



## Transgenders in Kerala- Realisation of their Identity

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper tries to unfold the life journey of transgenders in Kerala and their experiences of interaction with societal institutions that have shaped their identity. The state of Kerala does not have a “traditional” transgender culture such as hijras and hence transgenders in the state have had less exposure to a transgender socialisation. A qualitative descriptive enquiry is done to draw out the various stages in the identity realisation of transgender individuals. The backdrop of the socialisation in their life is drawn out to understand transgender identities in depth. The relations of the transgender individuals with societal institutions such as family, school, etc. keep changing over these stages and take both positive and negative connotations.

**Keywords:** Transgender, Kerala, Realization, Identity, Culture, Socialisation



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Black: white, male: female, sweet: bitter- humans have the inherent tendency to classify and segregate as a result of our quest for knowledge. They try to fit their observations, including observations of self into neat divisions. This concept of ‘black’ and ‘white’ has conditioned human minds to the extent that a thought of not falling into these categories, or being in the ‘grey’ area leaves them perplexed, aloof from the system of binaries or categorisations.

Men and women are socialised into performing their respective genders (see Butler, 1990) which aligns with the sex they are born into while transgenders have no such parallel socialisation. Deviation from these traditional socialisations are frowned upon, confronted and stigmatised. The evidence from history and mythological transcripts point out that transgenders have been challenging the concept of binaries and celebrating gender continuums. Yet, the stigma faced by transgender identities in the society proves why a “normal” life is still an aspiration for transgender individuals. They construct, establish and thus realise their gender identity like a long nourished desire.

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*Authors note: By using the word ‘realisation’ or ‘realising’ in the title and elsewhere in the paper, unless otherwise mentioned, I have tried to encompass the experiences of transgenders in achieving, negotiating and comprehending their identity.*

Transgender is an umbrella term to refer to individuals whose expression of gender is different from the sex assigned to them at the time of birth (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). The diverse sub-groups in this group are people who identify themselves as transwoman (MTF- transitioning from Male to Female), transman (FTM- transitioning from Female to Male), transsexuals- securing surgery and/or hormones, gender queer- not identifying with 'male' or 'female' and many others (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). In short, a transgender person does not conform to the societal norms of binary gender i.e. man and woman. A cisgender person on the other hand has a coherent sex and gender i.e., the gender performed by a cisgender person is the same as the one assigned at birth.

If transgenders do not conform to the socially constructed binaries, then where do they belong? It is essential to understand the concept of identities such as gender and sex as a continuum to know how transgenders realise their identity. Sex of a person is assigned to them at birth based on visual assessment of baby's genital presentation (Sennott & Smith, 2011). Sex is also on a continuum as there are 40 different intersex conditions out of which only one-third is visible to naked eye according to the Intersex Society of North America (as cited in Sennott & Smith, 2011). Unger (1979) defines gender as a "term used to describe the non-physiological components of sex that are culturally regarded as appropriate to males or females". Gender is an identity that has been carefully constituted in time that is established through a specifically styled repetition of acts (Butler, 1988). Gender is an emotional state and hence, there is no 'real' or 'true' gender, it is what we experience ourselves to have (Sennott & Smith, 2011). Gender expression, which is the outward expression of gender, cannot be confined in the binaries of masculine and feminine; it is rather a continuum and shifts shape over the course of one's lifetime (Sennott & Smith, 2011). The gender expressed is independent of their sex.

In India, there is a plural and diverse transgender population which is spread across the country such as Hijras, Aravanis, Tirunangais, Kothis, Jogtas and Jogappas, Shiv Shaktis, Kinnars, etc. (as cited in Ghosh, 2015) out of which hijra culture is acknowledged as the institutionalised transgender role in India (Nanda, 1986). Reddy (2006) explains hijra identity as understood by most people as "phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation- that is an excision of penis and testicles- dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata (known in different names across India)". The hijras are organised into guru-cela (teacher-disciple) relationship (Ghosh, 2015); this relationship more often takes the meaning of mother-daughter relationship. When a person joins the hijra community they do so by accepting a senior member in the particular hijra household she wants to join as her guru and she becomes cela. These communities and their members have come out to the society to declare their identity, but often stay out of the political and social realm or are forced to do so. However, the transgenders in Kerala who gained visibility lately are not organised into a community like hijras. Upon asked by Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment about the issues faced by transgenders in Kerala in 2013, Govt. of Kerala responded that "there are no officially identified transgenders in the state" (Report of the Expert Committee on the Issues Relating to Transgender Person, 2014). The difficulty in negotiating their gender identity as well as

creating a space for expression of their identity within the state of Kerala has been two-fold for them because of (1) the absence of transgender communities which offer gender socialisation and comfort of having a community and (2) the stubbornness of the society to accept the existence of non-binary gender identities. Their perception of transgender identity has been shaped by the influence of the hijra culture in the nearby cities of Chennai and Bangalore (as some were part of the culture and came back to Kerala), family, their individual experiences of seeking education and livelihood, rights based organisations working for them and so on. This paper tries to describe the life journey of transgender individuals in Kerala through stages of realisation (stages of reaching full potential), to understand how they have negotiated their identity with societal institutions that has contributed significantly towards shaping their identity.

