CHAPTER 5: POLITICS OF PASSING AND BODY MODIFICATIONS

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter I focus my discussion on politics around use of various terminologies, preference for trans(gender) identities, and transgender sexuality. I highlight multiple positions of aravanis and MtF transgenders/transsexuals while engaging with these politics. Furthermore aravani and MtF transgenders/transsexuals perspective towards body modifications, womanhood, passing as a woman, and transgender body politics around social and biological construction are also discussed in the chapter.

5.2. Trans(gender) Identities – A debate

Aravanis and MtF transgenders/transsexuals in Tamil Nadu prefer to use terminologies such as hijra (optional), aravani, thirunangai, transgender (woman), transsexual (woman), and some prefer to be called as a woman. Use of a term or combination of terms depends on one’s own comfort/preference. There is no restriction on use of a term or combination of terms. These are not merely terms, but use of these terms automatically connotes various trans(gender) identities. For e.g. if aravani is a term/label, then automatically it is also an identity term.

The purpose of highlighting ‘(gender)’ within trans(gender) is to explain that though transgenders transgress gender (in this case MtF), it is also their sex assigned at birth that is (not) in question with their gender transitioned body. As we proceed we will understand complexities of various trans(gender) identities and their resonance and divergence with mainstream sex/gender binary definitions.

During the interview with Ms. Gayatri, when I asked her the meaning of term transgender, she replied “I don’t know the difference. It’s my understanding that aravanis are known as transgenders in English.”

Similarly Ms. Sheela too mentions that hijra, aravani, and transgender have same meaning. In her words “According to us, hijra, aravani and transgender is one and the same. We take the translated term. According to us the word transgender means aravani or vice versa.”
In India the term transgender has been used loosely for *hijras, aravanis*, and other MtF transgender/transsexual categories (Krishna and Gupta 2002; Chakrapani et al. 2004, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Project Parivartan 2006; Kavi 2007; The Humsafar Trust & Population Services International 2007; APCOM 2008; Puri 2008; Chakrapani 2009). The western term transgender is used for various MtF transgender categories in India.

Within a Tamil Nadu context, the terms *hijra, aravani*, and transgender are loosely used interchangeably (by both primary and secondary respondents) for MtF individuals. There is fluidity in use of term transgender and *hijras/aravanis* are considered a part of transgender umbrella.

However it is important to understand the cultural significance of an identity within a subculture. The *hijra* subculture is embedded in the Indian society from a very long time. It is the most visible MtF population. It is a part of the Indian society. As there is less information available on MtF categories/identities, people (general public) generally do not make a difference between *hijra* and other MtF transgender categories. Also *hijras* and *aravanis* are of the view that the western term transgender is an English equivalent of their traditional terms. With growing transgender activism in India, the term transgender is adapted by many (mainly by MtFs).

Mr. Gurumurthy highlights how the term transgender has become a synonymous term for *hijras/aravanis*:

There is a lack of understanding or lack of identifying themselves as particular category, some transgender want to call them as transgender woman and some want to be called as just transgender, some call themselves as *hijra*. There was no common request from the whole community. Because those who undergo SRS can be called as transgenders or transgender woman, others will not be called. These issues are within the community, the community has to come out with a common understanding if they want. The community members do not have clarity whether they need a uniform identity … If they want to have a definition they have to talk among themselves. They have to talk with their own community members first and they have to come out with a common term.

Within an Indian context both the terms *hijra* and *aravani* have a religious-cultural significance, and transgender/transsexual (mostly in the west) is viewed both from a medical-technological intervention perspective and also from a rigid sex/gender binary point of view.

In many parts of the world transgenders and transsexuals are expected to fit under the binary. This is not in the case of *hijras* in India. The *hijra* population is open about its third gender identity.
According to Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) ‘transgenders are those who express gender identities outside traditional heteronormative definitions’. Any person expressing gender identity outside the traditional sex/ gender is put under the transgender category as they don’t adhere to the socio-cultural gender norms. However within an Indian context hijras and aravanis not only enjoy a third gender status, but are also considered an epitome of feminity and womanhood.

The discussion in Tamil Nadu is not only on use of terms hijra, aravani, transgender/ transsexual, but also preference for use of term ‘woman’. As Ms. Nikhila highlights “Some people think they are complete woman some think they are transgender or transsexual woman. It is their perception. Operated aravanis consider themselves woman.”

Dr. Rakesh highlights that there is no clarity in use of terms. The hijra identity is mistaken for other MtF transgender categories that do not have any affiliation with the jamaat system. There are some MtF transgenders/ transsexuals who prefer to be identified as a woman, and if the terms are used interchangeably then a transgender will be mistaken for a hijra. In this context Dr. Rakesh mentions that it is of utmost importance to know the difference between various transgender identities. According to him “Clarify the use of terminologies like transgender, transgender woman, hijra, aravani etc. in an Indian context.”

Ms. Ramya recalls that during a sexual minority meet, there was an argument between various transgender activists on use of appropriate terminologies. Hijras from the traditional jamaat system want to retain their third gender identity. They do not want to use a new term which has its origins in the west. Jamaat members want to retain their traditional identity. Ms. Ramya recalls:

In The India Network for Sexual Minorities (INFOSEM) meeting there was a big fight. Geetanjali (name changed) from Mumbai claimed that she didn’t want to be identified as a transgender woman. She wanted to be a third gender. I asked her what is third gender? She replied though I am in a saree and I am in female attire, I want to be a hijra and not a woman. There are lots of confusion and their own perceptions. Everything is rubbish and they don’t have any clarity.

The term transgender keeps resonating with hijra, aravani, and third gender identity and often the umbrella term transgender is used as a blanket term for all these identities. Ms. Sheela is aware that there are differences of opinion on use of terms, but she holds on to the view that hijra, aravani, and third gender identity are one and the same. In her words:
Yes there are lots of differences of opinion. Many people want their identity as an aravani and some want as transgender or transsexual woman. Hijra word is a local language word. Like we have the terms aravani here and Kojja in Andhra Pradesh, so all these words are similar transgender, aravani, hijra, Kojja etc. Yes there are many people who want a third gender identity and it is an understanding that aravani identity is a third gender identity.

Politics of use of terminology is also a strategy to exclude those who do not associate themselves with the traditional hijra identity. If members from the same community have a preference for a different term, they are not considered a part of the jamaat. Ms. Sheela iterates that the politics around the use of terminologies is to purposely exclude few from the hijra category. Tamil Nadu aravanis are not considered a part of the Western-and-North Indian hijra jamaat system. She expresses:

North Indian transgender people want to make hijra a separate category but we say that hijra, transgender and aravani are one and the same, but they don’t understand that. They say that hijra is different and aravani is different. Even in some meetings they say that hijra and aravani are different. Such issues exist in Mumbai. There they say that hijra is a very strong community. They say that according to the jamaat system they do not count aravanis as a hijra. They say that only hijra is a transgender. But we don’t understand why they want to differentiate between hijra and aravani.

