



## To be or Not to be Seen? Paradox of Recognition among Trans Men in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** This article is a part of a broader study titled 'transgender identities in contemporary Sri Lanka'. It attempts to identify a framework based on contemporary Sri Lankan trans men's lived experiences, to analyse and interpret gender, embodiment, social relationships and identities. The article discusses how socially accepted normative behaviours of gender contribute to negotiate their identities. At the same time, the masculinities demanded by capitalist forms of production in the modern world also offer possible avenues for them to explore and understand their bodies. Further, it argues that the assistance offered by the post-war Sri Lankan state for a person to move from one binary to another, is part of the long-term project of the nation state. Identifying trans men as a 'category' of gender, the State and civil society in Sri Lanka, (mis)represents and acts to homogenise and de-politicise their everyday lives. Therefore, while their identities are 'imposed' by nationalist and neoliberal discourses, they are constantly narrated, challenged and re-negotiated through paradox of recognition, visibility and non-visibility.

**Keywords:** Gender, Trans men, Sri Lanka, Masculinities

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We were born in the wrong house. We want to be in our own house. We need to be there. To fulfil that need we want the support of medico people like you...The only where place we can regain our life is the health sector. Until we die, we need your support. We need you, we come to you and we ask you to be there to support us, to bring a smile to our lives. That is all we need. We know how to live our lives without doing any harm to any other person (Ranketh, 2019).

The first thing is to note is that the rigid division of bodies into 'male 'only' and 'female 'only' occurred at a particular moment in human history, that is, at the inception of the constellation of features that we term 'modernity' (Menon, 2012, p.53).

I begin this article by deconstructing the first excerpt shown above, from a lecture delivered at the Annual Scientific Sessions of a medical association, held in Kandy, Sri Lanka. These words were spoken by the Executive Director of an NGO based in Colombo that works for the rights of transgender persons in Sri Lanka. According to his statement, 'sexual 'body' and 'gender 'identity' are two elements that coexist in one 'house'. A perfect life is one where the two elements live together without a conflict and only medical science can produce this 'happy' organism/form of life where the identities coexist. But citizens who call for such support from the State are bound by their pledge to live their lives subservient to the State (without being a nuisance to anyone). Thus, through this public speech, a community representative requests the State (represented by the medical authorities) to 'correct' people who are born with and suffer the consequences of a mistake of nature, who must be admitted to the State as 'good' citizens.

On the other hand, in the second excerpt, Nivedita Menon argues that the classification of the body, whether male or female, only arises with the onset of Western modernity. Similarly, Menon's analysis extends to how the principles of Western modernity are a legacy of colonial rule in Oriental and African societies, with differing degrees of

acceptance of the strict, socially normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity (2012,p. 54-60).

This article is a part of a broader study titled 'transgender identities in contemporary Sri Lanka'. It attempts to identify a framework based on contemporary Sri Lankan female to male transgender persons' (trans men) lived experience to analyse and interpret gender, embodiment, social relationships, and visibility. By identifying transmen as a 'category' of gender, the State and civil society in Sri Lanka (mis)represents and acts to homogenise and de-politicise their everyday lives. Instead, I argue that their identities are 'imposed' by nationalist and neoliberal discourses, yet constantly narrated, challenged, and re-negotiated through the paradox of recognition, visibility, and non-visibility.

My analysis begins with a discussion of how transmen are 'accepted' as citizens of the State based on the medical gaze on their bodies and the success of their performance of idealised male gender roles. I argue that paradoxical identities are being built and negotiated—on the one hand, being recognised by the State and fighting for their rights in civil society spaces while on the other, they continue their journey of 'abandoning' the past (i.e., womanhood), which involves home, self, country, and memory. Their lives' lingering and principal goal is to become a 'complete man'; created, built, framed, and maintained by the Sri Lankan post-war, capitalist, nationalist agenda, which necessitates able-bodied men.

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#### Study

This article was developed using the data gathered for a doctoral research study conducted between 2016-2020 and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. A total of 15 transmen between 23 to 39 years old were selected using the snowball sampling method and interviewed. They identified themselves using terms such as 'trans man', 'F2M',

'transgender' or simply 'man' to introduce themselves, however, I have used the term 'transmen' throughout the article. It is noteworthy that none of them identified as 'a transsexual person' and I, therefore, avoided using the term in my analysis. The use of such terms in this article does not necessarily imply that this is an essential identity of a 'special group' of people; instead, it offers an understanding of how they experience and negotiate their everyday lives.

I approached many of them through my existing contacts, and the majority of the discussions happened at places they suggested to me. Rather than standard interview mode, the discussions were very long, unstructured conversations with them. Discussion themes were their childhood memories of friendships, family and school, current engagements (i.e., work, private life, profession, and education), medical aspects, future aspirations, and expectations of life. However, in this article, I analyse their upbringing, societal/institutional influence in their identities, and current engagements with the workplace and largely, with the State. I also interviewed two psychiatrists working in government hospitals.

Pseudonyms are used to ensure safety and confidentiality of the participants. After writing the article, I contacted them again to verify their ideas and to make sure that none of them can be recognised in the text. However, based on feminist standpoint and theory, I present the findings with the understanding of my own positionality as a queer/woman/attorney/activist, which may affect the research process, analysis and articulation.

