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## **Within the mirror of a transsexual woman:**

Unveiling issues on body adequacy aesthetics

**Visual Ethnography**

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### **Abstract**

The article seeks to present the process of body improvement among transsexual women in the search for adequacy to the gender to which they identify. From the use of hormones and industrial silicone, bodies are built with the aim of achieving “*passability*”<sup>1</sup> as markers of the female gender. However, when seeking such improvement, the starting point is from clinically healthy bodies, even if psychologically questioned by the women themselves, to a continuous process of illness to the detriment of the processes and products used. Ethnography was used as a methodology, as it is the method of anthropology. By presenting two ethnographic accounts, the author hopes to take the reader at the places in which these bodies are transformed, and the main issues brought to the daily life of these women.

### **Keywords**

Aesthetics, transsexuals, violence, bodies, modification.

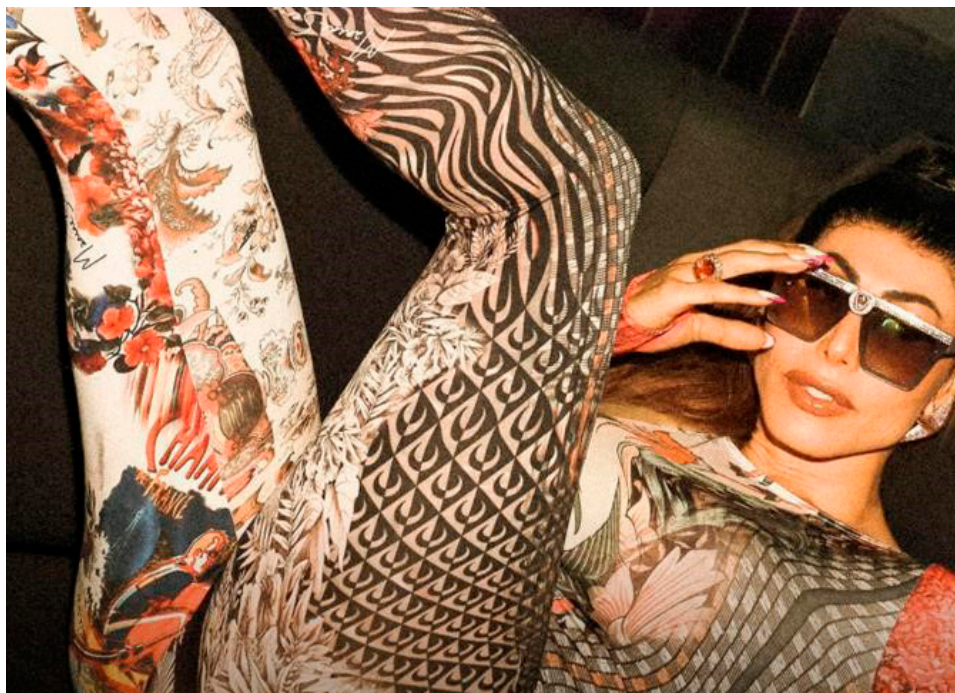
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**1** Be recognized as a woman.

2 Continuity between sex, gender and sexual practice, and the coherence is what makes intelligible genders. Butler's idea of "intelligible genders" suggests that society imposes norms and expectations about how bodies should behave according to gender categories. People are encouraged to conform to these norms in order to be recognized and accepted as legible members of a given gender category.



**Figure 1** Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Ariel Moraes, 2022.

## Introduction

The following discussion proposes a reflection on the procedures and aesthetic uses of cosmetic, hormonal, and surgical products as strategies for body improvement (Pussetti and Pires, 2020; Pussetti, 2021). I will specifically address procedures used by trans women during their gender identity realignment process. To explore this topic, I will present ethnographic data obtained over the past years (2012 and 2013) from various fieldwork experiences with this community.

For every trans woman, becoming "perfectly gorgeous" (Pelúcio, 2005) is primarily a reason for living. Being "perfectly gorgeous" is an aesthetic-moral classification indicating a set of care practices directed towards the body and, consequently, identity construction. The goal of becoming beautiful is to construct what is termed "intelligible genders"<sup>2</sup> (Butler, 2002; apud Pelúcio, 2005 and Brosin, 2017), where the induced changes allow coherence between sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.

