. Trans Non-Binary ':-)'" The post was accompanied by the image of the 'Nonbinary Trans Flag'. The traditional transgender pride flag<sup>271</sup> created by Monica Helms in 1999, unfurled at Phoenix, Arizona Pride March of 2000 is made up of alternating pink and blue stripes signifying the gender stereotypical notion of girls and boys respectively with white in the middle representing intersex or people who are transitioning or having gender undefined. The non-binary flag<sup>272</sup> created by Kyle Rowan in 2014 and has four colours - yellow at the top, followed by white, purple and black at the bottom. The Trans Non-binary flag that was posted by Bhaskar on facebook seems to be an amalgamation of the transgender flag of Monica Helms and the non-binary flag designed by Kyle Rowan. There is mention of this flag at <https://cadehildreth.com/nonbinary-trans-flag/> posted by Cade Hildreth on 1st March, 2022. This flag has six stripes containing six colours - blue at the top, followed by pink, yellow, white, purple and black. Apart from the traditional male and female colours of blue and pink, it has yellow representing people falling outside the binary, white representing people with all or many genders and black at the bottom representing people who identify as being without a gender. As a queer affirmative counsellor, I can state from my personal counselling experience that many of my clients now identify as non-binary or trans non-binary. They do not identify with the feeling of being 'trapped in a wrong body' and look at their bodies as being different and not fitting within the biologically deterministic social structure of male and female. It is a body in transition but a body that is 'non-binary' or 'not-binary'. During a telephonic interview Dr. Bhaskar Das,<sup>273</sup> said,

Trans and non-binary were two terms that came to me separately. When I studied chemistry I came to know about the 4 bonding arms of the carbon atom. If two similar molecules are attached to the same side of two arms of the carbon atom it is known as a cis molecule and if different molecules are attached to the two sides we call it a trans molecule. It's like not aligning to the other self, when your biological sex or assigned sex isn't synchronised with your inner sexuality and self. So all identities that challenge the binary system or 'cis-tem' is trans. If I'm not 'cis', that is my gender assigned at birth and my sense of gender are not in alignment it means I am not 'cis', I am 'trans'. The 'trans' identity seems to be now reinforcing the binary as in transman and transwoman, transmale and transfemale, transmasculine and transfeminine. But there are so many identities outside this 'trans-binary' like gender queer, intersex, gender fluid, gender non-conforming which are also 'trans' since they challenge the 'cis-tem'. So where do I

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<sup>270</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bhaskar.flywithme> (accessed on 03.05.22)

<sup>271</sup> <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/trans-flag-colors-meaning-transgender-pride> (accessed on 03.05.22)

<sup>272</sup> <https://queencitypride.ca/banner-project/> (accessed on 03.05.22)

<sup>273</sup> Interview on 07.05.22 (telephonic interview)

place them because they are not cisgender and that is where trans non-binary comes in. So as we progress, as psychology and psychiatry, DSM-V... we are understanding that all these terms can come under the 'trans' configuration so many people now say I am not 'trans', I am 'trans non-binary'. That is how I feel comfortable in identifying myself

Their affirmation of Trans Non-binary is in the non-recognisability of their body and their identity within the domain of the heteronormative and even non-normative social structure. Whether this Trans Non-binary space carved out of the niche 'in-between transness', is gender creativity creating new shapes, forms and frames of references or just another box only time will tell and could perhaps become the scope of future research.

Anuradha (38 years, transfeminine person from North 24 Parganas)<sup>274</sup> talked about connecting to other movements of people who do not qualify as recognizable, readable or valuable lives and in the process bringing together the woman, the dalit, and the queer, the poor and stateless entities who share a familiar experience of precarity. Ishan<sup>275</sup> (38 years), a transmasculine individual from Kolkata said,

I feel that before beginning activism in the larger society, the need is for each one of us to start activism from their home, within their domains. I started my activism from my home. I also feel that those who are neglected in society in any way, such as dalits, single women; they should all join hands. If all their activisms merge at one point, then only will it be productive. If I am with them in their fight, then I will have them beside me in my struggle.

