

TRANSWOMEN IN THE TRANSITION OF BODY CHANGE: “WILL WE BE ACCEPTED AS WOMEN?”

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Abstract Indonesian society is faced with a gender construction that always directs that men should be masculine while women are required to be feminine. But in reality, we are faced with a condition where there are men who are feminine, which ultimately makes them get stigmatized and discriminated against by society. This condition causes some men to decide to become women (transwomen). This article explores the journey of transwomen in embracing their gender identity through their physical changes. We conducted participant observation along with semi-formal in-depth interviews with 5 transwomen in the KTS organization (Kebersamaan Transpuan Semarang), to obtain data through the experiences of these transwomen. Through the results of the analysis, we see that the informants experienced emotional and social challenges faced during the transition process, as well as the hope to be accepted as a woman. Until now, they are still trying to be accepted by society despite the long process they have to go through.

Keyword:

Gender, sexuality, body construction, transgender, masculinity, femininity, patriarchal culture

Article Info

Received : 05 Oct 2024

Accepted : 24 Oct 2024

Published : 15 Nov 2024

1. Introduction

The question came to mind when we were exploring research on transwomen, what is their social life and the polemics they face after deciding to become a 'woman'? This eventually led us to meet Sinta, Molly, Tania, Tasya and Cici. Transwomen who live and work in Semarang, the capital of Central Java province. At that time, we saw Tania hosting a party. She hosted the event gracefully, beautifully and singing softly like a woman in a hetero perspective¹. Eventually, we got to know Tania. She told us that she was a man who decided to become a trans woman. She also brought us to the transwomen community in Semarang. They organize transwomen's activities and help each other. They gather regularly to give each other support and express the burden of life that they have been going through in their daily lives. In fact, the problems they face are more complex than we imagined.

As we know, sexuality in Indonesia is still centered on heteronormativity, where people

¹ A person born female who acts feminine; heteronormative assumes biological sex, sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles should be compatible (March, et al., 1999).

must live according to their biological norms. We will refer to March, et al (1999:17) who say that,

“Sex is the biological difference between men and women. Sex differences are concerned with men’s and women’s bodies. Men produce sperm; women bear and breastfeed children. Sexual differences are the same throughout the human race. Gender is the experience of being male or female differs dramatically from culture to culture. The concept of gender is used by sociologists to describe all the social given attributes, roles, activities and responsibilities connected to being a male or female in a given society. Our gender identity determines how we are perceived, and how we are expected to think and act as women and men, because of the way society is organised”.

Even with the definition described above that the distinguishing indicator of sex is the biological function of the body, the reality on the field, especially in Java, the division of labor also looks at sex which is still identified with gender². Then when we discuss the division of labor itself, we can slightly discuss the nature-culture dichotomy by Ortner (1974: 75), which states that men and women somehow boil down to roles that seem to have existed in their own boxes. Ortner herself provides an interesting critique, where women are synonymous with nature (nurturing, caring, giving birth to new life) and men are synonymous with culture (spinning webs of prolonged cultural systems). It is something that makes us realize that women seem to be no more valuable than men, in other words, the female body seems to only be a factory for the reproduction of life (giving birth to babies). Men will continue in the field of science so that they can create something eternal (technology), while women only create something that is prone to destruction (humans). This is highlighted when Ortner also offers her thoughts. How is it that the activity of destroying life (hunting and warfare) gets more honor than women's ability to give birth (create life)? This brings us to de Beauvoir's (1953) opinion that it is “not about who gives life, but about who risks life, man is finally elevated above the animal; that is why superiority has been conferred in humanity, not on the sex that gives birth, but on the sex that kills.” Then we thought, isn't giving birth to new life also a process of risking life? This becomes a new question for our debate.

Then returning to our initial discussion, not only is the division of labor a concern, appearance is also an indicator of achieving masculinity standards. Men are required not to wear makeup, not to show a weak side, which are indicators that are generally pinned as standards for women. Therefore, men must be masculine, which is synonymous with strength, masculinity, having an athletic body, not showing an emotional side, which is finally known as the term *manhood* (Kaufman, 1987). Then the phenomenon of transwomen becomes its own spotlight, because they are outwardly born men who then decide to change themselves into women, both in appearance and in their social life. This is an interesting highlight because many questions arise in our minds. Firstly, if being a man is a privilege because they have wider access to the public sector³, then why did they finally decide to become a woman? Secondly, what are the social

² A person with a penis is male, and a person with a vagina is female.

³ Both access to employment and access to education. Because this access became a privilege obtained by some groups in the past. This was also mentioned by one of the famous female figures in Indonesia, Kartini, who is known as a figure upholding women's emancipation. In that era, access to education and employment could not be obtained by women, they were only seen as a group that worked in the domestic sphere, as a wife who took care of household chores and served her husband and children (Pratiwi, T. & Hudaidah, 2021).

conflicts they face after deciding to transform themselves into women?