This process involves a network, often including other trans women who have undergone similar processes. Contact with the "beauty network" teaches, for example, the quantity of *perlutan* pills (female hormone) to be taken daily, clothing choices, walking style, sitting posture, gestures, and which type of silicone and "pumpers" (amateur and clandestine individuals performing aesthetic procedures) to consult. In broad terms, the adaptation to the desired gender involves what some transvestites and trans women call "dressing" (an emic category).

The moment this adaptation ends does not exist. A trans woman is always seeking new procedures to appear more feminine and beautiful. As the beauty industry introduces new procedures, these become the dream for many of them.

The costs for these services and aesthetic procedures are never cheap, making it challenging for many to afford the aesthetic realignment process as they would like. Lack of family support, whether financial or emotional, leads many to engage in sex work as the most logical way to obtain resources for aesthetic purposes.

As they initiate this activity (sex work) and start receiving compliments from clients, and as they attract more clients, the procedures become more

routine. The equation in these cases is as follows: [aesthetic procedures] + [more desired in the “market”] + [greater passability] + [more clients] + [more financial resources] = new aesthetic procedures.

As analyzed by Rocon (2017), in the case of trans women who are sex workers, the preferences and requests of clients play a crucial role in decisions involving body modifications, shaping the trajectory of their body production.

The aesthetic pressure persists from clients and society, tending to victimize less those trans individuals who can produce an image of a feminine body aligned with heteronormative binary ideals, [re]produced in these cases by the notion of greater possibility as a feminine body.

Trans bodies challenge and resist the dichotomous standard, promoting new aesthetic arrangements produced through various attempts at classification and standardization orchestrated by biopower (Benedetti, 2005, and Rocon et al., 2017). On the other hand, this pressure is not always met by the majority of these women who end up resorting to risky procedures with technically inadequate products, operated by non-healthcare professionals.

The transformations that trans women undergo aim at an alignment with their gender category and not their sexual practices (Benedetti, 2005). Body transformations aim to produce images and signs related to beauty.

These “plasticized bodies,” as Larissa Pelúcio (2005) describes them, contest the supposed biological and cultural destinies of their lives. In the pursuit of human improvement, they resort to industrial silicone, makeup, hormones, prosthetics, tanning, hair straightening, wigs, nails, foam fillings, clothes that highlight their forms, and various other “tricks” taught by experienced trans individuals, known as “*babadeiras*.”



**Figure 2** Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Ariel Moraes, 2022.

## **“Travesti isn’t a Mess!”**

It was around 3 pm when I arrived in Lapa, a bohemian neighborhood in the center of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Passing under the Arcos da Lapa and walking along Mem de Sá street, I spotted a large old house with a store on the ground floor, its doors graffiti-covered with the image of a transvestite and the words: “Travesti não é Bagunça!” (Travesti isn’t a Mess!).

It was a hot afternoon in Rio de Janeiro. As I reached the location, I saw a staircase next to the door leading to the house. After calling for a while, a *travesti* came to attend to me: “Hi handsome, good afternoon! Do you want service?” I replied that I had arranged to meet Luana, and he quickly allowed me to go upstairs.

Ascending the stairs, I encountered a small altar on the right with images of saints from Candomblé and some candles. Upon entering the house, I was fascinated because I knew I was in the home of the woman considered the new *Madame Satã* in Lapa. The house had a very old appearance, with peeling paint, leaks, and many rooms and divisions. Accompanied by a *travesti*, we crossed a long corridor to reach the main room.

In the room, Luana sat smoking a cigarette, with long blond hair, many tattoos, red nails, a headscarf, and a loud, hoarse voice. As soon as I saw her, I went to kiss her and thank her for receiving me. The topic we had to discuss that afternoon was about a film that the production company I worked for would shoot on Rua da Glória, a famous location in Lapa known for being one of Rio de Janeiro’s main prostitution areas.

Our conversation flowed as Luana told me about the dozens of photos on the wall. The house had over 30 *travesti* residents, passing through the place all the time. Luana would inquire about objects out of place and the daily lodging fees that had to be paid. All of them paid a fee to live in the house, and, in return, they received the necessary security to work on the “track.” Being Luana’s daughter meant protection and assurance that the worker would not fall victim to any kind of “sweet” (crime or trap).

