

Exploring past Experience of Becoming a Transgender Woman: Perspective from Malaysian Muslim Transgender Women: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Little is known about the factors contributing to become transgender women in a Muslim country.

Thus, this study aims to explore the past experience and factors contributed to become transgender among transgender women.

Transgender women in Kuantan, Pahang were invited to participate in an audiotaped in-depth interviews in 2021, conducted in Malay using a topic guide. The qualitative data were recorded, transcribed and analysed using framework analysis.

Majority of the respondents (n=8) admitted they have the tendency of becoming females since childhood. Some were being treated as females and they grew up with strong perceptions that they should be female. They found their circles of transgender women later in their life when they were not supported by family members. Most of the respondents agreed that they work as sex workers because of their own desire and had history of being discriminated at work.

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Introduction

'Transgender' is an umbrella term encompassing people with a different sense of gender, or gender incongruence, from their birth-assigned gender. This term is distinct from and does not describe the sexual orientation of a person.¹ The term transgender is further classified into three main categories, namely; transgender women, transgender men, and non-binary. Transgender women are those with birth-assigned gender of male but identifies as a female, while transgender men are those with birth-assigned gender of female but identify as a

male. If a person does not identify with both binary genders, the term non-binary is used, which include other specific genders, such as genderqueer, agender, bigender, and genderfluid.²

Transgender in Arabic is 'tasyabbuh', which means 'resembling something'. In the Islamic point of view, the definition of transgender by the Fiqh Jurists is men who resemble women or vice versa through their attire, adornment, voice and way of speaking, gait and mannerism, as well as to change one's physical appearance.³ In Malaysia, some common terms to describe transgender women are trans woman, mak nyah, transsexual and thirunagai. Some of the terms used may be degrading for transgender women, such as "bapak", "pondan", and "sotong", among others.⁴

The prevalence of trans women worldwide is unclear, but it is suggested that approximately 0.5% - 1.3% of male gender at birth identify as trans women.⁵ In Malaysia, the

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transgender activists estimated a number of 20,000 to 30,000 trans women in 2018.⁶ Of this, 80% are Malays.^{6,7} A study found an increment from 10,000 to 50,000 trans women in Malaysia, from 2001 to 2016.¹¹ Despite rapid growth of this population, Malaysian acceptance towards them is still low.⁵ They experienced stigmatization and discrimination in multiple settings, causing them to have a challenging life situation.⁴ The trans women community also faces several unique health issues, which affect both their physical and mental wellbeing.¹

Social Issues

Stigmatization and discrimination of trans women appear to be the primary source of their problems. A study by Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) revealed that they are discriminated against in various settings.⁴ Discrimination happens in school, the workplace, and even in the healthcare setting. Due to discrimination, abuse and violence in school, many trans women attained a low level of education. They are also stigmatized and often denied work.^{5,8} Due to these circumstances, many would corner and resort to sex work to gain a high income, leading to the high prevalence of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.⁵ It also induces high stress and anxiety in the trans women community, causing an increase in mental health issues among them.⁹

Physical Health

Transgender people are 1 of the 5 critical populations at high risk of HIV infection.¹⁰ According to the 2018 size estimation of key population, there are an estimated number of 15,000 trans women sex workers in Malaysia, with the prevalence rate of HIV more than 5% in this group.¹¹ The factors contributing to a higher risk of HIV in trans women are lack of knowledge on HIV infection, receptive anal sex without protection, multiple sexual partners, negative attitude towards HIV/AIDS and polysubstance abuse.¹² Other than that, transphobia and HIV stigma causing discrimination and ignorance of healthcare workers may be the issues placing transgender people at higher risk of HIV.¹³ Trans women are also at increased risk of other STDs, such as Gonorrhoea, Chlamydia and Syphilis.