Our discussion and questions are certainly inseparable from the history of the LGBT phenomenon that has become the talk of Indonesian society and seems to be an interesting spectacle space while implying the impression of horror, which this phenomenon is then called the uncanny⁴ (Freud in Royle, 2003). The uncanny phenomenon itself is something that is spread among Indonesian people through fairy tales, myths and superstitions. But the uncanny also does not only revolve around something in the imagination. The culture of fear is a scourge in Indonesia. This is also the case when society looks at LGBT people (including transwomen). Some of our hetero relatives also admitted that they experience the uncanny when they meet transvestites or transwomen in public spaces. They feel scared because of the framing of the media and society that always warns that transvestites or transwomen people are scary or disgusting. This fear eventually creates an impression of horror but at the same time becomes a spectacle space in itself. Likewise, when LGBT news is spread by the media, people's interest is centered on the news. Because of the fear and disgust directed at transvestites or transwomen, it becomes a field for them to show themselves and earn money from it. This phenomenon tends to be strange but satisfying, where people get the doctrine that transvestites or transwomen are a group that must be marginalized so that there will be fear and a disgusting stigma attached, but at the same time it has a strong attraction. Freud (1919) in his essay *The Uncanny* gives an epic example in the children's fairy tale, *The Sandman*, which was popular in 1816. He explained how Nathaniel as a child was given a fairy tale about *The Sandman* who would hunt him, want to take his eyeballs away, if he did not obey his parents to sleep. Nathaniel grew up with curiosity and fear of *The Sandman*, but this made him want to find out more and see *The Sandman* in person. This is also the case with the general public, they think that transvestites or transwomen are scary and disgusting figures, which eventually over time, they seek out these transvestites or transwomen, which ultimately leads to the fulfillment of the subconscious that they have been looking for all this time. We assume that this is one of the major factors for the phenomenon of transvestites or transwomen getting a big spotlight and a fantastic fee in the spectacle space for the public.

Furthermore, we refer to Hegarty's article (2022) which argues that transgender bullying stems from Indonesia's recorded criminal history. As was the case in 2017, Human Rights Watch in 2018 recorded 300 LGBT people charged under the Pornography Law. This is due to indications from the police and journalists involved that, despite the many positive things transwomen do, the authorities focus on negative stories. Also citing Gürsel, Z (in Hegarty, 2022), police and journalists are actively involved in creating and disseminating information that does not describe the current situation, but spreads news that benefits themselves. Ultimately, this is one of the main factors in the lack of justice for transwomen. They are perceived as creepy and synonymous with crime, so any achievements or good deeds they do will only be in the past, as society tends to still look at negative news about them.

This leads us to the question "why do men decide to become transwomen, despite knowing that living in the LGBT community in Indonesia is a difficult choice?" especially since being a hetero man is a privilege in a life that still revolves around patriarchal culture. Moreover, the process of transforming oneself into a full woman needs to go through many long processes. Body contouring surgery is also one of the stages they have to go through. This includes changing from penis to vagina, breast implantation, waist shaping, vocal cord alteration, and so on. These

⁴ Uncanny is usually synonymous with a sense of horror that is created because of the fear that humans experience in the process of interacting with other humans, the spread of fear of something to become a control of life.

lengthy procedures are not done in a short period of time, even for years. The problems don't end there, as transwomen people have to deal with the insecurities of acting as women in their daily lives. In the concept introduced by Goffman (1956) that every individual, in their social interaction, always performs themselves as if they are on a theater stage. In the context of transwomen, they face the challenge of presenting themselves in accordance with the gender with which they identify, even though the social environment often does not accept or even stigmatizes their identity.

However, on the other hand, transwomen also have to face the stigma. Stigma itself refers to a negative label or mark given by society to individuals who are considered to deviate from the prevailing norms (Goffman, 1963). For transwomen, this stigma comes in the form of discrimination, verbal bullying, and even violence, so they are caught in a duality between trying to change themselves according to their gender identity and facing pressure and negative judgments from society. They often have to deal with society that not only see them as 'different', but also put them in a marginalized position. The challenges faced by transwomen eventually lead us to a further question, "with the fulfillment of standards both in terms of appearance and division of labor as women, as well as about the performance of themselves, are they able to be accepted by society as a true woman? Or at least get equal justice in public and domestic access?". Through this introductions and questions written above, we will dive into the world of transwomen in the capital city of Central Java, Semarang, so that we can open our eyes to the phenomena of social problems.

