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Beyond the Binary

The Experiences of Genderqueer People in Colombo

Sadushi De Silva

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The International Centre for Ethnic Studies
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Beyond the Binary

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Sadushi De Silva*

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“That’s not an identity, it’s a fruit salad.”
– Undisclosed LGBTQ+ Community Leader

***To all my ‘fruit salads’: you are real and you are loved
and your contradictions make you whole.***

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Glossary

*The definitions below are neither totalizing or conclusive, nor do they claim to be so. They serve as a guideline for understanding how such terms are employed by me, the author, in the article text. Many of these terms have different uses and interpretations that vary over time, place and context.

Ardhanarishvara (Sanskrit): The composite male-female figure of the Hindu god Shiva together with his consort *Parvati*

Androgyny/Androgynous: A term used to describe gender expression that is both feminine and masculine, or neither

AFAB: Assigned female at birth

AMAB: Assigned male at birth

Asexual: A spectrum of sexual orientation in which a person feels little to no sexual attraction or desire. Fully asexual means the person has never desired sex or had a sexual attraction in their life and never will

Binders: also known as chest binders, these are pieces of fabric, often resembling a sports bra, that flatten the appearance of one's chest or breasts

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth

Cisnormative: The practice and reinforcement of male and female gender roles within society as normal and correct

Depaththetama neha (Sinhala): Within the context of this article, this phrase, translated from Sinhala, denotes being neither man nor woman, belonging to neither side

FTM: Female to male

Gender Dysphoria: A medical term to describe the state of severe unhappiness and mental disconnect caused by a misalignment of gender identity and physical appearance

Gender Fluid: A genderqueer term in which a person does not have one fixed identity or label and can shift gender expression/appearance each day

Genderqueer: An umbrella term used in this article to denote gender identities and presentations that do not fit the ‘dominant trans narrative’ of transitioning from your gender assigned at birth to the ‘opposite’ male or female gender

GRC: Gender recognition certificate

Hijra: Third gender identifying people of the Indian subcontinent who have deep histories in healing and culture

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and additional gender and sexual minorities; I include this acronym because the majority of Colombo organizations represented do not usually include “intersex” or “asexual” as in the last two initials of LGBTQIA+

MTF: Male to female

NIC: National identity card. A government issued identity card from the state of Sri Lanka given to all those fifteen years or older

Non-binary: A gender identity that does not conform to the traditional gender binary, whether as all-encompassing, a rejection of etc., that differs at the individual level and exists on a spectrum

Pandaka (Pali): A being from early Buddhist texts who is neither male nor female

Parvati (Sanskrit): Parvati is the wife of the Hindu god Shiva, known as “daughter of mountain”

Pronouns: A third-person pronoun used by an individual to indicate their gender identity

Queer(v.): to consider or interpret (something) from a perspective that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality: to apply ideas from queer theory to (something)

Queerphobic: Adjacent to homophobic, a term used to describe the hatred against members of the entire queer community. Homophobic refers specifically to hatred of homosexuals, while queerphobic includes homophobia, biphobia, transphobia etc.

Shikhandi (Sanskrit): A transgender figure in Hindu mythology

Shiva (Sanskrit): One of Hinduism’s main deities. The union of Shiva and Pavarti compose the male-female Hindu figure, Ardhanarishvara

Top Surgery: A medical procedure, commonly known as a mastectomy, in which one’s breasts are surgically removed and often replaced with a more masculine-shaped chest, including smaller nipples

Transgender: A person who does not identify with their assigned gender/sex at birth and transitions/ed to the opposite gender

Ubhatobyañjanaka (Pali): A term from Buddhist lore which refers to intersex or a person with the signs of both binary sexes and genders

Udhvimeye novene (Sinhala): A translation of the term “non-binary” from English to Sinhala

Statement of Positionality and Purpose:

Factoring in my personal upbringing and life in the United States, I subconsciously, and most ironically, bring heavy influences from the West to this project, be that through a lack of or difference in language and terminology, conceptual foundations, cultural sensitivity and literacy, and ways of relating to others (to name a few). My insider-outsider position as a child born and raised in the United States to former Sri Lankan nationals, in tandem with my personal colloquialisms and non-binary identity, known to the participants of this research, almost certainly subliminally influenced the crafting of and responses to my questions. I acknowledge the danger of a globally travelling politic of gender non-conformity which promotes itself as a universal project and I understand this research to be undeniably guilty of participating in it.¹ With this in mind, I hope, at the very least, this work gives voice to the perspectives and lived experiences of many on the island who deserve to be heard.

¹ King, “There Are No Lesbians”, 38.

Introduction

In the early days of this research, a pivotal phone call with the distinguished director of a longstanding Colombo-based LGBTQ+ organization challenged the horizons of this project. During our discussion, I described a recent shift in focus from traditionally thought of transgender people—individuals seeking a comprehensive transition to the opposite sex assigned at birth—to the lived experiences of those who transcend the binary: genderfluid/non-binary/genderqueer/gender non-conforming individuals. I was met with near-total defeat: “There are no non-binary people here. That is a Western concept. You might find one or two in Colombo because... it’s Colombo.”

I marked these words as an invitation to delve deeper into what extent this may or may not be true. Are there really no non-binary people here? A familiar narrative is present in Katie King’s work, “There are No Lesbians Here’: Lesbianisms, Feminisms, and Global Gay Formations”. In it, King engages the claim “there are no lesbians here” by imagining, “Who might make such a statement and for what intellectual and political purposes? What counts as a lesbian? And where is ‘here’?”² In response to this community leader’s comment, in congruence with the theoretical inquiries of King, and richly informed by the very real people who embody this research, the project at hand returns the questions: who might make such a statement and for what intellectual and political purposes? What counts as a non-binary person? And where is ‘here’?³ The following questions are the undertakings of this work which attempts to trace the lived experiences of people with non-conforming gender identities hailing from the island: how do cultural and social narratives shape the recognition and visibility of people with genderqueer identities? What are the challenges and opportunities for genderqueer individuals to navigate their identities within the constraints of the legal architecture of the state and the social frameworks of the queer and non-queer community? In what ways do local art and creative expression challenge or reinforce dominant gender norms and contribute to the visibility of nonconforming gender identities in the island? How do language, religion and culture impact the self-expression and collective identity formation of genderqueer communities?

² King, “There Are No Lesbians”, 33.

³ Ibid.

Literature Review:

Research regarding queer gender minorities in Sri Lanka has primarily centred around the experiences of transgender people who plan to or have transitioned from male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM). In 2014, EQUAL GROUND, a long-standing Sri Lankan LGBTQ+ organization, published an extensive report titled, “The Situational Assessment on Transgender Persons in Sri Lanka”. The information explored within the report is robust, covering childhood sex abuse, issues with family, psychological trouble, workplace harassment, healthcare, and stigma and discrimination within multiple realms of life, among other detailed subtopics. The report offers generous and expansive definitions of the term ‘transgender’; however, its findings draw exclusively from interviews with FTM and MTF transgender persons. Human Rights Watch published a comparable report in 2016, “All Five Fingers are Not the Same”, interviewing 61 LGBTI people and briefing us on the legal frameworks of gender recognition in Sri Lanka. In a similar fashion to the 2014 assessment, this article contains a wealth of information but lacks non-binary, genderqueer or gender fluid representation. Saittawut Yutthaworakool, in their thesis titled, “Understanding the Right to Change Legal Gender: A Case Study of Trans Women in Sri Lanka”, touches on how cultural binary norms influence the legal battle for trans rights in Sri Lanka and includes its relevance to trans folks uninterested in identifying with “male” or “female” categories. Distinct from other studies, this paper addresses some contentious views about third gender categories within the Sri Lankan trans community. The main composition of transgender rights research, including those aforementioned, examines the landmark institution of the GRC, or gender recognition certificate. Through a 2016 administrative decision, transgender rights advocates on the island won the ability to change government identification from male to female or female to male in culmination of a lengthy personal process. The remainder of the collection of research on the transgender movement analyzes the similarities and differences between Sri Lanka and other South Asian nations, battles for legal rights and social recognition.