#### Literature Review

Studies of the term 'transgender' have moved from the margins, and transgender studies are now established as one of the most creative sites of debate within gender and sexuality studies across the world (Hines & Sanger, 2010). The interventions of trans-scholars affected strong critiques of the organising principles and theoretical signifiers of

feminism and lesbian and gay theory/politics, articulating the productive challenges of transgender for feminist and queer theory and politics. Alongside a cultural turn to transgender (Hines, 2007) through a rising focus on transgender subjectivities within the media and popular culture, shifting attitudes towards transgender people are evident in law. These social, cultural, and legislative developments reflect how transgender communities acquire increasing visibility in contemporary society, marking transgender identities as an important area of social and cultural inquiry.

The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear 'one's body a certain way, imply a world of already established corporeal styles. To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew (Butler & Salih, 2004, p. 26). Butler & Salih (2004) further argue that the body becomes a peculiar nexus of culture and choice, and "'existing 'one's body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms. Stryker (2006) situates transsexuality as a culturally and historically specific transgender practice/identity through which a transgendered subject enters a relationship with medical, psychotherapeutic, and juridical institutions in order to gain access to certain hormonal and surgical technologies to enact and embody itself. She further argues that 'transgender became an over determined construct, like 'cyborg' through which contemporary culture imagined a future filled with new possibilities for being human, or post-human' (2006, p. 8).

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Critical readings of rights discourse show how understandings and practices of sexuality are constructed. In her analysis of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) of the United Kingdom introduced in 2004, Hines (2010) elaborates how the GRA opens citizenship rights for transsexuals who can tick all the right boxes; preferably heterosexual within their chosen gendered role and able to blend into gendered society without much risk of being read. In considering sexual citizenship, scholars such as Stychin (1998) and Richardson (2000) argue that discourses of citizenship are constructed along a heterosexual model—so that the notion of citizenship itself is heterosexualised. Stychin points to the

problematics of a politics of recognition: "...lesbians and gays seeking rights may embrace an ideal of 'respectability', a construction that then perpetuates a division between 'good gays' and (disreputable) 'bad queers'." (1998, p. 200).

Writing on trans-masculinities, drawing on their own experience, Green (2006), describes how 'out' transsexual men experience more 'gender policing'. He argues that the more congruent transsexual identities and bodies become through the transition process, the less interesting they tend to become to the public. Cromwell (2006) argues that by framing for themselves what it means to be masculine or to be a man, FTMs often deploy socially normative concepts of manhood, which nonetheless become 'queered' by the context in which they are used. Connell (2012), highlighting the differences between trans people in the 'global metropole' and the 'global periphery', highlights the necessity of inquiring into the specifics of non-Western trans people such as, *hijras* in India and *burnesha* in Albania, who often have epistemologies and ontologies that differ from trans experiences and trans embodiments in Western contexts. Further, some scholars have emphasised the importance of decolonising the knowledge on trans-masculinities (Vidal-Ortiz, 2014), while some have argued that masculinity studies have paid little attention to trans-masculinities (Gottzén & Straube, 2016).

My analysis of the identities of transmen in Sri Lanka is placed in the context of ambivalent notions of the sex-gender categories prevalent in Sri Lanka. Social advocates recently made up the lengthy Sinhala translation of the term 'gender' 'gender' (sthree purusha samājabhāvaya) in Sri Lanka, since there was no term for it in Sinhala. While the terminologies used by specific communities to identify themselves are more complex and nuanced in Sri Lanka, the literature is mainly framed around Western-oriented sex-gender categories. However, a few scholars have explored transgender subjectivities in Sri Lanka beyond NGO/rights perspective (Ariyaratne, 2020; Chandimal, 2014; Miller & Nichols, 2012; Nichols, 2010; Wijewardene, 2007, 2008). LGBTIQ study has been alienated in mainstream literature on sex and gender in Sri Lanka (Wijewardene, 2008), while research on sexuality

has either been overlooked or enclosed in a rights-based framework (Kuru-Uthumpala, 2014). As Samaraweera (2015) argues, research on transgender visibility in Sri Lanka has been limited to the study of urban transgender communities, and it is based on the hypothesis that transgender people are a 'tortured sexual minority'. This article attempts to address the gap of such literature in trans-masculinities, interrogating the dilemma of visibility among transmen in Sri Lanka.

### Citizenship, Medical Gaze, and Docile Bodies

The procedural laws and regulations on gender change in Sri Lanka in the recent past have evolved interestingly. While there is no law passed by an Act that accepts the change of gender as a fundamental human right, transgender communities are being recognised by the State by introducing practical procedural methods in various contexts.

For instance, when three transgender women in Sri Lanka complained to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka in 2015 after the Department of the Registrar General refused permission to change their legal gender, a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) that all authorities would accept was proposed, whereby gender would be indicated on official documents, including the Birth Certificate, National Identity Card and Passport. The Ministry of Health released a circular in June 2016 detailing the criteria for awarding the GRC. The draft certificate allows a doctor to certify that a transgender person has been referred for hormone therapy and the required surgical procedures and that the individual has undergone such procedures.

