

Phenomenon of Transsexual Behaviour Among Youth in Kuala Lumpur: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the complex lives of transsexual groups is essential in order to resolve this issue in a more intellectual, systematic and effective manner. Thus, this case study was aimed at knowing more about male-to-female transsexuals, especially among youth, by studying their sexual orientation as well as how far a sense of femininity is felt by them. Eight transsexual women were the informants recruited for this study based on snowball sampling technique. Each informant had completed a semi-structured interview at least twice. The basis of the interview was the principle of saturation in which the informants had been interviewed until no new ideas were emerging. The interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and checked for content based on thematic analysis technique. The findings revealed two important themes from the narrative of the informants, namely, their gender identification and sexual orientation. In terms of gender identification, it was found that all the informants identified themselves according to feminine features although the features did not match their own physical features. Meanwhile, in terms of sexual orientation, the results showed that this group of transsexuals preferred to engage in sexual activities. For them, sexual satisfaction was only achievable by engaging in such sexual activities because of their sexual instinct, which was similar to that of women. One implication of this feature would be a potential rise in social problems. Thus, all parties should cooperate to combat this issue aggressively and effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the evolution and advancement of various aspects of life as well as the challenges of globalisation that continue to advance, the tendency of some youth

in getting caught up in comfort zones has caused them to be pulled into self-inflicted damage and downfall, leading to their getting trapped in perturbing social maladies such as drug addiction, alcoholism and hedonism that prevent them from taking up the responsibilities that await them. In more extreme situations, they engage in acts of crime. Statistics by the Social Welfare Department of Malaysia show that a total of 4407 youth aged between 16 and 21 years were involved in several types of crime such as drug possession, vandalism, gangsterism, rape and others (Social Welfare Department of Malaysia, 2012a). However, the number of cases in 2011 showed some increase from the year before with 745 cases (Social Welfare Department of Malaysia, 2012b).

Recently, the phenomenon of alternative sexual behaviour, orientation and lifestyle termed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) behaviour has become increasingly visible among Malaysian youth, raising serious issues related to religion, morality and ethics. The promotion of the LGBT community through the *Seksualiti Merdeka* (Sexuality Independence) programme in 2012 became the talk of the town and a hot topic in the newspapers and other mass media. The National Fatwa Council, a prominent Islamic council in Malaysia, banned the LGBT community and *Seksualiti Merdeka* programme and declared those organisations as illicit (e-Fatwa, 2012), while several non-government organisations (NGOs) and a Member of Parliament suggested that the government categorise the LGBT activities as illegal in Malaysia (Utusan, 2012).

There is a lot of opposition from various quarters on on-going claims made by the LGBT group that they were creating an environment of sexual freedom in this country and that they felt that their action was proper and not against the law. However, in multicultural Malaysia, this issue is strictly contrary to the values, morals and culture; furthermore, this does not only involve Malaysian culture but other eastern cultures as well. Clearly, this is an important issue that needs further and deeper analysis in order to provide an adequate overview and explanation of this social problem. Hence, this study focusses on one component of LGBT i.e. the transgender or transsexual.

Essentially, activity among male youth transsexuals is known and judged from various angles. Some of these are based on the characteristics portrayed by the male youth transsexuals, such as their self-image, the way they dress, behaviour that is conflicting to their gender as well as the way they think, which is inconsistent with the cognitive development of a male (Nevid, Rathus & Green, 2008). In Malaysia, men involved in transsexual activities are popularly referred to as transsexuals or '*Mak Nyah*'¹. Viewed through the lens of Malaysian culture, the activities by these transsexuals are labelled an unhealthy and improper phenomenon in Malaysia as they go against the norms of the local communities (Teh, 2001). Similarly, religious figures and groups view them as acts of sin that violate religious codes
¹*Mak Nyah*: Man who has undergone surgery to remove his genital organs or has undergone a sex-change procedure; How transsexuals in Malaysia address themselves

of conduct. However, for most Western societies, the concept and activities of transsexuals are acceptable and tolerable. The clash between the two cultures with regards to LGBT behaviour has caused a major impact in judging and determining whether these transsexual activities conform to convention or otherwise (Abdul Aziz, 2002) within the Malaysian context.