2. Method

If there is a phenomenon to be observed, then the participant observation method is the best choice, which is then written in a qualitative form that reviews the phenomenon in detail. Participant observation is considered effective because it will involve the author in the activities being undertaken by transwomen, not only that, we can also get the same feeling when transwomen experience discrimination. Therefore, it also involves a phenomenological approach that can involve a subjectivist mindset, where the meaning of existing reality will be explored from an emic perspective⁵. We also conducts a semi-formal in-depth interview method, where the we will position outself as a relative who shares the story, so that the transwomen will feel comfortable in sharing their stories. Through this approach, transwomen will be open and not reluctant to reveal the phenomena of life problems they experience. The informants themselves were taken from one of the largest transwomen's organizations in Central Java based in the city of Semarang, but the name of this organization will be disguised as KTS (Kebersamaan Transpuan Semarang/ Togetherness of Tranwomen Semarang), as well as the names of the transwomen who become our informants, this is to maintain the privacy they want. The first informant is Sinta, a well-known MC and dress rental owner. She has a high level of experience as an MC (Master of Ceremony). The second is Molly, an outstanding student from a university in Semarang. The third is Tania, a singer and traditional dancer. Fourth is Tasya, a famous transwoman in Semarang, she works as a street busker and receives endorsements through her social media. The last one is Cici, a famous makeup artist, salon owner and also a dress rental owner. These five informants were chosen because they are important figures in KTS and are active in voicing the rights of transwomen. It is hoped that through their perspectives, we can open our eyes to the reality on the field regarding the discrimination of rights obtained by transwomen.

⁵ Perspectives are expressed through the eyes of the informants studied

3. Results and Discussion

If we talk about the phenomenon of equality between men and women in today's patriarchal world, it is still a debate. Especially when talking about women's rights, which in reality are still unequal in some groups. Access to education, public employment, health services and others are still the problems itself. If we look at Ranti & Hanjani (2023) who discussed the unequal access to work felt by flower farmers in Purwokerto, it is one of the many phenomena experienced by women. In this case, being a woman in a patriarchal world is not an easy thing. The discrimination experienced seems to be a normalcy that occurs. Then what about those who choose to become transwomen? The phenomena of this question will be revealed through the perspectives of transwomen. Starting from the history, the determination to decide to become transwomen, the conflicts faced and the fulfillment of gender roles that they try to fulfill. It is intriguing that men, who should have more access than women, are now choosing to transform themselves into women. Little by little we will understand the social conflicts and realities they face in society.

3.1. Body Transformation and the Struggle of Being Transwomen

We are well aware that being a transwomen will bring several impacts and burdens that will be carried by the parties concerned, including the transwomen themselves. Our expectation when we went to the field was that we would only meet waria⁶, but in reality we met transwomen who had completely change their appearance from head to toe, so that even at first glance, ordinary people would not realize that they were actually transwomen. In informant's decision to feminize⁷ their bodies, they are faced with a long process and history. The body as a social construction and the first and most natural instrument of human beings must be *learned* and *understood* in both good and bad ways (Mauss in Synnot and Howes, 1992). Mauss (1973) himself talks about the regulation of the body between men and women in his work entitled *Technique of the Body*, where he sees the order between men and women who are much different in the access to education obtained. He saw that men were educated in such a way as to be ready to work and get used to the conditions of the job field. Meanwhile, there is no school for women. They are educated entirely by their mothers and molded continuously with many taboos in life, and then released when they are married. Ultimately this is what determines the future of society and the formation of their personalities, meaning that the development of adolescence is decisive. It is at this time that they learn definitively the techniques of the body that they will maintain throughout their adult lives. Therefore we can also see that gestures in behavior are also a product of culture. Men and women also have their own gestures to express their gender identity. It is interesting when men who are required to apply masculine gestures⁸, instead apply feminine gestures⁹. This unconventionality is what eventually becomes the public spotlight, especially when trans women finally decide to patently change their body shape. Mauss (1973) states that every society has specific body techniques based on gender and social roles. In many societies, body techniques related to feminine and masculine are taught differently to individuals based on their biologically determined sex. However, in the case of transwomen, feminine body techniques can be consciously learned as part of gender transition. For transwomen, learning and applying

⁶ An acronym for female-male, which is the state of a man who still has a penis, dresses up (makeup and clothing) like a woman and behaves like a woman.

⁷ Feminizing their body to be like a woman. In the context of this research is changing their body from a male body to a female body.

⁸ Like walking with longer strides, more open legs, widened shoulders, etc.

⁹ Like walking with slower, smoother, closed legs and a less puffed chest.

feminine body techniques (such as how to walk, talk, and dress) is part of the process of internalizing new gender norms. This shows that body techniques can be a way to affirm a gender identity that is different from the one that has been determined at birth. Including transwomen's decision to undergo body modification -whether through hormone therapy, gender reassignment surgery, or facial feminization surgery- as the informants did, can be understood as a more sophisticated 'body technique'. This is in line with Mauss (1973) idea that the human body can be modified and adapted according to the demands of culture or social identity. So our discussion in this section will look at and understand the long history and life experiences that are part of the process of becoming feminine and transforming into a transwoman.

We talked a lot about the history of their decision to take a big step to change themselves into women. That afternoon, we met with transwomen as they held an event and gathered together to discuss the problems or conflicts of discrimination they experienced in the past month, as an effort to empower and resist their group. In the midst of the ongoing discussion, Molly, one of the informants shared a bitter experience that she had experienced that is still imprinted in her memory to this day.