Concurrently, the Department of the Registrar General of Sri Lanka also issued a circular in 2016 titled "Procedure to change the name and gender of transgender persons' birth certificates." According to this Circular, to qualify to change the name and gender in the Birth Certificate, a person has first to approach a psychiatrist who works for a government hospital who can issue a GRC. Thus, the medical health sector in Sri Lanka still possesses a robust discretionary power over

transgender communities in deciding the need for gender change. For instance, even though the World Health Organisation has declassified Gender Dysphoria as a mental health issue, medical scholars have argued that this declassification is 'controversial' as it is always a psychiatrist who deals with such persons (Malalgama, 2017, p. 27).

In Sri Lanka when a person consults a psychiatrist to obtain the GRC, it is the psychiatrist who 'takes the crucial decision' about whether the person is allowed to obtain it or not. In this identification process, the most critical decisions in the life of the individual wishing to obtain the GRC to modify their documents depend on the psychiatrist's acceptance, and the psychiatrist's discretionary power is unrestricted. For example, the Real Life Test (RLT) conducted by the doctors is designed to assess how one would cope with his/her gender transition in 'real' life. The purpose of the RLT is to confirm that a transgender person can function successfully as a member of that gender in society and to confirm that he/she is sure that he/she wants to live as the same gender for the rest of his/her life. A doctor who is eligible to issue a GRC describes the RLT as follows:

RLT is an assessment of how a *patient* lives in real life with his/her new identity. The full assessment takes at least two years. For example, if a woman comes to me wanting to change identity into a man, my first advice is to choose your clothes and start dressing as a man. Over the time, she needs to change the way she dresses. After some time, I observe how he cuts his hair, what kind of denim or pants he wears, whether tattoos are male tattoos or feminine tattoos, whether he wears male deck shoes,<sup>1</sup> and whether he wears men's jewellery. Not only that, but when he comes to see me, I silently observe how he sits and how he holds his hands. For example, I can quickly recognise his sitting pattern - whether he sits with *his legs wide open like a boy*

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<sup>1</sup>Deck shoes (also known as boat shoes) are typically canvas or leather with non-marking rubber soles. In Sri Lanka deck shoes are mostly popular among men.



or if he is still *sitting with his legs closed like a girl.*"(Interview with Psychiatrist X on January 30, 2020, Colombo, emphasis mine)

This normative, rigid, conventional recognition of gender identity (performed by a 'patient' in the hospital context) does not end there. This is the statement of another psychiatrist:

I ask them what they wear, not only when they come for consultations but also at home, at work too. I also inquire *what they like to do* at home and whether they have the *strength* to cope with external pressure (Interview with Psychiatrist Y on February 08 2020, Colombo, emphasis mine).

During my further questions of 'work they like to do', he further elaborated:

I usually find out if he works in the kitchen to help his mother at home, or he does male work at home—such as doing heavy work, going to the shop to buy groceries. If he was a boy, in his real life, he should be interested in doing the boys' work in his real life (Interview with Psychiatrist Y on February 08, 2020, Colombo).

He further added that it would be helpful if, in Sri Lanka, a social activist could be deployed in the home and workplace of the person to enlighten the residents or colleagues about their transition, like the process in the West (Interview with Psychiatrist Y on February 08, 2020, Colombo).

In fact, the statements by two leading psychiatrists in Sri Lanka offer strong evidence that this hypothetical 'real life', as defined and interpreted by doctors, is a locale full of conventional prejudices about gender and sexuality. All those who consulted them to change their bodily organs, had to perform before the doctor, using different ways of reinforcing the norms; i.e., established conceptions of female hairstyles, feminine clothes, and feminine behaviour. It was easy to obtain the doctor's approval if the performance was successful, which was the key

to enrolling as a citizen. Thus, the process ensures that everything from the birth certificate and identity card to passport, driver's license and education and work-related documents can be revised—but it would depend on the success of the man/woman role performed by the person, in the presence of the medical gaze. The medical health sector (and their knowledge) are gatekeepers for transgender persons, holding the authority to include them (or not) as citizens of the Sri Lankan State. The transgender body comes under the scrutiny of the State, and the modern form of power held by the medical profession over transgender subjectivities is apparent.

Foucault (1979) sought to understand how the modern individual and modern forms of power came to be. Foucault's focus was on the changing relationship between the human body and power. This changing relationship, he argued, influenced the operation of power in general. He elaborated that there is a relationship between power and knowledge. Institutional power, for example, the power of schools and the justice system, and the construction of knowledge, are deeply interlinked. According to him, together, they shape the individual's desires and the way they understand their place in the world. Foucault sought to show how every social norm, every impulse that society takes for granted, is historically produced and dependent on the systems of knowledge that created it. Power rests in the production of what is 'normal'.

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political economy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practical bodies, 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1979, p. 35).

In the case of transgender bodies, persons who need to be identified as citizens with their desired gender must behave in a way recognised as a disciplined proof that they are obedient to the norms of gender in front of the medical eye. The disturbing fact in this phenomenon is that the power produced by the medical gaze is internalised by their 'patients' who consider such normative behaviour an essential part of their identity.

If I want to be a man, first I have to *behave like a man* in the society, without behaving like a man, no use of changing your private parts from female to male (laughing) (Interview with Sameera on January 20, 2020, Kandy, my emphasis).