## **2. Methodology**

The Social Justice Board of Kerala conducted a transgender survey as a pre-requisite of the Transgender Bill 2015 to understand the situation of transgender population in the state with respect to access to education, livelihood, hospitals, psychological well-being, etc. The State Transgender Persons' Bill, 2015 reinforced the constitutional rights of transgenders taking into account the Supreme Court judgement (2014) and introduced a framework for the policy including the following- Right to Equality, Right to Dignity and a life without violence, Equal Voice and Participation in Development and Right to Freedom of Expression. This survey gave a glimpse of the transgender lives in the state; however it was necessary for an in-depth analysis of the situation in Kerala from a more qualitative perspective to understand how transgenders are negotiating their identity in the state.

A descriptive study had to be conducted as very little is known about transgender population in the state. The study brings out voice of transgenders, transwomen, transmen, transgender activists and non-transgender persons activists who advocate for transgender rights. It aims to describe and understand their lived experience in establishing and asserting their identity as a transgender and the factors that have contributed towards it. The objective of the study was to understand how transgenders in the state have been realising their gender identity.

I had voluntarily worked for online data entry of the transgender survey data and hence I had a good understanding of the scenario, area of research, and good rapport with the key participant as well as few transgender persons. Thus, the basic information about the population was available to me apart from the survey data and this helped me to purposively choose the sample after meeting some of them through the key participant and during various events. So, purposive sampling technique was used to find the suitable participants to include a range of experiences from varied social and political background as well as experiences of people belonging to varied positions in the gender queer spectrum. It involved developing a framework of variables of the participants that would be important for the research and considering these while choosing the samples (Marshall, 1996). The participants are all above 18 years of age and consented verbally to discuss their life journey and experiences and to have it audio recorded.

Data was collected from the participants using semi-structured interviews. Semi structured interview guide was used to set the direction of the interview. The in-depth interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Frank (1979) suggests that to locate a person's life as a cross section of space and time, life history method offers a technique for collecting data relevant to concerns about human existence in society. Thus, life history method was used to collect data to understand the life journey of the participants and their process of 'coming out' with their gender identity.

The terms used in the paper needs to be explained. The word transgender has been used to refer to the whole gender non-conforming community. The prefix cis- has been used to denote that the person performs the gender assigned at birth. For example, cis-woman means that the person was assigned the gender woman at the time of birth and she continues to perform the same. The term transwoman or transman has been used to denote male to female transitioning people and female to male transitioning people irrespective of whether they have undergone Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) or not. Essentially the words transgender woman and transwoman/ transgender man and transman are used interchangeably. If it has been specified "transexual" before man or woman, it implies that the person has undergone SRS.

### **3. A Historical Overview of Transgenders Identities**

An understanding of the changes in the assignment of attributes to an identity over the years is essential to figure the source of their acceptance/dismissal in the society. Hence, the status quo of transgender identity in the country is an effect of the evolution of their identity. According to Taparia (2011), the presence of "eunuchs" (a term used to refer to transgenders then, now used derogatorily) as slaves, brought by the masters to contribute to the labour force to build the empire, in India can be traced back to the time of Delhi sultanate i.e. the thirteenth century. They were castrated to ensure that they restricted themselves from sexual activities and would depend on the master solely as they would not have any kin (Taparia, 2011). They were seen as "gender-neutral" (p.23, Reddy, 2006) loyal harem guardians who could not impregnate a women yet can provide "manly protection" (p.23, Reddy, 2006) who "guarded, controlled and kept from male contact...their master's exclusive rights" over their women and harems which were "metaphor of power" (Taparia, 2011). The royal patronage institutionalised hijras as third gender; the evolution of an inhumane act of castration that was forced upon vulnerable and young males to create eunuch slaves later combined with religious underpinnings came to be practised as a ritual by the hijras (Taparia, 2011).