"Since I was a child, my father and mother were rarely at home, so I was taken care of by my aunt. My aunt really wants to have a daughter because in her marriage, she has not been blessed with a daughter. My aunt was very gentle with me, and I was also gentle with her. But I myself am aware that I'm more interested in feminine things since I was a child. For example, I'm more interested in barbies- yes, that girl doll! Until now I also like pink (color), it's cute! Yes, finally I grew up as a feminine man, I was put in a boarding school (*pesantren*¹⁰) because I was seen as someone who was perverted, I was told to repent. They cornered me, bullied me and kept saying that I was a *banci*¹¹ who should have died", (Molly, May 29, 2024).

Molly had unpleasant experiences throughout her life. This is a dilemma for herself. When Molly was born as a man, Molly must behave in accordance with the moral values that prevail in society. However, because Molly was born and formed into a man who has a feminine side, it ends up trapping her in an infinite space of bullying. In the process of discovering her identity, Molly also experienced a bitter experience when she was judged by her extended family. From her various experiences, it was finally that she thought carefully about the decision to change herself into a transwoman.

"I'm very active on Instagram¹², I already have a lot of followers, maybe because I'm quite vocal in talking about equality, and maybe because transwomen are still unfamiliar to the wider community. Because of this, in the end, there was my cousin who knew my account, then he complained about me to my parents. Even though at that time I was not yet a transwoman. I was still a man, yeah just a little bit *ngondek*¹³, finally my father called me, my father is a police. He got angry and said that I had to go home, or my father would forcibly pick me up. I don't want

¹⁰ Islamic boarding school.

¹¹ A negative derogatory term for a feminine men.

¹² One of the most widely used social media in the current era (2024), a place to share photos and videos about user's daily activities.

¹³ A slang term used to describe a feminine men.

to get trouble later, I finally went home, then arrived, it turned out that my extended family had gathered and everything was very tense. They judge me, they ask me what will happen to me if I continue like this? They also said that I was misguided (*sesat*), it was useless for me to have been schooled at the *pesantren*. My aunt was crying, she felt guilty, I could only hug her and say that it wasn't her fault. Then by them (Molly's extended family) my long hair was finally shaved", (Molly, May 29, 2024).

Even though she has experienced judgment by her own family, Molly still chooses to return to Semarang and dares to make the decision to become a transwoman. She experienced a strong upheaval in her heart, she felt that when she was a man, she was bullied because she had a feminine side that could not be accepted by many parties. Likewise, when she decided to become a transwoman, the bullying was still received by her. However, from the informant's unwavering determination, she still persisted in her determination to change her body shape as an effort to feminize in her transformation into a transwoman. The process to get there is not easy. She had to go through a long process and a lot of money. Molly is also ready for the consequences that she chooses in her life will have an impact on the acceptance of her family.

"Turning a penis into a vagina is not an easy thing, very difficult. I had to lie down for a long time until I applied for a semester of study leave. Not to mention the other procedures I had to go through because being a woman had to change a lot of body shapes. I got all of that from my own capital, from organizations (KTS) that also helped, but my parents didn't know that. They are at the outside of the island (Java). But I'm sure, they must know when they look at my Instagram, it seems like they have started not to admit me as their child", (Molly, May 29, 2024).

Unlike Molly's experience, Sinta has a different life journey. Sinta has been a transwoman for approximately 20 years. The difference with Molly is that Sinta can be well accepted by her family and the environment (especially neighbourhood) for the decision she chooses. Sinta also said that the decision to choose her current life is the result of an experience she used to feel, where she has always been a feminine man because she has a soft side since childhood.

"I've been here since I was a child. The neighbours here is very accepting of me, maybe because it is indeed from my young age. When I decided to become a transwoman, they said "Not surprised at all, because you have been like that¹⁴ since you were a child". Indeed, since I was a child, I was more comfortable playing with girls, very soft, and very feminine. My neighbours also always know my activities, I also always say goodbye to them when I have to go to work. They are always friendly and caring, asking where is the job for today? What event? So it is difficult for me to adapt if I have to move from here. Because not all environments can accept me as well as here, like family. Likewise, if we (KTS) haven't held out activities in my house for a long time, my neighbours like to ask "why haven't you girls (KTS) gathered for so long?", yeah like that", (Sinta, May 29, 2024).

¹⁴ Feminine

The struggle of these transwomen does not stop at the feminization of their bodies, but is accompanied by social problems and administrative problems, all of which are intertwined. This administrative issue also accompanies the transwomen. This administrative issue relates to the making of ID cards or identity cards which must be adjusted to the original name and gender. We cannot deny that the issues and news about LGBT still lead to negative things, so it is not easy for transwomen to change their ID cards. Their struggle started in 2009 and only received permission to change their ID card photo in 2018. Although it has been a long time, it has been a significant progress for trans women.

