Buana Gender

Social Acceptance of Waria as a Third Gender in The Tolerant City of Pematangsiantar

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Abstract

This research explores the social acceptance of transgender woman individuals, known as "waria," in Pematangsiantar, a city in North Sumatra, Indonesia. This research method is a qualitative study. Despite the city's cultural diversity and values of tolerance and harmony, gender discrimination issues persist. The research reveals that waria often face rejection from their families, leading to domestic violence. The public's perspective on waria varies, influenced by limited understanding and negative stereotypes. Stereotypes and prejudices make it difficult for waria to access job opportunities and the economy, impacting their social and economic positions. Communities with conservative religious views often reject waria, considering them contrary to accepted religious teachings. The research emphasizes the need for further progress in addressing gender discrimination especially promoting equality. Even in a tolerant society, gender discrimination can persist, highlighting the importance of challenging social norms and fostering greater acceptance and inclusivity.

Keywords: Third Gender; Social Acceptance; Transgender; Gender Discrimination

Introduction

Pematangsiantar is a city in the province of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Located in the Simalungun Regency, the city is strategically positioned as it is traversed by the Sumatra Transverse Highway. With a land area of 79.97 square kilometers and a population of 268,254 people as of 2021, Pematangsiantar has a relatively large population. There are 132,615 male residents and 135,639 female residents. The religious composition in Pematangsiantar consists of 51.25% followers (46.54% Protestant and 4.71% Catholic), 43.90% Muslims, 4.36%

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Buddhists, 0.01% Confucians, and 0.11% Hindus, based on data from the Pematangsiantar Central Bureau of Statistics in 2017.

Pematangsiantar boasts a diverse culture and society. The city is known as an urban melting pot, where people from various ethnicities and cultures reside, including the Toba Batak, Javanese, Simalungun Batak, Chinese, and Malay communities. This diversity contributes to the rich cultural heritage of the city, preserving the traditions and customs of each ethnic group. The people of Pematangsiantar value tolerance and harmony, fostering good relationships among individuals regardless of their ethnic and religious backgrounds. The city of Pematangsiantar harnesses the potential of its multicultural society, encapsulated in the motto and philosophy of the local community: "Sapangambei Manoktok Hitei," which means "togetherness for noble goals." This signifies the strengthening of unity through an ideal utopian permissive attitude towards unity, as unity serves as the foundation for communal life. Conversely, without unity, there is no strength to build a monument of civilization in the city of Pematangsiantar.

The tolerance and diverse composition of the society in Pematangsiantar does not automatically eliminate issues of discrimination entirely, particularly those related to gender in all its manifestations. While a society may be considered tolerant in terms of religious freedom, there may still be inequalities and discrimination rooted in gender factors, include towards the third gender like transgender woman (commonly named waria).

In relation to gender, social construction has always believed in the idea that sex and gender are absolute. Gender is seen as a direct result (inter core) of sex. In Indonesia, there are commonly only two categories of sex, namely male and female. Each is constructed in its own position and cannot be exchanged with each other. Males are associated with their masculinity, while females are associated with femininity. There is no room for those who do not have such synchronicity as a consequence of their biological sex. However, deviations can always occur, and it is possible for individuals to violate the social norms determined by the relationship between sex and gender in society. It is not uncommon to find men who adopt a feminine appearance, who are interested in presenting themselves as women, popularly known as "waria" (a combination of "wanita" and "pria," meaning "woman-man"), or "transgender woman." This shows that the synchronicity between sex and gender in reality is not always aligned with what is constructed in society. The societal construction of gender

identity is not necessarily internally ingrained in individuals. However, societal judgments on social reality are inevitable. If there are individuals who deviate from these norms, they may be considered "deviant" and "abnormal." In fact, sex and gender are separate and distinct concepts. Sex refers to an individual's biological condition, namely their innate assigned sex at birth, which is determined by their bodily anatomy and confirmed by the medical community, always referring to the presence of a penis or vagina. On the other hand, gender is a separate social construct. Quoting the Women's Studies Encyclopedia, the term "gender" is a cultural concept that assigns differences in roles, behaviors, mentality, characteristics, and emotions to males and females in social life (Siburian, 2021). Gender is the attribute and behavior attached to males (penis) and females (vagina), which are socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, gender can change over time and is heavily influenced by culture. For example, women are associated with femininity, domestic roles, and reproduction, while men are associated with strength, masculinity, and public roles.