Currently, there exists no study that focuses exclusively on the lives of people self-identified as non-binary, gender fluid or genderqueer. To my knowledge, this academic research is the first of its kind, and yet, it merely skims the surface of the spectrum of lived experience. Within the existing body of adjacent scholarship, few articles on transgender people mention overlapping issues with the gender

non-conforming community. This research attempts to introduce the perspectives of non-binary and gender fluid people to the larger conversation of transgender rights, life and community on the island. Akin to the HRC and EQUAL GROUND reports, this study addresses multiple facets of life as a genderqueer person in Sri Lankan communities. Furthermore, the work asks interviewees to elaborate on the friction between trans and genderqueer identifying members of the LGBTQ+ community as introduced by Yutthaworakool's work. Finally, the project seeks to understand the ways in which genderqueer people outside the binary create space for themselves through various forms of expression.

Considering local demarcations of the term 'transgender' is notable to this research, especially because they vary greatly between the island's LGBTQ+ community, participants of this study, pre-existing body of scholarly research, and finally, the Sri Lankan state. The government, alongside the majority of academics, adopt the term as coined by the World Health Foundation, designating, "Transgender [as] an umbrella term for all people whose internal sense of their gender (their gender identity) is different from the sex they were assigned at birth."⁴

Such an ambiguous definition leaves room to host other gender diverse experiences such as non-binary, gender fluid and gender-nonconforming identity. Although this language provides space for pluralist inclusion, those who the state accommodates as transgender in practice are forced to embody much narrower terms. Legal recognition, solely achieved by way of the gender recognition certificate (GRC), fixes transgender identity exclusively and binarily as female-to-male (FTM) or male-to-female (MTF). In agreement, one outspoken advocate in the transgender community shares that she does not believe non-binary or gender fluid identity should be housed under the umbrella of transgender identity.⁵ Furthermore, within the cohort of genderqueer people of this study is a kaleidoscope of opinions as to whether non-binary and gender fluid are transgender. The perspectives of the ten genderqueer participants are as follows: five consider these to be under the transgender umbrella, two do not, one is unsure, and the last individual answers "yes and no".

The conversation around this term is salient to this research not only for clarity around the working definitions of this piece, but also as being critically relevant to

⁴ Ministry of Health- Sri Lanka, "Issue of Gender", 1.

⁵ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

what some would consider the incorporation of the ‘transgender’ experience into a legal political identity of the Sri Lankan state. Non-binary and gender fluid have thus been precluded from this identity formation and thereby, in their statelessness, erased from the legitimacy of “her” on this island. For the purposes of this article, in the interest of clarity, we shall assume the meaning and constrictions of the state definition of transgender. Furthermore, terms such as non-binary and gender fluid will be referenced under umbrella classifications such as gender non-conforming and genderqueer.

Methodology

Between October 2023 and February 2024, I conducted fifteen semi-structured qualitative interviews. These interviews, although conducted individually, can be thought of in two groups: Group A, comprising gender fluid and non-binary people, and Group B, consisting of civil servants and representatives from LGBTQ+ interest organizations. Ten interviews were classified under Group A and five under Group B.

Within Group A, eight participants were born, raised and resided on the island as of March 2024. The two other participants had varied backgrounds: one was raised in Sri Lanka and currently attends university abroad, while the other has lived in various countries, spent their secondary schooling years in Colombo, and currently resides overseas. The ages of Group A participants ranged from 19 to 32 years at the time of the interview. Regarding ethnic representation, half of Group A interviewees identified themselves as Sinhalese. Each of the remaining five participants self-identified respectively as Tamil Muslim, Sri Lankan Tamil, half Sinhala-half Tamil, half Colombo Chetty-one quarter Sinhala-one quarter Tamil, and half Sri Lankan Moor-one quarter Tamil-one quarter Sinhala.

Social media was the primary tool I used to locate individuals identifying as non-binary or gender fluid. The name of one prominent non-binary identifying person in Colombo, given to me in a phone call, was the springboard into my deep dive on Instagram. Browsing through the followings and followers of their page directed me to other users sporting non-conforming pronouns such as “they/them”, “she/they”, “he/they” and the like. Blind direct messages detailing the objective of the research invited potential interview candidates to participate. Five individuals, now thought of as members of Group A, responded affirmatively. The snowball

sampling method was employed to recruit the latter five interviewees in this group. Each interview was conducted in a face-to-face meeting with the exception of one interview carried out over Zoom. Group B included representatives from five Colombo-based organizations focused on gender-related advocacy including EQUAL GROUND, Women and Media Collective, Young Out Here (YOH), the Bridge to Equality project of the National Transgender Network, and the Family Planning Association. The ethnic makeup of Group B consisted of four Sinhalese and two half-Sinhala-half-Burgher identifying people. I contacted these organizations via Facebook and Instagram, again using direct messaging, and upon receiving positive responses, I conducted in-person interviews throughout Colombo.

For both groups, I developed a semi-structured interview guide covering various topics. Group A's interviews explored background information, identity formation, LGBTQ+ community dynamics, advocacy, creativity and care. Group B's interviews focused on background information, LGBTQ+ community dynamics, advocacy efforts and interactions with the state. While the guides provided structure, each interview was adapted to the participant's unique experiences and insights. Interviews typically lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours and all participants provided signed consent for recording responses. To ensure anonymity and safety, the participants either gave consent to use their everyday name in these findings or elected to adopt an alternative name. Those who wished to remain anonymous chose a pseudonym which they are referred to as in this report.

My personal lack of fluency in Tamil and Sinhala, coupled with the lack of access to translators, severely limited the sample size and regional reach of this project. Furthermore, as an American-born person of the diaspora, limited connection to the island constricted the network of people I could connect with within the expanse of the queer community. This research focuses almost entirely on Colombo-based genderqueer individuals and fails to uncover the vast possibilities of the lived experiences of non-conforming people who reside outstation. Moreover, the preponderance of Sinhala-led queer organizations in Colombo distorts the narrative of how genderqueerness manifests and is received within minoritized communities on the island.

Recognition and Representation

‘What Counts as a Non-Binary Person?’

Defining genderqueer identity is a mission impossible. Inherent to these identities is a breadth of expression that is untethered to the cisgender societal constructs of “man” and “woman”. Questions that inform gender identity journeys sometimes subconsciously include: “How does one perceive the world? How does one perceive themselves based on that? How does one present that to the world? And how will that presentation and behaviour be received, re-conceptualized, and acquired by the world?”⁶ Genderqueer identities can be characterized as “fragmented, context-dependent, and relational.”⁷ Non-conforming gender expression is read by others as feminine, masculine, a blend of the two, or even incomprehensible to both. In short: there’s no way to tell, and that is ok.

The personal identifications of the participants interviewed in Group A ranged across the non-conforming spectrum of gender identities. Their identifications are broken down as follows: four non-binary people, two non-binary and gender fluid people, two trans non-binary people, and two who preferred not to say or subscribe to any gender categorization.

When asked how they expressed their gender identity, Group A exhibited diverse responses ranging from what is tangibly visible, such as physical presentation, to a resounding “I don’t know.” The uncertainty of how they expressed themselves resonated with half of Group A participants. Vithu (she/they/he/it) further reflects on the complexity she feels, stating, “Even for me it’s very confusing, non-binary identities. What is that?” They later elaborate, “I understand myself as I am being myself, that is all. That’s the non-binary conceptual idea for me.”⁸ Khayrat (they/them) articulates struggles with self-recognition, stating, “I don’t really recognize my gender very often and I feel quite dysphoric about my body... but also sometimes I feel like I’m really holding myself back in terms of how I express it, not just outwardly, but even for myself.”⁹ For many, gender expression is not consciously articulated; as Pubudinie (she/they) suggests, “I think people don’t

⁶ Kularathna and Hasintha, “A Comparative Literature”, 174.

⁷ Ellawala, “Mismatched Lover: Exploring”, 1335.

⁸ Vithu, interview by author, Colombo, November 9, 2023.

