

Identity Negotiations of Trans Women at the Indonesia-Singapore Border, Kasu Island in Batam City

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ABSTRACT

The existence of transgender people in Indonesia is still considered a mismatch with norms in society. Not infrequently, they are individually and community marginalized, criminalized, and even persecuted. This study aims to determine the negotiation of gender identity in trans women on Kasu Island, the Indonesia-Singapore border. The existence of trans women on Kasu Island is not a new thing, but the social environment does not mind their existence. This study uses a qualitative research method of case studies. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews and observations. Secondary data is obtained through online searches of relevant literature. The results of this study revealed that the existence of trans women on Kasu Island faces fluid identity management and negotiations over a close social environment (attachment identity). The existence of trans women in the border areas of this country is inseparable from the influence of the modern situation in the country of Singapore.

KEYWORDS

gender identity; trans women; negotiation.

INTRODUCTION

Gender identity research in Indonesia remains controversial. Syaputri et al (2020) that the presence of LGBT people in Indonesia is not yet recognized for their position in different policy areas. As a result, LGBT discrimination and persecution of individuals and communities continues today. The existence of this gender and sexuality-related minority has also been hunted down and fought in scientific studies, such as those by Dacholfany (2016) and Sofyanto (2017).

The existence of individuals and communities of gender minorities is undeniable in various regions in Indonesia, including on the Indonesia-Singapore border on Kasu Island, Batam. Their existence is controversial (Giri, Bajari & Maryani, 2019). This is because regulations in Indonesia still deny the existence of other genders other than heterosexual.

The presence of transgender and trans women on Kasu Island is one of the gender expressions that, on the one hand, represents existence and, on the other hand, the realization of economic sustainability. According to field observations, trans women on Kasu Island make a living as bridal makeup, salons and stage entertainers. Based on a study by Suwandani (2015), the outbreak of sexually transmitted diseases (STIs) may be more or less due to the knowledge and dangerous attitudes of Waria (women, men—a term for crossdresser gender expression).

Those who have gender expression outside of heterosexuality, have a vulnerability to discrimination and even persecution (Adelia & Pratiwi, 2021; Marco & Winduwati, 2022). This is because of the negative image and stigma attached to trans women, for example, because of their work as prostitutes (Febriani & Irwanto, 2021). Moreover, Indonesian people are still taboo about discussing sexuality, so minority sexuality narratives are

always directed at criminals (Niko & Rahmawan, 2021). These heteronormativity values create power relations in minority gender groups in Indonesia (Salsabila & Sulistyani, 2019).

Nico (2016) found that gay gender groups and individuals in Indonesia even face discrimination in mass media reports. This means that, due to various assumptions, their existence is not yet considered human, not natural, and ill (Harahap, 2016; Ermayani, 2017; Annisa & Indrawadi, 2020). Therefore, this study describes the negotiation of transgender gender identity on Kasu Island. Where amid rejection and marginalization, they still maintain their existence.

RESEARCH METHODS

The approach used in this study was a descriptive qualitative method using a case study approach. In this study, we looked at data on trans women as individuals (case objects). The data collection method was carried out through on-site observations and in-depth interviews. This survey was conducted on Kasu Island. The region of Kasu Island has been incorporated into the management of the Belakang Padang district of Batam City in the Riau Islands. This area was the border between Indonesia and Singapore. For data collection, the survey informant was determined using a targeted random sampling procedure. The study included three informants who were transgender women living on Kasu Island. In this study, interview guidelines were conducted in the form of questionnaires, which were subsequently further developed within the framework of questions in the field of study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kasu Island and the Existence of Trans Women

Kasu Island is an island located in the Belakang Padang District, Batam City, Riau Island. The island is surrounded by sea bordering the country of Singapore. The majority of the people on Kasu Island are indigenous Malays with jobs that have been carried out as fishermen from the past until now. Despite being part of Batam City, the situation on Kasu Island is not as developed as on Batam Island.

The condition of the ocean on Kasu Island today is no longer natural, This has forced many people to have to switch from work as fishermen. Some have turned into casual daily laborers, to Indonesian Migrant Workers to Malaysia and Singapore. This is motivated by the decrease in marine products and income that is not by the needs of daily life.

During this situation, it is unique that trans women on Kasu Island can survive with "unreasonable" jobs; such as bridal makeup and hairdressing (salon). Most of the trans women from Kasu Island chose to migrate to the center of Batam City (Batam Island). The opinion of informants of this study agreed that there was convenience in getting money on Batam Island. The impact that occurs on a person's life, of course, leads to a positive impact, such as getting a new job and easy access to markets. While the negative impacts that occur include the existence of a new culture, individualism, to impacts related to gender, such as the choice to become transgender.