Ms. Shilpa also highlights that there is lack of clarity with use of terms “How many people are accepting third gender? Even among transgender themselves there is confusion. They don’t know whether to take transgender or a third gender identity. There is no clarity amongst transgenders.”

She continues to suggest that there should be consensus among MtF transgenders for a single identity “Aravani community should come together and discuss and arrive at a common consensus whether they want the transgender or third gender status. There is not clarity about the identity that they want. There should be only one common identity agreeable amongst the aravani community.”

Mr. Prakash Raj who has experiences of working with various transgender groups shares that MtF transgenders have different views towards their own identity. In his words:

Each aravani has her own understanding about her own identity. For e.g. Madhu (name changed) might want her identity as a woman, Sheela (name changed) might want her identity as a thirunangai, Sumitra (name changed) might want a third gender. So there is lot of work required in that area. So once the operation (SRS/ castration) is done then they have to decide what identity they want. The government can’t take any decision in this. Aravanis have to decide about their own identity.
Though there are differences of opinion on use of terms or preference for identity, there is unity amidst diversity. It is the ‘we-ness’/ ‘MtFness’ that brings them together for activism and collectivization.

Lack of clarity in terms of usage, different labels and how it actually maps into an understanding of different gender and sexual identities exist within the State and various transgender groups. Leading transgender activists in Tamil Nadu are of the view that the state can play an important role by giving proper sex/ gender definitions.

Ms. Ramya raises questions whether the state itself is aware of various transgender categories/ identities. In her words “Under the welfare board everything comes, but it is still a big question which should be addressed by the government. Who is a transgender? It is a million dollar question. Or who is a transsexual?”

Transgender Welfare Board members especially transgender members have discussed these issues in the Board meetings. This is one important issue pertaining to transgender identity. Ms. Madhu, a Transgender Welfare Board member recalls from her experiences of discussion within the Board. According to her the state considers transgenders outside the sex/ gender binary. In her words:

> The government does not look at us as a woman they look at us only as a third gender. Even though we have a SRS policy the acceptance as a woman should come from their side. Just like in western countries there are some places where there is law to legally change either male or female and they can also legally marry. But here it is like you are third gender you are Thirunangai the government says like that.

Primary respondents clearly do not know state’s perspective towards trans(gender) identities. Primary respondents are of mixed views. For e.g. in the words of Ms. Sumitra “The Tamil Nadu government see transgender as third gender.”, while Ms. Sheela expresses “I think they look at us as a woman we have so much of feminity so they view us like a woman.”, and Ms. Nikhila who has undergone a complete SRS in Thailand says:

> The government thinks that there is a small population belonging to neither male nor female and they look at them as third gender. No matter how much you say you are a woman the government might still look at us as a third gender. The government might not look at the person in a negative way but they see at the person as somebody with some problem, like as a handicapped person.

In the initial stages of the Transgender Welfare Board formation the government officials proposed to include it under the disability department. However transgender activists
opposed the idea and after immense discussion the Board was included under the Social Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme Department.

Physical bodily features also play an important role in defining one’s gender. A person is defined by his/ her appearance. According to Ms. Sneha bodily features are important to be considered a female “We cannot get recognition as female, our voice is not like woman, and even the government will not give recognition as female. They look at us as a separate community.”

Ms. Sultana\textsuperscript{71} too iterates that external bodily features like good looking or looking more feminine is of utmost importance to be identified as a woman. Here the physical appearance plays an important role. A woman is considered a woman only if she appears beautiful. In her words “Regarding the third gender identity we are happy, but some within the community say that they want recognition as a female. But that can happen only with aravanis who are beautiful and there are some who are not beautiful. I am happy with the third gender category.”

In the subsequent sections I’ll discuss more on transgender bodies with respect to body modifications. However the critique here is that the western term transgender is used as a blanket term for hijras, aravanis, and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals in Tamil Nadu. Preference for use of these terminologies in Tamil Nadu creates trans(gender) identities such as aravani, transgender (woman), transsexual (woman), or woman. Sometimes these terms are used individually or are used in combination. These terminologies are not mere terms/ labels, but they are identity by itself.

For e.g. Ms. Kanamma, when she is in Mumbai she uses the term hijra, when she comes to Tamil Nadu she prefers to use regional term aravani. Within the jamaat she uses the term hijra/ aravani. Because she is engaged in transgender activism she also uses the term transgender. Use of terminologies and preference for identity/ identities depends on one’s comfort level and is also context specific. Ms. Kanamma is a good example of this intersectionality of use of terms, preference for identity, and also here traditional role as a jamaat nayak and a transgender rights activist.

Transgender identity terms are used singly or used in combination in Tamil Nadu. Leading transgender activists assertively use preferable identity terms and stick to the identity.

\textsuperscript{71} As shared by Ms. Sultana during Group Discussion in Madurai.
Though the term *aravani* has gained a politically correct identity status for MtF transgenders in Tamil Nadu, it still remains a regional term. It does not have any significance and relevance outside Tamil Nadu.

In this situation an *aravani* will not use the term *aravani* in Western-and-North Indian states and also within the *hijra jamaat* as it is a term given to them in Tamil Nadu. There she will use the term *hijra*, which is used across India. Similarly within the *hijra* and *aravani jamaat* sub-culture, the term transgender is not used as it is a newly coined western term and not a traditional term.

It is of relevant to think whether such definitional clarity is necessary at all. Since it is ‘trans’ which brings the binary into question, fitting back a trans body and transsexual body into the binary seems to be an ongoing effort, which is often referred to as ‘lack of clarity’ or ‘confusion’.

However it is important to understand that lack of clarity in use of terms creates problems in interaction within various groups for their collective mobilization. The ‘third gender’ *hijra* identity is viewed within the lower socio-economic profile, and their counterparts in Tamil Nadu ‘*aravani*’ too share a similar background. However the western term transgender is an umbrella term and covers various categories. But it is of recent origin which does not have a community subculture like the *hijra jamaat* system. Hence any influence from the west (or from any other culture) is not easily welcomed or accepted in the existing culture which is largely derived from religious-cultural-traditional values.

Moreover transgender and transsexual bodies in the west are expected to fit under sex/ gender binary which is not in the case of *hijras* and *aravanis*. However there are MtF transgenders/ transsexuals who prefer to fall within the binary system.

The *hijral aravani* identity is non-heteronormative (barring their sexuality). While transgender/ transsexual identity is heteronormative because of their expectations to fit within the binary system which is socially constructed. There are many MtFs in Tamil Nadu and India who subscribe to transgender/ transsexual identity and do not associate themselves with the traditional *hijral aravani* identity and *jamaat* system for various reasons.