In West Bengal the trans-movement shows a journey from the margins to the centre. Big rallies, important meetings are mostly arranged in Kolkata. The district based organisations come to Kolkata to attend the events. The journey from the centre to the periphery is also needed. COVID 19 has made the districts become more active in working with the local people. This in turn has resulted in a much stronger presence of the CBOs, Collectives, NGOs and networks like Ekta 24 Parganas, Koshish, Kolkata Rishta, Gokhale Road Bandhan, Sappho for Equality, People Like Us (PLUS), Transmasculine Initiative for Support And Resistance (TISAR), Pratyay Gender Trust, Swikriti, Samabhabona, Varta Trust, Amitie (Hooghly), Madhya Bangla Sangram (Murshidabad), Moitrisanjog Society (Cooch Behar), Dinajpur Notun Alo (North Dinajpur), Nadia Ranaghat Sampriti (Nadia), Swapnil (Bardhaman), Bengal Transmen, Durnibar - Voices for Inclusion, and many others who have been extremely active providing support, relief, shelter to the trans-community and working on livelihood of trans-individuals during and after the pandemic. Online platform on one

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<sup>274</sup> Interview taken on 04.12.19 in Kolkata

<sup>275</sup> Interview taken on 03.01.19 in Kolkata

hand has brought people together during the pandemic but this technology- dependant new normal has also excluded some people in the fringes who do not have access due to economic reasons or due to lack of infrastructure for a robust connectivity network.

Support groups provide a safe and holding space for self exploration and self realisation. They help to make connections. Support groups also induct the individual into the movement. The process of self realisation and the courage to articulate one's self creates a moment of subversion and sublimation. Raj<sup>276</sup> (24 years, Transmasculine individual from Darjeeling district) also shared that by providing conceptual clarity his support group Northern Black Rose Society helped him to know himself and become braver. They also helped him to initiate a dialogue with his mother.

In this concluding part, coming back to performativity, precarity and liveability, I will try to bind all of these factors together through the lens of central capabilities as propounded by Martha C. Nussbaum. In the chapter on livelihood, I have tried to look at the livelihood question of the trans-individuals on the basis of the basic capabilities as theorised by Prof. Amartya Sen and got a nuanced picture of the situations that increase the precariousness of the trans-lives. Performativity is closely linked to precarity, as it is about normative gender roles, which if not followed increases the vulnerability of the subversive entities in a majoritarian society. Thus liveability, like performativity, fundamentally links to a wider political question of social transformation, a rethinking of life so that its conditions for flourishing are enhanced in society. Here in order to perceive and experience a liveable life a short discussion on the central capabilities based on the human development approach becomes significant.

We are talking about human lives and liveabilities which cannot be understood by GDP figures only. To appreciate it we need to have a subjective approach for determining what these lives are actually being able to 'do' and to 'be' (Nussbaum, 2011). This resonates with the ways the thesis has tried to look at 'gender' through the 'beings' and 'doings' of the transgender individuals. In order to comprehend the liveabilities of the trans-individuals the exploration of their capabilities gives us a vast framework for policy formulation and social reform. All through the thesis I have used the plural forms of the key words like, genders, sexualities, roles, lived experiences, liveabilities, capabilities in order to emphasise that the most important elements of people's quality of life are plural and qualitatively distinct

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<sup>276</sup> Interview taken on 25.10.16 in Darjeeling district

(Nussbaum, 2011:18). The capabilities are a set of opportunities and substantial freedom seen from the human development approach in order to maximise the quality of life and maintain the standard of basic justice. Whether people will use it or not depends on individual discretion. The choice is theirs. The capabilities approach respects each individual's power of self-definition. It resonates with the NALSA Judgment where self declaration of gender identity has been promoted for all. But here the context becomes equally important. An individual must have an enabling environment for exercising their agency. The external context, i.e. the social, economic, familial and political environment becomes important. In the absence of tolerance and acceptance, capability failure occurs due to discrimination and marginalisation (Nussbaum, 2011). Through reading the trans-narratives, experiences of discrimination and abuse surface again and again indicating the abysmal situation of basic justice in our country. It is not only about the trans-experiences, whoever is 'different', whoever is not aligned to the patriarchal social order, whoever is asking for their rights, whoever is talking about variance, it is all about them, it is all about their quality of life. The more the variations surface, the more the majoritarian discourse loses its dominance and hence more the suppression of the non-normative ways of lives in order to maintain the status quo.