My immediate question to Sameera was how he perceived a man's behaviour, which he responded as follows:

Born and raised as a girl, becoming a man is different and difficult. It needs a lot of courage. People will initially tell you that you are a masculine woman. But once you start taking hormones, your voice become rougher. Hair and beard start growing. My office colleagues initially talked behind me about my body changes. I initially felt shy and awkward. But my doctor was very supportive in facing this; he always said *becoming a man means having much courage to face the world* as who you are. These words guide my journey of becoming a man (Interview with Sameera on January 20, 2020, Kandy, my emphasis).

The problematics of claiming sexual/gendered citizenship map on to the paradoxes of claiming gender recognition. While the Health Ministry Circular (2016) has developed to broaden the rights of citizenship for trans men, the influence of medical discourse and practice and the binary conceptualisations of genders and sexualities effect a division between the trans citizen who is able and/or willing to fulfil the requirements of the law, and the trans person who is unable or unwilling to meet the demands of recognition.

However, these prejudiced beliefs about gender norms construct the masculinities that they have embodied in their lives since childhood.

Sameera: I was treated as a girl who behaved like a boy during my school time. I never did *girls work* at the school.

Me: What do you mean by girls' work?

Sameera: Like sweeping the classroom, decorating the teacher's table with flowers. My friends did them for me. But I was asked to carry the dustbin and throw the garbage after they swept the classroom (Interview with Sameera on January 20, 2020, Kandy, emphasis mine).

In the context of school, duties within the classroom (the private sphere) such as sweeping the classroom and decorating the teacher's desk with flowers were considered by kids as women's work while activities outside the classroom (the public sphere) such as throwing garbage away were considered men's work. This confirms their adherence to the social norms of performing gendered social roles from childhood. In school, many of them preferred boxing, cricket, volleyball or hockey which are considered 'men's sports', requiring physical strength and energy. While many of them did not like discussing the female bodies they had in the past, it became very apparent during the discussion on sports that the physical attributes associated with athleticism (i.e., playing men's sports) and physical superiority (i.e., winning medals and awards) were among the main elements of embodying masculine identities.

After being labelled and marginalised as a 'girl who acts like a boy' by their families, schools, religious institutions, and neighbourhood/community, their identity crisis was somewhat resolved through Western medical science and the knowledge produced by civil society/non-governmental organisations. This framing of gender is produced and maintained by the liberal knowledge systems of the global North, who fund non-governmental initiatives in the global South. The modern LGBTIQ classification produces strict categories of gender

identities and sexual orientations, which are very closely aligned with the white-male identities of the global North. Thus, neo-colonial knowledge production and domination continue to play an increasingly important role in the creation of identities among transmen in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the pursuit of an 'ideal life' within the framed, systematic gender identities and rights that are presumed to exist in the global North, becomes the goal of many transgender lives. Many expect that they will be invisible among a larger migrant community in the West and they can continue to live as a male, easily abandoning their transition process and history. These paradoxical goals i.e., recognition vs. invisibility, is elaborated more in the next section.

#### Forgetting the Past - Moving Through Spaces

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The first and most common question asked by nearly everyone involved in discussions with me was, "Will I be identifiable through what you write?" I had to make a particular explanation of the anonymity and confidentiality of their identity as it was manifested by them. It is noteworthy that even though they all accepted themselves as transmen according to medical terminology, they prefer to be called men in their everyday lives.

It is also noteworthy that many were keen to erase the memories of their past, about their female self, not just from their own memories but from the memories of the outside world. For example, Thisal, who attended a training programme with an NGO at the time he started hormone treatment, requested my assistance to delete all the photos and videos released by the NGO on the internet, where he was attributed as having 'feminine' characteristics of the body during that period. Thisal said that it was embarrassing for him to see the images taken two years ago of his previous, feminine body (telephone conversation with Thisal, January 20 2020). Meanwhile, Sameera had achieved success at national level in Netball and Cricket tournaments while he was a woman and later had to stop playing due to the change of gender. Many of his (previously,

her) achievements were reported in the national newspapers. When asked whether he had compiled those newspaper articles, Sameera said:

No, no....even if I had, I would have hidden them. I played as a girl at the time, and those reports carried my girl name.

(Interview with Sameera, January 20, 2020, Kandy)

I noticed that everyone who spoke to me wanted to erase not only the evidence—the photographs, files, and certificates, but also the memories associated with their past womanhood.

Evidence of this desire to establish their present identity as a man and their abhorrence and embarrassment about their previous identity as a woman can be seen in the following statements; the past life as a woman was "...not a part of my life" (Interview with Lahiru, November 15 2019, Colombo) and, it felt as if it was "...a life in another world" (Interview with Sameera, January 20, 2020, Colombo, emphasis mine). I believe that the reason for this discontent or embarrassment was often because of the idea that their women's identity was somehow incomplete, distorted or flawed in ways that could be corrected by embracing the identity of a man, thereby entering a 'complete' life.