Association with trans(gender) identity/ identities has a class dimension. Those affiliated with the *jamaat* fall under the lower-socio economic background, while those who subscribe to the transgender/ transsexual identity and pass as a woman and are able to blend into the
mainstream society as a person within the binary system are in a better socio-economic position.

Many MtF who are not open about their transgender/transsexual background are left out in the mobilization process as they refrain from publicity and maintain their status as a ‘woman’ within the larger mainstream society. Commonalities of trans(gender) identities and their sense of ‘we-ness’ forms an important ground for mobilization/collectivization.

5.3. Transgender Sexuality

Fragmentation within various transgender groups in Tamil Nadu is also due to transgender sexuality issues. In this section I’ll discuss issues related to transgender sexuality in Tamil Nadu.

Transgender sexuality within the aravani jamaat and amongst general public is heteronormative. MtF transgenders are expected to have relationship only with cisgender men. Relationship of a hijra, aravani, and MtF transgender/transsexual with cisgender man is acceptable, but there is taboo with transgender-lesbianism and transgender-bisexualism. The aravani jamaat is very pro-heteronormative. Similarly secondary respondents also view transgender sexuality within a heteronormative framework.\(^{72}\) I will first explain views of primary respondents towards transgender sexuality.

Ms. Kanamma an aravani jamaat leader and a transgender rights activist heads a CBO. She holds the view that a true hijra/aravani should practice celibacy and abstain herself from sexual practices. According to her aravanis should be romantically and sexually attracted only to cisgender men and not to cisgender women or other MtF transgenders. According to her such individuals are not respected within the community. In her words “Lesbianism between hijras is their wish, it’s their pleasure, it is their right. These kinds of people are not included in the jamaat. This kind of sexual behaviour is secret. There is no respect for such people in the jamaat. They cannot openly claim this in the jamaat.”

The jamaat as a sub-cultural entity restricts certain sexual practices through various mechanisms (such as fine, taboo etc.), and it reflects the heteronormative view towards transgender sexuality. Though not a celibate, it is acceptable to have relationship with a cisgender man.

\(^{72}\) Interview with Ms. Shilpa and with Prof. Sita.
Ms. Jaya too expresses that “Lesbianism and bisexualism is a taboo within the jamaat. Diverse sexuality is not encouraged within the jamaat system. Jamaat leaders talk cheap about aravanis who are married to woman.”

Though multiple sexualities are not much discussed topic within the traditional jamaat system, leading transgender activists view sexual orientation from a Human Rights lens. There are transgender activists who counter with the traditional jamaat norms when it comes to personal choices such as sexuality. Ms. Sumitra an educated leading transgender activist from Coimbatore and working from Chennai explains stigmatization of transgender-lesbian and extends her support to transgenders with multiple sexualities. She views transgender sexuality from a Human Rights lens. In her words:

Within the transgender community there are straight people, gay people, and lesbians also. Within the transgender community there are individuals who are sexually attracted to other women, these people are dis-communicated, ex-communicated from the community and there is discrimination and violence against them. But I as an individual, as a rights activists working for equality, gender and sexual orientation, I am working for their rights too, and working for people especially if a transgender is attracted to other transgender or if a transgender is attracted to other woman, then we need to respect their privacy and their rights. It is supporting at all levels and respecting all gender and all choices of sexual orientation.

Many MtF transgenders in their pre gender transition stage are also forced to marry cisgender women. When parents and other family members realize their son with a feminine behaviour and his attraction towards men, they force him to marry a woman. By doing so they anticipate that their (feminine) son will not become a homosexual or transgender and will remain a straight heterosexual male. Parents also think that by doing so they will escape the taunt of society. Situation becomes more complicated when these forcefully married aravanis/ transgenders run away from their house to join the hijra/aravani community. As a consequence the wife and child/children are deserted and it is a shock to the parents, family members and others when these MtF transgenders come out as an aravani/ transgender.

However the attitude towards transgender sexuality is slowly changing. Transgender activists understand that transgenders might have married women in their pre gender transition stage under various pressures. Ms. Jaya explains her views on forceful marriage of aravanis in the pre gender transition stage. In her words:

An aravani would have married a woman maybe because of family pressure. If any aravani has any kind of sexual orientation then we don’t have any problem with that. To have the kind of sex they want is their choice. Even if an aravani married a woman and beget child, still she might have a preference for having sex with a man.
However such situation can be avoided if transgenders come out much earlier about their sexuality to their parents and spouse. Mr. Gurumurthy explains that such situation can be prevented if transgenders come out about their identity and sexuality to their spouse. This can avoid ordeal in their later life. In his words:

My only concern is that whatever they are doing they have to be open to their life partner i.e. about their bisexual orientation or transgender status. They should talk to their own spouse. They have to discuss that problem with them, it’s their life. The life of the child and the life of the woman who has come with this person are ruined.

According to Mr. Senthil, parents wanting their (transgender) son to remain a man for the whole life is only to prove to the larger society that he is normal and nothing is wrong with his (her) sexuality. It is the heteronormative view of larger society that results in this kind of situation. In his words:

If the aravani say that she does not want to marry a woman then the parents will say that you marry a woman only just to show the society that you are a man, and after that you do whatever you want to do. […] They say whatever you want to do you do, but just marry a woman and we’ll show to society that our son has married a woman. That contributes towards hiding the sexual orientation and stigma and discrimination. Lot of pressure comes from elder brothers. They feel that they will also be mistaken as a transgender and MSM. They put lot of pressure and try to cover up.

The intensity of forcing an aravani to marry a cisgender woman or having sex with her is so strong that few aravanis were dragged to sex workers by their brothers and vigiled the whole night. The person is coerced and forced to change his/ her sexuality. Prof. Sita recalls one such act in theater play of Sudar Foundation. She narrates one story from her play where a transgender in her pre gender transition stage was dragged to a sex worker only just to change her sexuality:

The story begins with a family where the brothers beat up and she has a scar in the leg. There are three brothers and one brother becomes an aravani and the other two brothers beat up and drag and tie her. They drag (him) to a sex worker to have sex. The sex worker understands that situation and we stop the play there.

Heteronormative view toward transgender sexuality place them under the rigid man-woman relationship concept. Prof. Sita critiques this heteronormative perspective of transgenders towards their own sexuality. In her words:

It is a very heterosexual model. You are born as a male and you transform yourself into a female, you desire a male body and you try to remain as the feminine side of the couple. You think that since you have become a female your experiences of sexuality will be what a woman undergoes, or that is what the aravani imagination about sexuality is and that is why I think it is very difficult for the aravani movement to support gay rights movement. So sometimes I find it very homophobic, to find a transgender person to be homophobic is sad.
Though Ms. Shilpa advocates for transgender rights and has liberal views towards transgender empowerment, when it comes to sexuality she expresses her heteronormative view. Heterosexuality is considered a norm of the society, and when it comes to multiple sexualities then it is critiqued from a cultural lens. In the words of Ms. Shilpa:

I have no objections towards that. It is basically their orientation. If their attraction is towards man that is fine, but towards woman is not easily accepted. We have cultural limitations…. I might have my own reservation. I condemn the bisexual orientation of transgender people. We accept people who are very feminine, but why do they want to go for a homosexual orientation. We work with lesbians in South Africa and they are gang raped and killed, this is basically a patriarchal norm, men challenge women, you don’t want to marry, so they gang rape and kill, we do have intervention, but given our cultural limitation it is still a long way to go.