It was my first time entering the house, and my fascination and amazement were noticeable. At one point, I asked to use the bathroom and, upon being directed, ended up closing my open bag, as was my habit. I noticed that Luana didn’t like this gesture, although she didn’t say anything; her gaze was piercing. Quickly, I positioned my bag next to her to convey a message of trust.

Upon returning to the room, I found Luana attending to some girls to settle the lodging payments, which should be made after each night on the “track.” At this moment, some of them approached with a syringe in hand and said the following phrase: “Mother Luana, can you administer hormones to me?” Luana took the syringe from the *travesti*, lowered her clothes, and applied the medication to one of her buttocks. The ritual of hormone application took some time, as other “daughters” approached her with the same goal.

Observing these scenes, I maintained the familiarity expected of anthropological work and began to understand the “improper” uses of hormones intended for the feminization process.

The use of hormones by trans women and *travestis* (an emic category in Brazil) is described by different authors (Pelúcio, 2005; Rocon, 2017, and Kulick, 1998) as the first step in the process of [re]shaping the body and gender identity. In their perception of having an “unhealthy” body, they hope to achieve health through the use of different hormonal doses, which may vary based on recommendations from friendship networks, solidarity, and even from procurers (Rocon, 2017).

According to Benedetti (2005), the “construction” of the body also involves definitive means such as plastic surgeries, the implantation of liquid silicone in various body regions, but it is primarily through the use of hormones that a woman “builds” herself. As Pelúcio (2005) mentions, quoting a *travesti*: “A *travesti* who doesn’t take hormones is not a *travesti*, they think it’s carnival and go out dressed as a woman” (cited in Lopes, 1995).



**Figure 3** Luana Muniz, Rio de Janeiro. Photo by <https://mundot-girl.blogspot.com>. 2013

The use of hormones causes significant bodily changes, and among these changes, the one that holds greater symbolic meaning for *travestis* is the emergence of “little breasts.” The breasts are a central element in the process of recognition as a travesti by others. In other words, *travestis* only recognize each other as such if they (at least) use hormones resulting in breast gland growth (Ramalho, 2020).

Observing Luana’s role in administering hormones to other *travestis*, I realized that this process requires someone’s support. Therefore, it is common for *travestis* to seek the assistance of fellow *travesti* friends; few are those who self-administer injections (Ramalho, 2020).

Despite the considered positive effects that hormones produce on bodies, some adverse effects can also be perceived. For example, a decrease in erec-

tile capacity and sexual performance becomes a problem for those who are sex workers. Pelúcio (2005) also identifies mood alterations and increased irritability, perceived by users as “nerve control loss,” causing them to “explode” at any circumstance. Control over feelings and emotions becomes more unstable.

Despite these adverse effects, hormones are perceived as the “purchase of beauty.” Through these medications, the concepts of beauty and femininity are structured. The change in voice, breasts, reduction of body hair, rounding of hips/thighs/legs, waist definition, change in skin texture, among other effects, outweigh all the problems that their use without medical supervision may cause.

Spending an afternoon at the Mansion on Mem de Sá Street, I realized that it was not just a place where they slept and rested from the intense overnight work routines in Lapa, but also where they shaped their bodies and exchanged experiences on which procedures to undergo and which “pumpers” to turn to.

After three hours of sitting on the sofa next to Luana, she finally gave me the answer I needed to proceed. Not only did she approve the recording, but she also allowed me to conduct fieldwork in that region for a few months. To feel secure, she accompanied me on the first day and introduced me to the main security guard, whom I became friends with and spent numerous nights with.

These streets where I conducted fieldwork (2012) became my main leisure and conversation spot. On days when I wasn't doing fieldwork, I would head to the same place to drink and chat with the *travestis*. All their stories fascinated me; it was like being in a movie theater or watching a real-life theatrical performance.

On May 8, 2017, around 5 a.m., the “Queen of Lapa” bid farewell to everyone. Five years after our first meeting, Luana Muniz passed away due to a cardio-respiratory arrest. Her story was told in cinema through the films “Rainha da Lapa” (Theodore Collatos and Carolina Monnerat) and “Luana Muniz – Filha da Lua” (Rian Córdova and Leonardo Menezes). Like Madame Satã, she became a legendary figure among sex workers.

