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CALL ME HEENA

SHAHRIA SHARMIN

"I feel like a mermaid. My body tells me I am a man and my soul tells me I am a woman" — Heena, 51.

Hijra, a South Asian term with no exact match in the English language, refers to people designated as male or intersex at birth who adopt a feminine gender identity.

Often mislabeled as hermaphrodites, eunuchs, or transsexuals in literature, hijras can be considered to fall under the umbrella term transgender, but many prefer the term "third gender".

Traditionally, hijras held a semi-sacred status and were hired to sing, dance, and bless newly married couples or newborns at household parties. Earnings were pooled through the guru system, in which hijras declare allegiance to a guru and submit to group rules, in exchange for financial and social security.

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Growing up in Bangladesh, I was influenced by prejudices and stereotypes about hijras. Then I met Heena, who opened up her life to me and helped me get to know the other members of her community as the mothers, daughters, friends, and lovers that they are. Call Me Heena is my attempt to show the beauty in hijra lives, despite the challenges and discrimination they face.

The work features hijras in Bangladesh, as well as a number who migrated to India. While some continue to face discrimination once in India, others have found greater social acceptance than in Bangladesh. At the same time, many hijras in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries have stood up for their rights and gained at least limited legal recognition for a third gender. I hope my work will help hijras to open up even more space for themselves within Bangladeshi society. ■



SHAHRIA SHARMIN is an internationally acclaimed photographer who has extensively work with the Hijra Community.