With the coming of the British, the hijra identity was given a new dimension of caste/ tribe and the status attributed to them during the rule of Delhi sultanate became insignificant (Reddy, 2006). Caste was the primary social category for the British and the sexual minorities, especially hijras were targeted and classified as not just another caste but as "criminal caste" (Reddy, 2006). The 'section 377' of Indian Penal Code, 1860 and 'The Criminal Tribes' Act, 1871 that came into existence during the British colonial rule thus laid the foundation stone for legal and socio-economic discrimination of the transgender community. While section 377 condemned "carnal

intercourse" and suppressed the sexual expression of 'non-traditional' genders (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), labelling the "eunuchs" as criminal tribes who kidnap and castrate children (Criminal Tribes Act, Part II, 1871) wiped them away from the mainstream.

Taparia (2011) observes that at present, economic consideration is the primary motive for conducting ritualistic castration of hijras (nirvana) and there has been a shift from the religious obligation, as it was in the colonial as well as immediate post-colonial period. The hijras have tried to cope themselves to the "shrinking space of opportunities in the Indian social structure" and hence turned to prostitution when the spaces to exercise their religious traditions were shrinking (Taparia, 2011). The stigma towards transgenders thus also arises from the general attitude of the Indian society against homosexuality and prostitution.

The spotlight slightly shifted from hijras to kothis (transgenders who do not perform castration) as well with the advent of HIV epidemic, as transgenders and Men having Sex with Men (MSM) were identified as the vulnerable groups apart from female sex workers in late 1980s (Dutta, 2012). Funds for CBOs catering to transgender groups were increased in this context in many states such as the West Bengal State AIDS Prevention and Control society (Dutta, 2012). The identity of kothi thus came to be defined by the HIV-AIDS discourse as "males showing varying degrees of femininity and involved mainly in receptive anal/oral sex with men called parikh in West Bengal and panthi elsewhere in India" (Dutta, 2012). Thus, identities were assigned to these communities based on their livelihood, sexual choice and related marginality.

The literature in India regarding transgenders are centred around transgender cultures and the historical background of their presence in the society, whereas academic scholarship across the world focuses on transgender identity creation, transgenderism and an attempt to deconstruct the binaries and mainstream the transgenders beyond traditions and rituals to validate their civil, political and social rights. For example, Bolin (1998) suggests that transgenderism is becoming another way in which people construct their gender identity transcending the boundaries of man and woman. An understanding of scholarship which focuses on individual and collective transgender identity is essential to assimilate the wide spectrum of information related to gender non-conformity available in the country.

#### **4. Life Journey of Transgenders in Kerala**

A society with heteronormative divisions of labour and power has been long accepted as "normal" that fluidity of gender (gender as a continuum) can seem threatening to the status quo and hierarchy established in the society. Hence, the transgender community faces discrimination on many fronts- social stigma associated with how they carry out themselves through dressing, mannerisms, taboo associated with the livelihood options they resort to and so on. Transgenders in India often earn their livelihood by begging for alms, dancing at auspicious functions such as birth of a child, marriage, etc. and sex work as their means of earning a livelihood. They sometimes tend to use unconventional means to forcefully obtain money when a person refuses to give alms to them. The general belief that the transgenders have the power to curse or bless,

backed by the Hindu mythological stories which testify to this belief is often cited as the reason by people for seeing them with apprehension. They instil a sense of fear in some people due to the superstitions surrounding the community, while some take advantage of their “unfortunate” social situation. They have been denied access to the basic resources such as education, health and have been visibly invisible to the society. Hence, transgenders have to battle it out with themselves to come out as a transgender and realise their gender identity, with their family to accept their kinship rights and with the society to establish their socio-political and legal rights as an individual. The life journey of transgender persons, as told by some of them, projects the aspects of their life that could be considered relevant in realising their identity. The performance of gender identity has evolved through different stages of their life and they establish and perform their gender identity in ways they seem most comfortable at each of these stages. Judith Butler (1988) reiterates that gender cannot be a stable identity, rather it is carefully constituted in time and it has been established through “stylised repetition of acts”. It has been proved through philosophical, anthropological, philosophical and phenomenological discourse that gender is a performative accomplishment compelled by social action and taboo (see Butler, 1988). Transgenders (the word is used in an encompassing sense for gender non-conforming individuals; also because it is the preferred usage by the community in Kerala to refer to gender non-conforming individuals) defy the traditional gender norms and refuse to perform the gender assigned at birth.