“We have succeeded in advocating for the photo on the ID card to be what we look like now. So we dress up as women, with long hair, in our ID card photos. Although our gender can't be changed (to female), we can express ourselves. We had a long journey to get that goal, it took a lot of struggle. But yes, we only got a photo, for the name and gender column, we are still not allowed. We fought from 2009, only got the right (to change the photo) in 2018. There is Permendagri¹⁵ number 58, if I'm not mistaken, which makes it easier for people to make identity cards. That is the basis that we use to emphasize Dukcapil¹⁶ to make our steps easier. Thankfully, Semarang City's Dukcapil was very cooperative in helping us. In the past, we fought for it, even though identity is a citizen's right, right? And it's a citizen's obligation to have an identity card, but why do they make it difficult for us?”, (Sinta, May 29, 2024).

Sinta's criticism is a new example of the inequality of rights experienced by transwomen. But on the other hand, it is a step forward when transwomen face rights discrimination, bullying, and inequality of access, as they begin to be recognized and gain space in society. The bullying they experience seems to be a normal thing and has become a spectacle for the wider community. Something that is not usually found in people's daily lives that eventually attracts attention becomes a convention that transgender people are not a group that deserves to be fought for. They experience the insignificance of the life they live. When they don't change their body shape, they are considered as men who are unable to meet the standards of masculinity, which eventually leads to bullying and being excluded by the heteronormative majority. But when they decide to transform themselves into women, they still have to struggle to gain equality like other Indonesian citizens.

3.2. Life Conflicts in Changing Body Forms

That night, at the KTS secretariat, one of the transwomen named Tania, a traditional singer and dancer, looked at us with teary eyes. It started with our question about her life before and after deciding to become a transwomen. She told us that her life was harder when she was a man. She -who has a feminine side- seems to be forced to repent, while she feels that it is as she was born. Likewise, her parents had no problem with it. The pressure came from her neighbours and her peers in high school.

¹⁵ Peraturan Menteri Dalam Negeri (Regulation of the Minister of Home Affairs)

¹⁶ The Population and Civil Registration Office (Dinas Kependudukan dan Pencatatan Sipil) has the task of carrying out population administration affairs in the field of population and civil registration based on the principles of autonomy and assistance.

“Back when I was a boy, I tried to be quiet and shut myself off, they always laughed at me, like I was a joke. They forced me to repent even though I never did anything deviant. Yes, I'm Muslim, I don't eat pork, I don't drink alcohol, I've never committed a crime, and I always pray on time. But all that seems to be meaningless if I am a *banci*. Even when my butt was often squeezed by men carelessly, it was my female friends who defended me, they accepted me well. What hurt me the most, yes... at that time there was a man I liked. He intensely contacted me through social media. I thought he really liked me, I didn't ask for much. It's enough to know that he accepts my condition like this, he's comfortable with me, I'm happy to be able to keep him company. Until finally she said “Daniel¹⁷, are you free after school?” I was nervous, I thought he would ask me to go or just chat together. When I came to see him, it turned out that he said “I'm actually curious how about having sex with a man, would you like to do that with me?” I felt my knees weak, I immediately cried, it turned out that he had been approaching me only because he saw me as a sexual object. It was precisely when I became a man, they became curious about me, interested and harassed me. Not to mention that some people also consider me not a complete man because I can't be masculine”, (Tania, May 31, 2024).

Tania's helplessness in fulfilling masculine standards in patriarchal culture eventually led her to the trap of toxic masculinity, where men who are unable to fulfill masculine standards are not considered normal men in general. Connell (2005) herself writes the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which she explicitly describes as a trap for life in society. Because of the binding hierarchy, it is as if times must dominate in all sectors. This then leads to embodiment in the body, hegemonic masculinity is also often linked to the way the male body is represented. For example, men must good at sports. It's not just about roles, standards of appearance also become cultural standards. Men are required to fulfill masculine standards, such as not having the feminine side that is the standard for women. They are required to be strong, assertive and not show too much emotions. Therefore, the standard of hegemonic masculinity seems to be a standard that must be met by all men. It also relates to men who are required to be able to lead, so they must work in the formal sector and have a steady income. When Tania decided to become a transwoman, the problems she faced were more complex than she imagined,

“Because instead of being looked at halfway, I decided to become a transwoman. When I changed, they looked at me with fear, like I was a threat to them, a look of fear like I was a criminal. It's so annoying. Similarly, when I danced *jaipong*¹⁸, old men would tease me, they even kissed me on the cheek, offered me money, yes I got angry, I said it was rude. They laugh at me and keep harassing me, but when they find out that I used to be a man - I scream with my male voice (Tania hasn't had her vocal cords operated on yet) they shudder, one even got nauseous *huwek-huwek*¹⁹ like that. Like I'm despicable”, (Tania, May 31, 2024).

¹⁷ Tania's name when she was a man.

¹⁸ Jaipong dance is traditional dance form Indonesia, a combination of a number of traditional arts, such as pencak silat, tap tilu, and wayang golek.

¹⁹ The sound of vomiting.