The interest in this research has grown due to the phenomenon of the waria community, which continues to exist over time. Specifically, it is related to the existence and sustainability of the activities of the waria community, who gather regularly and routinely in a specific location around midnight to engage in sex work. This takes place near the Mataram Railway Station in Pematangsiantar. According to information published in the Tribun Medan newspaper, the presence of waria at the Mataram Railway Station in Pematangsiantar has been observed since 2005 (Tribun Medan, February 13, 2017). The waria group resides in rental houses located on Jalan Mataram I near the Pematangsiantar Railway Station. They live together with other local residents and engage in daily interactions and socialization. In the perspective of normative gender, waria are considered deviant and vulnerable. This is precisely why this research is conducted, to further explore and examine the social acceptance (acceptability) of waria in Pematangsiantar.

Method

Based on the research issue, the authors have chosen to utilize a qualitative research approach with a descriptive nature. The focus is on studying transgender (waria) individuals. The qualitative approach is based on the assumption that human understanding can only be achieved within contextual frameworks rather than through causal laws. Data collection

for this study involved conducting interviews. The collected data provides descriptive explanations of the phenomenon under study. (Sugiono, 2016).

Finding And Result

Attitudes and behavior emerge as a result of social interactions and relationships among individuals in society. In a social context, individuals can be seen or treated differently depending on factors such as culture, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, and other factors. The treatment of an individual by others is influenced by social norms and values that impact them. Norms are rules or social expectations applied in society, while values are accepted principles within a society.

Looking closer at the initial attitudes of families towards transgender individuals (known as "waria" in this context), it is found that rejection by family members is a common occurrence. Rejection takes various forms, ranging from minor incidents to more serious forms of rejection. Families perceive them as a threat to existing social norms and traditions. They view waria as "abnormal." Rejection of waria's lives begins when signs of feminine behavior emerge. During this period, waria often experience domestic violence. BB, a transgender informant, faced severe rejection from one of their family members, their sibling, who resorted to violence by throwing a pipe at their head. According to BB's account, this resulted in a severe and lasting injury. "The most severe one was from my sibling; they threw a pipe at me until I bled. They took all my clothes out of the wardrobe and kicked me out of the house." The existence of waria can bring shame upon the family.

Similarly, the general public's perspective on waria in the city of Pematangsiantar, based on the author's observation, is highly diverse and likely to evolve over time. Symbols of rejection given by the public to waria also vary, one of which is the use of derogatory terms, naming, or labeling of waria. The level of rejection or acceptance towards waria is generally influenced by the public's limited understanding of waria, often regarding them negatively. Additionally, the public's response to waria is influenced by their social interactions and experiences with waria individuals. If the way they dress, speak, and interact is positive, the public's perception of waria may be favorable. However, if the interactions yield negative results, the public's view towards waria becomes even more harsh, as waria already face rejection in their families and society. However, the forms of rejection vary, some are subtle while others are severe, even reaching the point of violence.

It all stems from the binary view of gender that assumes there are only two distinct categories: male and female. This perspective narrows down the diversity of gender identities and disregards the variations and complexities that exist between them. The binary gender view also imposes strict roles and norms on each category, emphasizing heterosexuality as the only valid form of sexual orientation. This view fails to consider that gender identities can extend beyond the binary framework and that sexual orientation is not limited to heterosexuality. Consequently, individuals who do not fit within the expectations and norms of binary gender face discrimination, stigma, and pressure to conform to the standards set by society. If one has a penis, they are expected to adopt male attributes and be attracted to women, while if one has a vagina, they are expected to adopt female attributes and be attracted to men. Sex becomes a kind of seed, while gender and desire are the tree, its trunk, and leaves that grow from it. This is what is meant by a "stable point of reference," which reinforces or enforces the ideal standards of masculinity or femininity. It is a concept that creates differentiation in roles, behaviors, mentalities, characteristics, and emotions based on one's sex in social life. Members of society define and determine their own actions and the actions of others by referring to and quoting the norms of knowledge that form part of the heterosexual matrix. Through these value standards, judgment, stigma, and stereotypes against individuals or groups outside of it become possible. The gender division based on a "stable point of reference" creates normative heterosexuality, reinforcing the stigmatization of waria by questioning their gender (that they are not true men or women).