Mr. Kumar does not consider MtF transgenders as a woman. According to him a MtF transgender will not become a woman. During the interview he was not clear about the reasons for not considering a MtF a woman. He is aware about the male sex assigned at birth to MtF transgenders, their gender transition, and their relation with cisgender men. Secondly while discussing transgender sexuality, according to him homosexuality is a western idea. As a non-transgender advocate he supports transgender sexuality:

Before doing the operation aravanis are still biologically male. Even if they change their dress, if they have relationship with a female there is nothing wrong in that…. There is nothing wrong in having a relationship with a woman after the operation. It’s their wish. There are a lot of changes that have come in our Indian culture. Homosexual and lesbian things are becoming common now. Nobody can stop anybody from doing anything.

Dr. Rakesh too shares his views that both transgenders and general public view sexuality from a heteronormative lens. Both within the jamaat system and the larger society, transgenders are expected to have heterosexual relationship. Here the biological body (sex) of a person is not important, but the gender identity ‘woman’ of a transgender leads to a heteronormative view:

Transgenders at the grassroots level follow the attitude of the general public. They think that if a person is born as a male the person will live in a masculine manner and the attraction should be towards a woman. For e.g. if I am born as a male and identify as a woman so then I am a transgender woman. Then the expectation is, as I identify myself a woman, I should be attracted only towards a man and in that line of thinking I think transgender people think like the general public, they think that if a person identify or born as a particular gender the person should be only attracted towards the opposite gender. There are also transgender woman who are attracted to a woman. That is a taboo and there is a stigma attached to it. We also need to sensitize the transgender community on issues related to sexual orientation and sexuality. I have seen people and have heard about person identifying as a bisexual hijra, the person identifies as a hijra but also says that she is a bisexual, i.e. attracted to both man and woman. If a man can be attracted to another man then why can’t a transgender woman attracted to a woman. That kind of understanding is lacking.
Furthermore Dr. Rakesh raises questions on the legal marriage between MtF transgender and a cisgender man. He tries to highlight the problems with sex/ gender definition of a non-operated transgender. When transgenders will demand legal marriage recognition, it will then raise issues related to the ‘sex’ definition of transgenders. In the pre-operated stage, transgenders biological sex is still a male sex. In this case if a pre-operated transgender legally wants to marry a cisgender man then it will raise questions on the sex of a MtF transgender. Moreover it opens up discussion on the socially constructed ‘woman’ and male biological body of transgenders:

My body is male I am marrying a man, whether it is male to male marriage or male to transgender marriage, it is not usually valid, just because we are given an identity as a female whether my marriage will be legal, these are some complications, legal issues, which eventually will come out. [...] What is the understanding of the identity of an aravani person who is not operated and still wants to be identified as a woman? Similarly if a third gender wants to get married to a man will that be considered a legal marriage? For e.g. if an aravani’s biological identity is male and now she wants her gender to be a woman, and if a card is given as a female and if she is non-operative then there will be a confusion. The aravani person is given a card as a female but her biological sex is not female as she hasn’t undergone emasculation/ castration or SRS so her biological identity still remains a male but her gender identity is a woman.

Relationship between transgenders and cisgender men remain hidden from the public view or are open only in certain class background. Men from lower socio-economic background mostly from slums are open about their relationship with aravanis/ transgenders. Some live together as husband and wife. There are examples from many districts in Tamil Nadu where men have openly married aravanis in a temple or in public places. After their marriage they live together as a family and few also adopt children and live as a family. However men from the middle class and upper-class are always not open about their relationships.

Generally family comprises of heterosexual couples (cisgender men and women) with or without children. MtF transgender relationship with a cisgender man in Tamil Nadu, both living together under one roof as husband-wife and maybe also with adopted children, changes the concept of heterosexual family. The MtF transgender irrespective of her operated status lives with a man as his wife. Her social gender as a woman is accepted. However issues arise on her biological capability to procreate. In the subsequent sections, I’ve discussed politics of procreation.

73 Examples of cisgender men marrying aravanis and living together as a family was shared during Group Discussions in Madurai, Salem, Villupuram, and Tiruchirappalli districts. Aravanis/ Transgender activists from Chennai, Kancheepuram, Toothukudi, and Coimbatore also shared similar stories during one-to-one interview.
Men having romantic relationship with MtF transgenders are also married to cisgender women. The reason for marrying a cisgender woman was under parental pressure and preference of a heir for the family. Because of these reasons many cisgender men break-up with their transgender partners. However some men continued relationship with their MtF transgender partners and wanted to keep them as their second wife (a concubine kind of status). These cisgender men were ready to have an extra marital affair with MtF transgenders in secret.

5.4. Various Trans(Gender) Identities and Multiple Transgender Sexualities

Various trans(gender) identities and multiple transgender sexualities lead to multiple possible positions of transgenders both within the *aravani jamaat* and the larger mainstream society. Table 4 helps us to understand these multiple positions.

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trans(gender) identities/ terms</th>
<th><em>Aravani jamaat</em></th>
<th>Mainstream society</th>
<th>Possible positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hijra</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Optional term both within the <em>aravani jamaat</em> and larger mainstream society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aravani</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Regional term used in Tamil Nadu for <em>hijras</em> and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender (woman)</td>
<td>✓/ ×</td>
<td>Lack of clarity</td>
<td>Term basically used for <em>aravani</em> and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals who may or may not have any <em>jamaat</em> affiliation. Class dimension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transsexual (woman)</td>
<td>✓/ ×</td>
<td>Lack of clarity</td>
<td>Term basically used for MtF transsexuals who have undergone complete SRS. Class dimension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Optional</td>
<td>Term used by <em>aravanis</em> and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals who want to be identified as a woman.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Transgender Sexuality**

| Heterosexual Transgender        | ✓                | ✓                  | Transgender sexuality pro-heteronormative within the *aravani jamaat* |
| Transgender-Lesbian             | ×                | ×                  | Lesbianism with transgender/ cisgender woman remains a taboo within the *aravani jamaat* and mainstream society. |
| Transgender-Bisexual            | ×                | ×                  | Bisexuality with transgender/ cisgender woman remains a taboo within the *aravani jamaat* and mainstream society. |

✓ - (Acceptable)
× - (Not acceptable)
✓/ × - (Either or optional)
5.4.1. Trans(gender) identities/ terms.