The primary approach for managing transgenderism is gender-affirming treatment, which includes cross-sex hormonal therapy and gender reassignment surgery.¹⁴ There is no local official guideline available for the prescription of

hormonal therapy for trans women.¹⁴ Many of them use over the counter feminizing oral hormonal medication such as birth control pills.¹⁵ Self-prescription of medication leads to a lack of clinical monitoring, causing a higher risk of side effects including venous thromboembolism, gallstone disease, hypertriglyceridemia and weight gain, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, hyperprolactinemia, diabetes mellitus, and breast cancer.¹⁶ Gender reassignment surgery of external genitalia for trans women includes orchidectomy, penectomy, vaginoplasty, labioplasty/clitoroplasty and urethral meatus reconstruction.¹⁷ These surgical procedures exposed them to increased risk of HPV infection and HPV-related malignancy and HIV infection due to chronic laceration and inflammation post-vaginoplasty.¹⁵

Mental Health

Trans women are more likely to experience mental health problems than the general population. This is due to transphobia, discrimination and violence towards their community.¹ The psychological issues experienced include depression, anxiety and substance abuse.⁵ Some may even engage in self-harm behaviour.⁵ This may be explained by the minority stress model, which describes the stressors embedded in the social position of sexual minority individuals as causes of health-related conditions, such as mental disorders, psychological distress, physical disorders and health behaviours.^{9,17} In light of the issues on Malaysian transgender women, this study aims to explore the past experience of transgender women on how they became transgender women and the reasons to become sex workers.

Materials and methods

A qualitative research using in-depth interviews were conducted among 8 transgenders who lived in Kuantan city. The interviews were audiotaped with consent from the respondents. The audiotaped data was transcribed and analysed using framework analysis. The research was approved by International Islamic University of Malaysia Research Steering Committee with IREC ID: 2019-170. This study had been performed in conformity with the ethical standards as laid down in 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

TOPIC GUIDE

The in-depth interviews utilised a topic guide which covers on their early life experiences (Table 1). The questions were developed based on the objectives of this study

No	Questions on Personal life of transgender women in Kuantan
1	When do you start to have the tendency to become a transgender woman?
2	What are the contributing factors leading to transgender? Do you blame anything or anyone?
3	How is your family's acceptance when you first become a transgender woman?
4	When is your 1 st sexual intercourse experience? Why, with whom and where do you do it?
5	When do you start becoming a sexual worker? What is the reason?

Table 1. Topic guide.

Results

No	Name	Age at interview	Religion	Race	Education	Occupation	Income
1.	R1	34	Islam	Malay	STPM	Sex worker	RM1,000
2.	R2	45	Islam	Malay	Form 3	Sex worker	RM1,000
3.	R3	40	Islam	Malay	SPM	Sex worker	RM 1000
4.	R4	44	Islam	Malay	SPM	NGO & Sex worker	RM1,200
5.	R5	20	Islam	Malay	Form 3	Sex worker	RM1,500
6.	R6	30	Islam	Malay	Diploma	Sex worker	RM2,00
7.	R7	29	Islam	Malay	SKM Level 2	Sex worker	RM1,500
8.	R8	48	Islam	Malay	SPM	Bridal business & Sex worker	RM2,500

Table 2. Background profile of participants.

Early Personal Life and Experience

A. Age of tendency to become transgender women

From the interview, the findings suggest that most of the participants started having the tendency to become the opposite gender since their childhood. Some of them started to wear girl's clothing since childhood, while others started at ages ranging from secondary school up to 24 years old.

- "I started to become a 'maknyah' when I was 19 years old, after sitting for STPM. But I have been feminine since my childhood." (R1)
- "I have been feminine since my childhood. I enjoyed being a woman. I started at age 13 years old, when I learned to secretly used my

mother's make up, applying lipstick and all." (R4)

- "Since I was in primary school, I love to play 'pondok-pondok' with girls. My friends from primary to secondary school were all girls. I only had 2 to 3 male friends." (R7)

One participant even started to wear female clothes during preschool age.

- "My experience of being a 'maknyah' started from I was a child. I swapped clothes with my sister. I wore her clothes, and she wore mine. Since I was a child, I like to wear feminine clothes, about 5 to 6 years of age." (R8)

B. Contributing factors of becoming transgender women

A few factors were brought up during the interview session. The main contributing factors were their own desires, as well as families and friends. All of them mentioned that they became transgender woman due to their own desire or instinct. As mentioned by an interviewee:

- "I think it is from my own instinct. I am used to that feeling." (R7)

A few of them also stated that it was their family who treated them as a girl since they were born.