Judith Butler, in her theory (Queer), in the context of equality and justice for gender, introduced a more complex and inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. In works such as "Gender Trouble" and "Bodies That Matter," Butler criticizes traditional views of gender that consider it as something fixed and unchangeable. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent identity but rather a continuous performativity generated and reproduced through social interactions. She develops Foucault's perspective by referencing his works, particularly in his writing titled "The History of Sexuality," where Foucault explains the close relationship between sexuality and power, wherein sexual norms are formed and used to reinforce social and political power, serving as control over knowledge and discourse. Butler also highlights how social power influences gender identity and how gender norms are formed and used to maintain power structures. This results in non-heterosexual orientations being regarded as shameful and disgraceful deviations from the body, soul, and self. Butler introduces the concept of queer as a gender spectrum consisting of numerous variations.

Picture 1. Transgender at night in Pematangsiantar

Stereotypes and prejudices make it difficult for "waria" to have a bargaining position in social life. The implications include a direct impact on limited job opportunities and access to the economy, as they are often regarded as unworthy and useless individuals. Consequently, it becomes challenging for them to obtain adequate access and positions in social and economic life. There are several factors that influence society's attitudes towards transgender "waria". Some communities hold conservative and rigid views on gender and sexuality. Some communities have very conservative religious views and consider waria as being contrary to accepted religious teachings. This is in line with data obtained from ES, a local informant, who stated: "Waria go against God's creation as men. As a nation, we must also remember Pancasila as the foundation of our country, where religious values should be upheld." The informant perceives waria as a threat to the security and morality of society. Ironically, the same society that rejects waria often enjoys their performances as entertainment. This is reflected in ES's account, stating: "During the August 17th celebration, they participate in creating competitions, and many people watch. I also watched them at that time." This demonstrates the inconsistency and hypocrisy in society's views.

So, why does society still accept waria despite seemingly rejecting them? A logical explanation can be found using Weber's rational action, where every individual's action has a purpose. According to Weber, as cited by Soelaeman (2008), the basic type of social action is rationality. Instrumental rationality is the highest form of rational action, where conscious consideration and choice are made in relation to the goals of the action and the means used to

achieve it. Each individual has goals they want to achieve through rational actions. Although waria may be disliked, they still form a part of society and have their benefits.

The creativity of waria in various aspects becomes a potential that is continually utilized by society. The instrumental action of society, always seeking specific purposes, can explain society's dependence on waria based on their potential. Factually, the phenomenon of waria in society indicates recognition of their existence and presence culturally, which grants them a place in certain social spaces. However, in everyday life, not all social spaces accommodate the lives of waria.

As experienced by informant BB, who was expelled from their family home, it is evident that the majority of waria in big cities are migrants who distance themselves from their parents because their presence is not accepted by their families (Siburian, 2021). That is why they feel sad and oppressed. As a result, an impression arises that society accepts and utilizes them only within certain limits (such as for entertainment purposes only). This can be seen from what informant BB expressed, "The community's attitude is not rejecting when I participate in activities. If I pay for condolences, they accept it and even welcome it. Likewise, when I host other events as an MC, their response is good."

Max Weber's Concept of Rationality Based on Weber's concept, individuals act based on their experiences, perceptions, and understanding of objects that can stimulate or specific situations. According to Weber, something would not become an action if it does not have a purpose. The science of rationality is understood as individuals being agents who always strive to utilize what they have acquired in productive activities and exchange relationships. They also consider social order as a complex "result" of individual actions. In Weber's view, social order is not solely natural but also a result of rational human action. In this context, Weber believes that individuals act based on rational considerations and their understanding of the situations they face. They use their knowledge and experiences to achieve the goals they desire in productive activities and in their social relationships. Based on observations of the attitudes and social acceptance of transgender individuals (waria) in society, it can be divided into two contexts: individual and communal. The individual context depends on the everyday social behavior exhibited by a transgender individual, independent of their community. This is where the importance of social adaptation by individuals and the creative potential of each transgender individual lies, which can be utilized by society, allowing them

to find a place in certain social spaces and ultimately transform their self-image. This aligns with the concept of acceptability as a social construction that is dialectically built between transgender individuals and their social environment. Dialectics occur because everyday life has both objective and subjective dimensions. Humans are creators of objective social reality through the process of externalization, and as mentioned by Berger and Luckman in Koeswinarno (in Novita, A. 2021), objective reality influences humans through the process of internalization. Therefore, society is seen as a product of human beings, and human beings are products of society. In the second context, transgender individuals are always negatively valued in the general construction, reflecting the dominant treatment they receive. This is where transgender individuals are consistently viewed in a negative light. Society tends to attach stigmatizing symbols, labels, or names that reflect the rejection of transgender individuals, considering them as deviating from social norms. In this context, the struggle of transgender individuals in building social relationships must continue to be done as best as possible because there are still many members of society who cannot fully accept them. The reasons for this are highly varied and closely related to cultural and religious backgrounds, as well as individuals' perspectives on transgender individuals