The term ‘hijra’ is a commonly used term across India both within the hijra jamaat and the mainstream society. The term ‘aravani’ is largely used for hijras and MtF transgenders/transsexuals in Tamil Nadu. However the term aravani is a regional term and is used only within Tamil Nadu. It is not used outside Tamil Nadu. It is considered a politically correct and dignified term in Tamil Nadu.

‘Transgender (woman)’ is mainly used by MtF transgenders who may or may not have undergone sex reassignment surgery. ‘Transsexual (woman)’ is mainly used by those MtF transgenders/transsexuals who have undergone SRS or those who are in the process of gender transition and aspire to undergo SRS in the future.

Many aravanis and MtF transgenders/transsexuals prefer to use the term ‘woman’. They identify themselves as a woman and desire to live with a woman’s identity.

Terms such as transgender (woman), transsexual (woman), and woman are not used within the aravani jamaat system. The aravani jamaat is very pro third gender and prefers to use traditional terms like hijra or the newly coined term aravani.

The terms aravani, transgender, transsexual, and woman are also used by the general population to address MtF population. However there is very less knowledge and lack of clarity about the differences of these terms within the mainstream society. Many times the hijra/ aravani identity is mistaken for other MtF trans(gender) identities. The most commonly term used for MtF in Tamil Nadu is aravani or transgender. Thirunangai is also a term used for aravanis in Tamil Nadu.

5.4.2. Transgender sexuality.

Hijra/ aravani, and MtF transgender/ transsexual sexuality with the aravani jamaat is pro heteronormative. There is a taboo with transgender-lesbian/ transgender-bisexual within the jamaat system. General public too view transgender sexuality within the heteronormative framework. Though there is silent acknowledgement of multiple transgender sexualities by the advantaged and disadvantaged groups and people from mainstream society, it is not openly discussed. Both primary and secondary respondents acknowledge existence of various trans(gender) identities and multiple transgender sexualities.
If sex is a binary from the viewpoint of compulsory heterosexuality and gender is enacted, and if sexuality is constructed within the power relations and this power is particularly understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions (Butler 1990: 48), then MtF transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu gives an opportunity to understand the non-heteronormative construction of transgender sex/ gender identity from a religious-cultural perspective (in this case an aravani identity and the terms transgender/ transsexual used as synonyms for aravanis) and the (non) heteronormative sexuality of aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals because they are not socially constructed according to the sex binary.

Queer theorists argue that binary sex system creates rigid psychological and social boundaries that give rise to systems of dominance and hierarchy. In such system either compulsory heterosexual or not certain feelings, desires, act, identities and social formations are excluded, marginalized and made inferior (Seidman 1995). In this whole process individuals are forced to see themselves as hetero-or-homosexual. While doing so when placing oneself in one identity the other is excluded. Gay theory focuses on same-sex gender choice but it leaves out gender identity issues.

For e.g. while looking at sexuality vs. identity within the larger LGBT spectrum in the west, if the separation of lesbian from Gay Liberation were on the basis of sexuality and identity respectively (Beasley 2005: 119, 123), then how different is the proliferation of trans(gender) identities with transgender sexuality in Tamil Nadu? Intersection and divergence of various trans(gender) identities with multiple transgender sexualities in Tamil Nadu demonstrate that sex and gender binaries cannot be rigidly written on gender transitioned bodies, and multiple transgender sexualities are acknowledged irrespective of their non-sex/ non-gender binary positions (and also irrespective of complete SRS status).

Thus the biological body is free from the clutches of socially constructed gender binary. However the gender is in dialogue with sexual orientation. A non-operated aravani can be socially accepted as a woman, her sexuality will be always viewed from a heteronormative lens with an understanding that she will have relationship only with a cisgender man. Though biologically she is still a male her gender identity as a woman is accepted. However her relationship with a cisgender man does not make her a homosexual or gay as her gender identity is seen as a woman. With this understanding a gender transitioned (MtF) woman and her relationship with a cisgender man will be seen as a heterosexual relationship irrespective of her biological body position (operated/ non-operated).
Though UNDP (2008, 2010) and NACO (2011: 2) acknowledge transgender and MSM as two distinct groups, as transgender is related to gender identity and MSM is related to sexual orientation, what is important to understand is the line of proliferation. It takes us back to the discussion on the proliferation within the larger LGBT in the western world where gay issues were more relevant to sexuality and lesbian issues more related to women’s issues (because of their biological female body). We are seeing a similar proliferation pattern between MtF transgenders and MSM in India which is largely based on gender identity of transgenders and sexuality of MSM.

However it is suggested that detailed research study is required in this area across India to understand complexities associated with transgender identity and MSM issues and their convergence and divergence.

5.5. **Politics of Passing and Body Modifications**

Body image is an important aspect of gender consciousness and identity. According to Thapan (2009: 106) “The body image is not just about how one is seen by another but also how sees oneself and would like others to see us.” Psychologists study body images and self concept, anthropologists deal with cultural meanings of the body, while sociologists discuss the body as a carrier of the ‘self’ (Davis 1997).

If both sex and gender are culturally constructed (Butler 1990, 2004; Davis 1997), and if sex and gender binaries are fixed (Lindemann 1997; Beasley 2005), then do gender transgressed transgender bodies give an opportunity to break the discourse around the cultural and social construction of gender binaried bodies which are written on fixed sex binaried bodies?

In this section I discuss issues around MtF transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu with respect to body modifications, passing as a woman and the politics of procreation. My discussion is largely based on lived experiences of *hijra/ aravani* and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals (primary respondents), and also response of secondary respondents.

5.5.1. **Body modifications, passing as a woman, and womanhood.**

Many primary respondents expressed their desire to pass as a woman. However it is very interesting to know what is womanhood according to them. The first discussion on womanhood is on the physical appearance. All MtF transgenders do not pass easily as a
woman because of their masculine physique, coarse voice, facial hair (beard and moustache) etc.

Generally the image of a *hijra*/*aravani* image is a saree clad body with flat breasts, facial hair, coarse voice, and for many a masculine physique. However with latest technology and cosmetic procedures these features can be corrected/changed (Raymond 1979; Hammarberg 2009). Facial Feminization Surgery and other body modification techniques (like breast augmentation etc.) become an important part of gender transition process (Namaste 2009; Gooren 2011; WPATH 2011). In many parts of the world, transgenders undergo surgical and cosmetic surgeries to improve their facial and body features to pass as a woman.

Feminizing hormone therapy can be adapted to enhance breast size, become more feminine etc., laser and electrolysis treatment can reduce facial hair, and voice therapy helps to develop a more feminine voice. Also surgical procedures like silicone breast implants can be use for breast augmentation, Facial Feminization Surgery can give a more feminine face etc. By undergoing these body modification procedures many MtF pass as a woman in the general public and they blend into the mainstream society to lead a ‘normal’ life just like any cisgender woman. By doing so, the fear of getting read as a transgender is eliminated.