Transgenders are people who feel that their gender identity does not match their gender at birth (Ningsih & Syafiq, 2014). Usually, they will do and show attitudes or traits that are different from most people. For example, men have feminine traits like women, then women have masculine traits like men. However, many studies on femininity and masculinity state that both can be constructed so that both men and women have feminine and masculine traits (Bártová et al., 2020; Cornwall, 1997; Stets & Burke, 2000).

The existence of trans women on Kasu Island is not something new, so people are used to their existence. This makes trans women not feel ashamed to admit their new status in society. The existence of trans women in the Kasu Island community certainly has a lot to do with social life. This can be seen by the presence of a group of teenage boys who have a feminine style. Their existence is inseparable from the influence of feminine behavior displayed by trans women so adolescents construct this behavior.

The existence of trans women on Kasu Island is considered to have a bad influence on the environment and the community around them. Some people say that transgender women have a bad influence on the community and are considered deviations, some of them even feel like they don't want to be with them just because they are afraid that their family or relatives will follow in the footsteps of trans women. The notion that transgender people can be contagious also often exists so many of their families or relatives in the Kasu Island area are not allowed to hang out with trans women. Social stigma against transgender people is always there, so it often has an impact on mental health (Bockting, 2014).

It is undeniable that some communities open the way for trans women to express, communicate, organize, and socialize in the community. According to them, transgender is not a problem, because transgender is a fellow human being. This open society does not discriminate, according to them, transgender is also His creation, but only slightly different and unique. There are not many trans women living on Kasu Island, only five to seven people. Meanwhile, when there is a celebration or wedding ceremony, transgender women from other island areas will gather on Kasu Island as entertainers. There are about a dozen people.

Based on field observations, it is known that the influence of transgender women on society; whether good or bad or even they are like ying and yang where the two are one. This influence can cause debate in society because each group in the Kasu Island community has different attitudes and responses to the existence of trans women.

Gender Identity Formation of Trans women on Kasu Island

Transgender refers to people who resist socially 'given' common gender labeling (male and female). The naming of transgender is related to people who change gender from male to female, and female to male. This also raises a lot of debate, because transgender people have chromosomes and hormones that affect their appearance. Therefore, some of them use surgical procedures to completely transform themselves (Halberstam, 1998; Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). In this study, the trans women who became informants were those who claimed to have undergone a surgical procedure to change their gender.

Case Study of Informant 1

The informant with the initials AF is a person who has been living on Kasu Island for a long time. Based on the story, since childhood, he considered his heart and felt more like a woman. As in the following interview excerpt:

".....which starts with a circle of friends surrounded by women, this is also what causes people to think that I am a woman. Sometimes I indirectly make gestures like a complete woman. One of them is when I sit cross-legged like a woman's graceful grace. Besides that, when I was in elementary school, I tended to prefer socializing and playing girls' games, for example, playing rubber games, playing with dolls, and dressing up with my female friends. I also dress more like girls when I play with them."

The AF informant told of his fun childhood. He occasionally laughed in the middle of his story; reminiscing about the good old days and nostalgia.

"By dressing earlier, I also demonstrated and was equipped with high sandals like a capital photo".

Her feminine nature and character have been acting since she was a child. So according to him, her parents do not question his behavior because he is still a child. Then, the feminine identity is attached until he grows up to be a teenager.

"When I was a teenager I started to feel inclined to like or attracted to men. When I was growing up, going through puberty, I started to use cosmetic tools to apply makeup and imitate my female friends, when I was about 20 years old."

Femininity that is in his body until adulthood makes his family and social environment not accept AF. He didn't get where he wanted to be, so he chose to start a new life.

"At that time I started to venture out of the area because my parents didn't accept me like this and I was determined to start my life to find my true self. I had to do this because my family, environment, and even the community where I lived did not match my life. With this decision, I managed to change little by little from completely male to trans female, although periodically, starting with changing my breasts, nose, face, and lips including eyebrow embroidery, instead I almost intended to change my genitals. I went through all these processes until now I have become a trans woman in general."

Based on the results of interviews with AF informants, it can be said that AF's feminine gender identity has been encountered since childhood. So that this trait sticks until he is an adult.

Case Study of Informant 2

Informant ZC talked about how her history became a trans woman. The story starts with his experience in junior high school, where he knows the love of youth.