Gender and gender expression are in a continuum and can only be felt and expressed by self (Sennott & Smith, 2011) and hence the gender of a person is the one they choose to identify with. The transgender individuals I interviewed placed themselves at different positions in the gender spectrum. Tinu explained their gender identity as a transgender. They explained it as:

*“I would tell that I am a transgender, because even when I was born as a male, I always had a female attitude.. but cannot be called female because I don't want to do Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS).. I want to do breast implant and laser treatment to remove hair... so I cannot be a complete woman. Legal sanction has been given for a third gender and so why can't I choose that identity. I choose to be a transgender.”*

*-Tinu, Transgender woman*

A germane understanding of self was reflected in the names they choose while they established their identity. Their names have also evolved with their process of gender realisation. They reinvent their identity step by step. Few participants preferred to use names that explicitly expressed either masculinity or femininity while majority of the transgenders I have known have chosen unisex names. This can be seen as an attempt to assert transgender identity as a gender identity along with male and female, an attempt to create a “gender neutral space” beyond the binaries and not merely conforming to the socially established gender attributes even after physical transitions.

# All the names used are concealed, but researcher has tried to maintain the gender aspect of the names chosen to convey the meaning attributed.

# Plural pronouns are used for people who preferred non- binary pronouns.

*When I became a woman through operation, society pointed out that I am not a woman as I cannot give birth to a child. Hence, the woman inside me has restricted me to the limit of a transsexual. So I like to be known as a transsexual only.. a woman who became woman through Sex Reassignment Surgery.. I am a woman too."*

*-Krishna, transsexual woman*

The narration of the life journey of the participants took me through their life circumstances. Very evident parallels could be drawn between each of their life in terms of the stages of gender realisation they went through. Each of these stages carefully moulded and crafted their perception of gender. The influence of parents, siblings, relatives, neighbours, teachers, friends, other transgenders, hijra community and other societal institutions such as police and school were in varied ratios through the stages, but have contributed significantly nevertheless. Bolin (1998), in her ethnographic study of the transformation of male to female transsexuals, stresses how important is the process of becoming a transsexual for the establishment of their gender identity. In the case of transsexual female- man becomes woman through transmutation of personal identity, social identity and physiology (Bolin, 1998) and the same concept can be extended to all transgender identities. This is being explored and broken down to 'stages of realisation of gender' in this section. The stages in realisation of identity of transgender individuals could be understood broadly as self-realisation, seeking out, becoming, establishing and coming out.

#### **4.1 Self-Realisation**

The first stage in the process of realisation of aspired gender identity starts with childhood. The child recognises the difference in perception of self and misalignment with assigned gender at the age of seven to eight years (studying in class 3 or 4). The outward expression of gender is through gender specific dressing, performance of roles in the society, mannerisms, attraction to opposite sex and so on. The self-realisation came when these outward expressions were in contradiction to what is expected out of them by the society. The consciousness of the person in their early childhood about this discovery is subtle and innocent expressions of aspired gender were exhibited- like holding hands of their friends who belong to same assigned gender as the child and infatuation towards them or. The feelings slowly strengthen as the child grows and realises that they naturally feel like behaving the way a person in the opposite sex would do. They realised it either by themselves through certain instances or through self-contemplation when the society- which includes the family members, neighbours, teachers and so on in this situation- pointed out the "unnatural" behaviour to these children.

*"When kids play father-mother pretending games, I always become mother in the act. I used to observe what my mother did closely. I always play with girls. I used to admire the brides during marriage in the neighbourhood. I loved to do make up like that. I did jobs such as cleaning using broom which is generally done by girls in the class." -Shama, transgender woman*

Connell's theory of masculinity (1995) provides a critical feminist analysis of historically specific masculinities and at the same time acknowledging the varying levels to which individual men reproduce it. The "toxic masculinity", he refers to in his theory, of the societal elements is reflected in the treatment of gender non-conforming children in this early stage as harassment and child sexual abuse. The long term effects of child sexual abuse include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicide, sexual promiscuity, victim-perpetrator cycle, and poor academic performance (Paolucci, Oddone, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). These effects can be seen throughout their life journey of transgender individuals.

The male to female transgenders remembered that they always befriended girls and tried to be around them as presence of masculine entities threatened them. One of the transgender woman participants said that it is also through this fear of mundu clad boys who fold mundu in half at their knees (perceived as a sign of masculinity) that she realised that she is not like them. The perpetrators of abuse were elder men in the family, neighbourhood or in school. Some shared that it was difficult for them to understand why men used them sexually in spite of having physical appearances of a boy. The mental and physical trauma they suffered deepened their conflict in mind. The deep rooted patriarchy which sanctions machoism made it impossible for effeminate boys to escape abuse in schools and neighbourhood at that young age.