The concept of capabilities is two pronged, i.e. internal capabilities and combined capabilities. The internal capabilities are the characteristics of a person, which are not fixed, but fluid and dynamic (Nussbaum, 2011:21). The social, economic, familial and political environments play an instrumental role in supporting the development of the internal capabilities. Combined capabilities are the foreground where the internal capabilities are exercised. Referring back to Jaan's narrative <sup>277</sup> (30 years, transfeminine individual from Hooghly) in Chapter 4 on livelihood, Jaan a medical laboratory technologist was denied jobs at medical labs for her gender orientation. According to Jaan, her trans-femininity was associated with lack of professional expertise. This forced her to quit and start pursuing MSW to fit into the development sector where she felt she had the best chance of getting employment. An individual identifying as a trans-person may have internal capabilities like personality traits, intellectual and emotional capacities, physical health and fitness, personal learning, perception, intuition and intelligence but in order to use the capabilities, the outer environment needs to be conducive and enabling without which their internal capabilities cannot be actualised. For this thesis, the capabilities approaches discussed by both Prof.

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<sup>277</sup> Interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly

Amartya Sen and Prof. Martha C. Nussbaum gave me an apt framework for understanding the trans-experiences as far as their liveabilities were concerned. The concepts of internal capabilities and combined capabilities open up a very effective way of exploring transgender persons' lived experiences. Discussion about central capabilities helps us to assess the status of social justice in the country, helps to conceptualise policy choices that protect and support agency and human dignity and function as a reference point for promoting equality, equity and liveabilities. According to Martha C. Nussbaum, "Central capabilities based on human development approach focus on the protection of areas of freedom so central that their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity" (Nussbaum, 2011:31). What finally matters is to be able to live a life to its fullest with physical and mental well-being, freedom of choice and expression (including gender and sexual expression) without fear of violence and oppression. To be free to imagine, think and create and have full artistic, political and religious expression and to love and be loved according to one's needs and desires. To have critical thinking that brings about intellectual courage to question and challenge belief systems, to have the intellectual empathy to understand and feel the thoughts and feelings of others. To treat others and be treated with respect and dignity without any discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, caste, religion and nationality. To live in harmony with plants, animals and nature and to laugh, play and enjoy life. All are equal in importance, distinct in quality, yet interacting and interplaying with each other. This is all about 'personhood' that needs to be honoured. It is human living that we are talking about. Martha Nussbaum talks about good human living by bringing it to the political discourse, making it a moral basis of minimum constitutional guarantee.

As I come to the end of my thesis, I start wondering, "Have I also succumbed to the existing binary social structure by fitting the rich narratives of my respondents into two boxes - Transmasculine and Transfeminine?" This has made me wonder that as the thick multilayered narratives talk about gender creativity, could my study not have gone beyond the gender boxes and envisaged a world without gender, where gender is not an identity but just an expression. I could have circumvented the binary, carving out a completely new path, a new way of looking at gender. The binary is all pervasive and the questions asked in the thesis clearly show that - whether transgender lived experiences reinforces the binary bringing back body essentialism or going beyond? Whether the movement is being enriched or fractured? Could I not have looked at gender beyond the binary? In the words of Nilanjan Majumdar,

father of a gender non-conforming child and photographer who has been photo-documenting the queer movement in Kolkata and surroundings for the last one decade

Gender to me is like clay or a clump of earth waiting for the potter within to give it shape. Like the potter who has the potential to give shape to clay, to make pottery, to break it and make something new, so do we break and make ourselves again and again in our journey of self discovery and exploration.

The discursive trajectory is never linear, it is dynamic, ever changing and taking newer shapes as seen and understood by the queer/feminist, post-modern and post-structural accounts that consider the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality as plural, provisional and situated (Richardson 2015:31). Thus relationships between gender and sexualities are related, dynamic and multifarious. Richardson used the shoreline metaphor and talks about the relationship between land and sea creating 'patterned fluidities' explaining complex accounts of how genders and sexualities are related to each other and how identities are created and dissolved in a continuing process. Feminist thinker Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* has talked about 'borderland' (Anzaldúa, 1987) an indefinite, hazy space, a space in constant transition. This borderland is also ever changing and the '*in-between*' of my thesis is perhaps such a space carved out by each and every one of my sixty respondents.