In Malaysia, transsexual behaviour exhibited by male youths received much attention in the early years that such behaviour became apparent among Malaysian youth. It grew into a more serious issue when a significant number of transsexuals began to be noticed in higher-learning institutes across Malaysia (Suriati, Jabil & Azilah, 2011; Rohana & Zulkifli, 2001). Extensive coverage and serious attention given by various parties have exposed transsexuals, particularly those in higher learning institutes, to various negative implications. They have repeatedly received negative reactions whether through gesture or word by other students who consider them the cause of various problems, particularly moral issues (Abdul Aziz, 2002). Moreover, these transsexuals are also pressured by the university authorities with rules and regulations that limit their freedom to express themselves. One of the rules that limit their freedom is the dress code or the freedom to dress on campus (Aminuddin & Johan, 2002).

According to Aminuddin and Johan (2002), on the issue of transsexuals among male youth, society sees the phenomenon as a moral setback, as it involves the

personality and character of an individual. Society considers such a moral crisis a major setback as morals are the core and foundation of a human civilization (Mat Saat Baki, 1993). The rise and downfall of a society depends on the morals and conduct of its people. Duly, society today does realise the need to resolve this crisis of transsexual behaviour among male youth or '*Mak Nyah*'. These youth should not be treated like a disregarded minority as they are unable to solve the problem themselves. If the problem is left unresolved, it will give rise to a greater moral crisis.

The experience of transsexual tendencies within the male population is often described in this way: "A woman's mind trapped in a man's body" (Abdul Aziz, 2002; Aminuddin & Johan, 2002; Rohana & Zulkifli, 2001; Azam Beruntung, 2001; Ahmad Amin, 1995; Wan Azmi, 1991; Wan Halim, 1987). The expression, 'a woman's mind trapped in a man's body' implies that transsexuals or *Mak Nyah* possess the identity, feelings and sexual behaviour of a woman. This assumption to some extent has caused some uneasiness in the community, resulting in feelings of prejudice against *Mak Nyah*, and the resulting ill effect is discrimination against transsexuals, both from the authorities and members of society itself (Azam Beruntung, 2001). The dilemma of transsexuals or any other problems that they may face are often ridiculed and made light of; similarly their feelings are toyed with (Mat Saat Baki, 1993). No one wants to understand or believe what they are experiencing, as if what they were

experiencing was all fantasy (Wan Azmi, 1991). Society considers this minority group 'immoral' as the behaviour of individuals in the group are deemed inappropriate by and often upset the majority (Aminuddin & Johan, 2002).

Hence, the attempt to understand the minority group of transsexuals is appropriate so that future approaches to resolve this issue can be more intellectual, systematic and effective. Therefore, the present study attempts to uncover the tendency of this group in terms of several different facets such as their gender identity and sexual behavior or sexual orientation. This means that this study tries to understand how the group identifies themselves as individuals either as male or female, their sexual interest either in men or women as well as their sexual behaviour with their partners. Allowing this group of transsexuals to describe their personality and behaviour from their own perspectives will provide rich and valuable information about the group to others. Hence, the qualitative approach was seen as the most suitable method for the purpose of this research.

THE CONCEPT OF TRANSSEXUALS

'Transsexual' refers to the condition where a person tends to identify his/her gender as different from his/her biological sex leading to his/her action of undergoing medical procedures to change his/her sexual body structure in order to live as the gender he/she dreams of being (Suriati *et al.*, 2011; Ahmad Amin, 1995). On the other hand, from the medical perspective, 'transsexual'

refers to someone who is known to suffer from psychological gender disorders and practices the lifestyle of the opposite sex after undergoing surgery or hormonal therapy to attain the desired physical appearance by having their external sex organs changed (Online Medical Dictionary, 2008). Even though transsexual and transgender as phenomena are sometimes related, there is a difference between the two, mainly in the method of gender change. Transgender people show their feminine identity through appearance and behaviour. However, transsexuals change almost everything including their behaviour, looks, body as well as their genital parts. This is because transsexuals can never accept the sexual organs (penis and scrotum for men) that they were born with. They are willing to undergo genital change surgery or to construct a fake vagina to become a woman. Besides, they also use hormonal therapy to develop breasts and other female secondary sex characteristics. Subsequently, they live the lifestyle they have always desired.