⁹ Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

intentionally express their gender identity. It just comes out. So I don't really know how I do it. But I know I do it...We just be. And it shows."¹⁰ Nisala (they/she/he) analogously proclaims, "I feel like it's just truth. It's the only truth that I know."¹¹ Ashu's (she/they) words underscore the fluidity of their expression, remarking, "Sometimes I like to dress more masculinely...I have a binder. I wear it sometimes when I feel uncomfortable, but I think I really just try to be myself instead of trying to fit in a box."¹² When her appearance leans feminine and they effortlessly, yet unintentionally, pass as a cisgender woman, they encounter questioning remarks like, "Why do you use any other pronouns? You're a girl."¹³ Despite the inherent privilege of blending into cisnormative expectations, Ashu and fellow interviewees often grapple with erasure and invisibility, stemming from their nuanced and situational expression and others' unwillingness to accept them. Scarlet (they/them) draws from their aesthetics like "hair, tattoos, style [and] jewellery"¹⁴ to reflect personal authenticity rather than conformity to binary norms.

Some members of Group A opted to change their names and/or pronouns to better align with their identity. Vithu uses she and they as casual pronouns and sometimes subscribes to he or it. Nine out of ten of the interviewees in Group A adopted they/them pronouns in some capacity, reflecting a broader trend among English-speaking people of genderqueer identities. Khayrat interprets they/them as "the opposite of trying to limit something, it's literally meant to expand it."¹⁵ The space that they/them pronouns occupy-under Khayrat's definition, a space of ambiguity-unlocks the possibility of what one's gender is and can be. They observe how this language "starts a process of degendering me in your mind"¹⁶ and can inspire genuine re-framing of the way one views another. For some, like Benny, the most affirming approach is using Benny's name rather than any pronouns, reminding us of the importance of respecting and learning others' self-identification.¹⁷

Genderqueer people not only embody their queerness variably but also maintain varying degrees of attachment to their gender identity. For some, it is a foundational

¹⁰ Pubudinie, interview by author, Colombo, November 14, 2023.

¹¹ Nisala, interview by author, Zoom, December 11, 2023.

¹² Ashu, interview by author, Colombo, November 8, 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Scarlet, interview by author, Colombo, November 21, 2023.

¹⁵ Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Benny, interview by author, Colombo, November 10, 2023.

aspect of their character, while for others, like Jehan (they/them), it is merely a fraction of their identity which they give little thought to.¹⁸

Queer Discovery and Identity Formation:

With the exception of one, all participants in Group A revisited moments from childhood where they strayed from the normative behaviours of their assigned gender. In one anecdote, Nisala shares:

“I’m an only child and I’m male. So there’s this ambition that’s been placed on my body, this expectation that’s a very gendered thing too. I’m very intelligent and there was a lot of ambition placed on my intelligence, and it’s considered a male thing. But I was also very loving and nurturing and always helping around the house. And I would only hang out with the women in our communities. So my parents would actually start introducing me to people at that age as the son and the daughter of the family. And it was super normal for me to think of myself that way. I wasn’t really thinking about my gender really. I was just like ‘Oh yeah I’m the boy and the girl. I am the son and the daughter.’ So that was the first moment that I started thinking I guess about it or relating to it in some kind of way.”¹⁹

For most others, consuming media depicting queer people proved crucial to personal exploration. Ashu vividly recalls her first introduction to a queer person:

“When I was small, I read this article. It was in a newspaper. It was about a trans woman in India. She transitioned from a man to a woman and went from Roshan to Rosa. I remember it so clearly. I didn’t know that trans people existed right, so I thought this was just a thing that just happened to this woman suddenly. And I was convinced that the opposite was gonna happen to me, like I was gonna grow up and I was gonna be a boy.”²⁰

Ashu was the sole participant in Group A who cited print media as their first portrayal of queer personhood. Characters and personas in film and television were more commonly referenced, as in Scarlet’s case:

“I remember when *Orange Is the New Black* was the thing. Ruby Rose was also the thing. She was very out about being gender fluid right, and that was the first

¹⁸ Jehan, interview by author, Colombo, January 3, 2024.

¹⁹ Nisala, interview by author, Zoom, December 11, 2023.

²⁰ Ashu, interview by author, Colombo, November 8, 2023.

time I figured out ‘ok that’s a thing.’ I really like that. And then Doctor Strange came out. The sorcerer had a very androgynous look and I read up on interviews because I was interested. [Filmmakers] said, ‘No, I want to intentionally go for this androgynous look.’ From there on, I think I just jumped and hopped and skipped over to, ‘Ok there’s an identity called non-binary’...and that just fit so much with how I was feeling and what I was doing that I was like, ‘Ok yea that makes sense.’ But it took me a few years to properly start identifying as non-binary internally.”²¹

Over half of the interviewees in Group A credited social media as a tool which granted them access to gender diversity discourse. However, real-life interactions too can profoundly re-shape the possibilities of what gender fluidity could tangibly look and feel like. From a memory they shared about meeting a friend of a friend who is non-binary, Khayrat observes, “it is one thing to come up on concepts on the internet but when you witness a person really embodying themselves and be present, it’s quite impactful.”²²

Navigating sexuality first was the segue into some participants’ gender exploration. Pubudinie notices, “It was like progress. Like you first realize you’re not straight. And then you get into this whole umbrella of being a queer person. And then you’re like, ‘Oh I might not be a woman woman.’”²³

Benny’s journey mirrors theirs. Benny explains, “First I thought I was gay, like everyone else. Then I was like ‘Ok there’s more to this. That might be my orientation.’...but in spite of that I’m not going to explore about this, and I had to like figure shit out because I was still not comfortable, so then I thought, I’m transgender. And then I was like eeeeeeee... There’s more to this.” Soon after, Benny’s life coach introduced Benny to non-binary identity during conversations surrounding Benny’s intention to transition into a woman. Benny felt non-binary captured Benny’s feelings most appropriately.²⁴

For some, creative forms of performance and artistic articulations of their own design allowed for traversing identity. By means of Benny’s very own fashion brand, Benny began to explore fluidity through clothing by designing one-of-a-kind apparel.²⁵ Two interviewees play Dungeons and Dragons, a fantasy role-

²¹ Scarlet, interview by author, Colombo, November 21, 2023.

²² Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

²³ Pubudinie, interview by author, Colombo, November 14, 2023.

²⁴ Benny, interview by author, Colombo, November 10, 2023.

²⁵ Ibid.

playing game, with friends. It not only allows them to venture into different gender personas but also enables cisgender people to explore non-binary identity, which one participant found quite affirming.²⁶ Embodying different genders through cosplay and theatrical performance was another integral aspect of three out of ten interviewees' gender journeys.

Critical Calls for Representation:

Although the term “non-binary” may be remiss in application on the island, claiming fluid articulations of gender have not or do not exist on the island, or, more broadly, in South Asia, is false. Non-conforming gender groups existed in the region well before the recent insertion of the “non-binary” category in the West. Hijra communities have lived in the Indian subcontinent for centuries.²⁷ The island itself has been home to people of non-normative gender identities since around the nineteenth century—the Nachchi.²⁸ Depending on who you speak with, Nachchi identity gets cast into different queer categories of gender. Some claim it to be transgender identity, while others, such as Sathya (she/her), a former Nachchi, contend that Nachchi is the original non-binary ideation on the island.²⁹ In another article, Nachchis are conceptualized as, “male-bodied individuals with a (in instances partial) femme interior, different to an unequivocally binary transgender identity, as those interviewed demonstrate periods of intense femininity, especially when in drag, but experience little body dysmorphia and are not distressed by their masculinity.”³⁰ No matter what definition one subscribes to, Nachchi and contemporary non-binary identity on the island, in sharing their refusal to submit to one definition, together inhabit the liminal space of genderqueerness. Antithetically, Western notions of gender, which colour colonial legacies, distil identity down to a single model and a linear trajectory of development.³¹ Binary delineations of “man” and “woman” render the experience of gender as lifelong, stable and neither situational nor mutable, unlike the Nachchi and the genderqueer.³² Conversely, we might understand the spirit of non-binary identity to not be a Western concept but rather as having been co-opted from Eastern and pre-colonial cultures by the West.

²⁶ Tharushi, interview by author, Colombo, November 20, 2023.

²⁷ Harvard Divinity School, “The Third Gender”, 1.

²⁸ Miap, “Nachchi: A Beacon”, 1.

²⁹ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

³⁰ Ellawala, “Mismatched Lover: Exploring,” 1327.

³¹ Ibid.