## **The use of industrial silicone**

The second case I will present refers to the use of industrial silicone as a strategy for bodily adjustment. Through contact with Milenna Passos, a *travesti* and activist in the trans movement in Salvador, Bahia (Brazil), it was possible to perceive the direct effects of using industrial silicone to “shape” her hips and buttocks.

I met Milena in 2013 through a project (Moura, 2013) developed for the Ministry of Human Rights of Brazil. At that time, I was supposed to bring a case that could be reported as a human rights violation from the perspective of the 12 rights recognized and provided for in the International Human Rights Instruments of the United Nations.

Choosing the group and region of the country I wanted to work in, I contacted grassroots community organizations as the first way to enter the field. This led me to the Grupo Gay da Bahia (GGB).

The GGB is the oldest association defending the human rights of homosexuals in Brazil. Founded in 1980, it is registered as a non-profit civil society in 1983, declared a municipal public utility in 1987. In 1988, it was appointed a member of the National AIDS Commission of the Ministry of Health of Brazil, and since 1995, it has been part of the committee of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). The GGB, as its coordinators define it, is an umbrella entity that provides space for other civil society entities working in similar areas, especially in combating homophobia and preventing HIV and AIDS among the community and the general population.

As a data collection strategy and to understand the daily lives of *travestis*, I chose to stay for two weeks in a house of sex worker *travestis* located in Salvador, Bahia. Although the time was excessively short, I considered it more relevant for obtaining data than conducting individual interviews as the main



**Figure 4** Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Marcos Moura, 2022.

method. After sharing this goal with the GGB, I was introduced to Milenna, then the president of the Travestis Association of Salvador.

Through contact with Milenna, I got to know the house of the travesti Rogéria Maria. At that time, four travestis and Antonio, a cisgender man, the husband of the property owner, lived there. They rented rooms to live and work and walked the “track” along the Pituba beach during the nights.

Until that moment, I had not realized the degree of involvement Milenna had with this group. Their close relationship was crucial for us to spend time together over the days. During this period, I visited her house, workplace, friends’ houses, the “track,” bars, and supermarkets. I could perceive the effects of industrial silicone on her daily life.

## Arrival at the house:

The vacant room was used by the “girls” to receive clients they found on the “track.” The amount I had to pay for the days I would stay was defined by Antonio. The house is located in the Pituba neighborhood, a middle-class neighborhood in Salvador. The residence has two floors, front and back yards, and a garage for two cars. With high walls and wooden gates, passersby cannot see what is behind the walls. On the first floor, there are some rooms located near the entrance door where the “girls” receive clients. They were decorated with a bed with a leather headboard, a wall with red texture, a recessed chandelier, red curtains, a fan, and a table with various items such as wigs, handcuffs, gel, condoms, towels, dildos, high heels, and panties. Near the staircase leading to the second floor, there is a bathroom used by the “girls” and clients. On the ground floor, there is also a kitchen with a door constantly open to the backyard and a TV that is on day and night. In this backyard, everyone gathers, and there is a large table and a bathroom under construction.

Upstairs, the transgender women have their rooms. The area reserved for the owner of the residence and her husband has two rooms, a space for the bed, a closet, a Jacuzzi, and a large mirror. Next to this area is the room where the “girls” rent spaces. In this place, there are three beds, a TV, and three fans. Next to each bed, there is a suitcase with clothes and personal items. The house has four dogs, two large ones outside and two smaller ones inside.

The residence where the transgender women rent rooms belongs to transgender woman Rogéria Maria, 41 years old, married for 19 years. When I met Rogéria, I was struck by the volume of industrial silicone she had in her body, around 11 liters, shaping her desired feminine form. The other transgender women in the house were Ketelen Elwira, 19 years old, Juliana (Gigi), 30 years old, and Nayla, 21 years old.

With a large and medium-standard dwelling, a car, and many furnishings, Rogéria says she achieved everything thanks to “prostitution” and also thanks to Antônio, who managed the money well for the house to be built: “If it weren’t for his management, I would have spent all the money,” says Rogéria Maria. Her life in “prostitution” alternated between Salvador and some Italian cities, where she stayed for three years and even married a woman. During this period, Antônio also went to Italy, where they worked together for a while, and then he returned and took charge of the construction.