In Malaysia, transsexual women are fondly known and addressed as '*Mak Nyah*', a male transsexual (Mukhannas) who desires a gender other than their original gender (Teh, 2001). An earlier researcher, Wan Halim (1987), found that society also categorises transsexual women as transgender, queer, '*darai*', hermaphrodite, '*mukhannas*' and '*mukhannis*' instead of '*Mak Nyah*'. What distinguishes them from another is the name or title used in certain places. Wan Halim (1987) also mentioned the other names and terms used to address

transsexuals such as 'bapak', 'adik-adik', 'kedi', 'khunsa', 'cik mek', 'cik awang' and others. Besides, among themselves, these transsexuals call themselves the PLU (People Like Us), Sters (short form for 'sisters'), 'che gaya' and 'dugong', among others.

Like individuals biologically born women, transsexual women also have feelings of wanting to be loved by someone; the difference is that they are only attracted to males, and reject women as their life partner. This is in line with the study conducted by Siti Ainiza and Azhari (1997) which stated that transsexuals need someone whom they can see as a protector, a male who is able to guide them and to whom they can be married to. In addition, they like to be treated as a wife and to carry the responsibilities of a wife in their marriage. For them, marriage is based on the concept of an 'understanding of love' between them and their husbands. The assumption is that these transsexuals do have husbands who are partners in bed and with whom they are sexually active, as well as whom they hold on to and turn to for shelter, as do many individuals who are born biologically women (Siti Ainiza & Azhari, 1997).

Despite the variety and diversity of terms or the meaning of 'transsexual', all these definitions come back to the same basic meaning, which refers to the tendency of the individual to act contrary to the given nature of his/her gender, whether a man who wants to act as a woman or a woman who wants to act as a man. Nevertheless, parallel with the objectives of this research, the main

focus here will be the issue of transsexuals within male youth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this case study is the qualitative research design. The qualitative approach for this study is the preferred research design because of its suitability to answer the 'what' and 'how' questions in research (Creswell, 1998). Besides, Leedy (1990) stated that the use of qualitative design enables researchers to gain information deeply especially in terms of respondent understanding and knowledge. The present researchers also agree with Rohana Yusof (2003) that the qualitative approach is characterised by eclecticism, is orientated towards being hypothesis-free and accepts the reality of the nature of the phenomenon.

In this research, the sample consists of eight male youth transsexuals or 'Mak Nyah' from different racial groups within the age range of 18 to 33 years old. Through snowball sampling method, the informants were obtained from several places around Kuala Lumpur such as Lorong Haji Taib and entertainment clubs which are the famous and common spots for these transsexuals or 'Mak Nyah'. To gather the information, the researchers conducted meetings at the informants' house as requested by the informants themselves for comfort reasons. The interview location is important as it affects the emotions of informants in giving truthful and sincere information. The semi-structured interview technique was used to collect information from the informants. The

researchers recorded the interview results, transcribed them verbatim and analysed them based on thematic analysis technique. In this present research, the researchers also took into account the reliability and validity of the information. Thus, in the data collection process, the researchers took into account honesty or trustworthiness in carrying out this study by adhering to the four main criteria listed by Noraini (2010) which are truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Thematic analysis used for this study identified the theme and sub-themes. In this research, the two main themes identified are: 1) gender/sex identification and 2) sexual behaviour and orientation. We will discuss and explain these two themes and the relationship to their personality and their identity as transsexual people.