*"I started realising about my difference in nature well when I was in 6-7 classes. But, I have been sexually exploited while I was in class 4. I know what sex is..I know what majority of the men do to a woman.. But I also know the limitations of the sexual organs I have.. My question is why was I violated then! Why was I chosen by them!"*  
-Krishna, transsexual woman

Thus, in this phase of life they realised that there is a mismatch between their assigned gender and their performance of gender. This was catalysed by the various experiences of ridicule, harassment and abuse which could be seen as the reaction of the society towards their gender non-conforming nature due to deep rooted patriarchal notions of understanding gender. The rest of their life journey is an attempt to deconstruct and understand the awareness they acquired at this stage.

#### **4.2 Seeking Out**

In the second stage, the transgender person tries to explore their identity further. They seek out for different means of gender expression to comprehend their gender identity better. The urge to express their gender is strong and they find various methods of expression. This is also the phase that is filled with fear of stigma and alienation from the society as the individual tries to knowingly perform their desired gender implicitly or explicitly. The transgender individuals testified that the negative home and school environment in this phase had detrimental effects on realisation of their identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional single piece white cloth tied at waist by men in Kerala

The transgender women I interviewed expressed their close association with art forms such as drama and dance and also shared the role these art forms have played in carrying out their desired gender expression. Many transgenders find these forms of expression to be very satisfying at this stage.

*"..The feminity in me was reflected through dance.. dance, acting.. maybe these art forms have helped me find a way towards the feminity I was seeking.. to an extent it was also a veil.. a cover.... because when I dance, I can dance in female costumes.. thus it was a veil to my desires.. schooling brought me these opportunities.. when I started to understand myself, only dance was my resort"*

*-Krishna, Transsexual Woman*

Transgender men who transitioned from female to male identity could engage in only subtle ways of expression of their gender at this stage. The expectation from a girl to be feminine is imposed on them from a very young age and this societal pressure has made it difficult for transgender men in this stage to express and satisfy their aspirations. Hence, their non-conformity which results in non-compliance to the various social expectations with regard to mobility, dressing and conduct makes them outcaste.

When the gender expression of the transgender individuals started becoming explicit, so did the harassment and abuse from society, school and family. Their peers would tease, alienate and harass them, while the teachers abused them physically and sexually. "Not being able to act convincingly as a male" was the reason why the transgender women were under attack. Each and every site which would otherwise have been avenues to make friends such as tuition classes, schools, etc. became situations to receive harassment and abuse. The children who could not study due to fear of being subjected to mental and physical torture dropped out from school. The reasons for dropping out ranged from extreme uncomfortable feeling in wearing clothes they did not identify with as part of school uniform to sexual harassment and abuse from peers or elders. The male to female transitioning students were teased for their feminine voice, their effeminate actions and were picked on by teachers in class. The formal education of transgender individuals suffered a setback due to eve teasing, mental harassment and sexual abuse they suffered from family as well as students and teachers alike at school.

*"I had a terrible incident while in class 9. There is a place near school where building construction takes place. Five to six boys ran behind me.. I fell into the puddle there.. they peeled my dress off.. terrible, terrible pictures.. saw condoms too.. I did not know what condoms are for.. I blew it thinking it is a balloon.. extremely dirty.. I was affected by fungus and was taken to hospital. There was a rumour in school that it is because those boys did like that to me.. the head master told my mother who came to school that the boys did so because her son behaves like a girl.. Everybody spread rumours that I am suffering from AIDS.. Mother would take me to hospital and give me medicines, but I could never openly talk about my problems.. thus, I dropped out of school in class 9." -Shama, transgender woman*

The participants who were in their high school at this stage faced had a negative school environment. Gender non-conforming individuals have not had a pleasant school life and dropped out of school citing abuse, harassment and mental trauma. The Transgender survey found out that 58% of the transgender students drop out even before completing 10th and the reasons for this include (i) severe harassment which makes studies impossible, (ii) gender related negative experiences at school and (iii) poverty or lack of special reservation or quota (State Policy for Transgenders in Kerala, 2015). The transgender individuals who managed to study beyond class 10 did so by hiding their non-conforming identity with extreme perseverance. They managed to continue because their school environment was slightly better and the attack on their femininity was limited to eve teasing and verbal harassment.

