

**Unseen Lives – Making Transgender Identities Visible: Dominant  
Social Perceptions of the Transgender Community  
in Urban Sri Lanka**

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Transgender is a hidden and a 'tortured' sexual minority which is invisible within the larger hetero-normative value oriented Sri Lankan context due to the lack of support from the wider social, cultural and legal fields. There is relatively little written by social science scholars regarding LGBT identity in Sri Lanka. Among what is available, only a few directly address the issue of transgender identity. Much of this literature also focuses on sex workers and not on ordinary persons living in society as transgender individuals. Within this context, I conducted a qualitative study using ten case studies of those living with a transgender identity including six transgender women and four transgender men in the Sri Lankan urban context. Therefore this study focused on transgender individuals in general, and only one case study was conducted with a transgender sex worker. The main research question related to how these individuals with transgender identities describe themselves within the hetero-normative value oriented Sri Lankan urban context. In this context, I focused on three sub research questions: how transgender individuals describe their gender identity and sexual orientation; the reactions of others in primarily heterosexual society towards their gender identity and sexual orientation; their strategies to cope with, avoid, or respond to the reactions they have experienced. Consequently, my attempt in this paper is to position transgender identity in the context of gender discourse within the Sri Lankan context and address the issues related to dominant social perceptions of the transgender community in urban Sri Lanka. My main argument is that those who do not fit into the gender prism of so-called sex and ideal gender roles categorizations are marginalized as a sexual minority and discriminated in all legal, social, and cultural sectors which leads to these individuals facing both physical and psychological violence in the use of language, mass media, and in everyday life in the Sri Lankan context.

Keywords: Transgender, Violence, Marginalization, Discrimination