

## Original Research Article

# Bargaining with social construction of gender identities: transgender realities in Cumilla, Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study explored the agency of intention of transgender women within everyday forms of resistance (thought, desire, intension, and communication) against the rigorous binary biological composition and gender identities in Bangladesh's social context. Transgender women ask society to take distinct and subjective gender identities thoughtfully and uphold their right to make a transition. Transgender women go through the psychological narrative where a specific sex organ does not outline the intact gender identifications. They want to be accepted, understood and supported by establishing their inner gender identities endeavored to their agency and deconstruction of customary gender identities.

**Methods:** The study was conducted at Kaptan Bazar, Cumilla Sadar in Cumilla, Bangladesh; twenty in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were adopted to gather primary data. The study participants engaged with various projects and contributed health services and social counseling to other transgender and male sex workers.

**Results:** The result considered transgender womans agency grounded in internal sharing, communication, daily activities, and viewpoints of identity position. Informal, undeclared thoughts, actions, and experiences portrayed numerous connections to their agency of intention. Encounters of participants presented a profound explanation of everyday resistance.

**Conclusions:** The agency of intention of transgender women may create a dialogue against socio-cultural prejudice and structural injustice; simultaneously, it can intersect a better consequence in proper contexts.

**Keywords:** Transgender, Agency, Everyday resistance, Gender identity, Anthropology

## INTRODUCTION

Transgender people in Bangladesh comprise individualities, features, and behavioral patterns beyond the binary approach of gender identities.<sup>1</sup> In the social construction of gender identities, most individuals determine their identities, acts, and socio-cultural gender characteristics by their sex assigned at birth. Transgender women denoted a conflict between an internal sense of gender and may not be corresponding with their biological sex; it does not always imply sexual

orientation. Transgender women are discriminated against whether they present themselves publicly or not; in most cases, they are beyond the interactive process of receiving social recognition and support for their gender identity and expression.<sup>2</sup> According to feminist scholars, women are a gender concept different from biological traits; they cannot signify by a human female. Moreover, the assessment depends on social role or position and other social traits.<sup>3</sup>

When 'man' or 'woman' concepts are interpreted based on managing a hierarchical social role according to

considered physiology, that aspect marginalizes transgender people. Thus, for defining individual agency, gender should be analyzed not only as an identity but also as a class.<sup>4</sup> Addressing the gender identification of transgender women and man allows to open up the critical engagement of agency and the social reality of gender as a class. 'Marginality' or 'exclusion' is reversible in the context of significant socio-economic and political circumstances, and distinct aspects like race, gender, ethnicity, displacement, movement, health status, and occupation determined individual and community exclusion. Transgender women are one of the most excluded groups in the mainstream society; in this aspect, within their own community, they have an inclusive affiliation, and they acknowledge their interpersonal relationships as social capitals.

Presumably, more transgender women are allied with the community as not everyone exposes their identity due to fear of hatred, socio-cultural stigma, and discrimination. The study participants (transgender women) were unwilling to disclose their identities publicly (except two respondents), living in the parental home or with other relatives. They have a connection (friendship, social activities) with the *Hijra* community, but they are not affiliated with the traditional norms and occupation of *Hijra*. This study sheds light on transgender women who encounter the social construction of mainstream binary gender identities. This study tried to work towards an extensive understanding of how the formation process of socially constructed mainstream gender identities being indicted by the agency of transgender selfhood, how do transgender women practicing daily resistance and negotiating the situation. This study searched the everyday resistance of transgender women against the social-cultural oppression; strategies of developing a counter-discourse against the power and knowledge of gender identities through their intention, thought, and communication that may not be the emancipatory form of political action or the broader identity politics but could make an agenda in becoming stage.

### ***Theoretical background***

For explaining the relevance and significance of this research, this study notified the agency of transgender women with the compensation of the human agency of cognitive theory, agency theory, and everyday resistance theory. Researchers suggested that new studies should have considered macro and micro-social perspectives to explore the barely identified passage of gender ideologies.<sup>5</sup> The micro-social philosophy focuses on agency, and the micro-social perspective emphasizes the analysis of social systems and populations at the structural level. The model for conceptualizing social cognitive theory's human agency combines understanding behavioral, environmental, and personal factors in an affiliation. This model can explain the importance of adopting micro-social and macro-social elements and

perspectives. Bandura in 1994 stated about this model, an individual's agency should be his/her capacity to influence their environment through their course of actions.<sup>6</sup> There are three dimensions of observing an individual's agency- behavioral factors (e.g., resistance, gender ideas), environmental factors (e.g., social care structure, access to social capital), and individual characteristics. Individual factors considered understanding oneself, an expectation of action, and personal competence beliefs to develop selfhood. Whenever it's a question about understanding transgender women's experience with the social phenomenon, it can't be confined to observing their behavioral, environmental, and personal factors separately. These three factors have an overlapping influence on each other<sup>5</sup>. To this extent, there is a significant alliance that has been marked distinguishing an individual's agency (behavioral, environmental, and personal factors) ahead of the binary approach of gender. Theoretically, understanding this roadway might help a transgender individual to confront disgrace and injustice.