³² King, “There Are No Lesbians”, 42.

Almost half of the genderqueer interviewees credited knowledge of Hijra identity as helpful in mapping themselves in the global context of binary gender nonconformity. Still, many in Group A reported feeling outcast, specifically within Sri Lankan society, expressing an array of emotions spanning from “alien” to “subhuman”. Scarlet astutely observes, although regional representation is a good starting point, relying on it delays the urgent need to develop localized narratives of fluid identities.³³ The absence of visible non-binary people in localized contexts perpetuates the misconception that there are “no non-binary people here,” and continues the damaging narrative that such people are only of elsewhere spaces and places. One genderqueer interviewee detailed the unbearable stress shouldered in being the unofficial public face of the non-binary community in Colombo.³⁴ This not only pins undue burden onto this person, but also constructs a singular image or stereotype of non-binarity. Multiplicity in localized representation is essential in counteracting narrow interpretations of genderqueer people.

Forging more vast representation is a great responsibility which must coincide with popular education, as visibility in the absence of education breeds “ignorant people making trouble”³⁵ and threatens the safety of those outwardly defying gender norms. The harmful consequences of lacking education have already been felt, with nearly all people in Group A reporting instances of violence, harassment or invalidation, ranging from internet threats to physical and sexual assault, in response to their perceived difference.

Furthermore, representation should simultaneously normalize “non-normative” expressions. Tharushi (she/they) laments that representation in media is often lacklustre in that it targets cis-heteronormative people, centring the outside viewer’s study and spectacle of genderqueer people, rather than including them as ordinary community members.³⁶ In such overstated portrayals, we see a reproduction and exacerbation of the alienation many interviewees endure. Incorporating genderqueer people implicitly in stories and media instead of in explicitly exaggerated performance can challenge the reproduction of such otherness.

In self-representation, the internet is a powerful platform for creating space for those interviewed to express the identities. The distinct majority of 8 out of 10

³³ Scarlet, interview by author, Colombo, November 21, 2023.

³⁴ Benny, interview by author, Colombo, November 10, 2023.

³⁵ Tharushi, interview by author, Colombo, November 20, 2023.

³⁶ Ibid.

Group A members list their personal pronouns in their Instagram bios. Many spoke of not having “come out” to friends and family in person but have soft-launched their gender in the form of publicly sharing their gender diverse pronouns on Instagram. Although a valuable tool, social media is limited in access: in 2023, 33% of the island’s population did not have access to the internet, thus excluding a significant portion of people from benefiting from its resources and utility.³⁷

(In)visibility in Language:

Employing terms around gender diversity on an island with multiple languages, cultures and influences proves challenging and therefore needs to be examined. Despite critiquing the use of “non-binary” and thereby erasing this identity from the island, the NGO leader who was first mentioned runs an organization which has adopted these very same Western terminologies through public discourse on social media, their website, and in Sinhala and Tamil module translations. As seen in the previous discussion regarding the use of “transgender”, gender and sexuality terms from the Global North are often borrowed by places such as Sri Lanka, in part because the West largely funds initiatives in the Global South.³⁸ Still, language is one of the most powerful ways we create and share culture. While each interview was conducted in English, all those interviewed also spoke one of the other two languages of the island, with thirteen participants being Sinhala speakers and two participants being Tamil speakers.

When asked whether colloquial words with comparable meanings to “gender fluid” or “non-binary” existed in either Sinhala or Tamil, responses varied greatly. Of the thirteen Sinhala speakers, three believed there was none, five were unsure or unaware, and the remaining five each named terms with no consensus. Two individuals cited Nachchi as the non-binary equivalent in Sinhala, one shared *depaththetama neha*, and the other stated that it was directly translated from the English term to *udhvimeye novene*. Of the two Tamil speakers, one interviewee could not name a specific word that connoted gender fluid or non-binary, but they referenced a group in Tamil Nadu who had researched, “what kind of language is employed around [these ideas] historically, and then they developed a list of terms to use.”³⁹ From their understanding, “some of the terms are like neologisms

³⁷ Kemp, “Digital 2023: Sri Lanka”, 1.

³⁸ Ariyaratne, “To Be or Not”, 71.

³⁹ Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

but a lot of them have some connection and are drawing from these things.”⁴⁰ Khayrat summarizes the indispensable utility of culturally specific language-building, stressing, “If we accept that we already have the sort of philosophical underpinnings for this kind of expression and the lived experiences of people for it, then finding the language to articulate that in the present day in these languages is a very affirming project. It’s not Westernizing in any way. Because you’re literally using Tamil.”⁴¹

This project failed to reach a significant number of diverse people across various regions of the island and neglected to ask of the potentially gendered nature of the two languages themselves. However, during discussions on terminologies, two Sinhala-speaking interviewees in Group A volunteered some information. Nisala mentioned that the colloquial spoken language did not use gendered pronouns,⁴² while another’s perspective modified this assertion by adding that, although pronouns were not gendered in Sinhala, the formal language, as expressed in news media, was gendered.⁴³ As for Tamil, neither of the Tamil speaking interviewees commented on the topic unprompted. From my limited knowledge of spoken Tamil, gendered personal pronouns are practiced. Whether there is a movement to de-gender or an effort to accommodate gender non-conforming people within the Tamil vernacular should be considered in future study. As the representatives of organizations in Group B were exclusively Sinhala speakers and hailed from predominantly Sinhala speaking organizations, none had knowledge of the possible dialogues surrounding the Tamil language. Even so, what people in each language community share is the need for vocabulary that is digestible, positively charged and culturally specific.⁴⁴

Reception and Representation in Religious Culture:

Nine of the ten interviewees in Group A feel that people on the island are generally unaware or unwelcoming of non-conforming gender identities. The denial of rights to the LGBTQ+ community in Sri Lanka and in other parts of South Asia may be attributed to conservative principles propagated by contemporary religious and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Nisala, interview by author, Zoom, December 11, 2023.

⁴³ Jehan, interview by author, Colombo, January 3, 2024.

⁴⁴ Ellawala, “Mismatched Lover: Exploring,” 1334.

cultural beliefs.⁴⁵ Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, state authorized ethno-religious dominance in Sri Lanka, plays a dangerous role in influencing attitudes and censoring access to information from the public. In one example from 2016, “Hathe Ape Potha”, a year seven sexual education book introduced in government schools, was removed by the unilateral decision of the Buddhist clergy. Exposure to the topics of sexual and reproductive health provided by this text served as a groundbreaking channel in educating young people and fostering a more inclusive understanding of gender and sexual diversity in society.⁴⁶

Many who fail to recognize genderqueerness within their religious histories reject divergence from cis heteronormativity. With close interpretation, we can locate non-normative instances of gender across the major religions of the island. Vithu, who was raised in Jaffna and belongs to a Hindu family, explains that people accept those with transgender backgrounds because Shikhandi, a trans being, along with Ardhanarishvara who is part Shiva, part Parvati, “one body with two genders,” exist in Hindu belief. They add that trans reception is complicated by the intersections of caste, disclosing, “the oppressive caste is very hierarchical and against the non-binary and LGBT community.”⁴⁷ As for experiences in Buddhist contexts, one interviewee recalls their mother’s belief that queerness appears as a karmic manifestation of suffering for the sins of one’s past lives.⁴⁸ Yet, we see queerness appear in Buddhism too. In the “Vinaya Pitaka”, it is revealed that the “Buddha sermonized the existence of another two genders apart from male and female. They are the ubhatobyañjanaka and the pandaka.”⁴⁹ Khayrat shares how in Islam, “the pronoun for God in the Quran, the Arabic term that is used, is genderless. It is societal factors at play in terms of interpretation and later translation that fixes it as ‘he’”.⁵⁰ Tharushi speaks of the eroticism and morbidity of Catholicism and the abundant potential for “queer identities to fit into it.”⁵¹ In the absence or rejection of such interpretations, what people on the island might ask themselves is: must we see queerness or queer bodies explicitly in popular interpretations of religion, culture or history in order to treat people with respect, care and dignity?

⁴⁵ Kularathna and Hasintha, “A Comparative Literature”, 179.

⁴⁶ Bhattacharya et al., “Transgender Persons”, 686.