The families have different mechanisms to react to the gender non-conforming nature of their child. The punishments came in terms of retaliations, verbal abuse, curbing mobility and freedom and so on. The transgender women said that they did all the jobs which are considered feminine such as washing utensils, cleaning rooms, etc. at their house and the family did not react to this. This was also perceived as an acceptance in the family by some of them. In Kerala, where masculinity is glorified and men are expected to socialise with men in the neighbourhood, for a person with an assigned the gender male to be 'brought up like a bird in a cage' (words of my participant) is unusual. Knowledge about the "third gender" or the fear of being ridiculed by society must have prompted the families to do so. One of the participants testified to this and said that her brother who has the same assigned gender as her had the freedom to go out and not report back at home until late while she was asked to stay at home always. The gender roles in the family which are considered feminine such as washing utensils, cooking, cleaning the house etc. were also done by the trans women and the family

*"..they are seeing me as a girl. I always do the household work. Even at a young age, I used to wash amma's saree, wash utensils, cleaning the rooms, I used to do everything. So I grew up as a girl only. Dressing was that of a boy and I didn't have hair, rest I grew up and lived as a girl only."*

*-Harini, Transsexual Woman*

With the hope that "gender-crisis" can be treated like any other mental condition, the families sought treatment for their child. A participant was admitted to mental hospital by the family for nearly two months to get treatment for her gender non-conforming behaviour. Another participant was locked up by her family as it was getting impossible for the family to keep an eye on her. Her family was scared that their boy would run away and become one among the hijras as her dad was acquainted with the community while in Mumbai. Hence, she was admitted to a catholic seminary to become a priest hoping that the strict rules and punishments would restrict her freedom and change her ways. Thus, the families, being protective of their child made sure that their child does not get attacked by the society and also does not express or learn about their identity.

The seeking out phase is not only about seeking out for ways to express their gender, but also

seeking out to find people who can understand their situation, and can provide them insights about their "situation". The portrayal of effeminate men in the movies, the reaction of society towards effeminate men in their neighbourhood have all created an impact on the self-identity as well of transwomen. Tajfel suggested that a person's social identity ("referred to as the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups along with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Turner, 1975) is enhanced through comparison with other social groups. This comparison helps the person validate their position in the society which in turn contributes to the social identity of that person. This can be understood as one reason why transgenders look for validation of their identity in the society- they try to look out for people who express gender differently from their gender assigned at birth.

Most of the transgender participants said that they used to feel that their situation is unique because they have not seen people who cross-dress or express their gender differently from their gender assigned at birth; neither have they heard of such an identity. It is important for them to get the confirmation that it is not just their "situation" or "abnormality". In their attempts to learn more and express their gender, they narrated significant instances which became turning points in realising their identity. They got acquainted with people who are gender non-conforming and this becomes instrumental in their journey forward. This 'point of validation' marked the start of their journey in exploring their identity.

*"I had gone to Calicut for pilgrimage purposes and I happened to see an effeminate man at the Calicut bus stop. Till then I used to think that there is only me in this world like me. When I met such a person I wanted to talk to that person, sit and know more about them. Until then I could not talk to anyone about myself, everyone was trying to oppress me." --Krishna, Transsexual Woman*

In this phase of transgender identity creation, family, school and transgender acquaintances have played a crucial role. Education and freedom to understand and accept their identity and a positive family and school environment at this stage would have made significant changes in the way they perceived their identity. Transgenders who are educated managed to hold on and used formal education to seek out to sources of information about their identity such as books, internet, etc. They had a far better understanding of self at this stage than their peers. This stage was significant in terms of their gender identity creation.

### **4.3 Becoming**

A transgender person, who has sought out about their identity and acquainted with people of similar gender expressions, now would want to have a better freedom of expression and become their true self. The desire to have a congruent mind and body is strong. They are forced to stay away from familiar circumstances due to lack of acceptance in the family and society. The constant worry about what the society would think of their family, their own mental conflict, physical and sexual harassment from masculine entities in the neighbourhood, etc. are some of the reasons stated by the participants for moving out of the house. Some of the participants eloped as they felt

that they have no other option; some managed to find reasons to stay away from the family for higher studies or job. Livelihood becomes crucial at this stage of life. Earning to sustain their lives as well as transform their bodies, in ways deemed appropriate to self, to complete their journey of becoming a transgender becomes priority.

The transgender acquaintances in the 'seeking out' phase become instrumental in their lives at the 'becoming' phase. These acquaintances knowingly or unknowingly gave hope that they can also lead a normal life like any other individual. The transgenders who eloped ended up in unfamiliar cities. The commercial sex workers helped them at night and showed sympathy towards them. The transwomen also started engaging in sex work for a living, even when they earned only five times less than a woman sex worker. Sex work was a choice many of the transgenders made not only to survive outside their family but also to feel accepted for their femininity and sexuality.