The sexual harassment they experience does occur in their daily lives. This cannot be denied because they get it very often. But it turns out that the conflict they experience does not stop at that problem. They also feel inequality and discrimination in public access. They often get unfair and uneven treatment like the general public. An example they get is when they want to access health and the administrative process they have to go through.

“At that time, I was called by the name of my ID card. Even though I have appealed to call by my alias name as women. But I were still called by my ID card’s name. Secondly, I went to hospital, because I wasn’t very healthy. At that time was not during the Covid-19 period. I checked his eyes, his gestures did not show friendliness. They didn't even check me at all, as if I didn't deserve the same health screening like the other. However, KTS itself teaches us, when we are discriminated against, it is better to remain silent and then report directly to the higher authorities. For example, when I used to experience that, I advised to remember who the person is, what the chronology is, then report it. So I try to respond less emotionally. From that incident, I reported it to the health office center. Then they took action in the form of a reprimand. It's better than us being emotional and angry arguing in that place doesn't even solve the problem. It will have an impact on the stigma of transvestite or transwomen who are unfriendly, fierce, sensitive, it will continue to stick if we continue to do it. So we play beautifully, so that gradually it will change the existing stigma. People sometimes don't want to understand why transvestite or transwomen can get angry. They only want to see our emotions and then labelling that transvestite or transwomen are fierce and sensitive. Even though we are still humans who defend ourselves”, (Sinta, June 1, 2024).

Because of Sinta's statement, we realized that the situation they experienced from the public service was a form of symbolic violence based on gender identity. The officer using the name on the ID card rather than the alias that had been submitted was a form of disregard for Sinta's gender identity. This violence also reflects normative power over gender identity that is considered legitimate. Strictly speaking, we can say that the public officer symbolically rejects gender legitimacy, which then leads to social control over non-conforming identities and bodies. This action is also a form of indirect affirmation that Sinta as a transwoman is a subordinate party. The legal name is used as a tool to reinforce the boundaries of who has the right to be recognized as a true 'man' or a legitimate 'woman'. Not only that, officers also show the position of power they have. As a legitimate institution, officers legitimize the law to dictate interactions and demonstrate their superiority. Then when we look at the inequality of access of health screening, it is also a form of the possibility of stereotypes or stigma attached to hetero society towards groups that don't conform to the gender or sex norms they recognize²⁰. This is a clear form of social exclusion mechanism that maintains the dominance of the heteronormative majority group. Another example can also be seen in Tasya's statement, which we will see next, regarding the elimination of the first winner of Exemplary Student Championship (because she

²⁰ We can then see this phenomenon in Goffman's (1963) description of stigma, which is a labeling by the majority group that transgender people have negative connotations that must be avoided. It can be due to the benchmark of gender standardization that still on heteronormative.

is from minority group), as well as a statement from Cici²¹ regarding intimidation by mass organizations against activities that will be held by the transwomen.

In addition, we also looked at the daily conflicts presented in the mass media. The media focuses more on the criminal acts committed by transvestites or transwomen, which results in the stigmatization of their group. This has an impact on the loss of the good name of transvestites and transwomen who have never committed a crime. The public seemed to turn a blind eye and beat them with a negative stigma. We pondered and we were both silent, until Tasya finally told us about another inequality that she had experienced. Tasya mentioned that inequality in access to education is also experienced by her and her transgender friends at KTS,

“We also feel that inequality. I live as a street transwoman, I busk everyday and utilize my social media for advertising, it can increase my income. I was able to become a street transwoman like this because I was kicked out from my house. If I hadn't met Sinta, I wouldn't have a place to live. Actually, I've been feminine like this since I was a child, it just so happens that my environment doesn't accept me and I was always got mocked as *banci*, you *banci*! Like that. At school, I always got first place, and I was also participated in a quiz competition. I was supposed to win first place, but suddenly the judges said that I should be eliminated to number 2 because I didn't look like a typical man. I was angry at that time, then I rebelled, I left school, anyway all of my friends bullied me, I couldn't stand it, like every day I couldn't breathe and wanted to die. My parents were also very angry, but I finally decided to leave home. I didn't come back for 15 years, when Sinta finally persuaded me to get along with my family again, I was hesitant because I had completely changed into a transwoman. I finally got the courage to go home, and it turned out to be true, right? My parents were so angry, they were terrified to see me. Finally I said goodbye again, gave my money to them. The funny thing was that they kicked me out, but still accepted the money, immediately pocketed it. Whatever anyway, at KTS I have met a family who can really accept me”, (Tasya, June 1, 2024).