The whole idea is to blend into the mainstream society and lead a mainstream life without any psychological discomfort. Many transgenders are stigmatized and discriminated because of their bodies not appropriately matching with their gender identity.

However there are mixed views on transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu. There is very little knowledge and awareness about body modification procedures among *aravanis* in Tamil Nadu. As these procedures are expensive, many transgenders do not opt for these services.

Ms Sumitra shares that there is very poor understanding and information available on body modification procedures among transgenders. In her words “Lot of transgenders take medication by word of mouth. There are different regiments of hormones, different injections, silicone breasts, different methods of going for sex change…. When it comes to hormones therapy and breast augmentation or breast implants there has been tremendous wrong ideas and wrong medications.”

Money is also an important factor. *Aravanis* engaged in sex work or those into dancing earn lot of money and they are able to afford these expensive body modification procedures. However *aravanis* with lower socio-economic background cannot afford these expensive
procedures and use cheap birth control pills or abortion injections which are easily available at the pharmacists counter without any prescription. Use of these pills is not monitored under proper medical supervision. There is very little research done on the use of these medications and its health/ side effects.  

Body modifications can be viewed within the class context. Those who have money can avail these services. Ms. Sultana\textsuperscript{75} and Ms. Latha\textsuperscript{76} highlight that bodies can be altered/ created with money. In the words of Ms. Sultan:

\begin{quote}
It can be done if people have money, there is nothing wrong in that. If I have money then I myself will change myself to a complete woman. And that time if I go out nobody will agree that I am an aravani. So there are many aravanis like Aishwarya (name changed) who live as a woman and do not come out as a transgender.
\end{quote}

Class (economic) position of transgenders plays an important role in access to body modifications. Those who are engaged in sex work mostly opt for these surgeries and aravanis from lower-socio economic background do not use the services.

The discussion of body modifications with respect to class position can also be carried forward by understanding position of aravanis within the aravani jamaat. The aravani jamaat in Tamil Nadu closely follows most of the hijra jamaat norms. Ms. Kanamma comments that an aravani will always remain a hijra even if she undergoes body modifications. In her words “If they use silicone implants, then also they will be called as hijra and will not become a woman. So it’s better to be without silicone and remain as a hijra.” She further mentions “They go for SRS and silicone implants to earn money in sex work. We follow the customs of our elders. A person having silicone breast cannot become a nayak.”

The aravani jamaat is mostly viewed within the lower socio-economic profile because of their occupation and life style. Moreover there are traditional practices of the jamaat such as preference for third gender identity status which does not support the idea of body modifications.

However as there is fragmentation within the transgender community in Tamil Nadu, there are differences on opinion with respect to body modifications too. Both pre-operated and post-operated aravanis desire to go for breast augmentation. Some aravanis are afraid of

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{74 Email correspondence with Dr. Kalra.}
\footnote{75 As shared by Ms. Sultana during Group Discussion in Madurai.}
\footnote{76 As shared by Ms. Latha during Group Discussion in Tiruchirappalli.}
\end{footnotesize}
risks/ health problems associated with breast implants. According to them breasts can also be developed by using hormones, birth control pills or abortion injections. However they are unaware or do not know the health problems associated with using birth control pills or abortion injections (manufactured for biological female body) without consulting any doctor or endocrinologist.

Many aravanis consider birth control pills much safer as compared to breast implants. By using birth control pills, the body develops breasts by itself. However breast implants are considered foreign objects. It is not a part of the biological body. Ms. Gayatri highlights health risks associated with body modifications “I have seen some aravanis with silicone breasts. I have only taken injections. With silicone one cannot do much physical work. I suggest not having them as there are many health problems. Why should we go for silicone implants? It’s better not to have them.”

Transgenders are also ready to undergo body modification procedures if it is available free of cost. There is a desire to undergo these costly procedures but within a class-cultural context. Older aravanis with pro jamaat perspectives do not give importance to body modifications. Younger generation aravanis prefer to alter their body. Ms. Rupa too shared her views on the same lines.77 In her words:

It is very dangerous to undergo all these kinds of operation but it is okay to go. But still it has its own side effects. If the service is available free of cost then we can use it. It is fine if aravanis go for vaginoplasty or silicone implants. If these services are available free then it can be used. Some do not go for vaginoplasty or silicon as there are some health problems.

One more interesting observation was to accept one’s body as it is and not to opt for any kind of body modification. The body is also perceived as something which is god given and should not be altered. Ms. Radhika comments78:

The doctors explained the pros and cons of silicone implants. Silicone has many side effects hence I do not want to go for it…. We should not go for facial feminization surgery. We don’t know the after effects of doing plastic surgery and facial feminization. What god has given us we should be happy with that. There is nothing wrong in having an inappropriate nose, jaw, lip, nose etc. That is not the parameter for a woman.

However it raises the question, why do MtF transgenders want to alter their male body which is also god given? The god-given natural body is altered and made to fit according to the societal gender expectations.

77 As shared by Ms. Rupa during Group Discussion in Villupuram.
78 As shared by Ms. Radhika during Group Discussion in Salem.
This raises the next question, what is womanhood or how a woman should be? Thapan (2009) while discussing (woman’s) embodiment mentions that body image is an important aspect of gender consciousness and identity. Cultural and social values in different religious and social contexts develop gender identities. These values lay emphasis on female submissiveness, passivity, and particular role-specific identities. Women are portrayed as passive, submissive, helpless victims of power within various patriarchal institutions such as family, education, marriage etc. Also a woman as ‘soft’ natured is derived from her identities within domestic roles such as a devoted mother, wife, sister, and so on, and a ‘good’ woman is one who is married, and is secured as a wife and mother. So a ‘good’ woman can also be modern if she holds on to her familial values and is looked upon as bearer of tradition and symbols.

Aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals in Tamil Nadu are looked upon as a woman because of their feminity and also because of their resemblance with the woman’s identity. General image of an aravani is usually a saree clad body that claps hands and lifts skirt in public places and use abusive language and misbehave. This image of an aravani does not match with the image of an Indian woman. Primary respondents are of the view that in order to be considered a woman, aravanis should move around softly, and should be soft spoken. Just like Indian women, aravanis too should wear culture appropriate attire like saree and other Indian outfit. Jeans and t-shirts are western outfits and they do not reflect feminity. Thus there are cultural and traditional markers of identity.