⁴⁷ Vithu, interview by author, Colombo, November 9, 2023.

⁴⁸ Benny, interview by author, Colombo, November 10, 2023.

⁴⁹ Wijayath, “Recognition of Transgender”, 44.

⁵⁰ Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

⁵¹ Tharushi, interview by author, Colombo, November 20, 2023.

Legal Recognition, the Police and the Threat of the State:

People of non-binary and gender fluid identities in Sri Lanka remain invisible in the legal terms of the nation. In spite of this, in the late 2010s, some headway was made in gaining state recognition of transgender people, born out of a legal case brought forth to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka which resulted in victory. The win took its form in a 2016 administrative decision spearheaded by the Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, granting transgender people the opportunity to modify their name and gender identification from male to female or female to male, on what is now known as a gender recognition certificate (GRC). An individual in possession of a GRC can subsequently amend their birth certificate along with their national identity card (NIC) to reflect their gender.

Metamorphosis into a “complete” man or “complete” woman is required to acquire a gender recognition certificate. The 2016 circular detailing its implementation mandates the intervention of a government hospital’s consultant psychiatrist to determine a person’s fitness as a man or woman.⁵² In one interview, a psychiatrist describes silently observing how a patient “cuts his hair, what kind of denim or pants he wears, whether tattoos are masculine or feminine... how he sits, how he holds his hands,”⁵³ among other things. The doctors follow the observations with suggestions on how the patient should physically present and carry themselves, stressing articulations of hypermasculinity or hyperfemininity.⁵⁴ Such unchecked discretionary power licenses state psychiatrists to mould cisnormative presentations and behaviours into people. By these deductions, people who do not subscribe to type casts of binary gender such as non-binary people, are rendered unrecognizable to the state thus making them vulnerable to criminalization.

According to an interviewee in Group B, prior to the introduction of the GRC, state institutions in conversation with trans community members offered the construction of a third gender category. She explains:

“In 2015, we had a discussion with the Ministry of Health, Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, and Defense Ministry. They asked us: ‘What do you want?’ We said we want male and female identity cards because we had a community called trans people. Nachchi people said ‘we don’t want, we are happy like this.’

⁵² Ministry of Health- Sri Lanka, “Issue of Gender”, 1-2.

⁵³ Ministry of Health- Sri Lanka, “Issue of Gender”, 73.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

We may know we are not men, we don't want identity cards. We are just happy. So they [in reference to the three aforementioned institutions] asked: 'actually, do you want us to give you a separate document called 'other'?' This happened in 2015, and we were going here and there...We saw the harassment the Hijra community faced when they held O or X identity cards or legal documents. So we said that no, no, no, no. We want only male or female."⁵⁵

The "O or X" designations referred to in these comments call to attention the "X" or "O" gender designation used in official documents to denote being of a third, non-binary gender that is neither strictly man or woman. Furthermore, this insight into the GRC implementation discussions suggests that past administrations were willing to institute a third, "other" gender distinction. Group A voiced mixed perspectives on what the future of the 'gender box' should hold: 3 out of 10 people favoured a write-in format with the option to leave it blank, another 3 out of 10 imagined removing the whole category from documents altogether, 1 individual was unsure of their feelings about the topic, and 1 person supported each of the following ideas – include AMAB and AFAB only, add 'other' and 'prefer not to say' to existing categories, or insert a third gender category, at the very least. Though it may be true that almost ten years ago an "other" gender category was not in demand, it is worth considering, as evidenced in this research, that times have changed. In recent years, other nations in the region have made administrative and legislative decisions in favour of the rights and recognition of genderqueer people. In 2013, the government of Bangladesh officially recognized Hijra identity, while the Pakistani legislature passed their Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, which entitled non-binary people to constitutional rights.⁵⁶ Chathuri elaborates on the difficulties of state erasure: "I'm legally not identified. And comes another struggle because your representation is not there. Then you look at your history and everything, you're not there. Absolutely not there. So then it becomes hard for a person to feel anywhere. They feel like they're kind of like a lost being."⁵⁷

Psychological stress over feeling nowhere is compounded by the possibility of violence ratified by the state. Much of Sri Lanka's archaic penal code, penned and imposed by British colonial rule, still governs the island today.⁵⁸ Of note is Section 399, which states: "A person is said to be cheating by impersonation if he cheats

⁵⁵ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

⁵⁶ Bhattacharya et al., "Transgender Persons", 680.

⁵⁷ Chathuri, interview by author, Colombo, November 16, 2023.

⁵⁸ Kularathna and Hasintha, "A Comparative Literature", 179.

by pretending to be some other person or by knowingly substituting one person for another, or representing that he or any other person he or such person really is.”⁵⁹ Considering some people of non-binary identity appear incomprehensible to traditional cisgendered style and etiquette, they are at risk of arrest by police under this law. One participant of Group A expressed a desire to transition legally by means of the GRC process out of safety concerns and for protection from the law.⁶⁰ Over half of all interviewees raised adjustments in attitudes and culture as one of the greatest barriers to change. With cisnormative colonial legacies of “male” and “female”, post-colonial scholars warn⁶¹: “Focusing exclusively on legal rights without interrogating systems such as colonialism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, patriarchy and class, that impede access to legal rights relegates human rights to merely legal changes that affect practice in a very limited arena.”⁶²

Studying the attitudes of law enforcing bodies such as the police can feed our understanding of the threat of state violence. Kaushalya, an attorney-at-law and project officer at EQUAL GROUND offers a cautionary tale, recounting a 2021 case brought against the Sri Lankan police, which resulted in a circular drafting guidelines on how to handle situations involving transgender people and people undergoing gender transitions with the intention of preventing arbitrary arrests. Advocates campaigned for this circular to include all LGBTQ+ people, regardless of their identity. In her interview she speculates:

“For some reason they [referencing the police and the state] are more accommodating of the trans identity than a lesbian or gay or someone who identifies as bisexual because, again, if you’re trans and you fit into a binary, that’s ok with them. It’s very hard to explain to them what’s a lesbian, what’s a gay person because of their cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, and so on and so forth...I believe they had an incident with someone with a gender fluid case... It was very hard to explain to the police officer there, what is gender fluid. So their questions are also: ‘So you’re a man or you’re a woman?’ It’s a practical difficulty. I suppose people can’t comprehend because we’ve been taught to fit into a binary since our early childhood”.⁶³

⁵⁹ Sri Lanka: Penal Code, 404.

⁶⁰ Benny, interview by author, Colombo, November 10, 2023.

⁶¹ Ariyaratne, “To Be or Not”, 67.

⁶² Bhattacharya et al., “Transgender Persons”, 678.

⁶³ Kaushalya, interview by author, Colombo, January 9, 2024.

Such accounts and the unilateral preference for trans identity evidence the state's admission of who can and cannot be accommodated in its remit. Meditating on these ideas, we might inspect what makes non-binary identity definitively inhospitable. It is by definition undefinable, and perhaps that is what is so threatening to the state. How can it contain its citizens who refuse to be contained? With the GRC process, the state curates performance of cisgender stereotypes in order to depoliticize gender diverse people into disciplined subjects of the state, all in preservation of the status quo which valorizes a particular concept of man, woman, marriage, the family, and regulation of sexual practice.⁶⁴ How can it recreate uniformity, or the appearance of it, let alone reproduce itself, without obedience to the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist cis-heteronormative structural relationships?

Access to Gender Affirming Medical Care:

Like all people in the world, non-binary and gender fluid people deserve the right to make decisions about their own bodies and consult medical professionals who are informed about and sensitive to their unique concerns. The right to self-determine one's gender is non-existent in Sri Lanka, unlike in Nepal, where in 2007, the Supreme Court recognized a third gender category for people who are neither male nor female and made clear a path to obtaining documents that are based on self-feelings and not the opinions of medical professionals.⁶⁵ The ability to self-declare gender identity is integral to curbing violations of dignity and bodily autonomy. Scarlet admits they do not seek out medical care for Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), due to the fact that doctors on the island are clueless and unaccommodating of their gender identity.⁶⁶ At their personal intersection of non-binary identity and asexuality, they do not wish to receive typical birth control treatment for PCOS. Autonomy in their eyes means, "healthcare treatments that can relate to my non-binary identity, not my born gender"⁶⁷.

