



Trans Women in the Spectacle Room: Ambiguity Between the Construction of Masculinity and Femininity

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Abstract. Society in Java is still related to patriarchal culture which upholds standards of masculinity for men. Because of this standardization, it becomes taboo when men cannot fulfil masculinity standards. In the social reality of Semarang as the capital of Central Java Province, the existence of trans women is still taboo. Therefore, there is an anomaly that occurs. The change in body construction from men with penises to women with vaginas does not necessarily mean they are recognized as a ‘complete’ woman. The achievements made by their talents do not necessarily mean that they can be easily accepted in society. The society around still assumes them as a man, they should fulfil the culture of masculinity that is suitable to heteronormativity standards, so they are often seen as abnormal humans. Trans women have tried to reach their equality and recognition as complete women through activities in PERWARIS Satu Hati (Persatuan Waria Semarang Satu Hati). Through this reality, using Lippa's theory of Nature, Nurture, and Productivities, we found that trans women play a role according to the standards of femininity. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, we also found that there are double standards that ensnare trans women. When they were criticized for failed to fulfil the standards of masculinity, they actually became pioneers in the entertainment sector in Semarang with high salaries, which proves that ambiguity between masculinity and femininity can become a space that makes money for them to survive. Because trans women are not accepted to work in the formal sector.

Keywords: Trans Women, Masculinity, Femininity, Patriarchal Culture.

1 Introduction

What do you think when we discuss about discrimination in the context of gender? In fact, there are still many stories about these two topics that continue to flow, both through mass media portals and the realities that we face. When we talk about discrimination that occurs against women in patriarchal culture, this is still being fought until these days. Then what about those who decide to become trans women? In Indonesia, patriarchal culture is still dominating, especially if we talk about Java land. Javanese society still adheres to heteronormative gender classifications which only revolve around men and women, literally men are those who have penises and women are those who have vaginas. It doesn't end there, men and women have their own roles according to their sexual identity (which is still often considered gender)[1]. Regarding sex and gender itself, we will look at the statement given by March, et al [2],

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“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.”

Based on the statement above, when men and women have their respective roles, this is related to the culture that develops in their social sphere. Returning to the discussion of gender in Java itself, Geertz[1] carried out an analysis of the division of tasks between these two. Javanese society's standards for men still revolve around patriarchy, where men are the dominant party, the main pillars in a family unit and society. Men are required to be able to lead, so they must work in the formal sector and have a steady income. Not only about this role, appearance standards are also a cultural standard. Men are required to meet masculine standards, such as not being able to have feminine side that are the standard for women. They are required to be strong, firm and not to show excessive emotionality, these things are then called manhood[3]. The standards set for men are very different from the standards set for women. They are required to work domestically, look after children, be feminine, maintain their appearance and be the ones who always follow decisions determined by the head of the family (which tends to be led by men).

Then from these things, a question begin. What happens to men who decide to become women (trans women)? Who changes their body shape, appearance and cultural role to become women? This question will lead us to the discussion in this paper. Together we will know the story told by PERWARIS Satu Hati (Persatuan Waria Semarang Satu Hati), where they experience discrimination in everyday life, both from the formal and informal sectors, public and domestic. When they are not accepted by society because they do not fulfil the standards of masculinity, they actually have their own work viewing space with large incomes. Through this, we will examine little by little the gender roles they carry out every day through Lippa's perspective which classifies women's roles into three aspects of gender, nature and nurture.

2 Methods

If there is a phenomenon that is observed, the participant observation method is the best choice, which is then expressed in qualitative that reviews the phenomenon in detail. Participant observation is considered effective because it will involve the author in the activities that trans women are currently undertaking, not only that, the author can also get the same feelings when trans women experience discrimination. Therefore, it also involves a phenomenological approach which can involve a subjectivist mindset, where

the meaning of existing reality will be explored from an emic perspective[4]. Apart from participating in activities held by PERWARIS Satu Hati, the author also carried out a semi-formal in-depth interview method, in which he would position himself as a relative sharing stories, so that trans women would share their stories comfortably.

3 Result and Discussion: Transwomen on the Brink of Life's Unreliability.

That afternoon (May 29, 2024) we went to a densely populated area in Semarang. We stopped at a fork in the road, and the road couldn't even be passed by two motorbikes at once. We were confused, but not for long, a middle-aged woman opened the window of her house and greeted us, "where are you going?", we were shocked, then we answered that we were looking for Silvy Mutiari's house, precisely as the secretariat of PERWARIS Satu Hati. The woman finally showed us the way, and as we passed house to house, the neighbors showed us the way to Silvy's house. Until finally in front of a house, a neighbor knocked and shouted kindly, "Silvy! There are guests, come on, get up! Fast! It's already afternoon! Oh, I'm sorry, Silvy seems to have worked all night, so she hasn't woken up yet." Not long after, the door opened and we were warmly welcomed.