Instead of resembling agency diversity, by the guidance of agency aspects of Ortner (2001), this study assessed the appearance of the agency's decisive role in transgender women's lives and their interpretations of denying the superiority of gender normative discourses. In 2001, Ortner assigned two quality modes of the agency; agency associated with power ideas, including domination and resistance, and agency nearly linked to intention.<sup>7</sup> Though both do not represent the entire agency category and not also reciprocally independent, both are distinct. The forms of power can be defined as the essential aspect of the agency, such as individual's action and capability to act on their behalf, authorizing own entities, and influencing situations or other people; thus, the agency holds both domination and resistance. In this regard, resistance appeared as a pattern of 'power agency.' On the other hand, domination and resistance are not always fundamental in terms of the agency of intentions. This form upholds an individual's desire grown in their life structure, also centered by an individual's structures of inequality. Both states were affirmed as trigger points of developing transgender selfhood.

The agency of intention was also profoundly structuralized by Scott in the year of 1985.<sup>8</sup> We can address resistance as informal, undeclared, nearly hostile, and hidden forms of marginalized classes from his perspectives. He labeled this form of resistance as 'everyday resistance' that distinguished the relation of knowledge and actions. In his view, an individual's intention or purpose influenced his/her acts/behavior; consciousness and thoughts on resistance happen in continuous communication. Second, intentions and consequences are not intersected. Intention not always meet the outcome, but if circumstance changes, it may become possible to act. A transgender person may enhance his well-being by the outcomes of resistance; on

the opposite, imaginary/romantic resistance strategies can terminate unpopular customs and laws. Nonetheless, a foundation of more valid legislative action may emerge through practicing everyday resistance by the transgender community.<sup>9</sup> Following Scott's theoretical base, this study endeavored to search an individual's intentions, thoughts, and communications for learning the everyday resistance of transgender women in 1985.<sup>8</sup>

## METHODS

### *Study design and population*

The primary data of this exploratory qualitative study were collected from November to December 2017 in Kaptan Bazar, Cumilla Sadar, Cumilla, Bangladesh, and a total of twenty respondents participated in the study. The study respondents voluntarily involved several HIV prevention assistance and schemes that contributed to sexual health services and social counseling to other transgender and male sex workers. The age range of the respondents is 18 to 40. The participants completed the education level from grade one to ten; two achieved higher and intermediate degrees.

Data were collected after instating the specific research question and objectives of the research. To specify the research problem, methodology, and type of data that should be collected, a unit of analysis was developed based on two points 'what' (agency) and 'who' (transgender women). The study followed the latent approach to read the data's subtext and underlying assumptions and the meaning of the social context.

### *Data collection*

A non-government organization situated in Kaptan Bazar helped to get the initial information regarding study participants by providing an address of a participant along

with the participant's consent. The rest of the sample population was selected by snowball sampling, and the key informant helped arrange the focus group discussion. Twenty in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were adopted for gathering primary data.

### *Data analysis*

This study grasped the cultural domain analysis process to analyze qualitative data and formed domains from data notes (Table 1).<sup>10</sup> The common semantic relationships (e.g., Person-transgender selfhood, a desire to identify self, a result/cause of discrimination of binary gender identities, a type of resistance) were identified for organizing the social relationships. According to the study objective, the following data notes formulated four specific domains (concern issues of agency, developing the gender identity, participant's desires, and patterns of representing self in the public sphere as an issue of resistance). The primary domain (agency) executed several included terms from the data. Finally, a set of a logical relationships were examined.

### *Ethical consideration*

This study attended the ethics of research linking human subjects.<sup>11</sup> To serve the research ethics and shield participants' rights, the researcher accepted three principles: beneficence, justice, and respect for persons. In data collection procedures, the confidentiality of data and the researcher's role in ensuring accurate data are the most critical ethical issues. Concerning respondents, this study did not disclose the study respondent's identity and maintained their verbal and written informed consent for participation, and followed the proper respondent selection criteria. Ethical approval was occupied from the Department of Anthropology, Comilla University, Cumilla, Bangladesh.

