

Ungendering Gendered Identities? Transgenderism in Malaysia

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ABSTRAK

Salah satu kelemahan teori-teori kajian gender adalah perhatian yang terhad tentang fenomena silang gender. Perdebatan berkenaan dengan jantina dan gender seringkali berkisar sekitar isu-isu biologi dan/atau konstruksi identiti secara sosial untuk menerangkan perbezaan di antara lelaki dan wanita; manakala, isu transgenderisme tidak diberi perhatian langsung. Makalah ini ingin menerokai fenomena transgenderisme di Malaysia dengan mengkaji tentang transgenderis lelaki-kepada-wanita, yang lebih dikenali sebagai mak nyah. Beberapa soalan dipapar dan dibincangkan di sini, iaitu: apakah tingkat persilangan gender? Apakah proses dan perubahan sosial semasa transformasi tersebut? Sejauh manakah transformasi itu mempengaruhi dan dipengaruhi aspek sosial yang berbeza? Sehubungan ini, beberapa institusi sosial utama telah diselidiki, seperti agama, keluarga, pendidikan tinggi, dan kumpulan rakan sebaya. Temubual mendalam dan pengalaman hidup para transgenderis digunakan di sini untuk menunjukkan persepsi dan pengalaman peribadi dalam pembentukan identiti dan silang gender. Pengalaman tersebut juga memaparkan strategi adaptasi, pengasingan atau pertukaran yang dialami oleh para transgenderis sebagai reaksi terhadap stigma dan jangkaan masyarakat.

ABSTRACT

One of the limitations of gender theories is the lack of emphasis on the phenomenon of gender crossing. While debates on sex and gender surrounding issues of biological and/or social constructions of identity/ies have intended to explain the differences between men and women; transgenderism is highly under-emphasised, if not ignored. This paper intends to explore the phenomenon of transgenderism in Malaysia by looking at male-to-female transgenderists, popularly known as mak nyah. A few questions are posed and examined, they are: what are the stages of gender crossing? What are the processes and social changes incurred during the transformation? To what extent such transformations affect and are affected by various social aspects? In relation to this, a few essential social institutions are investigated, such as religion, family, tertiary education, peer group, etc. In depth interviews and life stories of transgenderists are utilized to reveal personal perceptions and

experiences of gender-crossing and identity reconstruction. These stories also show the strategies of adaptation, seclusion or conversion adopted by transgenderists in reaction to mainstream's stigmatisation and expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most common thing we do on a daily basis, whether we realise it or not, is to identify gender and/or to make gender related statements. We perform gender roles, display gender identities and possess general expectations of ourselves and others, largely based on our understanding and perception of gender and sex.

Dominant discourses of gender and sex delineate the bipolar system of men and women. These essentially Western discourses position gender (men and women) in dichotomous categories closely connected to sex i.e. male or female. In fact, many societies in general, expect men or women to perform their (masculine or feminine) roles and to behave in line with their sex assigned at birth. Social interactions are also expected to conform to established norms and values that are in accordance with salient gender statuses.

However, there are people who transcend these gender constraints. Their identities can be fluid, ambiguous and in contrary to their biological sex. They are generally called transgenderists. Set outside the bipolar gender, this group of people are apparently non-gender. Hence, the inquiry and suspicion of their identity: are they gendered according to their sex at birth, but they appear and behave like the opposite sex? Or are they ungendered due to the incongruity with conventional gender/sex dualism? How do they fit in to the gender divide? However, transgenderism is by no means a new social or medical phenomenon (Ekins and Kind (eds) 1996; Herdt (ed) 1996; Murray and Roscoe 1997) The low level of understanding, ignorance or the 'will not to know' [Murray 1997] of transgenderism in society is perhaps the root of public anxiety or stigmatisation towards transgenderists.

This paper focuses on a particular group of transgenderists in Malaysia, which is popularly known in the Malay term, *mak nyah*. *Mak nyahs*, as a group of male-to-females, face social pressures and resentment, mainly as a result of society's homophobic expectations and the lack of understanding about transgenderism. Transgenderists are also stereotypically marked by society as 'abnormal' or 'deviants' based on the hegemonic discourses and knowledge of the binary system of gender and sex. This paper does not intend to investigate the etiology of transgenderism in Malaysia, or to question *mak nyahs'* position in society based on moral terms. Its main aim is to explore the phenomenon of transgenderism on a conceptual level. I am content that *mak nyahism* is an added dimension to the theorisation and existing perspectives of gender and sex identity, and sexuality.