- "The ultrasound scan detected me as a girl. Suddenly, I was born (a boy).but my parents prepared only girl's clothes prior to birth, so I wore girl's clothes. I only had my first haircut when I was going to the kindergarten. During Hari Raya, I would wear Baju Kurung, same as my sister." (R6)
- "The factor is that all of my siblings are boys. Back then, both my parents were working. So, I would be the one to manage the house chores, including taking care of my younger siblings, and cleaning up the house." (R2)
- "I felt like this since I was a child, since school age. Another factor may be due to my siblings. They were all girls, so I was familiarized with girls. I started to be more involved with 'maknyah' after I dropped out of school." (R5)

One of the participant attributes it to the needs to take over the mother's role, especially when both of the parents are busy.

- "I am feminine since I was born. In primary school, I have been thought to be independent and do house chores. My mother was busy as

she was active in politics, so I was the one who took care of our house. I was also the caretaker for my late grandmother..... I did all of the work in the kitchen. So, I have the tendency as I did all of the house chores.” (R3)

C. Past family acceptance

Almost all ‘maknyah’ participant from this study has had some form of rejection from at least 1 close family member. Some had been physically assaulted for being a transgender woman, while others were nagged or scolded. Some of the examples of rejection are as follows:

- *“When I first started to become feminine, my oldest brother strongly opposed my decision..... His friends also mocked me. So, I was frequently beaten when I was a teenager.” (R2)*
- *“At first, they did not accept me. Even now, they did not accept my condition. When she first knew, she wants to know the reason why her son becoming this (transgender)....She even broke into my rental room to look at what is inside, to find a cause. She was angry..... I feel like they did not understand me, not accepting me. I then made a decision to stay away from my own family.” (R5)*
- *“From my mother’s side, there was ‘maknyah’ before, my cousin. However, I got a strong rejection from my oldest brother..... I bumped into my brother once, and he chased me across town. That’s what happen during my early years..” (R3)*

However, one of them has a good acceptance from all family members from the beginning, although not for the sexual work:

- *“I was taught to be a girl since I was a child. So, there were never a problem in my family about me being feminine nor about my physical appearance. However, they warned me not to do immoral things. They did not know that I am currently a sex worker.” (R1)*

D. First sexual intercourse experience

The age of their first sexual intercourse experience ranging from as early as 13 to 19 years old. Their first experiences were either with friend, family member, teacher, or customer. Most of them did it due to lust and money. Some of the experiences were narrated as below:

- *“I was taught by my uncle to have the desire to do it (sex). When I was in primary school, I was just feminine, but when I was in secondary school, it started to be more obvious. During a ‘kenduri’, he first started to have sexual intercourse with me. I was 14 years old when I first did it.” (R3)*
- *“I started to have sex when I was 17 years old, when SPM is approaching. I always met with my teacher. The first time I had sex was with my own teacher, the one who taught me. The teacher did not force it on me, but I am the one who wanted it. I was 17 years old, just before sitting for SPM.” (R4)*
- *“The first time I had sex was not for a sex work. It was just for fun. In my village, we are the Divas. My group and I would ride around with our motorcycles after school, and the boys would surround us. That is when I started having sex. They are my senior in secondary school. I was in Form 3 at that time. I felt happy as people loved me when I was in female clothing. Money was not my concern yet.” (R6)*

One participant mentioned that the first sex is for money

- *“My first time having a sexual intercourse was when I start being a sexual worker. I was 15 years old after I drop out of school. I was looking for a way to get some money, as I was jobless. I was staying all by myself away from my family. I asked my friends about the sex work, and they taught me how. At that time, I was a little bit scared as I heard some bad experiences, and I asked my friends to help teach me. My first experience was with a customer, but I could not remember who he was. We did it at my rental house, using an online platform to set it up.” (R5)*

E. Age and reason of becoming a sex worker

The participants started to become a sexual worker from the age of 15 to 24 years old. Most of them had to become a sexual worker for money, while only 2 of them started to do it for lust and fun.

- *“I started to become a sex worker after SPM, when I was 19 years old. I first went to Lorong following my friends, during which I have already started wearing women’s clothes and wearing makeup....’ I was also having desires*

for men during that time. So, I went and started to be exposed to Lorong. My first sexual intercourse was with a customer. The reason was my own lust. Money is not my concern yet. However, when my lust was fulfilled and I got the payment, my desire to do sex work increases.” (R1)

- “I started to be a sex worker when I work at the resort. I was a show girl there. At the end of the night, I would take a customer. I was 19 years old at the time. My customer was the guests at the resort..... After some time, it becomes fun.” (R8)
- “I became a sexual worker since I moved to KL. The reason was for money, I did massage and other things. I was 18 to 19 years old at that time, after finished my study and moved to KL.... I work alone.” (R7)