The term 'correction' is very complex, problematic and stereotypical. When discussing it with transmen who use the term, I found out its source. For example, Sameera found information about his transgender process from newspaper articles and a psychiatrist who was introduced to him by his friends. It was while studying in a European country that Thisal realised that he 'needed to correct' his gender identity and that it was possible. Maalinga's statement is also significant:

I went to a famous girls' school. My behaviour as a boy did not matter to anyone in the school. I was famously known in the school as a 'girl like a boy'. In the university, I was considered as lesbian who is sexually attracted to girls. I first heard the term 'transgender/transsexual' when I attended a workshop conducted by a group of NGOs in my final year of the university. It was only then that I started

looking into it. I was curious about it and consulted two psychiatrists for more information. They talked to me and 'assessed' me as a transman. I knew I could change my identity. It's been five years since this process started. Somehow, we have to complete *the rest* (Interview with Maalinga, February 10, 2020, Colombo, emphasis mine).

What he meant by the term 'the rest' was the surgical procedure to change genitalia, which is currently quite challenging to do in Sri Lanka (Interview with Maalinga, above). Although breast removal surgery and hormonal treatments are relatively easy to access, the process of male genital replacement surgery in Sri Lanka is difficult, almost impossible. While it is possible to have internal surgeries such as the removal of a uterus done free of charge at a government hospital, it is still difficult to change the external form of the genitalia. Therefore, many people who find it difficult to go abroad still see themselves as 'incomplete' men.

I am still in my journey of becoming a proper man (Interview with Sameera, January 2020, 2020, Kandy).

The goal of my life is to be a complete person (Telephone conversation with Shevon, August 28, 2019).

Nevertheless, where does this complete life/person exist? When can they be complete? The past is a chapter they need to forget or wipe out, and the present is a moment of imperfect journey. The following points were highlighted in every discussion I had with transmen:

a.) Their home, family, village, and neighbourhood were reminiscent of past lives; every one of them was living away from home, either in Colombo or other urban areas.

b.) Everyone was planning to migrate to another country (often in the West) in the near future. One person has already moved.

This fascinating similarity is indeed made visible by their dream of a future with a complete male identity, which is far away and free from the 'imperfect' female identities of the past (and the present).

Sameera explains his experience of being invisible, away from his home:

I have been working as a factory worker in a cable company in Malaysia for two years. During my stay in Malaysia no one cared about my gender or sexual orientation. There were many lesbians, gays, and transgender persons in the factory. I could wear what I like and had relationship with another girl. I was *not noticed* by anyone particularly as a transgender man (Interview with Sameera, on January 20, 2020, Kandy, emphasis mine).

However, this has an interesting dimension in terms of people working in organisations for trans-rights. For instance, Mano, who has founded a leading trans-organisation in Colombo, wanted me to identify him as a man. But in different spaces, such as meetings of civil society organisations, activities with Ministry of Health officials, and committees of the National Human Rights Commission, he identifies himself as a transman.

My transgender-ness has brought me a long way. It made me to who I am today. I have founded my organisation. I have been working for the benefit of hundreds of transgender persons in Sri Lanka. I work with important government officials, in order to recognise transgender communities in the system of governance. But in the society (i.e., my higher education institute, my neighbours, etc.), I simply want to be a man like any other. I do not want a different treatment from the society. I want to blend in with the society as any other man (Interview with Mano on May 12, 2020, Colombo).

During the presidential election of 2019, when a group of left-leaning LGBTIQ activists supported the candidate of the main leftist coalition



(JVP/NPP)<sup>2</sup> in Sri Lanka, some other trans-activists demanded that the Sinhala terms used by the group should indicate the presence of transgender communities. While activists use the Sinhala term *Samarisi*<sup>3</sup>, some transgender members argued that *Samarisi* does not imply transgender persons; rather, it has been used as a common Sinhala term for same-sex relationships. Therefore, the demand was to use the term *Sankrān̄thi* (transgender) along with the term *Samarisi*, wherever political campaigns were taking place. It is quite important to mark the paradoxes of the two needs; wanting to be recognised and wanting to be invisible, at the same moment. While claiming different identities in different moments and contexts, they were always careful to use the word 'transgender' in our election campaigning and requested everyone to use the term when referring to queer communities.

While inclusivity and visibility are being highlighted in these contexts, invisibility is what they expect from the society they live in and going to live in the global North creates a paradoxical relationship that they are unable to explain or understand. Their ultimate purpose of emancipation from the old self/body becomes a journey of physical movement across spaces. However, in the new space, the expectation of being invisible or to blend in with the normative gender binaries of the outside world has also been challenging. Shevon, who has migrated to a country in the global North as student, shares his experience:

When I came here, I thought it is easy to live here, because nobody knows me as a trans-man. Even though ticking the box as trans-man has been benefitting me in several contexts (e.g., college entrance, membership of different societies), I have never disclosed my identity with any of

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<sup>2</sup>*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (People's Liberation Front) became a coalition called National People's Power (NPP) with several other leftist civil society movements in 2019. The author is a member of this coalition.

<sup>3</sup>Term *Samarisi* is originated by two terms *sama* (same) *risi* (like).

my friends or colleagues. But when they are very close to me and we share personal experiences, I always feel like I cheat about my *true* identity. Even though I will become a *complete man* one day, I do not think I can forget my past completely (*Long silence*) (Telephone conversation with Shevon, August 28, 2019, emphasis mine).