Fig 1. Silvy, One of Important Member from PERWARIS Satu Hati



Apart from being the secretariat of PERWARIS Satu Hati, the house is also a salon. Silvy also provides dress rental and makeup artist services. Not only there, she works in the informal sector as an MC (Master of Ceremony) and singer. This informal sector is actually able to support all the life needs of this 44 years old trans woman. Silvy said that in her daily life, she plays a role like a woman according to Javanese cultural standards, where she is more dominant in domestic work. She dedicates herself as a woman, no longer a man who holds the standards of masculinity in Javanese society.

Because of this decision she made, she experienced discrimination in various sectors throughout her life, as did the other members of PERWARIS Satu Hati.

3.1 Story of Their Life as A Trans Women

Being a trans woman is not an easy thing, especially when talking in Java which still holds strong patriarchal values, especially with the heteronormative values that are still very embedded in society. Heteronormative is an idea that influences the way of being a man and a woman, masculine and feminine, are perceived in terms of their binary existence. Society determines the development of heteronormative identities based on gender socialization so that most other gender and sexual identities are not given equal status. Heteronormativity is defined as a system that values heterosexuality as the natural and normative sexual orientation, thus devaluing all other expressions of sexuality[5]. Therefore, Silvy and other PERWARIS Satu Hati members often faced discrimination from an early age. Many family members cannot accept their situation as men who are unable to meet masculinity standards. They often get bullied since they were in elementary school, they understand very well that they were born as men with penises but have a feminine side. Apart from that, the parenting style also has a big influence.

“My mother really wants to have a daughter. Then when I was born a boy, my mother treated me like a girl. Bought girl's clothes, girl's toys. The one who takes care of me is also my older sister, so we finally have emotional closeness (girlhood).” (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

Her upbringing made Silvy a gentle person who has a feminine side. She is used to domestic work which is usually the domain of women. Geertz[1] said that in Javanese society, domestic work tends to be controlled by women. This work is a sector of women's power, such as cooking, cleaning the house, managing the household economy, caring, and so on. Silvy, who at that time had not yet decided to become a trans woman, was already capable and accustomed to the dynamics of domestic work. Growing up, Silvy began to have the courage to express her feminine side. This was not easy to do, but Silvy's family accepted it happily. Silvy has the best place in life, even though out there, she still often experiences gender-based discrimination.

3.2 Gender Expression, Sexuality and Inequality of Public Access for Transwomen

As mentioned above, being a trans woman is not an easy. Heteronormative society is still reluctant to accept them because their values are not in accordance with existing standards. PERWARIS Satu Hati members often experience discrimination in public spaces, both in terms of public services and the facilities they should receive.

“Throughout life (bullying), it is inherent. So we have to be smart in response. So we are trying to make peace with this condition. We teach all our trans women or waria friends to try to be calm in the face of discrimination. For example, when I experienced it at the community health center, at that time I was called with my male name. Even though we have been advised them to call us by our aliases as women. At that time we advised them to remember who the perpetrator was, the chronology, and then report it. So we try to respond less emotionally. We reported this incident to the health department. Then those who take action take the form of a warning. It's better than being emotional and angry arguing in that place. Later it will have an impact on the stigma of waria being unfriendly, fierce, sensitive. This will continue to stick if we continue to become emotional. So we play beautifully, so that gradually the existing stigma will change. People sometimes don't want to understand the problem of why trans women or waria can be angry. They only want to see our emotions and then label waria or trans women as fierce and sensitive.” (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

I then referred to the article by Hegarty, B. [7], who said that the bullying that occurs among trans women stems from the history of criminality recorded in Indonesia. As happened in 2017, Human Right Watch's 2018 noted that 300 LGBT people were charged under pornography laws. This is due to indications from the police and journalists involved, even though there are many positive things done by trans women, but the authorities are focused on negative news. Citing also Gürsel, Z (in Hegarty, B. [7]), police and journalists are actively involved in creating and sharing information that does not describe the current situation of events, but spreads news that benefits themselves. However, this is also highlighted in our discussion, where the police and other institutions in Semarang have begun to open up and accept the presence of trans women.

But again, in reality, the gender expression they choose becomes a problem when they still live in a heteronormative environment that holds and still divides into only men and women. Being a trans woman is considered an extraordinary taboo, so they are often labeled or stigmatized as the abnormal one and must repent (taubat)¹. In the end, society still corners them and continues to flock to encourage them to repent. This is due to the existence of religious values which still play a big role in social life in Indonesia. The trans women finally took a position to give in as a minority by explaining it wisely.

3.3 The Informal Sector as Way Out and Also a Trap in the Spectacle Room

Trans women do not always have a good place for acceptance in society. Many public policies and facilities do not accept them. Of course, we cannot close our eyes to the

¹ According to the KBBI, repentance is being aware of and regretting sins (wrong or evil actions) and intending to improve one's behavior and actions; return to the true religion (path, thing).

fact that minorities tend to experience discrimination from all sides. However, in reality, trans women have their own market in the informal sector. They tend to dominate the job sector in the entertainment sector such as MC (Master of Ceremony), singer, endorsement, modelling, beauty sector and others.