Gender/Sex Identification

In discussing the main theme of gender or sex identification, the study highlighted two important points: perception of own sex and personal attitude as a woman.

Perception of their own sex

Based on the information obtained from the interview, every informant chose to refer to himself as a woman and declined being referred to as a man. This was evident in the answers given by the informants when questioned about their gender and sex.

These were the statements of the informants regarding the nature of their gender:

“You, I’m really a woman...I’m a woman, not a man. Touchwood, if you say that I’m a man...it gives me a creep...I’m a woman. I feel that I am a woman who is trapped in a man’s body..” (Informant 1)

“Who knows...it’s hard to answer... what’s important is that I’m a woman, I’m not a man...Do you see me as a man??? No, right... errmm. I feel that I’m a woman...” (Informant 2)

Based on the excerpt above, it shows that the informants felt that they were women and refused to acknowledge themselves as men. This is because the feelings of these informants as a woman exceeded their feelings as a man, and that indirectly tells us that they want to be acknowledged as a woman either physically or emotionally. Moreover, some informants felt that they were better than most individuals biologically born women. For instance, one of the informants said:

“Of course I’m a woman, you... In fact, I feel that I’m much perfect compared to the women out there, okay.....” (Informant 3)

When asked how they wanted to be treated, each informant responded with a similar answer i.e. that they wanted to be

treated as a woman. For example, almost every informant replied:

“Of course I want others to treat me like a woman because I am a woman....” (Informant 4)

To them, they are women and as women they would like others to treat them as they would treat individuals biologically born women. A simple example is how each informant addressed himself as “*mak*” (mother) or “*kakak*” (sister) and was uncomfortable when addressed as “*abang*” (brother).

In terms dressing, informants openly said that they would always want to look beautiful. One such response was:

“I want to look beautiful...I am more beautiful than the actual women okay.....” (Informant 5)

“Your appearance must be beautiful...I am a woman, okay... so, I have to take care of my appearance.....” (Informant 6)

This clearly tells us that transsexuals in the interview are really concerned with having an appearance that is appealing and attractive in the eyes of the public. Moreover, the term ‘want to look beautiful’ also informs us that they would like to look attractive as a woman instead of a man.

Attitude as a woman

With regards to being seduced by a man, each informant answered differently. This

may be due to the difference in their marital status. However, all the informants were excited at the thought of male seductions. For instance, one informant who was married and lived a normal married life with a stable partner answered as follows when asked on his reaction to male seduction:

“I’m a woman...I get sexually aroused when seduced by men... But, I am not fond of it...I have a husband. So, I have to take care of myself and my behaviour...” (Informant 7)

His answer suggests that he possesses the characteristics of a woman who watches herself and is mindful of her manner and actions, as would any woman with a family. On the other hand, an informant who is single claimed that he was shy when seduced by men. He said:

“I don’t like to be seduced by men because I’m shy, embarrassed...I’m a woman, ok...shy, ok...But, I’m aroused by their seduction....” (Informant 2)

His answer suggests that male transsexuals are sexually excited by male seductions. However, they are mindful of their actions, displaying caution in the face of advances by a male as might most women who believe caution in such a circumstance to be proper. On the other hand, another informant had the opposite response. According to him:

"I love being seduced by men...I feel aroused and lustful when they seduced me..." (Informant 3)

This statement also proves the existence of sexual arousal towards men without any accompanying feelings of shame. However, there are others who feel shy of men as would a woman.

When asked about their level of self-confidence and self-assurance, all the informants agreed that they were comfortable with their appearances. The only discomfort they felt was triggered by the environment around them, particularly the perception that the public have of them. For example, according to one informant:

"Mostly, I'm comfortable with myself. I'm just not comfortable how others see me...." (Informant 1)

There were, however, informants who would like to see an increase in self-confidence and self-acceptance. For example:

"I'm comfortable with myself...I just want to go for a surgery to remove my testicles...so that I would feel more comfortable...I don't want to be a hypocrite...If I want to be a real woman, why should I have male sex organ..."(Informant 3)

Based on external observation, Informant 3 looks no different from a

woman. In fact, the nature he projects and the way he interacts are feminine and womanly. However, because he was born a man, he believed he needed to physical changes to his body in order to feel more comfortable with himself.