In fact, while living in a predominantly white area in the country, Shevon had to be more concerned about his race and class identities than his transgender identity. He had shared an experience of an incident he faced while commuting in public transport, where a young white man complained that 'immigrants take all our jobs'.

I thought grass is always greener on the other side. My history or the present as a trans-man is less important here. There are more important things; being a brown man or a poor man matters more (Telephone conversation with Shevon, August 28, 2019).

As a person who had lived away from his family since he was 18, 'home' for Shevon, could be either the family he left behind at a younger age, the city (Colombo) he lived in before leaving; or his nation and home country (Sri Lanka) in the context of his present life in the diaspora; a place filled with nostalgia which he cannot go back to.

"Home...", as Gopinath writes "...in the queer fantasy of the past is the space of violent (familial and national) disowning." (2005, p. 173). According to Gopinath, home for a queer diasporic subject becomes not only that which they cannot want but also that which they could never have. Nostalgia as deployed by queer diasporic subjects, is a means to imagine oneself within those spaces from which one is perpetually excluded or denied existence. Quoting Popoola and Sezen, Tudor (2017) describes the failure to belong that is imposed by racism and migration as the feeling of 'never be[ing] whole', eternally searching, homeless and dispossessed. Thus, moving away from violent or unwanted 'home' spaces to (presumed) better spaces has in fact opened more complexities of identities for young trans men who were in the process of finding their

so-called 'true' inner selves. Instead of a complete rupture from the past and a sense of a new/complete identity, they meet with different life realities to deal with, that require them to imagine themselves in the frames of various other identities, i.e., Asian/brown, poor, etc.

### 'Able and Productive' Bodies

I recall my visit in late 2019, to a leading NGO working for transgender communities in Colombo. They had set up their new office in a suburban area and invited me to pay a visit. The neighbourhood was very quiet and residential with middle-class houses surrounded by high walls and remotely controlled iron gates. I could not resist comparing this environment with that of one of the other NGO's (working mainly with the *nachchi*<sup>4</sup> community and HIV positive persons) offices that I often used to visit, situated in the middle of a messy, lower middle-class neighbourhood.

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When I entered the office, I could see a room converted into a small gym. There were a few heavy-duty exercise-machines, along with dumbbells, weights, and some other weight-lifting equipment. Later, I learnt that many of the clients/beneficiaries of the organisation were transmen and the gym was one of their major requirements/needs. Therefore, the organisation had decided to provide this service for a nominal fee, and the gym instructor himself was a trans man. Apparently, among this particular group, a muscular body with 'six packs' and a sense of strength/capability have become an essential part of trans men performativity.

In her analysis of how violence and valour shape Sri Lankan Tamil masculinities, De Silva (2014) argues that masculinity is tied to the body: attributes such as courage, violence, aggression, confidence, composure, and deference are inscribed upon the body and its demeanours. De Silva

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<sup>4</sup>A local term used by a transgender community in Sri Lanka, born with male anatomy but perceived as women. They do not necessarily undergo hormone/surgical treatments.

(2014) further explores how taking up arms has become one of the highly performative practices of masculinity and how the associated aggression privileges it over others. Further, Randall and colleagues (1992) argue that bodybuilding offers men clear-cut mechanisms for asserting values traditionally associated with masculinity. Achieving an ideal male body requires "...a lifestyle centred on control and conducive to individualism, independence, domination and competition." (Randall et al., 1992 p. 63).

In the context of trans men, being qualified to be a man becomes a matter of how successful they are in terms of normative masculine performance, not only as a subject of the medical gaze, but also in their day to day lives, in society. Many have childhood memories of rejecting female clothing and demanding shorts and t-shirts from their parents, cutting their hair short and using hair gel and tightly binding their breasts with a piece of cloth, etc. Their childhood heroes included famous male figures of the cinema or television such as Vijaya Kumaratunge<sup>5</sup>, Tarzan<sup>6</sup>, or Knight Rider.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the figure of an ideal (Western) male body plays an important role in the imagination of the bodies of contemporary Sri Lankan trans men.

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<sup>5</sup> Vijaya Kumarathunga (1945-1988) was a popular Sinhala film actor and a singer who later became a politician. Kumaratunga (called Vijay by fans) was famous for his romantic male-hero characters in Sinhala cinema, but he had a wide fan base across the country. He was shot and killed in 1988. However, his songs are still sung by many other singers in popular media.

<sup>6</sup> Tarzan is an American television series that aired during the 90's in Sri Lanka. The series portrayed Tarzan as a well-educated character who had grown tired of civilisation and returned to the jungle where he had been raised. In the series, Tarzan wears a small under-garment made with leopard skin and the upper body remains naked.

<sup>7</sup> Knight Rider is an American action crime drama television series aired in Sri Lanka in the 90's. The show stars David Hasselhoff as Michael Knight, a modern crime fighter assisted by an advanced, artificially intelligent, self-aware, indestructible car. The main character of Michael was popular among Sri Lankan viewers as the 'Knight Rider'.

Similarly, when talking about work, many have mentioned 'physical capability' as a qualification in getting work. During my discussions with them, their ability/inability to work became an observable reiteration. It was interesting to notice that every single person I had discussions with linked their work into the gender identity/performance in an inextricable manner.