# APPENDIX A

## Interview Schedule

PhD Studies

School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata – 700032

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Interviewer's Name:

Place:

Date:

Supervisor's Name:

### Consent Form

I hereby give my consent to talk with the interviewer following the interview schedule attached here with as a part of the PhD Study titled .....

conducted by Srabasti Chatterjee of School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. To the best of my knowledge the following information would be used for the academic interest of the project. I have / do not have any objection to my name being used in the case study narratives.

Signature

Date:

Part 1: General Information

- 1) Name:
- 2) Age:
- 3) Permanent Address:
- 4) Present Address:
- 5) Mobile:
- 6) Email:
- 7) Religion:
- 8) Caste: Gen / SC/ /ST/ /OBC
- 9) Number of Family members :
  
- 10) Partnership status
  
- 11) What is your current living arrangement? (Please mark only one answer)
  - i) Living alone
  - ii) Living with parents/siblings
  - iii) Living with partner/children
  - iv) Homeless
  - v) Living with friends/roommates
  - vi) Living with others of my identity
  - vii) Other (please specify):\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 12) Educational Qualification: not literate, pre primary, primary, secondary, higher secondary, graduation, post graduation, vocational training

13) How do you currently earn your living?

- 1) Salaried (please specify)
- 2) Self employed (please specify)
- 3) Through chhala or badhai
- 4) Lagaan / Seasonal dancing
- 5) Supported by family
- 6) Supported by a partner or friend/s
- 7) Other

*Please state:* \_\_\_\_\_

14) What is your monthly income?

- i) No income
- ii) Less than Rs. 5,000
- iii) Rs. 5,000 – Rs. 9,999
- iv) Rs. 10,000 – Rs. 14,999
- v) Rs. 15,000 – Rs. 19,999
- vi) Rs. 20,000 – Rs. 24,999
- vi) > Rs. 25,000

15) How do you identify yourself in terms of gender?

16) Can you live in your preferred gender?

- i) Always
- ii) Often
- iii) Sometimes
- iv) Rarely
- v) Never

17) Can you please state - why you are not being able to live in your preferred gender?

i) That is my choice

ii) I have no fixed gender

iii) Because of obstacles I face, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

iv) Other reasons, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Part 2: Child hood experience and thereafter**

18) Can you remember from when have you been identifying yourself as a transgender individual? What were some memories that you remember which made you think and perceive yourself like that? How was your childhood? Can you remember some memories of your childhood in this regard?

19) When did your parents or caregivers started to question your perceived gender identity? What was their reaction? Did you get support from any family member? Have you ever tried to make them understand your position? If so how and what were its results?

20) What was the attitude of your relatives and neighbours? How did you negotiate with them? Who were there beside you in these instances?

21) How was your school life? What was the attitude of your teachers towards you? What was the attitude of your friend towards you? Did you have some supportive friends?

22) How was your college life? What was the attitude of your teachers towards you? What was the attitude of your friends towards you? Did you have some supportive friends?

23) At present whom do you consider as your support system?

(Support group, CBO, friends, parents, siblings, partner)

24) What is your idea or preference about your partner?

25) At present do you have a partner/partners? What are your expectations from your partner? What are the expectations that your partner/s has/have from you?

26) What is your idea about having children?

**Part 3: Professional life:**

27) Are you content with your professional life?

(a) If 'yes' elaborate

(b) If 'no' elaborate

28) What is the attitude of your colleagues/boss towards you?

29) What are the problems that you have to face in your professional life? How do you negotiate with others in your professional life?

30) What is your support system in your professional sphere?

31) What are the advantages and disadvantages of your profession?

**Part 4: Idea / experience regarding the gender expression and bodily experience**

32) What is your idea about your 'Body'?

33) Are you comfortable with your body?

i) Yes (please elaborate)

ii) No (please elaborate)

iii) Don't know

34) If the answer of Qs. (33) is No, then what do you do for dealing with your discomfort?

Elaborate -

35) How do you negotiate your gender expression with your body?