Thus, all of the informants were comfortable with their present physical condition of resembling a woman. This is supported by Wan Azmi (1991), who stated that *Mak Nyah* or transsexuals genuinely feel that their identity and feelings are those of a woman.

The findings of this research are also consistent with the concept of self-acceptance that Ismail (2001) proposed as being one of the major issues in homosexuality in Malaysia. According to Ismail (2001), self-acceptance is the foundation upon which homosexuals come out and acknowledge publicly their LGBT orientation. In his study, Ismail revealed that a small number of the homosexuals refused to admit their LGBT orientation as they failed to consider that being homosexual was a normal phenomenon, and therefore, were not willing to be open about it with others, especially as the environment failed to support them when they revealed their orientation. However, most of the informants in this study had little difficulty in achieving self-acceptance. Many of them succeeded in accepting their differences and had little trouble revealing their transsexual personality in public. Most of the informants were very proud of their feminine body and appearance.

Sexual Behaviour and Orientation

One way to observe whether transsexuals have a male or female instinct is to analyse their sexual behaviour. To achieve this end, this study presented a few questions to the informants regarding their sexual tendency and activities. Two sub-themes were identified based on the results, namely, sexual desire for men and sexual orientation.

Sexual desire for men

This sub-theme arose when the researchers asked the informants about the gender of their partners. All the informants said their partners were of the same sex i.e. male. When asked whether they had a lover or a partner, two out of six informants stated that they had partners whom they acknowledged as their husbands. The remaining informants had multiple sex partners who were all men. They did not have a regular partner. When asked to explain why all their partners were men, all stated that they wanted men to pamper and indulge them so that they would feel more like a woman. Two examples of the informants' statements are given:

"I have a husband so my husband treats me as a wife like a normal couple would....." (Informant 7)

"I want a strong man that could cater to my needs. I love it when men indulge me..." (Informant 3)

Both statements clearly inform that the informants love to be pampered by men who consider them as women.

When asked about their sexual relations, all the informants stated that they were sexually active with their male partners. All the informants felt that they were sexually satisfied when they were with men. They were not lustful or excited when with women as they considered themselves to also be women. Some examples of the statements by the informants are given:

"Of course all of us have had sex, you...it is impossible if not...."
(Informant 2)

"I'm only lustful with men....women, sorry....It gives me the creep, ok...."
(Informant 8)

These two statements clearly reveal that the informants had engaged in sexual relationships with partners of the same sex to achieve sexual satisfaction and were not interested in women as they considered themselves to be women.

In addition, when questioned on the role played during sexual intercourse, all of them replied that they played the role of the woman in satisfying their male partners:

"Of course a woman when in bed... since I'm a woman, so I have to act as woman in bed...." (Informant 4)

Almost all the informants gave answers similar to the above, proving that all of them saw themselves as women when they were with men, particularly during sexual intercourse. A few of the informants were in relationships with stable partners

through marriage and kept the daily routine of male-female couples. Those who were married placed importance on their sexual relationship with their partner and behaved as any wife would. For example, according to informant 6:

“I have a husband...I have to take care of my relationship...I used to change partners, but now I have to be faithful to one...sex is only for my husband...” (Informant 6)

It is clear here that the informants who were married treasured their marriage and performed their duties as a wife faithfully while preserving their honour as a woman.

Sexual Orientation

The interviews revealed that the types of sexual intercourse regularly performed between the informants and their partners were oral, anal or both. Six out of eight informants claimed that the frequent types of sexual activity that they performed during sexual intercourse with their partner were both oral and anal:

“In my relationship, I usually perform oral and anal sex together... It’s more satisfying...” (Informant 7)

“I perform both of it...” (Informant 5)

Nevertheless, two of the eight informants only performed anal sex as they were not

interested in oral sex because they disliked it. For instance, informant 8 said:

“I only perform anal sex...it’s disgusting to do oral...really disgusting...” (Informant 8)

In their opinion, most women were not fond of performing oral sex.