Ms. Ramya not only shares her views on transgenders passing as a woman but also their behaviour in the public place and also culture appropriate dress. She gives example of violence faced by women who wear western outfits. It attracts attention of men and others and hence they are not considered part of the culture. In her words:

These people when they go to the bazaar to collect alms they clap and lift their skirts. They say that they want to live as a female, but the behaviour in the public should be like Indian women and not like hijras because the public will get annoyed and fear and then how will they come and help you. In one word I can say, if you look at the mirror you can see only your face. Just like that the society will retaliate on how you behave. […] It is not only for transgender it is even for girls or female, the way you dress. Suppose if a girl wears tight jeans with big breasts and she is wearing a tight t-shirt, other men’s attraction will be only on her breast. And definitely she’ll be harassed and she’ll be teased. We are not in a foreign country, we are in India, we have our own ethics, our own culture, it has to be followed at all levels, otherwise we won’t get proper recognition. Even for a girl wearing a tight jeans or any other sexy dress, drinking and smoking in the public, how far she’ll be accepted by her neighbours or in that area.

Though Ms. Ramya is a highly educated leading transgender activist from a leading pioneered transgender CBO in Chennai (location and class context), and also the first person to submit a
memorandum to the state officials, she also gives importance to culture and tradition appropriate attire. *Aravanis* are judged by the kind of dress they wear.

Transgenders wanting to pass as a woman, and also those who prefer to identify themselves as woman behave in such a way that their behaviour gives legitimacy to their (gender) identity to be identified as a woman’s identity. It is this behaviour in the public that gives social legitimacy to transgender bodies to be identified as a woman. Ms. Renuka mentions that *aravanis* should behave according to expectations of the society in public. In her words:

One of my personal opinions is that we should change according to the expectations of the society. A transgender person should behave like a normal woman. If anybody looks at me and if they hesitate to sit beside me then I will not react and I will sit quietly, and they also respond positively. We should be able to give back to society what they expect from us. We should not always shout that we are discriminated. People are ready to accept us. Why that heavy make-up is required. Why heavy pan cake, eyeliner, eye shadow etc. Just be casual and people will surely accept us. If we try to look different and do different, then they look at us differently. We should be like a woman. Why do you want to do make-up and go out at 11 pm? Just be simple. Put turmeric on the face, put *bottu*\(^{79}\) and wear *chudidar*\(^{80}\) that covers the body and be like a woman. Unless you show something people will not disturb you. If you want to be a woman, be like a woman.

The notion of cultural and traditional appropriate womanhood is so intense that *aravanis* shared that behaviour is very important to be accepted as a woman\(^ {81}\):

It all depends on the way we behave. If we go silently they will not harass us? So now we get lot of respect in Madurai. [...] What we counsel *aravanis* that it is not necessary to dress heavily, apply heavy make-up, wear anklets which make loud noise, it is not necessary to show that you are a woman. When you realize that you are woman, you are woman from that time. It is not necessary to apply turmeric on your face and apply *kumkum*\(^ {82}\) and tell the whole world. It is okay to be simple and live as a woman. It all depends on the way we behave. If we go silently then why will people harass us?

This cultural and social construction of woman does not necessarily correspond with the biological sex. A transgender body in culturally appropriate attire is socially accepted as a woman. Though a body is culturally and socially constructed as a woman, it is not their biological sex that makes them a woman. I’ll come to this point later.

Contrary to the social acceptance of transgenders as a woman, within the *aravani jamaat* in Tamil Nadu there is no concept of passing as a woman. *Jamaat* leaders prefer to use traditional terms like *hijral aravani*. Politics of terminologies and politics of passing as a

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79 Colourful sticker usually in round shape placed on the centre of the forehead.
80 Indian dress.
81 Shared during Group Discussion in Madurai.
82 *Kumkum* is a powder (usually in red or orange colour) applied on the forehead in India.
woman have no meaning and significance within the *aravani jamaat*. Ms. Kanamma comments:

I do not want recognition as woman. Those asking documents as female don’t have brains, they don’t have knowledge. The *jamaat* asks for third gender identity. If they claim to be woman then what is their work in the *hijra jamaat*. […] They go for SRS and silicone implants to earn money in sex work. We follow the customs of our elders. A person having silicone breast cannot become a *nayak*… They are not eligible to become a *nayak*. […] Even if there is a beautiful *hijra*, people still look at her as third gender or *aravani*, she cannot give birth to a child. Her beauty is appreciated but she does not get a name as a woman.

However I would like to highlight one point here regarding depiction of beautiful transgender bodies. Beauty contests organized for MSM and transgenders during Koovagam festival explain that transgender bodies are also considered beautiful bodies by competing with each other. Though not a biological female, transgender bodies during the beauty contest are judged on various aspects of the body such as beautiful hair, body structure, feminine face, transgenders who look like women etc. Though the purpose of mobilization through beauty contest is for HIV/ AIDS awareness, transgender bodies are appreciated for their beauty and feminity. In this process the biological sex of transgender body is not important to win the contest, but the physical features that match with the societal expectations of a woman’s body.

5.5.2. **Politics of procreation.**

The *jamaat* views transgender bodies outside the sex/ gender binary by placing transgender bodies within the ‘third gender’ status. Transgender embodiment of self and self image is highly impacted by how they look at themselves (either as a group for e.g. the *aravani jamaat*, or as individuals for e.g. individual transgender/ transsexual) and how they are looked upon by others. Though MtF transgenders are socially accepted as a woman, biologically in the absence of procreation they are not considered a complete woman. It is procreation that reduces their body merely to a gender transitioned or gender transgressed body. Procreation is an important factor to become a complete woman.

Ms. Nikhila highlights this lacuna very well. Though she has undergone a complete SRS in Thailand and she can have a heterosexual relationship with her boyfriend (cisgender man), in the absence of procreation she considers herself an incomplete woman and she holds the larger society responsible for this sense of incompleteness. In here words:

I see self as a woman in many situations but in some situations I am forced to see myself as a transsexual woman. My boyfriend will not marry me because I am not a genetic woman. I cannot
give birth to a child. There is a social stigma attached with transgender identity. Transsexual woman are not viewed as a biological woman. Legally I am a female but socially it is not accepted. Transgender people are not biological woman and that is repeatedly brought to their notice. Procreation is an important factor to be eligible to be called as a woman.

Even secondary respondents have similar views on procreation. If a transgender convincingly passes as a decent person then socially she is accepted as a woman. However in the absence of procreation she remains an incomplete woman. Here the body is reduced to biological process. In the words of Mr. Prakash Raj:

_Aravani_ consider themselves as women and they marry men. But they cannot give birth to a child. There is no provision for legal marriage. New generation _aravanis_ have boyfriends, and they have a secret relationship as they are afraid of society. Very recently I heard that a man desired to marry a _aravani_ but his family raised questions whether she can give birth to a child. So when they change to a woman they desire to have boyfriends. But marriage is a bit difficulty. It is an understanding that if a (cisgender) woman gives birth to a child then only she is considered a complete woman. Since _aravanis_ cannot give birth to a child they are not considered a complete woman.