36) If you are asked to think about a spectrum of trans-bodies ranging from doing nothing to change one's body (living the preferred gender through perception and imagination only) to complete SRS, where would you be comfortable placing yourself? Please elaborate

37) Do you use make-up for expressing your preferred gender and ornamenting your appearance?

i) Yes      ii) No

38) If Yes, where do you buy make-up from?, What kind of make-ups do you use? Who help/s you in make-up? Do you take professional help? When do you use make-up (regularly, special occasions)

39) Can you dress / adorn yourself according to your choice and comfort?

i) Yes      ii) No

40) If Yes, What kind of dresses do you like to wear? From where do you buy your dresses? How do you negotiate with the sales persons / shop keepers?

41) Do you use any special aid or prosthetics for expressing your preferred gender and ornamenting your appearance?

i) Yes      ii) No

42) If Yes, What kind of aid or prosthetics do you use? From where do you buy these? How do you negotiate with the sales persons / shop keepers? Do you use these regularly or in special occasions?

43) According to you, is there any ideal body type?

i) Yes ii) No (Justify your answer)

44) What kind of body type do you aspire?

### **Part 5: Idea and experience about SRS**

45) Do you know anything about Sex Reassignment Surgery?

i) Yes

ii) No

46) If yes, what is your idea about SRS?

47) Have you ever visited a counselor, doctor, hormone specialist, surgeon or other health professional about transition/trans-related health care?

i) Yes, often

ii) Yes, once or a few times

iii.) No, never

48) If the answer to the above question is 'no', why have you never seen a health professional for gender transition healthcare services? (Tick 1 or more answers)

i) I do not need/want such services

ii) I prefer community-based forms

iii) I cannot afford such services

iv) I do not know how to get such services

v) I am afraid of using such services

vii) Such services are not available

viii) Other reasons

49) Have you undergone SRS?

i) Yes (fully/partially)

ii) No

50) If Yes, what made you take the decision of going for SRS? How have you convinced others about your decision? What was their reaction? (family members, partner/s, friends, colleagues, boss etcetera)

51) If you have done full SRS, what was your experience regarding SRS? How do you feel about yourself after SRS? How do you feel about your body now? What are the reactions of your family members/friends/ partners/colleagues/ boss etcetera.

52) If you have done partial SRS, what was reason behind taking this decision? what was your experience regarding SRS? How do you feel about yourself after SRS? How do you feel about your body now? What are the reactions of your family members/friends/ partners/colleagues/ boss etcetera.

53) Do you want to undergo SRS?

i) Yes (please elaborate, why)

ii) No (please elaborate, why)

iii) Don't know

iv) Haven't given it a thought

54) If yes, when have you planned to go for the surgery?

55). If yes, are you consulting a psychotherapist or psychological counsellor?

56) If yes, from whom will you receive support during the regime?

57) If yes, how will you arrange for funds for the process?

58) If no, what are the obstacles that are resisting you from taking any decision?

59) If no, what are your reasons for not wanting to go for SRS?

60) If all the restraints (financial etc.) are removed will you be going for SRS?

#### **Part 6. Negotiation in public spaces**

61) How do you negotiate in the public spaces (markets, shopping mall, restaurant, male and female queues, washrooms etc.)

#### **Part 7: Your experience and the larger movement & Expectation from the State**

62) How do you perceive yourself in the LGBTIQ movement?

63) What is your viewpoint about the LGBTIQHKA+ movement?

64) Do you know about NALSA judgement? What is your view point about it?

65) What is your expectation from the State?

66) Do you know about the State Welfare Board for the Transgender persons? What are your expectations from the board as a state machinery?

## APPENDIX B

### List of interviews with respondents

Names of all trans-respondents have been changed to maintain confidentiality. Unless otherwise mentioned, all ages mentioned are as on the date of the interview.