*"I started doing sex work.. The person who used me for sex is the person who bought me a meal... that day I realised that my body has value.. what is a man's sex work, what can a man give a man. Until then I was only sexually abused or exploited... I used to be slave to other's desires.. there are people who have exploited me cruelly.. That day I got financial as well as emotional security.. then, I earned this money as a transgender.. I decided to continue sex work.. I would give my body to people who want my body.. because, I have starved for days without anything to do and ate leftovers sitting along with a dog... I know the value of money.. If my family had supported me, I would have never done it (sex work)"*

*- Krishna, Transsexual woman*

The transgender women who knew about hijra community through acquaintances left their homes to join the community to become a woman through physical transformation. The two livelihood options that hijras engage in are begging and sex work. The transgenders who join from Kerala also either beg or do sex work to earn money for their sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and for other treatments such as hormone therapy, silicone breast implantation and laser treatment. Enhanced femininity and a sound financial situation added immense value to their identity. They felt an increase in self-worth after the surgery and the acceptance and applause for their feminine beauty enhanced their confidence as a transsexual.

This phase is also the most difficult for a transgender man. The female physiology and outward appearance generated a feeling that they are susceptible to attacks from masculine entities of the society and governance.

*"I sometimes feel that I should just leave home and go, but even if I do so, my body is this right?.. Even if I go what if somebody does something to me.."*

*-Joby, Transsexual Man*

The scope for free expression of gender for transgender men could only be pursued with the help, support and protection of NGOs. Cutting off their tresses and wearing men's dresses gave

transmen the first breath of freedom. Seeking livelihood has been very difficult for transmen as well due to harassment and ridicule for "acting like a boy".

The transgender individuals embrace their identity more strongly in this phase. They are a step away from establishing their identity and have already started their transition. Most of the participants expressed their happiness and confidence in their identity. They gradually built their lives by first ensuring financial independency and then achieving freedom over mind and gender expression.

#### **4.4 Establishing**

The culminating stage of identity realisation of a transgender person's life is when they establish their gender identity and perform their desired gender in the place they choose to and want to. They find a position in the spectrum of gender identities which best suits their gender expression and live true to the understanding of self. They make a niche for themselves in the system. The enhanced confidence and integrity due to improved coherence with body and mind is an important entity in the checklist at this stage.

The physical transition could be in stages and may happen at any point in life across any of the phases as and when the financial situation allows. Some transgenders do not prefer to undergo any physical transition but perform gender in the most comfortable way through dressing, mannerisms, etc. Hence, completing physical transition is not a necessary criterion at this stage of gender realisation. However, transgenders who wanted to become transsexuals by performing Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) generally does so to establish their identity. They undergo hormone therapy and seek medical help in this transition.

Until now, the transgenders were in a journey to achieve their desired gender. At this phase, they also look forward for acceptance in the society. This need for acceptance provides a chance for them to evaluate their self. A participant described her journey until then as a "continuous run to achieve the femininity pointed out by the society". On self-evaluation, an attempt to polish their gender expression is done.

*"I am a woman now(after SRS). Am I only walking and behaving like a woman.(self-doubt)! Am I expressing the femininity in me to an extent that is over the borderline of a woman's expressions? To become a woman we would make up extensively, would draw kajal, put on fancy earrings.. but, women in Kerala do not put make-up like that... What does a woman wear- a small earring, a chain, bindi, kajal on eyes.. a normal woman.. a woman with a decorum.. I realised this late,"*  
*-Krishna, transsexual woman.*

She taught herself the subtle feminine gender expression by rehearsing in front of mirror after developing an understanding of feminine expressions of common women in Kerala. The narration perfectly testifies that gender is learned and performed as suggested by Judith Butler.

An introspection of their livelihood choices to suit and satisfy the societal notions of a good woman could be seen at this stage. A few of the elder transgenders who wanted to establish their identity as well as face for the transgender community gave up sex work. While some chose to work in the entertainment industry as stage artists, some chose to take dance lessons. These decisions were mature and after realising the stigma surrounding sex work. They stood up for transgender rights, leads vocal activism with their own life and tries to realise their aspirations as an individual. Marriage is on the cards for some at this stage as they find partners who accept them. Elder transgenders testify that carefully chosen socially respected choices has increased self-worth and acceptance in the society.

Transgender men can easily pass their appearance for a man. They undertake hormone therapy and other medical transitions such as removal of breasts to transform physically. They develop facial hair and mostly go undistinguished as a transgender in crowd. The increased congruence in their mind and appearance gives them confidence to search and apply for jobs and establishing their lives.