**Table 1: Domain analysis worksheet.**

Cover term/ Domains	Semantic relationship	Included terms/subtypes
<b>Concern issues of developing the gender identity</b>	Person-transgender selfhood	Agency (notion of selfhood, positive thinking regarding social change, aspiration of marriage and making family, aspects of autonomy and social interaction)
<b>Participant's desires</b>	A desire to identify self	
<b>Patterns of representing self in the public sphere as an issue of resistance</b>	A result/cause of discrimination of binary gender identities	
<b>Agency</b>	A type of resistance	

**Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics.**

Variables	Gender distributions		Age distribution (year)		Educational attainment			Employment status		Marital status	
	Trans gender woman (19) [sexual orientation: androphilic]	Man (1) [sexual orientation: androphilic]	18-24 (17)	25-40 (03)	Level 1-5 (16)	Level 6-10 (02)	Higher and Intermediate (02)	Contract based formal job, business (02)	Stage performance, grocery, escorting, sex-work (18)	Un-married (17)	Married (03)
Sample (%)	95	5	85	15	80	10	10	10	90	85	15

**RESULTS**

This research's foundation was ideological; therefore, the study attended ideological research guideline for analyzing qualitative data.<sup>12</sup> Ideological analysis enhanced cognizance regarding control, power, and domination. In particular, formulating the change, increasing awareness about bias, and expressing the disempowered is the prospect of ideological research.<sup>12</sup> The study results presented quotes, including contextual bases, which might give a clear idea about researchers' focal discussions with participants. Study findings scrutinized in specific contextual base: (a) concern issues of developing the gender identity (b) participant's desires (c) patterns of representing self in the public sphere as an issue of resistance, and (d) agency of intension.

In terms of gender identification, except for one person, all respondents clarified their gender identity as a woman to the interviewer. During the interview, they declared their gender differently from their birth sex and preferred addressing their name that indicates their woman identity, which they used to call in their intimate group. They willingly shared about their sexual orientation and the grounds for being transgender; they estimated that all these are valid reasons that changed them to enfold the feminine psychology (Table 3).

Social contexts mostly influence people to follow and embrace their culturally constructed gender identities; yet, some of them identified their selfhood beyond that rigid stratification. The respondents learn about their womanhood obscurely from a young age. Participants shared their thought regarding decision-making, responsibilities, mental and sexual relationships with men, whom they introduced as 'partner' or 'boyfriend' or 'premik'. They expressed their desire for 'partners', and the relationship resonated with them; having a particular 'male partner' played an active role in cognizance of their individualities. Most of them don't illustrate a 'female body image,' including attires and appearance publicly as they live with their family. Notwithstanding, they uphold strength that their feminine psychology of male origin will be placed in proper circumstances (Table 4).

The respondents work voluntarily (one of them was a formal worker) in the HIV prevention assistance for MSM (male do sex with males) and Hijra. They were involved in counseling and organized training for other members and facilitated group discussions for increasing awareness and human rights issues. A public sphere had evolved by respondents through raising their voice against gender stigma and counseling others regarding human rights or selfhood. Though it's complicating to deal with other reactions, participants proclaimed their own identity continuously (Table 5).

**Table 3: Concern issues of developing the gender identity.**

Substratum	Childhood experiences	Relevant verbatim
<b>Sexual orientation with male relatives while growing up in an extended family</b>	Not being aware of sexual relationships, but male cousins approached them.	"My male cousin provoked me sexually when I was twelve or thirteen years old. He nurtured me as a girl, and our relationship continued for six to seven years. That relationship was the starting point of considering my womanhood. I am a woman with a beautiful mind trapped in a male body" (In-depth interview, age, 29).
<b>Raised like a 'girl' by parents</b>	Respondents used to wear girls' dresses with other accessories until their five or six.	
<b>Growing up with girls</b>	Used to play with girls; gradually, started approving 'girly' things and behaviors.	
<b>Instinctive feminine personality</b>	Feminine personality ignited instinctively; woman selfhood felt in the unconscious level of mind.	