If we can summarize, this inequality of access also affects the quality of Indonesian society, it is true that inequality of access can be felt by anyone, not just transvestite or transgender women. But in this particular case, if we can map it out more deeply, when transwomen have to leave or be expelled from school, they will not get a diploma. By not getting a diploma, they are ultimately unable to continue and get education in the formal sector. Their ability in academics is rendered obsolete due to their gender and sexuality expression. This will lead to a higher unemployment rate in Indonesia, making it difficult for the country to improve the welfare of its people. On the other hand, when transwomen have to return to being men or do not decide to become transwomen, they will still be bullied for not being able to meet the cultural standards of masculinity. But we can also open up the discussion that the media plays a role here. Hegarty (2022) himself explains in detail how LGBT people are seen as a group that needs to be shamed and must be negatively highlighted and spread by the media as an agent. Similarly, raids and reenactments are propagated as a form of criminality and shame, in this case, the police and media play a role. But let's take another look, do the relevant parties still play a role in demonizing transwomen people today?

²¹ In 3.2.1 Sisterhood in Transpuan.

3.2.1. Sisterhood in Transwomen

We see in the interaction dynamics of transwomen in the KTS organization that the pressure they get actually makes them finally have a sense of community and a sense of close care for each other. This is due to the same stressor²², so that they realize that they have a common life conflict, namely being a minority group in the majority group with a homogeneous cultural concept. This is then called minority stress. The concept of minority stress is expressed by Frost and Mayer (2023) that,

“Minority stress is distinguished from general stress—stress that all people may experience— by its origin in prejudice and stigma. Thus, a stressor, such as losing one’s job, could be a general stressor or a minority stressor depending on whether it was motivated by prejudice against sexual and gender minority people as opposed to, for example, economic downturns that impact all people regardless of sexual and gender identity. Meyer described both distal and proximal stress processes. Distal stressors include stressors that originate from people or institutions that impact the LGBT person. These include discriminatory policies and laws acute major life events (e.g., losing a job, being victimized by violence), chronic stressors (e.g., living in poverty), more minor, ‘everyday’ experiences of discrimination or microaggressions (e.g., being treated unfairly or with disrespect), or even non-events—expected positive experiences or events that were thwarted due to stigma and prejudice.”

The conflicts they face eventually lead to a close sense of togetherness with each other. The social pressure they feel together is not a social pressure that is generally felt by ordinary people²³, but the social pressure they feel is the pressure of minorities regarding their gender expression and sexuality. Conflicts and pressures are always obtained every day, therefore KTS regularly organizes monthly meetings to share stories about their daily lives. The goal is that members don’t feel alone and KTS can be an organization that will accept and empower them. Through this organization they can freely share their happy and sad stories with each other. They also tell us about the discriminatory experiences they have faced,

“There was also an incident where our friends wanted to hold an activity in Semarang, KTS organized it. Then Semarang, which I thought that there were no religious fanatic organizations, but at that time it turned out that there were still. Well, before the day of the event, the news reached the organization, even though we had asked our friends not to upload on social media, yes, our mitigation tool to avoid conflict. So until it leaked, there was this organization that knew about our activities, even though the activities were positive, we were only doing empowerment with entrepreneurial seminars for transwomen. Well, two days before the D-day, our venue was visited by this organization. On the day of the event, we were visited by this organization, and the venue was at Steak House, next to Dafam Hotel, even though we often do activities there. Well, at that time from the Steak House, the restaurant, we were called. “Ma’am, this is a mass organization that came and asked about activities. But, how come the activity is

²² Factors in life that cause stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

²³ As stated by Frost and Meyer (2023) that stress can generally be felt by people regardless of class, for example job loss, poverty, etc.

said to bring guest stars from Jakarta, the event will be big, wow, luxurious, glamorous, all kinds. Well, what about that, you know? They said the mass organization had reported to POLRESTABES (*Kepolisian Resor Kota Besar*)²⁴ that there would be activities." At that time, because they carried the name of a religious organization, we thought that we had to -well, not fight- we had to counter it with other religious organizations. Well, because we are close to NU (*Nahdlatul Ulama*)²⁵, with the large religious organization *Muhammadiyah*²⁶, we asked them for help to accompany us on the day of the event. But before the day of the event, we were also called from POLRESTABES, "Ma'am, there is a report from POLRESTABES from this mass organization, they say there will be this activity." Well, it just so happens that we are also close to POLRESTABES friends, we often entertain there -often as MCs or singers. "Well, sir, it just so happens that we also want to report that. We want to ask for protection, if any", "This is from the mass organization that wants to discuss, dialogue, would you like to be found?" "Wuoh, we really want to. We are even excited," like that. On the first day, a neutral meeting was arranged at the POLRESTABES office. "What time, sir?" "12 o'clock," okay. From 11 o'clock we have also been called, "later at 12 o'clock here, okay?" "Okay! We're ready!, I'm excited, sir!" We are confident because the activities we do are positive. Yes, that was earlier, because maybe we already have the guts to enter POLRESTABES, in the police environment, right. Then we wanted to show that the activities were like this originally, not like what was reported or reported as criminal or other negative things. Finally, at half past 12, we got another call. To intimidate us maybe yes, the goal is to scare us or something like that. "Don't forget, ma'am." "Yes, sir, we're already excited, we're about to go there." "Okay, Ma'am. This organization has come." "Oh yes, sir, I'm going there now, sir." "No, just come at 12 o'clock." Well, that was earlier, after that at 12 less 5, we got another call, "Ma'am, there's no need to come here, this person has withdrawn the report." "Well, sir? We're ready to go, we're just waiting. From here to POLRESTABES it takes no more than five minutes, sir. What do you say, sir, do we leave now, sir?" then he said, "No need, the report has been withdrawn." And yeah... but still tomorrow at the time of implementation there are officers who will go there, so that nothing untoward happens. Well, on the day of the event, we also invited several NU and Muhammadiyah organizations because they are close to us. For NU, we often work with LAKPESDAM (*Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia*)²⁷. There is LAKPESDAM, one of its divisions is for research of all kinds, human resources. Although yes, maybe other divisions, the hadith division, and what division, there are also many cons