A lack of education and the abnormalization of gender diverse identities forces many genderqueer people to forgo medical care. One interviewee from an advocacy group revealed that some surgeons required a person to have a state-issued gender recognition certificate (GRC) in hand to be operated on, as surgeons harbour

⁶⁴ King, "There Are No Lesbians", 37.

⁶⁵ Malalagama, "The Shifting Landscape", 48.

⁶⁶ Scarlet, interview by author, Colombo, November 21, 2023.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

suspicion of trans people as trying to criminally impersonate another individual, an act forbidden by the Sri Lankan penal code.⁶⁸ In such cases, the state and medical professionals gatekeep who can and cannot access certain medical care by weaponizing the GRC. As a person seeking top surgery who does not wish to take testosterone hormones or identify as a binary gender, Scarlet, along with any other non-binary person on the island with mutual feelings and desires, is thereby barred from top surgery.⁶⁹ Travelling abroad remains the only option.

Seeing as there can be overlap in the types of services non-binary and transgender people may seek, including hormone therapy and surgeries, we may look to the experiences of trans people in Sri Lanka to predict what might occur for genderqueer people if such services were at their disposal. According to Kaushalya of EQUAL GROUND, most people from the island venture to India or Thailand to undergo gender affirming surgeries.⁷⁰ Inaccessibility consequently precludes genderqueer people who lack the privileges of time, exorbitant amounts of money, and access to trustworthy information from traveling abroad for care. Of those transgender identifying people who have completed surgeries on the island, unacceptable numbers of them have reported botched operations.⁷¹ Extreme stigma from the medical community was reported in EQUAL GROUNDS' "Situational Assessment of Transgender People in Sri Lanka". Experiences in this report range from hostile facility workers to the sexual and physical assault of trans community members.⁷² In one instance, a prejudiced surgeon, who refused operation on multiple previous occasions, conducted the surgery in such poor quality to the extent that this individual required a secondary corrective operation.⁷³ With a deficit in experience in the health community that is riddled with egregious bigotry, negligence, and in some cases, refusal of quality care, gender non-conforming people can suffer from medical abuse and malpractice.

⁶⁸ Kaushalya, interview by author, Colombo, January 9, 2024.

⁶⁹ Scarlet, interview by author, Colombo, November 21, 2023.

⁷⁰ Kaushalya, interview by author, Colombo, January 9, 2024.

⁷¹ Chandimal, "Analyzing The Culture", 45.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

LGBTQ+ Community and Organizations

Direct Genderqueer Community

Celebration and commiseration with community anchors much of human life. Although restricted in size, networks of queer communities on the island are threaded by institutional acquaintanceships and interpersonal relationships. Because of its scarce visibility and limitless configurations, building and organizing a community around non-binary identity proves more challenging. All but one participant of Group A acknowledged the presence of at least one non-binary friend. The outstanding interviewee with no close non-conforming friend acknowledges:

“I don’t actually know non-binary people to connect and get advice from because the only other non-binary person I know was basically born male. So when I have specific questions about binding and my chest and top surgery, that sort of thing, I can’t ask them...There’s a lot of representation needed by default because if you have, let’s say someone like me, I prefer an androgynous look most of the time or towards the more masculine. I’m very rarely feminine presenting, but that’s not the same for everyone else. So if it’s just, let’s say me [as the sole representation] then everyone assumes ah ok if you’re non-binary, you have to ‘look’ non-binary. That is also an issue. You can look whatever way you want and still identify as non-binary.”⁷⁴

Because the experience of being non-binary can be so diverse, creating a larger, diverse network of genderqueer people who affirm each other’s experiences, as well as support the very unique struggles one may have, is essential. Concurrently, such connections work against the formulation of an archetypal “non-binary look”.

Impressions of LGBTQ+ Organizations

A supplementary avenue of support that should ideally exist for the non-binary community is situated within broader LGBTQ+ spaces such as queer advocacy organizations. Seventy percent of Group A interviewees rated their experiences with Colombo based LGBTQ+ organizations poorly. The following excerpts pulled directly from interviews illustrate general sentiments and experiences:

⁷⁴ Scarlet, interview by author, Colombo, November 21, 2023.

“I feel like most of the queer organizations focus on getting the projects done and to get the money. Being LGBT here, it feels like a business sometimes for these people, and that’s not what I believe.”⁷⁵

“There’s a certain, I don’t want to say, surface-levelness you can see from the kind of class of society that it caters to. That its politics is informed by very different lived experiences than how queerness, how queer people experience life, across the island. So having realized that about the predominant group or organization, eventually in 2018, a close friend started introducing me and taking me to spaces that were held by these other groups.”⁷⁶

“I think these organizations pick off younger queer people and they try to use you for their own things. Like whatever they’re doing, right. And I don’t know. I feel like to some extent they mistreat a lot of young queer people. And I think they should not do that. A lot of these people have their own ideas, like younger queer people have way more nuanced and understanding of how things are now.”⁷⁷

“So it’s done in the way they want to, not in the best way for the community. They are discriminating people. They are controlling people. They are blackmailing people. And they are literally trying to get people into doing things that they want. I feel like it’s not making an effect because the organizing is mostly focused on their personal agendas rather than what’s best for the community.”⁷⁸

“I’ve sort of made a conscious effort to avoid queer activism in Sri Lanka just cause I don’t think it’s a very productive space or a very focused space... It’s just that like the structures for queer activism in Sri Lanka are just so fundamentally broken and nonsensical. It’s the same group of five upper-middle-class, upper-class-rich-Sinhala-Buddhist passing queer people from Colombo who have done the same thing for the past twenty odd plus years that have absolutely no understanding of class consciousness and is just like an extremely terrible space to be in that I want absolutely nothing to do with and that I choose to avoid at all costs... It’s just pointless. It uses the umbrella of queer activism to just mask a bunch of rich queer people using their privilege to continue exercising said privilege.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Pubudinie, interview by author, Colombo, November 14, 2023.

⁷⁶ Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

⁷⁷ Ashu, interview by author, Colombo, November 8, 2023.

⁷⁸ Benny, interview by author, Colombo, November 10, 2023.

⁷⁹ Jehan, interview by author, Colombo, January 3, 2024.

Colombo-based advocacy groups, by virtue of these testimonies, are charged with unmitigated elitism, classism, ethno-religious nationalism, self-interest, and exploitation of the community they allegedly serve; immediate pause for re-examination of the leadership and underpinnings of these organizations is in order. In Group B, one queer rights activist discloses candidly, that especially within the Colombo groups:

“There’s a lot of anti-Tamil sentiment. There’s a lot of Islamophobia... It really ranges from microaggression all the way up to actual violence. Because exclusion in and of itself is aggression. Things like not being available in Tamil. But we do have a real shortage of good Tamil translators who are also equipped in queer language and terminology and know about the issues... There is a shortage but the shortage is because nobody really bothers to hire people or train people. There’s no demand for it. It’s very rare. And sometimes it’s either half-assed or not available at all.”⁸⁰

Within this league of organizations, only one received numerous positive mentions: Women and Media Collective. Tharushi mentions, “They do sex education booklets and education about various different things... I really like the work they do, and I feel like they’re very inclusive of all gender identities and sexualities. And from what I have read of their work, I feel like their ideas are aligned with mine, so I don’t have to be afraid to work with them.”⁸¹

As for organizations outstation, their reception was decidedly more positive. The work of Jaffna Queer Festival was raised by three people. One participant shared how the festival gave them a fulfilling creative role, with another in Group A noting, “The Jaffna Queer Festival is one of the best programmes that is happening at the moment that kind of breaks the idea of ‘it’s just a discourse’. They are discussing. They’re not saying that “oh you need to be queer to have that discourse.”⁸²

Reception of Genderqueer Identities Within the LGBTQ+ Community

Blatant invalidation of non-binary identities within Colombo LGBTQ+ organizations was reported by almost half of the Group A cohort. In contradiction to these findings, one youth leader of Group B affirmed its embrace and inclusivity

⁸⁰ Anonymous Queer Rights Activist, interview by author, Colombo, January 16, 2024

⁸¹ Tharushi, interview by author, Colombo, November 20, 2023.