My first overseas job was in Malaysia. I worked as a labourer in a cable company. All of my co-workers were men. I had not changed my gender at that time; I was still a girl. But I *dressed like a boy* and therefore, they were not hesitant to recruit me, I think. Later when I applied for a hotel job in Sri Lanka as a room boy, they checked all my sports certificates. I have *played boxing* and the Manager was very fond of it (Interview with Sameera on January 20 2020, Kandy, emphasis mine).

I was selected to the Sri Lanka Administrative Service. But I did not enrol. The reason was that I had to wear *Saree*<sup>8</sup> for work, which I hate doing. But the current job I do, does not require *Saree*; I can wear a shirt, a pair of trousers and male shoes (Interview with Maalinda, February 10, 2020, Colombo).

Both these examples illustrate the demand of the capitalist mode of production for the able, (preferably) masculine (often associated with strength and ability) body. Therefore, in a system where transgender bodies are stigmatised and continuously forced to become 'normal', whoever embraces a transgender identity must perform certain skills or have particular capacities in order to qualify as a 'worker' who is able to serve the economy of the country. On the one hand, the capitalist division of labour requires women to be kept out of waged labour (labelled as domestic labour) that produces surplus value facilitated by the corollary relation (Holstrom, 1981) between patriarchal family

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<sup>8</sup>Atraditional dress worn by women in India and Sri Lanka.

structure the capitalist system. On the other hand, in neo-liberal economic policies, the individual citizen is granted a set of liberties and responsibilities and is assumed to be a self-regulating, enterprising, good citizen subject (DasGupta, 2014; Foucault, 2003; Richardson, 2005). Whenever the State can regulate the body (in this case, the ability to work hard and the regulation of women's attire in the government sector), it is done purposely to sustain the notion of a good citizen in the nationalist agenda. Therefore, to be a skilled labourer who works for the capitalist mode of production and the nation state, a person should not challenge the accepted gender norms; rather, they should 'perform well' in assigned gender roles. Therefore, I argue that the more transmen want to enter the labour force, the less they want to be visible as transgender individuals. Rather, they attempt to become 'capable' or 'productive' men by performing strength and ability.

#### Fixing Categories by the State

However, it is important to recognise the post-war, progressive attempts by the Sri Lankan state to recognise the category of transgender within either the international human rights obligatory framework and/or medical health systems.

The first example is the new Constitutional reform process which took place in 2016-2019 where gender identity was recognised as a basis of discrimination. In the aftermath of the change of government in 2015, a Public Representative Committee (PRC) was appointed by the Cabinet of Ministers to receive public representations on constitutional reform to support the constitutional reform process.<sup>9</sup> Several LGBTIQ rights activists made representations in different locations of the

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<sup>9</sup> The new coalition government came to power in January 2015 with a mandate to abolish the executive presidency, reform the electoral system and make several other structural and political changes in Sri Lanka by introducing a new Constitution.

country.<sup>10</sup> The report of the PRC came out in May 2016, with a very progressive and a broad chapter of Fundamental Rights. It identified that citizens are discriminated against based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, and it made recommendations for equality and even the decriminalisation of same-sex acts. The equality clause included grounds such as "...race, religion, caste, marital status, maternity, age, language, mental or physical disability, pregnancy, civil status, widowhood, social origin, sexual orientation, or sexual and gender identities" (PRC, p. 95). Further, the right to marriage and privacy are guaranteed without any discrimination based on the same grounds (PRC, pp. 96-98). Most importantly, it has introduced a separate rights clause (Sec. 28) on LGBTIQ rights. The wording of the PRC places gender identity within the framework of the development/advocacy agendas of the global North that are derived from the language of the United Nations' human rights discourse.

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It can be assumed that the PRC identifies this as a 'fairly new issue' due to the intense scrutiny brought by civil society organisations in post-war Sri Lanka. The Interim Report released by the government in 2017<sup>11</sup> is interestingly silent about the Fundamental Rights Chapter, leaving it for a later assessment. However, the National Human Rights Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Sri Lanka (2017-2021)<sup>12</sup> has fascinatingly included 'gender identity' as grounds for discrimination and included it in the equality action (Section 6.1). However, by placing it with other categories such as disability, race and place of birth, the Action Plan has presented the term gender identity as an abstract, essential category, while it was very careful to avoid the term sexual orientation.

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<sup>10</sup>The author has been involved in making submissions to the PRC on behalf of LGBTIQ communities.

<sup>11</sup><http://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2017-09/Interim%20Report%20of%20the%20Steering%20Committee%20of%20the%20Constitutional%20Assembly%20of%20Sri%20Lanka%2021%20September%202017.pdf>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.stopchildcruelty.com/media/doc/1554788053.pdf>

The second example is the other steps taken by the post-war Sri Lankan State, to facilitate the process of changing gender by issuing the relevant Circulars in 2016 (as discussed above) for the Ministry of Health and the Department of Registration of Persons. These circulars in fact facilitated citizens to place themselves in one of the normative gender binaries (i.e., male or female) by acquiring body conformity and gender-conforming names. Thus, a transgender person's political relationship to the nation is submerged in his/her recognition in the State bureaucracy, and citizenship in the nation is mediated by the authorities.