Issues related to body image is a constant issue and at varying levels throughout the stages of transition and realisation of their identity.

*"I used to wear extremely tight dress to hide my breast and work as wage labourer in scorching sun.. now since the operation, I am happy.. (he got up and removed his shirt to show how his top surgery has been done).. see, they have not done the operation properly.. I am a man right, and when I have to remove my shirt, it is embarrassing.. However, I feel confident to search for jobs and live happily"*

*-Joby, Transgender Man*

In the phase of establishing their lives and identity, the choice of livelihood and respectability in the society is important for them. The transgender individuals tried to concentrate more on their individual aspirations of leading a life like any other person and were inspired by role models in their lives. People who have played important role in their 'becoming' phase become a source of inspiration for them. One of the participants looked up to her mother for her loving and kind nature and admired the bravery of the sex workers and tried to draw inspiration from their street-smartness in her life. The establishing phase is characterised by efforts of the transgender individuals to lead a more socially acceptable and closer to normal life they are socialised in.

#### **4.5 Coming Out**

Transgenders have to explicitly state their gender identity to be acknowledged as a transgender. The manners of expression of a man and woman are accepted and "normal" in the eyes of the society. Transgenders have to "come out" of these binary definitions and expectations of their identity and state their non-conformity to micro (people within direct contact- family, friends), and macro (society, culture, law, etc.) systems. It is a process and hence may happen at any of the above explained stages. Coming out to the micro system is to seek acceptance of their established

identity in the family and amongst friends, while coming out to the macro system is to gain legal recognition and assert individual rights.

The 'coming out' process of Female to Male transgenders or transgender men is more difficult than the Male to Female transgenders or transgender women. The patriarchal societal and state mechanisms have tied a woman down to her body that any transformation from the traditional societal norms is condemned. A person born as female but faces gender non-conformity at a younger age does not have resources- freedom, mobility, right to expression and aspiration to seek out to understand more about their gender identity. This can also be one of the reasons why the transgender men who come out are very less compared to transgender woman.

A Transgender activist explains their plight as follows:

*"The patriarchal impositions in the family on girls at the age they mature- also the age when they realise their gender identity- curb their expression of masculine gender irrespective of their aspired gender being male. They do not have the means to identify this gender non-conformity.. even if they muster courage to explore their identity by moving out of the family, the government mechanisms such as police and societal mechanisms would invest time and energy in bringing back the girl. Thus, Female to Male transgenders do not have access to mechanisms by which they can explore or express their identity."* -Anil Chilla, State Co-ordinator for TG Survey

NGOs and rights based organisations have played a significant role in preparing the transgenders to come out to their families as well as to the societal and judicial systems. They have created a space for transgenders to explore their identity, earn a descent livelihood through their projects to support transgenders and seek emotional support.

## 5. Conclusion

In the life journey of transgender individuals, one aspect that is prominent is the varying degrees of violence experienced by these individuals right from a young age. On comparison with life of an average human being conforming to accepted gender binaries, it is necessary to evaluate the societal attitude towards the slightest deviance from socially accepted norms. The classification of stages mentioned are not to be treated as compartments and have to be used to appreciate the struggle of gender non-conforming individuals while framing affirmative policies for transgenders. Another important aspect that is to be acknowledged while analysing the life journey of transgender individuals is the possibilities of diverse gender identifications within the continuum. The creation of binaries within this spectrum and legitimising them is met with criticism in the academic and activism space of transgender studies worldwide. The use of word trans\* (trans star) by the global transgender community to refer to all gender non-conforming, non-binary individuals other than transmen or transwomen is an attempt to redefine the reference of the people belonging to the spectrum. The stages discussed above broadly describe the life of transgender persons who do not belong to organised transgender communities. The recognition of individual rights rather than rights as a community (due to absence of a structured transgendered community) has enhanced scope for gender realisations beyond transmen and transwomen within

the spectrum of trans identities in the state.

The life journey recorded here is more similar to the transgender identity development models discussed in the global west. The androgynous spectrum of gender identity is too broad to be summarised into a single model of identity development; nevertheless certain aspects of their gender realisation could be understood. The model suggested by Bolin (1998) to describe the realisation of identity of transwomen is one such model. Thus, the attempt to unfold the life journey of transgenders was to broadly classify their experiences, yet not tie them down to traditional definitions and models. This also has significance in policy framing as affirmative policies should appreciate gender fluidity and be non-discriminatory towards all the gender identities. The challenges associated with "becoming a transgender" and living as one, understood by examining various factors affecting their lives needs be discussed to provide a complete picture of the lives of transgenders.

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