Thapan (2009) mentions that childbearing is central to married women’s well-being and sense of personhood and identity. In her words “Women who cannot bear children at all, or who do not bear a family that includes boys, feel incomplete and unfulfilled. In this sense, a woman’s body has failed her, and becomes a source of shame, loss of face, and mental agony, as well as family dishonour” (Thapan 2009: 134). A cisgender woman in the absence of procreation considers herself incomplete. Birth of child is not only to continue family lineage of husband, but is also related to respect for her and for the family. A woman is complete only when she gives birth to a child. Inability of a woman to conceive a child leads to mistreatment and label such as barren.

Coming back to the former discussion on cultural and social construction and acceptance of MtF transgenders as a woman, and the latter discussion that in the absence of procreation a transgender is an incomplete woman, explain that it is the traditional-cultural positions of these transgender bodies that place them under the woman binary. Though by undergoing a complete SRS MtF transgenders can be legally called as female, and socially accepted as a woman, in the absence of procreation she remains an incomplete woman.

Biologically a transgender body after complete SRS gets legitimacy to become a female (on legal papers and documents), however procreation a biological factor becomes a limitation/hindrance in acceptance of the body as a complete woman.
A view that MtF transgenders remain ‘incomplete woman’ in the absence of procreation counter-interacts with the traditional role of *hijras* who bless newlywed couples for their happy life and also for children. A *hijra* blesses cisgender bodies to beget and to procreate. However when the same body (in this case *aravanis/ MtF* transgenders) in Tamil Nadu move away from their traditional role of blessing, move closer to sex and gender binaries by adapting biological (by undergoing SRS) and social (woman identity) meanings and attributes of those binaries. The religious-cultural-social role of *hijras/ aravanis* as entertainers and blessers diminish under such framework.

The body is central to embodiment. Without a body there is no embodiment. Humans are social beings and biological organisms. Embodiment is both mind and body and one cannot exist without the other. Thus the mind along with body constitutes embodiment. In the words of Krieger (2005: 350), “Our living bodies tells stories about our lives”. Krieger (ibid.) further highlights, “Embodiment is contingent upon having a body. Understanding probable pathways of embodiment thus requires clarity about what it is that bodies do, as jointly biological organisms and social beings.” (Krieger 2005: 351).

Krieger (ibid.) uses the concept of embodiment as a construct, process, and reality, contingent upon bodily existence. Hence in order to understand embodiment, it is necessary to understand what bodies do jointly as biological organisms and as social beings. As biological organisms bodies reproduce, develop, grow, interact, exist in time and space, and evolve.

### 5.6. Conclusion

Lived experiences of MtF transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu explain their social and biological position both within the *aravani jamaat* and also within the larger mainstream society. Though they exist in time and space, interact and evolve in society, but as biological organisms they are incapable to reproduce.

It is postulated that transgender embodiment in Tamil Nadu has two dimensions. One is the social construction of MtF transgender as a woman, and second is their non-sex and non-gender construction.

The first dimension pertains to transgender passing as a woman and socially accepted as a woman if she behaves like a woman. Bodily features do not form basis for this construction. It is perception of self and of the society. If a transgender convincingly pass as a decent person (or have a submissive, soft, good character etc.) then socially she is accepted as a
woman. However in the absence of procreation she remains an incomplete woman. Here the body is reduced to biological anatomy. Naturally the female body is predisposed to procreate. The MtF biological male body, internally too cannot conceive. Though these bodies can live as a wife with a cisgender man and have a family with adopted children, in the absence of procreation she still remains a gender transitioned body. In this context, the biological body dominates the socio-culturally constructed body.

In the second dimension, both the *aravani jamaat* and the state place transgender bodies outside sex and gender binary. Preference for third gender by *aravani jamaat* and preference for non-sex/ non-gender binary terms and identities such as *aravani* and transgender by state on the G.O.s explain non-sex/ non-gender and non-binary perspective of state towards transgender bodies. The state is aware of MtF transgenders male sex assigned at birth, their relationship with cisgender men, and their desire to change sex through medical-technological intervention. However the state has not upfront given a female or woman’s identity to transgenders (except for the option to chose sex on voter id and the passport). The state does not provide any concrete transgender sex/ gender definition. However given the state’s response to various movements in Tamil Nadu, transgenders are considered citizens and responsibility of the state and the state provides remedies for their welfare and development. Thus like Thapan (2009: 4), can it be said that trans(gender) identities are in the process of becoming, being made and re-made, constructed and re-defined, shaped and transformed?

Just as the body became a political issue for feminist struggle and analysis of gender and power, and also to highlight the gender and sexed construction of the body (Davis 1997), then transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu also help us to understand transgenderist struggle and analysis of their gender both within the *aravani jamaat* and within the state framework which reflect the decreasing power of the *aravani jamaat* and increasing control of the state. Not only the concept of ‘power’ but also the social construction of transgender as a woman and the biological construction as a female (through SRS).

Though feminist discourse critiques social-cultural construction of sex/ gender binary, transgender experiences in Tamil Nadu demonstrate that the biological body’s capacity to procreate dominates the socially constructed gendered body. Biology becomes a destiny for (transgender) women to be considered a complete woman through the process of procreation. However transgender bodies are socially accepted as a woman if they follow appropriate traditional-cultural values. Nevertheless procreation is a limitation for gender transitioned transgender bodies to be considered a complete woman in Tamil Nadu.
The discussion in this chapter commenced with understanding various trans(gender) identities in Tamil Nadu and issues related to multiple transgender sexualities through lived experiences of aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals. Both these issues explain multiple positions of transgender bodies both within the aravani jamaat and also within the mainstream society. Transgender bodies blend into mainstream society because of their religious-cultural background. In the process of gender transition, transgender bodies pass through a process of social construction of their bodies as a woman. In the absence of procreation they are not considered complete woman. Biological male anatomy of the body is a limiation for transgenders to be considered a complete woman. Though SRS gives legitimacy to be legally identified as a woman, the process of procreation dominates the socially constructed gender of transgender bodies.

It is interesting to note that the carving of a third gender identity as a ‘hijra’ or an aravani is hinged on the lack of fit into the binary, but culturally across various states of India, there is a tacit acceptance of this third variant. Unlike in the western context, the transgendered body is predominantly fitted into the binary. Medical-technological interventions and body modifications are ways in which there are attempts to reassign the external sexual configuration of the body and socially perform the gender that one chooses. In the Indian context, along with the third gender as a gender identity called by multiple regional names, the range of various MtF trans(gender) identities are predominantly of lower classes, more likely subscribe to a heteronormative gender identity, and perform a heteronormative sexual life (or are engaged in sex worker) as partners to cisgender men. However there are certain transgender voices which silently claim their position in the mainstream society as a ‘woman’ or associate themselves with various trans(gender) identities which does not fall within the traditional third gender identity. These groups of transgenders have higher opportunities to climb the class ladder and lead an independent life as they fall within the socially constructed gender binary, which is acceptable by the larger mainstream society.