On the one hand, framing gender identity as a binary classification and purposefully 'ignoring' same-sex relationships are not random or unconscious acts of the State. They are persistently done in order to facilitate the notions of heteronormative, monogamous, gendered family structures that support the post-war, right-wing, nation-building project. On the other hand, offering a place to stand within a 'safer category' of gender (i.e., transgender as opposed to same-sex) has encouraged many transgender persons to step forward and be registered in the system. Therefore, placing gender identity in the safer terrain of the State makes transgender persons visible and observable, thereby making them easier to deal with. However, it is always emphasised that a 'good' transgender person can only claim his/her rights and 'proper' identity through a constant medical gaze. The childhood urges to wear male clothes and the desire to play cricket or boxing, hang out with male friends in the village, work in factories in jobs that require more physical strength and go to the gym have now become essential activities for transmen to qualify as 'real' men of the nation.

Nationalisms are contested systems of representation enacted through social institutions and legitimizing, or limiting, people's access to the rights and resources of the nation-state (McClintock, 1991). In order to facilitate this ideology, nationalisms are "...formed through a combination of marital and blood ties, ideal families consist of heterosexual couples that produce their own biological children." (Collins, 1998, p. 63). The State is organised not around a biological core, but a state-sanctioned, heterosexual marriage that confers legitimacy not



only on the family structure itself but on children born into it (Andersen, 1991). Therefore, assuming a fairly fixed sexual division of labour, in which the role of women is defined predominantly in the home and of men in the public sphere of work, the conventional model of the family often presupposes a separation of work and family. Described as a natural or biological relationship based on heterosexual attraction, this monolithic family type is articulated with governmental structures that are ideologically framed by heteronormativity/normative gender roles.

In order to get a citizen's benefits from the State, it becomes necessary to comply with its institutions, making them essential/fixed category, which in turn contributes to how they place themselves, understand their stances and navigate/negotiate their identities. Thus, the framing of gender identities and making contemporary Sri Lankan trans men 'invisible' are steered by the post-war nationalist project of the Sri Lankan state.

This article strives to provide an insight into the everyday lives, realities, and expectations of several young transmen in Sri Lanka, who were on their journey of pursuing an 'ideal - complete life of a man', by changing their bodily organs and undergoing hormonal therapy. I discussed how the socially accepted, normative behaviours of gender contribute to negotiating their identities. At the same time, the masculinities demanded by capitalist forms of production in the new era also provide possible avenues for them to explore and understand their bodies while making them more 'invisible' among the labour force. Further, I have argued that the support provided by the post-war Sri Lankan state to move from one binary to another, is part of a 'long term project' of the nation state.

It is important to recognise how young transmen negotiate with the outside world by performing the desired male gender roles in situations with extreme prejudices. Further, the transmen who have

taken the lead to establish organisations to support and lobby for trans-rights are writing history by making themselves visible in the big picture. Therefore, it is important to highlight that while their lived realities are influenced by gendered notions, capitalism, and nationalism, it does not imply that they do not have any authority or agency in taking decisions about their lives. Rather, shaped by several overarching factors and juggling between visibility and invisibility, contemporary transmen in Sri Lanka portray their life stories in the complex canvas of post-war, neo-colonial Sri Lankan history.

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Görünmek ya da Görünmemek? Sri Lanka'da Trans Erkekler Arasında Tanınma Paradoksu

**Öz:** Bu makale "Günümüz Sri Lanka'sında Transgender Kimlikler" başlıklı daha kapsamlı bir çalışmanın bir parçasını oluşturmaktadır. Bu makale, toplumsal cinsiyet, bedensellik, toplumsal ilişkiler ve kimlikleri analiz etmek ve anlamlandırmak amacıyla, günümüz Sri Lanka'sında trans erkeklerin gündelik yaşam deneyimleri temelinde bir çerçeve tanımlama denemesinde bulunmaktadır. Makale toplumsal kabul gören normatif cinsiyet davranışlarının trans

erkeklerin kimliklerini müzakere etmelerinde hangi şekilde pay sahibi olduğunu tartışmaktadır. Aynı zamanda modern dünyada kapitalist üretim biçimlerinin gerektirdiği erkeklikler de trans erkeklere bedenlerini keşfetmek ve anlamak için olası mecralar sunmaktadır. Makale ayrıca savaş sonrası Sri Lanka devleti tarafından kişiye bir ikili cinsiyetten diğere geçmesi için sağlanan desteğin uzun erimli ulus-devlet projesinin bir parçası olduğunu savunmaktadır. Sri Lanka'da devlet ve sivil toplum trans erkekleri bir toplumsal cinsiyet "kategorisi" olarak tanımlayarak onların gündelik hayatını (yanlış) temsil etmekte, homojen hale getirmekte ve depolitize etmektedir. Bu nedenle, her ne kadar kimlikleri ulusal ve neoliberal söylemler tarafından empoze edilse de, bunlar devamlı olarak, tanınma, görünürlük ve görünmezlik paradoksu üzerinden, hikayelendirilmekte, meydan okumaya tabi tutulmakta ve yeniden müzakere edilmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Toplumsal cinsiyet, Trans erkekler, Sri Lanka, Erkeklikler