This research was conducted in the city of Pematangsiantar, which is assumed to have a relatively good level of tolerance towards ethnic, racial, and religious diversity (urban melting pot), based on data from the Indonesian Legal Aid and Human Rights Association (PBHI) and the Tolerant City Index (IKT) 2020, which ranked Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra, among the top 10 tolerant cities from 2015 to 2018. As mentioned earlier, despite the tolerance and diversity in the composition of Pematangsiantar's society, the presence of religious tolerance does not automatically eliminate issues of discrimination entirely, particularly concerning gender in all its manifestations. Even though a society may be considered tolerant in terms of religious freedom, there may still be inequalities and discrimination rooted in gender factors. Religious tolerance focuses on recognizing and respecting individuals' freedom to practice their own religion without oppression or coercion. However, this does not necessarily mean that all religious beliefs or practices are considered equal or acknowledged in an equitable manner. Gender discrimination issues may persist even in the presence of religious tolerance because views or practices that are not in line with the gender construction may still persist in society, potentially marginalizing marginalized groups, including the third gender such as transgender individuals (waria).

Miles Hewstone and Rupert Brown (Khasan, M. & Sujoko, 2018) proposed categorization as one aspect found in stereotypes, where individuals within a group are often organized based on specific group categories, and this grouping is easily identified through certain characteristics or traits. Furthermore, religion as an active social entity also contributes to the grouping of individuals (social division). In fact, the categorization done by religion can create hierarchical systems such as caste systems (social hierarchy). It is clear that religion is one of the factors that contribute to social grouping and social judgment. The more social divisions and hierarchies created by religion, the greater the chances of prejudice occurring between existing groups. Religion, as a social institution, plays a crucial role in influencing the behavior and thinking of its followers in everyday life (Siburian, 2021). It is evident that the sacred values upheld by religion serve as the orientation for constructing legal systems and social concepts within society to address various phenomena. The central position of religion in its sacred form of values impacts the behavior and attitudes of its followers towards transgender individuals (waria). The phenomenon of interpreting sacred texts in relation to rigid gender concepts always positions the third gender as sinful. The existence of the stereotype of being sinful creates a type of social and spiritual barrier to the lives of transgender individuals. Although we also know that transgender individuals are human beings who socially need to interact with as many people as possible and spiritually need an intimate relationship with God. This stigma is closely related to socio-cultural factors that influence the development of religious doctrines today.

The dichotomy between male and female in various religious beliefs then becomes the status quo. Consequently, transgender individuals tend to be difficult to accept within the perspective of religion. These stereotypes are developed influenced by values and religious texts based on conservative interpretations of religious texts, such as religious texts regarding the events of Sodom mentioned above. For centuries, our society has been bound by the fixed idea that there are only two genders in the world, male and female. Transgender individuals or waria are considered "non-conforming" to God's provisions. Therefore, waria are seen as a gender anomaly or a deviation from God's will in the construction of religion.

Conclusion

Although the city of Pematangsiantar in North Sumatra, Indonesia, is characterized by its diverse and multicultural society. The city is known as an urban melting pot, with various ethnicities and cultures coexisting, including the Toba Batak, Javanese, Simalungun Batak, Chinese, and Malay communities. Despite the city's cultural diversity and values of tolerance and harmony, issues of discrimination, particularly related to the third gender, still persist. Transgender individuals still face many challenges in Pematangsiantar. Discrimination and stigma persist, even though they live in an environment that claims to be inclusive in terms of religion and cultural diversity. Therefore, the acceptance of transgender individuals cannot always be equated with tolerance and inclusivity towards religious and ethnic diversity. The social acceptance of transgender individuals in society can be divided into two contexts: individual and communal. The individual context depends on the everyday social behavior exhibited by a transgender individual, independent of their community. This is where the importance of social adaptation by individuals and the creative potential of each transgender individual lies, which can be a valuable asset in changing their image in society. In the second context, transgender individuals are always negatively valued in the general construction, reflecting the dominant treatment they receive. This is where transgender individuals are consistently viewed in a negative light. Society tends to attach stigmatizing symbols, names, or labels that reflect the rejection of transgender individuals, considering them as deviating from social norms.

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