#### Transmasculine Respondents:

Aman - 33 years, North 24 Parganas, interview taken on 20.07.19 in Kolkata  
Ambar - 34 years, South 24 Parganas, interview taken on 04.05.17 in South 24 Parganas  
Angshuman - 28 years, South 24 Parganas, interview taken on 17.01.19 in Kolkata  
Ani - 21 years, South 24 Parganas, interview taken on 16.06.19 in Kolkata  
Anwar - 29 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 19.07.18 in Kolkata  
Arjo - 18 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 21.06.21 in Kolkata  
Avay - 32 years, Howrah, interview taken on 22.06.18 in Kolkata  
Ayan - 30 years, North 24 Parganas, interview taken on 01.03.19 in Kolkata  
Bubai - 32 years, Nadia, interview taken on 25.08.19 in Kolkata  
Chandan - 30 years, Howrah, interview taken on 06.01.19 in Kolkata  
Dipto - 40 years from Assam, settled in Kolkata, interview taken on 20.10.18 in Kolkata  
Ishan - 38 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 03.01.19 in Kolkata  
Jammy - 34 years, North 24 Parganas, interview taken on 17.01.19 at North 24 Parganas  
Kayan - 33 years, Jalpaiguri, interview taken on 26.11.19 in Jalpaiguri  
Labani - 28 years, Birbhum, interview taken on 12.08.18 at Birbhum  
Megh - 28 years, North 24 Parganas, interview taken on 23.03.19 in Kolkata  
Piyush - 38 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 16.06.19 in Kolkata  
Priya - 28 years, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, interview taken on 26.10.16 in Siliguri  
Raj - 24 years, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, interview taken on 25.10.16 in Siliguri  
Rahul - 28 years, Jalpaiguri, interview taken on 30.05.17 in Kolkata  
Rana - 22 years, South 24 Parganas, interview taken on 02.02.19 in South 24 Parganas  
Samar - 34 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 09.07.17 in Hooghly  
Samrat - 28 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 22.06.18 in Hooghly  
Samudra - 29 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 12.07.18 in Kolkata  
Shubho - 22 years, Cooch Behar, interview taken on 01.09.19 at Cooch Behar  
Suhrid - 33 years, Nadia, interview taken on 20.05.19 in Kolkata  
Suprobhat - 42 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 29.12.18 in Kolkata

### **Transfeminine Respondents:**

Aditi - 29 years, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, interview taken on 25.10.16 in Siliguri  
Alpana - 43 years, Kolkata interview taken on 09.08.16 in Kolkata  
Anuradha - 38 years, North 24 Parganas, interview taken on 04.12.19 in Kolkata  
Arbaz - 38 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 16.01.19 in Kolkata  
Arun - 20 years, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, interview taken on 24.10.16 in Siliguri  
Badal - 34 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata  
Brishti - 27 years, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, interview taken on 24.10.16 in Siliguri  
Bubu - 23 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata  
Chhuman - 36 years, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, interview taken on 25.10.16 in Siliguri  
Deepa - 30 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 04.09.16 in Kolkata  
Jaan - 30 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly  
Jhora - 42 years, North 24 Parganas, interview taken on 01.12.19 in Kolkata  
Jhumko - 33 years, Cooch Behar, interview taken on 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar  
Jolly - 29 years, Cooch Behar, interview taken on 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar  
Joyee - 38 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly  
Krishnachura - 21 years, Birbhum, interview taken on 19.04.19 in Birbhum  
Maya - 30 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 05.09.16 in Hooghly  
Mana - 28 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata  
Manisha - 30 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 30.08.16 in Kolkata  
Nipa - 27 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 13.05.16 in Kolkata  
Pari - 23 years, Cooch Behar, interview taken on 31.08.19 in Cooch Behar  
Pinki - 37 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 18.03.20 in Kolkata  
Pratap - 33 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 14.05.16 in Kolkata  
Purba - 40 years, Bardhaman, interview taken on 23.06.19 in Kolkata  
Raji - 33 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 18.03.20 in Hooghly  
Roma - 28 years from Cooch Behar, interview taken on 30.08.19 at Cooch Behar  
Rosy - 40 years, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, interview taken on 25.10.16 in Siliguri  
Sophia - 38 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 16.01.18 in Kolkata  
Sruti - 30 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 07.09.16 in Hooghly  
Suhani - 37 years, South 24 Parganas, interview taken on 15.01.19 in South 24 Parganas  
Sumit - 32 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 18.05.16 in Kolkata  
Suparna - 40 years, Hooghly, interview taken on 14.09.19 in Kolkata  
Suva - 45 years, Kolkata, interview taken on 27.03.20 (telephonic interview)

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