**Table 4: Participant's desires.**

Factors	Desire levels	Relevant verbatim
<b>Relationship</b>	The sexual urge to other men has appeared benchmark of strengthening their women identity.	"God sent me on the earth with a male body and feminine psychology. Do you know the sense of having a penis in a womanlike body? That's like I am carrying a pen in my pocket, which is inkless. Anyway, my body limbs can't dominate my mind; only a 'man' can do that" (In-depth interview, age, 23).
<b>Decision making</b>	The passion between partners influenced respondents negotiating undesired situations.	"On 27 November 2011, my boyfriend got married to another girl. Both we know we couldn't get married because of the social-cultural norms. I had to accept what I lost. But I showed courage, the true essence of strength that a woman has" (In-depth interview, age, 20).
<b>Responsibilities</b>	Reflecting fundamental identities (what they want to be) through family responsibilities and personal activities.	"When my sister got a divorce, my family wanted my boyfriend as their daughter's husband. The situation was unbearable; even I thought to commit suicide as I could not disclose my fourteen years of relationship with my boyfriend. As we can't get married to each other, finally, he got married to my sister, that was the only way for us to staying together. But after their marriage, I moved on. Because, though my heart bleeds, being a woman, I couldn't ruin my sister's life" (In-depth interview, age, 27).
<b>Self-appreciation</b>	Establishing women identities is the most desirable phenomenon.	"If I had no family responsibilities, I would have disclosed my humble womanhood. If my mother knows her third son is a woman, she will be so shocked that she could die. Thus, I fight with just myself. When I look into the mirror, I can feel myself; I can feel my womanhood" (In-depth interview, age, 21).

**Table 5: Patterns of representing self in the public sphere as an issue of resistance.**

Resistances	Respondents' experiences	Relevant verbatim
<b>Informal negotiation with the mainstream binary system</b>	Joining in gender discussions builds ties among respondents and makes them self-reliant.	"I always walk like a man to avoid social stigma. My confidence grew up after joining group discussions and training. Developing myself can save my life. Now, when someone disregarded me by calling 'beta-maag' or 'Hijra,' I replied to them that my identity isn't their cup of tea at all" (In-depth interview, age, 29).
<b>Raising voice</b>	Experienced sexual, physical, and verbal abuse ('beitta', 'Hijra, 'porosh-maag'). Working autonomously against rejection and people's anger.	"Some of us got attacked physically due to showing women's attitude and wearing makeup. How could it be justified? Those activities are criminal. Mostly I talk back to them gently. I tried to talk even with my family members" (In-depth interview, age, 24).
<b>Confronting gender stereotypes</b>	Wearing woman's attire, movement and public demonstration of physique (two participants).	"From my childhood, I imagined myself as a woman. At age 13/14, I had started wearing a girl's outfit. Everyone in my family has beaten me near to death. Last year my cousins tried to drown me; then the police came, and they took me into their custody. My family kicked me out, but I keep fighting" (In-depth interview, age, 22).
<b>Knowledge about gender rights</b>	Internalizing and go along with inner gender.	"I am pretty fit on both male and female attire, and I can choose what I will wear. If I express myself publicly, people may point their fingers at what they are not supposed to do (In-depth interview, age, 20).

**Table 6: Agency of intention.**

Prototype of agency	In every day practices	Relevant verbatim
<b>Act of developing the form of empowerment</b>	Proclaiming selfhood against the stigmatization of being a "male with a feminine psychology"	"My parents cursed me for my feminine attitudes. However, I pretended as a man to make my family comfortable, but I became a woman when I want to make myself happy. It is my resistance to them, who don't acknowledge me; they can't change my inner identity and happiness" (FGD, age, 29).
<b>Self-advocating about the social changes</b>	Positive thinking regarding social change	"Feminine psychology with a male body-usually the society never consider. But change is happening. For instance, previously, girls were supposed to wear a scarf. Now the girls sometimes don't use a scarf; on the other hand, boys started using scarves with Panjabi! Does time not change?"(FGD, age, 23).
<b>Aspiration of marriage and making family</b>	The hope of meaningful social change makes respondents proficient in earning rights.	"When a woman weds another woman, it's simply a disaster. I'm cheating on my wife, cheating myself too. Every morning, I woke up and started a day with hope that someday I will find my 'partner' and wipe out all of my agonies" (In-depth interview, age, 29).
	Intention and reasoning reinforce the informal resistance against the social block of transgender family ideas	"I am unmarried and obviously never feel attracted to women, but I know my parents will force me to marry a woman. However, I will fight to keep my womanhood and make a family with my beloved person. It would be great to be able to foster a child" (FGD, age, 20).
<b>Aspects of autonomy and social interaction</b>	Social resources (support of family members, friends, and social groups) help to negotiate situations and formulate the individual agency	"I can express myself to the fullest in my secret gathering with friends and group members. I do makeup, dress my hair, wear girls' attire, make fun and talk about our men. Singing and dancing with my transgender cousin rejuvenates me. I also do stage performances outside the town secretly. When I do dance or act in a women's makeup, a perfect woman comes out from my inside and possesses freedom in front of a crowd."(FGD, age, 19)