²⁴ The Indonesian National Police has a structure or command in each region and is led by a leader based on the rank that leads, ranging from the Police, Police, Police, Police, to the Police. The Police is a police unit at the provincial level.

²⁵ The Islamic religious organization from Indonesia has members ranging from 40 million to more than 95 million in 2021, making it the largest Islamic organization in the world. NU is also a charity that manages Islamic boarding schools, schools, colleges, and hospitals and organizes communities to help improve the quality of life of Muslims.

²⁶ Muhammadiyah is a reformist Islamic organization that was born in Indonesia in the early 20th century. Muhammadiyah is an Islamic movement based on the Hadith and the Qur'an. In general, the meaning of Muhammadiyah is the people of the Prophet Muhammad.

²⁷ The Institute for the Study and Development of Human Resources (LAKPESDAM) is an institution that moves to empower the resources of NU residents in particular and community members in general.

who can't accept us, in NU there are also many pros and cons, but if Muhammadiyah in Central Java also holds its head, in Central Java here, there is no problem, they accept us well and often help too ", (Cici, June 2, 2024).

Although we can't deny that discrimination and inequality of access are still widely felt by transwomen, gradually, society is beginning to open its eyes to the existence of equality that must be upheld. This is reflected in one example of what happened at KTS. Entertainment services, which are the power of transwomen, have become a way for them to empower themselves continuously and slowly eradicate the bad stigma that is spread in society. Slowly they began to penetrate by providing socialization to other transwomen to be more empowered and embrace each other. The existence of this togetherness or sisterhood finally brought them to the mouth of unity and togetherness for the welfare of minorities.

3.3. Fulfillment of Gender Roles in Life

Transwomen have tried to break the stigma and the majority groups have begun to accept them well, but the problems they face don't stop there. Transwomen are still trying to fight for their rights to be accepted and recognized as part of society. They try to fulfill their roles as hetero women in general, to fulfill domestic needs such as cooking, keeping the house clean, managing the household economy, and serving family members well. In reality, they are still not accepted as full women,

"Actually, since before becoming a transwoman, I have become someone who is more comfortable working domestically. Even now that I'm a famous makeup artist, they still shout at me me "that's a *banci* Cici!", even though I've really transformed myself into a woman. I prepare all my father's needs, help my mother clean and tidy the house, help take care of household needs. Yes, so did the other KTS friends, but we still wouldn't be accepted in the society. I can only wonder, can we be accepted as women? We can't even choose to be like this, because we were born feminine and our sexual attraction is different", (Cici, June 2, 2024).

This is certainly a matter of debate. When a feminine man finally decides to become a transwoman due to many underlying factors²⁸, has an attraction to men and performs gender roles according to the cultural standards of society, they have actually lived a life like a woman in general. However, they have not been accepted openly as a woman in society. We need to recall the conception of sex and gender according to March, et al (1999: 17) that sex is something related to biology, regarding who produces sperm and who produces eggs. Meanwhile, gender is how a person acts according to the standards of the majority culture where they are. This situation is an oddity in itself, raising questions for all of us that may only be answered years later. Will transwomen be accepted as women, get equal access and live a prosperous life like the rest of society?

²⁸ A big example is those who are not accepted among hetero men because they have a feminine side and are unable to meet the cultural standards of masculinity.

4. Conclusion

In a culture dominated by heteronormativity, transwomen not only experience marginalization based on constructions of masculinity and femininity, but also face bureaucratic barriers to official identity recognition. The body itself is understood as a social construction that is actively controlled by gender norms. Transwomen, through body and appearance modifications, perform bodily techniques to express their gender identity that is different from their biological sex. However, in the midst of these changes, they remain trapped in the duality between their performance as women and social expectations that often don't accept them. The identity conflicts experienced by transwomen also reflect structural inequalities reinforced by patriarchal norms. The feminization process they undergo, both physically and performatively, is not always accompanied by complete social acceptance. Even if they succeed in making physical changes, they are still considered different and face stigma that prevents access to public services, employment, and legal identity recognition. However, underneath it all, the solidarity between transwomen in the KTS community shows a collective effort to face social pressure and discrimination, forming a strong sisterhood as a mechanism of resistance to the injustices they experience.

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