⁸² Chathuri, interview by author, Colombo, November 16, 2023.

of non-binary youth.⁸³ However, one of the group's former youth members, details a "non-binary protest" that ensued after the young people felt disrespected by the organization's leadership. This same non-binary participant challenges:

"I feel like the older generation of queer people don't understand that we exist. Don't believe that we exist. So they would, you know in the queer community it's very normal to roast someone and you do it in a friendly way. But I think it was very... it felt very targeted towards certain people. Like oh if you're dressing like a girl, you're acting like a girl why don't you pick one or the other and transition? And these are very young people and there is no space to really explore who you are or like how you choose to present yourself."⁸⁴

Many of Group A members cite the pressure to "choose" a binary gender, undermining their true identity. For instance, a Group B interviewee recalls:

"Non-binary people sometimes do fashion. Which is not acceptable at all. I'm not accepting. There is a guy, they are also non-binary. Good looking guy. Short hair. Wearing huge earrings, wearing a saree without a jacket, and using public transport. Imagine their situation. They faced violence during the travelling time. And they had to come back to the office to remove that. Because public is not ready to accept that kind of huge changes. We have to do it gradually."⁸⁵

In their reconfiguration of the saree ensemble, donned with earrings and short hair, this "guy" bends cisnormative standards and rouses condemnation from this community leader. Evidently queerphobic in its expression, the narrative suggests that the saree-clad individual should sacrifice their personal style, and thereby their queer identity, in obedience of the rules that govern cisgender society. Straying from societal norms ultimately compromised this individual's safety, as emphatically flagged by this interviewee. Even so, one interviewee of Group A pushes back against self-censorship, arguing:

"In the workshops and what not they very specifically tell you, if you want people to listen to you, you need to act in this way, you need to be boxed. I think specifically for non-binary people, our existence can't be boxed, so then, what are we supposed to do? Are we just not included in this whole narrative? And why is it that queer

⁸³ Prasangika, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

⁸⁴ Ashu, interview by author, Colombo, November 8, 2023.

⁸⁵ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

people need to fit into whatever boxes to be heard? Like that's not a good thing. Even if that's true of society, that's what we're trying to change right?"⁸⁶

They reference the problematic politics of recognition reproduced within the LGBTQ+ community. Imploring non-binary youth to condense themselves into "boxed", "respectable" queers causes immeasurable damage.⁸⁷ Although it may not be its intention, the GRC's binary walls ascribe transgender identity as "culturally legible through the 'wrong body' trope. Problematically...this process works to demarcate ideals of 'acceptable' transgender subjectivity: self-sufficient, normatively feminine [or masculine]."⁸⁸ Being safe and unbothered within "boxed" conventions may appeal to some LGBTQ+ community members, as EQUAL GROUND's Kaushalya explains, "when I speak to people I kind of see there's a tendency of people trying to fit into the binaries in Sri Lanka because they can have a marriage life you know, a normal marriage life here or want to marry their partners."⁸⁹ Abiding by the status quo allows some to intelligibly and paradoxically be invisibly recognized within the public sphere.⁹⁰ However, such articulations and the twofold coercive forces of cisheteronormative society—and ironically—queer society are unsavoury to others. Chathuri vents:

"It's a struggle even in the queer community. Non-binary is a term in Sri Lanka that is not accepted and defined as a category because we have been ingested from the 80s. If you talk about the old queers, like 80s, 90s queers, they're not ready to accept the existence of non-binary... They don't understand this category because again they've been binarily defined. You have to be this 'natural' woman... Literally I'm going through that with a lot of queer community people. You know they want to be something 'complete,' where gender and this concept and discourse of gender, being queer, is not being complete."⁹¹

The "complete man," "complete woman" trope resurfaces in a 2017 study where the author posits the Sri Lankan transgender community as sustaining "marked preference for what Western discourse would identify as cisgender, challenging the concept of transgender identity synthesis and pride."⁹² One Group B participant,

⁸⁶ Ashu, interview by author, Colombo, November 8, 2023.

⁸⁷ Ariyaratne, "To Be or Not", 71.

⁸⁸ Nicholas, "Queer Ethics and Fostering," 171.

⁸⁹ Kaushalya, interview by author, Colombo, January 9, 2024.

⁹⁰ Ellawala, "Mismatched Lover: Exploring," 1335.

⁹¹ Chathuri, interview by author, Colombo, November 16, 2023.

⁹² Ellawala, "Mismatched Lover: Exploring," 1332.

who is incidentally a transgender person, validates Chathuri's perspective, conceding that "This gender non-conforming is only the first stage because you're confused."⁹³ Such statements trivialize the lived experience of all those who identify as non-binary. Much of the cohort of Group A also shared the routine dismissal of their identity as a "trend". Revisiting the conceptual frameworks of King, we again may ask ourselves once more: what is the intellectual and political purpose of minimizing and policing genderqueer identity in the LGBTQ+ community?⁹⁴ Responses in Group B's pool hint at potential motivations. One LGBTQ+ leader admits:

"Nowadays people are coming out as non-binary. So my opinion is, it is because of the Western influence. There is a whole resistance you know. For non-binary. I feel very sad. I feel very scared. Because from Nachchi we evolved as LGBT and then now whole non-binary. Because I was the first prominent trans activist as well as Bhoomi. We are both women who came out to the society and fought for our rights as trans people, as trans women."⁹⁵

A second Group B member alluded to this same resistance to non-binary identity. The possibility of the government or its agencies revisiting the GRC milestone as backlash to a genderqueer movement haunts transgender rights advocates. In a scenario where non-binary people demand recognition, which in practice asks Sri Lankan society to uproot the paragon of cisnormativity, the GRC, lying precariously on the weight of an administrative decision, uncemented in law, risks revocation. Transgender rights proponents have framed non-binary individuals as antagonists of their movement, blinding them to their mutual enemy of freedom—the state. Continuing this dialogue, we may consider, "striving for the acceptance of certain minority identities that remain within the binary does not address the root cause of marginalization and prejudice against difference."⁹⁶ The GRC, by these principles, is a neoliberal re-articulation of the Victorian colonial legacies of bifurcated gender division. Can a nation-state that effectively absorbed colonialism and its exclusionary conventions be trusted to write the script of anti-colonial resistance? Two community leader-participants in Group B declare that it is not time for the non-binary movement, leaving us to wonder, when is? Currently, decriminalization efforts in opposition to penal codes 365 and 365A,

⁹³ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

⁹⁴ King, "There Are No Lesbians", 33.

⁹⁵ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

⁹⁶ Nicholas, "Queer Ethics and Fostering", 173.

which forbid same sex relationships, occupy the headspace of most Colombo-based organizations, according to the findings of this research.

Despite this internal strife, there is some awareness of an invitation for new leadership as one Group B director states, “The organization thinks that my experience is valuable, but personally I think I shouldn’t be here. I have to give this place to someone else. Because I started this organization. This organization is like my child, but I cannot stay here for a longer time.”⁹⁷ Whether or not the LGBTQ+ community, with leaders new and old, can accommodate the lives and needs of non-binary and genderfluid people, however, remains yet to be seen.

Art as a Means of Belonging

Even while navigating the margins in broader society and LGBTQ+ spaces, genderqueer people of the island are forging fresh representations through creativity. In her current project, *This land is not mine, mother*, Chathuri, an artist interviewed in Group A, queers some of the island’s historical traditions and rituals. They elaborate:

“I had a question: where do we belong? Because we want to belong somewhere... But that history, that culture, that tradition says that you don’t belong here. You’re not a part of that written epistemological history. So then I started thinking, what if I start searching and maybe reanalyzing? Because queering, the word queering, the discourse of queering, is so hidden. It’s in the margins. It’s like in-between lines. It’s not something you can literally like place it and say this is what is the meaning of queer. So I started searching for that.”⁹⁸

Histories, as we are told them, are never totalizing or uncontested. Chathuri locates queerness in a “reproduction of history and nation.”⁹⁹ She and her trusted team bring this art to life in ritual performance. They describe, “Even in rituals... I portray characters that wear masks, blending male and female attributes fluidly. Their movements defy categorization, challenging traditional gender norms. This concept of the soul and the body in tradition transcends gender, aligning deeply with queer discourse. Non-binary people exist.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

⁹⁸ Chathuri, interview by author, Colombo, November 16, 2023.