It is unfortunate that a few participants were discriminated and ridiculed at their previous job, causing them to quit and had to become a sexual worker to support themselves financially. One of them mentioned:

- “Before this, I had a job, but I experienced discrimination from my boss. So, I met with the maknyah community and started to be exposed to the world of “Lorong” as a sex worker. Only after having discrimination from my boss, that I started to become a sex worker at lorong. At that time, I have quitted my permanent job, so I did it for money.” (R3)

Discussion

Early Personal Life and Experience

Theme 1: Age of tendency to become transgender woman

The majority of the participants have had the tendency to become the opposite gender since childhood. Some of them began wearing girl's clothing as early as childhood, where one participant even began to dress in female clothing during preschool. Others began at ages ranging from secondary school to 24 years old. Similar to previous study,⁷ they found that all participants stated that they “had been born with the nature of women”. As such, we suggest parents and teachers to vigilantly monitor these children at an early age. Even if their desire to become a transgender could not be suppressed, they should be educated with Islamic teachings and sexual education. With proper guidance,

they may be able to lead a better life ahead.

Theme 2: Contributing factors of becoming transgender women

Several major contributing factors gathered includes own desires, as well as influence from families and friends. All participants stated that they became transgender women out of personal desire or instinct, and never blame others for their condition. Additionally, a number of them also shared that their family had always treated them as if they were a girl since they were born. One person relates it to the need to fill the mother's shoes, especially when both parents are working. As opposed to previous reports, they found that their childhood experience was not a factor influencing their condition, as it was only from their natural desires.⁷ However, they also found that transgender women tend to rely on peer support as they have had difficulties in school or work environment, leading them to the world of ‘lorong’ and sex work.⁷ With good surrounding support and guidance, they may be able to avoid involving into sex work. Families should also treat each child according to their gender, discouraging them to wear clothing of opposite gender or do activities typically associated with the opposite gender.

Theme 3: Past family acceptance

Majority have experienced some form of rejection from at least one of their close family members. Rejection came in the form of physical abuse, nagging or scolding. Only one of them received positive reception for being a transgender woman, albeit not for doing sex work. One of them even cut ties with his family. However, this happens mostly at their initial phase of becoming transgender, and the families have become accepting as the time went by. Previous studies proves that majority have close connection with their families and are more easily accepted.⁷ This may be better for their wellbeing as familial support is one of the factors that were considered for them to change, as mentioned in the later part of this study. In addition, acceptance from families may also give them financial securities, which is also one of the important factors for quitting sex work.

Theme 4: First sexual intercourse experience

Their first sexual intercourse occurred while they were between the ages of 13 and 19. This was in accordance with previous study

where transgender youths with mean of 15; were more susceptible to sexual coercion¹⁹. The first person they had intercourse with were varied, including friend, family member, teacher, or customer. The primary reasons were for the sake of desire and money. However, the research done before did not study on this issue. Surprisingly, very often the closest and supposedly reliable adult are the ones they have their first intercourse with. The action of sodomy is punishable by law, as it is a carnal intercourse against the order of nature, and some of them are under the legal age which is 16 years old¹². Parents should be alert of their child whereabouts and provide their children with proper sexual education, especially during adolescent period.

Theme 5: Age and reason of becoming a sex worker

The individuals began working as sexual workers from the age of 15 to 24 years old. Only two of them began doing it for passion and fun, while the majority of them were forced to become sexual workers for financial reasons⁵. Unfortunately, a few individuals were discriminated against and mocked at their former profession, forcing them to quit and turn to sexual work to make ends meet¹². Previous study shows similar findings.⁷ As many of them tend to start being involved in sex work for financial reasons and low educational level, government or non-governmental organization should look into this problem for further approach in reducing transgender sex workers in our countries.

Conclusions

Great challenges were faced by transgender women in Malaysia particularly social issues such as discrimination, as well as their physical and mental health. The government, non-governmental organizations, and the community must play their role in reducing discrimination against transgender, to help them to improve themselves and pushes them to quit sex trade, whereas healthcare workers with less stigma against this community can provide a better care for their health. A harm reduction program should be put into place for them. Currently, not many research had been done on transgender women in Malaysia, and the effect of their personal life on health. More studies need to be done to have a better understanding and

approach to ensure their physical and mental wellbeing.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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