When asked about the type of sexual pleasure and satisfaction experienced during sexual intercourse, six of the eight informants claimed that they gained sexual pleasure during sexual intercourse by performing both anal and oral sex. Only two of the informants said that they achieved sexual pleasure through anal sex alone. However, when asked of their sexual satisfaction as women, all the informants were of the opinion that they were sexually satisfied playing the role of the woman in the sexual relationship. For instance, informant 6 claimed:

“I am sexually satisfied when performing both oral and anal sex...I’m a woman and I am pampered and reached my sexual climax like a normal woman...that’s why I perform oral and anal...” (Informant 6)

This statement proves that these transsexuals achieve sexual climax and pleasure with their respective partners similar to that of a woman.

Two of the informants had stable partners as they were married to their

respective partners and also living a normal married life together with their same-sex partners. The remaining informants had multiple male sex partners and no regular partners. When asked to give reasons why their partners were all males, most of the informants agreed that the two main reasons were their desire to be pampered by men and the feeling of being a woman. This finding was consistent with Siti Ainiza and Azhari (1997) who found that transsexuals loved to have a husband or a male partner that could carry out the responsibilities of protecting and treating them as women.

Further, this study also identified that the sexual orientation of the informants was towards man; all of them had had engaged in sexual relationships with their male partners. None of the informants felt sexually aroused by a woman. These findings are consistent with the research done by Daskalos (1998) where it was found that female identity and hormones were two major matters that strongly affected changes in sexual orientation among transsexuals. In his research on six heterosexual male-to-female transsexuals, Daskalos reported that all the respondents had experienced major changes in their sexual orientation since they had converted their identity from male to female. Before the transition, the respondents had informed the researchers that they were sexually interested in women but after they transitioned into women, all attraction to women were gone, and they started to have sexual feelings for men. Half of the respondents had also reported that female hormones strengthened their sexual feelings

for men. Similarly, this research suggests that sexual interest towards men as reported by the informants in this study might also be triggered by the change of their identity from male to female.

In terms of the types and forms of sexual relationships and sexual pleasure experienced, the findings showed that six of eight of the informants derived sexual pleasure through oral and anal sex. Only two of the informants were sexually satisfied through anal sex alone. Even though there were different approaches to satisfy their sexual needs, all of the transsexuals in this study agreed that they felt satisfied with anal sex. This is because the feeling of being feminine is aroused when they have anal intercourse (Edwards, Fisher & Reynolds, 2007). When asked about their sexual satisfaction as a woman, all of them were of the opinion that they were sexually satisfied when performing as a woman.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the phenomenon of transsexual behaviour among male youth is a phenomenon involving the personality and emotions of the individual. The findings of this study show that transsexuals have a high tendency to identify themselves as females and are interested in men especially in terms of sexual activities or behaviour; thus, this study supports the notion and assumption that transsexuals among the male gender experience the phenomenon of being “a woman trapped in a man’s body”. The study also suggests that feminine feelings experienced by male transsexuals have a

major impact on their sexual orientation, and lead to their choice of playing the role of the woman during sexual intercourse. In terms of research significance, this study, to some extent, provides information on the severe identity crisis faced by the minority group of transsexuals in Kuala Lumpur. It is hoped that these findings will encourage the public to provide advice, guidance and moral support that would enable this group of people to make positive changes that could lead them out of transsexual behaviour. for them to change their selves positively instead of accepting the transsexual people as members of society. All these efforts could save them from falling further into the transsexual world.

The findings of this research are also expected to provide input for more effective planning and better execution of counselling and psychotherapy programmes designed to aid transsexuals. Hopefully, such programmes can create awareness and a sense of comfort for transsexuals to change themselves without fear of insult and negative perception.

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