At the time of the construction work, she had returned to her studies and was finishing high school (12th grade). Besides the place they lived in Pituba, they own two more houses that they rent. The street became a less frequent option as it is occupied at night due to school. The possibility of continuing with education is uncommon among transgender women. Many of them cannot attend school due to prejudice, ranging from the use of the bathroom to the attendance list, where they are called by their legal names and not by their chosen names. In Rogéria’s case, she considers the return to school a significant achievement, despite still facing prejudice in the school environment.

In the activism of the transgender movement, she met Milenna, and they became very close over the years, considering themselves as sisters. This closeness became apparent through my interaction with both of them. Living with Rogéria also meant contact with her “sister.” Milenna, despite being 34 years old, sees herself as an “old transgender woman.” When I express surprise at this term, she says:

“A transgender woman is born at 19 and dies at 30; many of them die due to drug use, HIV, silicone, and violence. Ranella and I are survivors, that’s why we are respected among the other transgender women.”

(Milenna Passos, transgender woman, 34 years old)

Regarding her education, she mentions that unfortunately, she had to drop out in the 1st year, a common reality among transgender women. Cur-

rently, she plans to return to studies in the second semester. Regarding job opportunities, she reports facing many difficulties in getting a job due to being transgender and having embraced her transgender identity at a young age.

Popular in her neighborhood, she is constantly approached by various children when walking down the streets, mentioning that they saw her on TV, referring to a recent protest she participated in. Having been born and lived in the same place until now makes her highly respected by everyone. Her house reveals how challenging her life is in that neighborhood. With only three rooms and no running water, she transformed the space into a place to receive neighbors seeking some kind of “advice.”

Family composition was one of the points emphasized during various informal conversations with all of them. The fact that many of them do not maintain contact with their families and they left home at an early age may explain the motivating factors for restructuring a family model that deviates from heteronormative standards. The coexistence among them (residents of the house) made me realize that they are emotionally connected not only by legal or blood ties but also by affection.

The almost daily visits of Milenna to Rogéria’s house allowed me to understand the difficulty she had in sitting on the right side of her buttock. Also, when walking on the streets or standing for some time, it was common to hear her complain about leg pains. The inability to sit was caused by inflammation from industrial silicone injected by a “pumper.” Since the product started causing problems, she has faced difficulties in movement and strong pains. Removing the product may bring other complications or even lead to a generalized infection. Unable to afford a safe surgical procedure, she lives with the unwanted effects of silicone on her body.

According to Pelúcio (2005), the use of silicone represents the “pain of beauty”; the “whole made” body is the dream of the majority. Turning to a “pumper” is the most common path for Brazilian transgender women in the last 40 years. The “pumper” is usually another transgender woman or a friend who agrees to perform the procedure (Kulick, 1998). With thick needles, liters of industrial silicone are introduced into the body; after forming a “ball” in the area, massaging begins until the expected shape is achieved. The holes are filled with “super glue” type adhesive.

The symbolic aspect that leads a person to undergo these types of procedures has its own logic (Mott, 1997). Pain and personal sacrifice are considered inevitable factors in achieving a personal victory linked to aesthetics. In this case, it is built on the use of silicone, despite possible problems. For Pandora, a transgender woman interviewed by Rocom:

“In my time, I spent about five liters: thighs, buttocks, hips, chest, my face – I did everything. And the process after this silicone in the body, I regret it. I regret it a bit because I didn’t have rest. [...] Silicone went down to the foot.”

(Rocon, et all. 2017:5)

In Milenna’s case, the silicone did not descend to the foot but caused an inflammatory process. Years after this initial contact, we talked on the phone, and the problems with silicone had eased. Just as she did not have financial resources for a clinical surgery, this time she also does not have them. All treatment is provided by the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS); the possibilities of surgery are limited given the situation. In the pursuit of a healthy body, an effectively sick body was created.

The indiscriminate use of silicone stems from a culture where bodies undergo social approval to be validated. What Milenna desired when undergoing the procedure was to establish her identity, be accepted by other transvestites, and achieve greater passability, which would apparently result in experiencing less social prejudice.