The pattern of everyday forms of resistance, significance, and respondents' views had rationalized how these forms have appeared and contributed. The informal, undeclared, and hidden forms of resistance identified the association of their understanding and responses. At present, the participant's everyday resistance (thoughts, intention, communication, action, capacity, and shared experience of discrimination) may not provide a concrete underpinning for establishing their gender identity as it is not making a symmetrical socio-cultural and political platform. Among the twenty study participants, three are married, and two have kids; they are bound to marry women. The family pressure and parents' decision regarding marriage formed a collision on gender identity and sexual orientation during married life. Respondents revealed their intention to make a family and get married to their 'Nijer Manosh' (beloved man); they articulated family rights ahead of marriage and adopting children. Some respondents have profound social relationships, such as family and companions, to make a way out of defending social denial. Respondents who have social resources (e.g., love/affection, service) are efficient in managing socio-cultural crises (Table 6).

**DISCUSSION**

The study result explored the settings of concern issues of developing the gender identity, recognizing selfhood, emerging resistance, and patterns of expressing self in the

public sphere that classified the process of conveying agency's function.

In terms of the debate of desire and identity research, contemporary psychoanalysis aspects of language and sexuality studies suggested the necessary turn from the identity to desire; many studies emphasize social identity rather than distinguish the entire sexual desire issues. But, in 2005, Hall differed with this rationale because the hurdle is desire-centered approaches made identity studies and desire studies opposite; it failed to screen the fact that the expression of desire is ultimately social.<sup>13</sup> He argued that identity position is developed and rooted in ideology; thus, explaining desire without identity is not conceivable. Boellstorff in 2003 also added that centering subject positions and subjectivities are the prime thought of the social fact of transgender selfhood.<sup>14</sup> This study supports these arguments in recognizing the self, which conceptualized the association between identity and desire in everyday lives. This parameter of the agency is crucial for transgender women in terms of arguing binary gender aspects. Despite living in a strict biological composition and gender customs-obsessed society, participants experienced their gender identities beyond the sexual orientation; the study result represented their experiences of beliefs and resistance with activities concerning the agency of selfhood. Being transgender is about identity and desire, the way they see themselves and identify with.

The study participants act through behavioral and personal factors centered on binary gender identities in unequal everyday life. Participant's everyday forms of resistance (agency) are the capacity of influencing circumstances through their knowledge of self-appreciation; desire to establish the instinctive feminine personality, and intention for raising their voice against gender stigma. Their purpose formed their acts; perception of resistance appeared into group communication that attended Ortner's (2001) and Scott's (1985) approaches on the agency.<sup>7,8</sup>

Transgender and same-sex relation knowledge appeared as fundamental insights in interdisciplinary sexuality studies.<sup>15</sup> An individual might use multiple identity terms such as gender-queer, two-spirit, queer, and that should be the individual is.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, identities can be transformed over time. With the support of those early studies, this study revisited the diverse identities of transgender women. A transgender person's significant spirit of self-esteem and the power of advocating the agency to others play an energetic function to discuss social body statesmanship.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the study participants' negotiations for developing better resistance against social stigmatization and discrimination imply their adopted flexibility, encouragement, and spirituality as a battling strategy.<sup>18</sup> The shreds of evidence from the study justified that a lack of belief in the personal skill of developing selfhood and lack of social care structure could lead to increased levels of an identity crisis.<sup>19</sup>

### Limitations

This exploratory study has a few limitations. Data were collected from an urban city area in Bangladesh; therefore, findings might not represent transgender people living in a rural area. The study included only twenty respondents, and they have participated in gender and sexuality rights programs. Thus, their knowledge of agency might be inspired by those awareness programs. The participants were self-reported, and study data depended on their remembrance. Most participants lead their womanhood almost secretly; talking to their family for more information or verifying data was inaccessible. The study didn't look for any transgender man respondents due to their social security and secret life. This circumstance demands further additional examinations such as exploratory and comparative research on transgender men's agency in Bangladesh. Investigating the agency's alliance with the social systems at the structural level may enhance the narrow downing of intervention and policies concerning transgender rights in Bangladesh.

### CONCLUSION

This study explored the participant's stimulating interpretation of everyday resistance, how they are questioning the binary biological composition and gender identities from an informal level of procedure. The study represented the participants' internal sharing and

connection on daily activities, views, and ideas of their identity position with their peer-group. Their desires and connection may become inevitable in a modified circumstance and a firm structural action can be grounded in the future. Therefore, following the underground narrative of the agency of transgender women, social science researchers and anthropologists may consider developing further dialogue against socio-political discrimination and systematic injustice of the transgender society.

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