“Yes, we have a market (in the informal sector). Yes, because of these things: societal stigma, norms and culture are contradictory. However, the reality on the ground is also the opposite. Trans women are entering the informal sector because we are not accepted in the formal sector. Even in education, we are not accepted, we are bullied a lot. From elementary school, middle school, we have received bad treatment, persecuted, both verbally and non-verbally. So many trans women drop out of school, so they don't get a diploma. Because they don't have a diploma, they ultimately can't get a job in the formal sector. Finally forced to work in the informal sector, which we feel can accept us. Even though most of us did well at school, we were actually able to complete our education. But things are like this.” (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

Social life and moral demands ultimately cause them to drop out of school and ultimately this situation causes them to have to work in the informal sector. Even though heteronormative morality is still restrictive, they are strangely well received as entertainment. Their gender ambiguity is accepted as a form of entertainment in itself. It's interesting to think that the issue of ambiguity and its potential for entertainment can be taken further, for example, by imagining it as a liminal zone that resists categorization and ultimately makes people feel fearful of the unknown, but at the same time attracts interest in watching or observing more closely as entertainment. Even the PERWARIS Satu Hati's market has entered the realm of government.

"My market has entered the Polrestabas, Polda, so yes, there are those who can accept us and that's not a problem for us. Personally there is no problem, so just institutionally. I think they are starting to open up to the existence of trans women who also have the right to have a proper place in society. Personally from the deputy police chief and regional police chief call us, we are invited every year. But it is true that for formal institutional events, we are not really involved. We open branding to them that trans women also have talents and ability to make money and also to entertain them." (Silvy, May 29 2024).

However, in the room where they seek a source of livelihood, they still receive harsh reprimands or satirical jokes regarding the morality and hetero values that they are forced to implement.

"(While working) They already know that we are trans women with our own female name, showing that we are indeed women, but we are still called 'mas mas², what we have to call you? But (you're) a man, right?', we also can't force them to call us 'mbak'³, but it doesn't feel appropriate if we dress up as a woman, are beautiful, have long hair, are identical to women, we are still called 'mas'. I responded by answering, 'Sir, ma'am, please. I've been dressed up since dawn, I'm already beautiful like this, why don't you

² call for men in Java

³ Call for women in Java

call me 'mbak'?). I treat it like that, so not with emotion, at least working professionals, I have to be friendly to them. Other trans women may not have a position to fight because they have to obey the rules. These are some of my friends who work in the formal sector, working as factory workers, with the rules there, you cannot dress up as a woman, you cannot behave as a woman. Likewise in the educational environment it is also like that. I also experienced something like that myself." (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

The discrimination they experience means that their space for movement is not as free as that of other communities who still adhere to hetero norms. However, injustice is also highlighted, especially in the education sector. They never chose to become a man who has a feminine side, just because of this problem, many trans women end up experiencing a lack of access to education and employment, not caring about their abilities, becoming a trans woman seems like a fatal mistake.

"If we were asked whether being a waria or trans woman was a choice, when I was little could I choose? Can I choose to be born into a family that is not heteronormative, not patriarchal? If I had to choose, if I was born, I would choose to be a boy or girl, straight, or hetero. Because life for minority transgender people is very difficult, because we live in a black and white world. How can we survive in a world like this? So, to straighten out the question, 'why choose like this?' Yes, this is not a choice. Being a good or bad trans women is a choice." (Silvi, May 29, 2024).

In the end, she expressed her opinion regarding the inequality in access to education. They feel that the lack of access causes trans women who actually have academic intelligence to simply abandon their abilities.

"Actually, many trans women have been invited to international forums. In Indonesia itself it is still rare. Many foreigners invited trans women from Indonesia who were competent to fill in at least a short lecture or one public lecture session as resource persons. But in Indonesia it's not like that. Opportunities in our own country seem closed for us to speak in academic circles." (Silvy, May 29, 2024).

These inequalities occur as if everything trans women do is meaningless in the public's eyes, even though if we look at Lippa[6] which states that women have three sectors: Nature, Nurture, and Productivity, in fact trans women have entered into these three aspects. It's just that they are still trapped in binding heteronormative barriers, so that there are still parties who are unable to accept the situation of those who have decided to be women.

4 Conclusion

Basically, minorities in any group tend not to be accepted with open arms by the majority group. The same thing happens to trans women. No matter how hard they try, their talents, intelligence, abilities and so on seem to be useless when they cannot fulfil society's standards of masculinity. But on the other hand, they have their own market in the informal sector, especially in the entertainment sector. Hetero people enjoy their services, and are even willing to pay a high price. This has become a separate double standard that needs to be highlighted and followed up. Humanitarian values and justice should be evenly distributed, not isolated in certain spaces, which will ultimately lead to class discrimination.

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