**Figure 5** Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Marcos Moura, 2022.

### **Final considerations:**

The final considerations of this text will shed light on the exhibition “Be Fu\*\*ing Perfect: The Pursuit of Excellence” and the results published within the scope of the Excel project. This project investigated, among other things, the use of biotechnologies and different ways of enhancing the human body and aesthetics. Various articles were published (Pussetti, 2019; Pussetti, 2021; Pussetti and Pires, 2020) indicating the logic of operation of markets dedicated to the use of silicone prostheses, cosmetics, plastic surgeries, hormones, and more.

In the current context, approximately 10 years after the ethnographic reports here, the variety of products and information has significantly increased.

The audience of trans women has developed a market niche focused on themselves, emphasizing the importance of building self-esteem through small daily cares. Even though surgeries with “pumpers” persist, the number of trans individuals using surgical prostheses instead of industrial silicone is growing.

The desired body is, in its essence, synthetic, artificial, a consumable product defined by circumstances and tastes inherent to cultural, historical, and political contexts. The standards incorporate models that sustain rather than undo bodily inequalities (Pussetti, 2021).

In the context of Brazil, in 2008 through Ordinance No. 1,707/GM/MS, norms were established for the accreditation of public health units regarding the Transsexual Process in the Unified Health System (SUS). In this context, the goal is to enable services in public hospitals that can ensure comprehensive healthcare for transgender individuals, addressing all their needs and ensuring access without any form of discrimination. Registered services must have a multidisciplinary team, including endocrinologists, nurses, social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists. The transsexual outpatient clinic is an initiative that allows for risk reduction and lifesaving. The state acknowledges that these procedures were performed without proper oversight and that its intervention was urgent.

According to Pussetti (2021), aesthetic procedures and the use of biotechnological tools, from a liberal perspective, imply that everyone can reach the pinnacle of the social pyramid if they do something about it. Correcting supposed “defects” does not aim to improve health but rather to construct human beings more suitable for the aspired

Every discussion about body improvement, aesthetic change and the trans transition process comes up against the issue of *passability*. This term appears in different investigations and therefore deserves due attention, as it is discussed several times by different trans women. In general terms, it is linked to the idea of a trans person physically passing as a cis person (Paulino et al., 2020). This process is connected to all the possibilities of interventions that the person can make.

Physically passing as a cisgender person implies being able to benefit from some heteronormative privileges to which these people are subject; passing as a cisgender person is a relevant objective for many transgender people (Vergueiro, 2015). Suffering less violence, getting a job, getting a boyfriend, not being watched all the time on the streets are some of these benefits. In this way, *passability* is also achieved through plastic surgery, aesthetic procedures, ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving. They are a set of elements that make trans women, when going through the transition process, more accepted in society.

What is at stake is the possibility of presenting an identity that allows for a feeling of recognition and belonging. This construction does not uncritically deny the heteronormative binary (Paulino et al., 2020). It is an attempt to “play” with socially accepted forms and find a way to survive a hostile social environment.

According to Debert (2001), from the 1970s onwards, lifestyles that demarcate the boundaries that indicate the different age groups began to go through a process of “blurring” (Siqueira, 2004). In the case of trans women, there is a dichotomy with a profession that requires a beautiful, healthy, and apparently young body. Age is not perceived as a behavior and lifestyle marker, but rather as something that must be aesthetically overcome through surgeries and aesthetic procedures.

It is important to say that the cases mentioned can lead us to an articulation between beauty and old age, in which, in a negative way, trans aging is perceived. Allied to this are the difficulties inherent to a profession (sex work) that works, above all, with the aesthetics of the new and young as a synonym for professional success. The aging process, in this case, not only brings changes to the body and health, but also practically makes them change the way they work. In general terms, it can be highlighted that it is difficult for transvestites and trans women to reach old age, it is not an exaggeration to say that

death comes early for this part of the population (Siqueira, 2004). Thus, old age is also anticipated when we consider life trajectories marked by contexts of violence of all types (Antunes, 2010).

Finally, it is important to highlight the ethical issues surrounding body enhancement. Although many trans women currently turn to specialized doctors, it is clear that many of these people seek the help of friends or people who are not in the health field to make the body adjustments they desire. It is important to emphasize that these procedures occur in an amateur manner and without any legal protection.

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