⁹⁹ Coloma, “What’s Queer Gotto Do”, 230.

¹⁰⁰ Chathuri, interview by author, Colombo, November 16, 2023.

Her creative interpretations trouble the assertion that “There are no nonbinary people here” and invert this claim to the accusation: “Where are the missing queer people?”¹⁰¹ Dialogues of the work confront the nation-state’s erasure of queer histories on the island, affirming queer people have always existed here.

Scarlet toys with developing characters devoid of gendered pronouns. They explain, “I have written stories where pronouns are deliberately omitted, forcing readers to confront their assumptions. It’s fascinating to see varied interpretations—from imagining characters as male-female pairs to same-sex couples. This experimentation aims to normalize queerness in literature.”¹⁰² Similarly, Tharushi integrates queerness into their art and writing, often portraying queer characters unintentionally and in doing so, normalizes queer existence.¹⁰³ Pubudinie incorporates LGBTQ+ identity into raw, uninhibited poetry,¹⁰⁴ while Benny’s clothing designs centre fluidity and diverse bodies.¹⁰⁵ Khayrat’s creative work dares to venture into multiplicity, navigating the complexities of gender alongside other discourses. They reflect, “My art addresses multiple intersections that critics may find disjointed or challenging, but this dissonance is a deliberate act of queering—embracing the fluidity and complexity of lived experiences.”¹⁰⁶ Each of these artists—Chathuri, Scarlet, Tharushi, Benny, Pubudinie and Khayrat—presents diverse approaches to queering, some intentionally and others inadvertently, reimagining societal norms and advancing the visibility of fluid and non-binary lived experiences across the island’s cultural and artistic landscape.

¹⁰¹ King, “There Are No Lesbians”, 37.

¹⁰² Scarlet, interview by author, Colombo, November 21, 2023.

¹⁰³ Tharushi, interview by author, Colombo, November 20, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Pubudinie, interview by author, Colombo, November 14, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Benny, interview by author, Colombo, November 10, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

Conclusion

Revisiting the allegations of non-binary inexistence which dared to end this research, Khayrat's words astutely retort, "Just because you don't see people asserting it, doesn't mean they aren't living it."¹⁰⁷ Perhaps, in a hopeful interpretation of this prominent LGBTQ+ leader's claim—"There are no non-binary people here. That is a Western concept."—they speak in stride with a local, anti-colonial liberation politic.¹⁰⁸ In such a reading, we might ask: what then must occur locally to validate the lived experiences of those who are "living it"? Terms like "non-binary", "gender fluid", "gender non-conforming" and "genderqueer" may certainly be inadequate to represent local practices, activisms or identities.¹⁰⁹

Of the many limitations of this study, my lack of fluency in either Tamil or Sinhala, a glaring cultural barrier, gravely restricted the pool of interview candidates. Although I was unable to reach people outside the Colombo bubble, as Khayrat observes, they too are "living it" in articulations that transcend the English vernacular. Language and naming are powerful devices in creating cultural insiders. Coining culturally distinct and linguistically sensical lingo could expand the community and mediate genderqueer people finding themselves. The ongoing transformation of gender non-conformity and its future remains uncertain. This includes understanding how locals wield power under globalization. Gender ideas may concern local people's ability to 'travel'—both physically and in the fields of power, from immigration to the internet.¹¹⁰ Prospective study and discourse must include the experiences, concerns and dialogues of diverse localities, rural and urban, across the island—not just Colombo. Without such inclusion, we advance the false narrative that bolsters English-speaking, internet-accessing, Colombo-residing people as the only ones capable of living this identity; simultaneously, that rendering others people such as those in Group A as 'Western', not of the island, and alienated from 'here'.

Within the imaginations of current society on the island, representations of diverse genders prove difficult to define. In conducting this research, I found it nearly impossible to avoid an identity politics framework. One leader in Group B warned against the labelling of identities and added that the government does but should

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ King, "There Are No Lesbians", 37.

¹⁰⁹ King, "There Are No Lesbians", 43.

¹¹⁰ King, "There Are No Lesbians", 41.

not ask for these identifications to provide services.¹¹¹ Organizations such as EQUAL GROUND are in the practice of refraining from asking community members to identify themselves.¹¹² Change, most ideally, would transpire “around principles rather than identities.”¹¹³ The GRC feat, however, points to why individuals may want official recognition—legibility to the state can be pertinent to the negotiation for rights. Still, contemporary identity politics is a paradox in which “we look for recognition from the very institutions we reject as oppressive.”¹¹⁴ Power rests in the production of what is “normal”¹¹⁵, and projects like Chathuri’s embody abstraction from the norm, rendering it both powerful and unstable. Perhaps it is powerful because it is unstable—its refusal to be contained threatens the uniformity of the nation. True self-determination would require the state to forfeit a piece of its power, a concession we arguably did not see in the cisgender-policing rollout of the GRC. On this account, in conspiring for the future rights of genderqueer people, we might weigh how to prevent our marginalized identities from being incorporated into the democratic machinery of the nation-state.¹¹⁶ Even so, within the current systems that govern the island, is escaping such inculcation truly a viable possibility?

Beyond governing institutions, shifting public awareness and attitudes is an essential and daunting task. In life on the island and in much of the world, difference in gender, sexuality and queer desire has and continues to be localized in queer bodies.¹¹⁷ However, there is queerness in the mundane, the plain, and the otherwise cis and straight. What if the onus of gender diversity education was inverted onto the public who may, “find ways to articulate what [they] are already experiencing as gender fluidity.”¹¹⁸ What if you found the queerness in you? In such an approach, the burden is redistributed to the ‘normative’ population to transform their outlook rather than placing responsibility on non-conforming individuals to pacify their identities, entertain binary norms, or articulate their identity in the language of the dominant.¹¹⁹ In other words, cisgender people would “choose to lose their gender

¹¹¹ Sathya, interview by author, Colombo, January 26, 2024.

¹¹² Kaushalya, interview by author, Colombo, January 9, 202

¹¹³ Nicholas, “Queer Ethics and Fostering”, 175.

¹¹⁴ Shi, “Defending My Own Oppression”, 1.

¹¹⁵ Ariyaratne, “To Be or Not”, 75.

¹¹⁶ King, “There Are No Lesbians”, 41.

¹¹⁷ Duggan, “Queering the State”, 6.

¹¹⁸ Khayrat, interview by author, Colombo, November 30, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Nicholas, “Queer Ethics and Fostering”, 175.

expertise,”¹²⁰ admitting to the ways in which almost everyone, whether they view it this way or not, expresses queerly. This practice, a disarming act of revolution, can facilitate the understanding that genderqueer people do exist on the island and, like all human beings, do not lead lives of “flat ontologies” but rather lives of “fullness, contradictions, and vibrancy.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ Nicholas, “Queer Ethics and Fostering”, 174.

¹²¹ Ellawala, “Mismatched Lover: Exploring,” 1336.

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Beyond the Binary

The Experiences of Genderqueer People in Colombo

Sadushi De Silva

This paper explores the vibrant and complex landscape of genderqueer identities in Sri Lanka, shedding light on the experiences, artistic expressions, and cultural challenges faced by non-binary people navigating both local and global frameworks. Through the lens of artists, activists, and community members, the study interrogates how gender fluidity is both marginalized and reimaged within a predominantly cisnormative Sri Lankan society. Central to the discussion is the tension between local cultural traditions and the increasingly visible discourse around queer identities, particularly in the wake of contemporary legal and social changes.

Drawing primarily on interviews with local genderqueer people in Colombo, the paper examines how many defy binary gender norms and construct alternative personal spaces where non-binary people can belong. Furthermore, this work illuminates the ongoing struggles within the Sri Lankan LGBTQ+ community to recognize and embrace gender fluidity, with younger activists advocating for more inclusive approaches to identity and visibility. It proposes a more localized and inclusive approach to gender, urging a shift in public awareness and attitudes. Challenging both the state's erasure of gender diversity and the limitations of identity politics, this research calls for a deeper understanding of how genderqueer lives have always existed but remain hidden in the island's margins.



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