"I began to know love like a man, in general, feel the seeds of love and try to express to the woman I like. However, unfortunately, my fate was rejected outright, making me frustrated".

Since experiencing his heartbreak, ZC is no longer trying to like women. Instead, he hangs out a lot and makes friends with women. A friendship that makes him comfortable with the situation, where they can laugh lovingly. Later, falling in love with a boy made him open up to the girls in his circle of friends.

"At that time a man came who became a place to vent and made a place for him to pay attention to himself, with this he always poured out all the problems he was experiencing with me as time went on I began to think that he was giving comfort and feeling and giving more response to me. His care gave birth to the seeds of love in my heart."

According to ZC's informant, her love experience was also the reason why she chose to become a trans woman. The love that she harbors for a man who makes her comfortable can't be expressed because of his physique as a man.

"...and from there I decided to change myself or look like a woman".

Case Study of Informant 2

Based on the opinion of the informant, the initials RC stated that he never wanted to become a trans woman. Based on the following interview:

"Being trans women is not something I want from myself, but a feminine soul figure that is increasingly enveloping me in my heart. In the sense of the word, I was a woman do not want to be like this, but this soul is difficult to become a masculine person like men in general".

RC's confession that he thought he was lost in the wrong body. His soul is that of a feminine woman, while his body is that of a biologically strong man. She shared that her feminine nature began to feel when she was a teenager and was still in junior high school.

"...a variety of factors that caused me personally to become a trans woman, especially the friendship factor. Especially since I was a teenager, I felt like a woman like my friends. My friends are surrounded by women, I am comfortable with them and I feel that I am the same as them (feminine)".

Based on a case study of three informants, it can be explained that the formation of transgender gender identity in Kasu Island is due to past experiences (adolescents and children), love experiences, and the environment of friends and family. In another study, it was shown that the formation of gender identity in LGBT youth did not show a relationship between parent attachment and gender identity (Primanita, Adri & Pramisyra, 2021).

Castells (2009) states that there are three processes of identity formation, namely project identity, where in the process there is an effort to determine how identity is formed by itself in society. Then, resistance identity, where in the process there is a rejection or resistance to the dominant identity. And, legitimizing identity, where there is legitimacy or recognition of an identity.

The identity of trans women in Kasu Island is basically in the project identity process. When asked each trans woman informant, why did they choose to be transgender? They answered; "This is not what I wanted." They feel that some drives made them who they are today. This means that there is a narrative of blaming the situation without a fight. It is different if we look at the existence of minority gender identities found in the study of Rahmawan & Sujadmi (2021) which states that the gay identity that is still being constructed creates resistance to the dominant gender identity. The situation of transgender gender identity on Kasu Island has not yet reached the stage of resistance against those who dominate.

Identity Negotiations of Trans Women

The pattern of identity negotiation in the case study of transgender gender identity in Kasu Island is inseparable from the socio-cultural situation on Kasu Island. Moreover, identity negotiation is also closely related to self-acceptance by trans women themselves. At the stage of developing a homosexual identity, individuals always have struggles with espoused religious values; that homosexuality is a sin and prohibited (Salsabila & Sulistyani, 2019).

In the case of trans women in Kasu Island, the main negotiations they carried out were with the environment and social groups. Rahayu, Satriani & Mahaswara (2014) states that collective behavior is determined by its identity and mechanical reproduction into the culture in society. Therefore, identity is autonomous.

Based on field data, there is a unique tradition carried out by the people of Kasu Island when someone comes out as a trans woman. They gather at the person's house, and perform the ritual of prayer "tolak balak" to change the name from a male to a female

name. Community leaders were also present, because of their openness and mutual respect. The event was also a celebration party for their new gender identity.

Then, negotiations in a society that is in good social interaction. Trans women become entertainers at every party on Kasu Island, such as weddings, circumcision parties, and other thanksgiving parties. Trans women are always presented to enliven the party. This is a meeting place between the general public and trans women who are not only from Kasu Island but also from other regions.

CONCLUSION

The identity of trans women in Kasu Island is basically in the project identity process. The situation of transgender gender identity on Kasu Island has not yet reached the stage of resistance against those who dominate. However, the identity patterns negotiated by women on Kasu Island are attachments, such as association with a fluid social environment. This study contributes to opening up the discussion space on non-heterosexual gender studies in Indonesia. Especially in the study of Sociology, this study opens a space for continuity in the development of non-binary Gender Sociology and queer studies.

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