This added dimension also challenges the prevalent dichotomous divisions of gender and sex. It further explains the extent such perspectives have dominated our lives. Nonetheless, owing to our established systems of socialisation, education (secular and religious) and expectations of gender/sex pertaining to social roles, sexuality, behaviours and responsibilities; gender dichotomy is ironically observed by many a transgenderist.

This paper also examines the so-called 'third' gender. Existing paradigms of the 'third' gender have given rise to various concepts and metaphors; not least, the rhetoric of deviant gender identities and sexual preferences in transgenderism (Murray & Roscoe 1997; Tewksbury & Gagne 1996). The spectrum of gender is adopted to illuminate the complexity and diversity of femininities and masculinities. These are presented in Tables 1 and 2 that illustrate the phenomenon of transgenderism, and some characteristics of a few ideal types of transgenderists. With this as the backdrop, it becomes apparent that *mak nyahism* is distinguishably a Malaysian concept; however transgenderism, as denoted by the concept, is across culture and society. Hence, *mak nyah* is both a complicated concept which represents an ungendered entity, as well as a group of transgenderists who possess dubious identity and sexuality, shared by other transgenderists in the world.

Following this, two excerpts of transgenderists' experiences are utilised to delineate the complexity of the intersection of gender, sex and sexuality. In addition, these stories reveal the effects of conventional expectations held by social institutions on *mak nyahs*, and the strategies devised by *mak nyahs* to construct, negotiate and display their identities and aspirations. Closely knitted with their negotiation are the constant xenophobic (as the other within) opinions and the questioning of their masculinity held by various social institutions.

The importance of transgenderists' self-perception is highlighted by this paper as an essential factor in the process of identity re- or de-construction. It is however, not difficult to spot throughout the stories that the pressure of dualistic gender and sex is perpetuated in the process. This contributes to transgenderists' apparent dilemmas: whether to follow their 'instinct' (*naluri*) or submit to social expectation. Further to these contradictions, the State plays a crucial role to curtail transgenderism. Despite all these, *mak nyahism* provides an intriguing aspect to and enriches the studies of gender, sex and sexualities.

GENDER AND SEX DICHOTOMIES

Social scientists such as Ortner, Rosaldo and Lamphere in the 1970s have theorised and studied gender in relation to nature and culture; private and public spaces; or the gendered division of labour (see Lee 2000). In such context, it is explained that man's and woman's roles, identities, sexualities, expected behaviours and characteristics are mapped out based on their (obviously differentiated) gender/

sex. The asymmetrical and dialectic positions of men and women are also pervasive in these perspectives. They are grounded on two disparate gender and sex categories, i.e. man and woman, male and female; and their performance of gender/sex roles and identities reflects femininity and masculinity. Based on these exclusive divisions, feminist theories in different stages of development have addressed inequalities, differences and rights between the two gender/sex. A more recent issue is the exploration of women's dissimilar lived experiences and roles in different societies (Rhode 1990; Ng 1994; Wazir 1995). Hence, indicating the diverse characteristics of femininity.

While the terms gender and sex are frequently used interchangeably as two categories of human beings; it is also not uncommon to find that gender as a system is also often overlooked or taken for granted in social analysis. The terms and system are accepted as pertinent or neglected in social arrangements, interactions and division. However, apart from the concentration of gender studies on female or women; majority of these studies are to show the subordination and unjust treatments against women. Masculinity is always dominant and as the inherent core of reference in gender and women studies. Nevertheless, we forgot that masculinity is not a quality solely dominated by men or by all men. Likewise, feminine behaviours are not found in women only or in all women.

Gender is a concept used to differentiate man and woman in the sense of their socially constructed and learnt roles and functions, their physical appearances and social identities. For example, a man should possess or perform the roles as a father or a husband; he is strong and dominant in the public sphere such as politics and economic productivity. Whereas, women are: mothers, wives, domestic workers; petite, soft spoken, wear *baju kurung* or *tudung*; and have nimble fingers. Since gender roles and characteristics are subsumed in social interactions and expectations, men and women are presumed to behave and act according to what was expected of their gender.

In close connection to this, gender behaviours and identities are coded by one's sex assigned at birth. Sex is the term refers to the biological construction of a female or male. It is usually denominated by male and female genitals and reproductive organs such as the womb, testes, breasts, etc. Other factors are like hormones, genetics, Adam's Apple, amount of body hair, voice and shapes of the body. Men and women are socialised and treated by others in accordance to their gender display and sex identities. In addition, male and female perform gender roles congruent to their social roles, sex and societal expectations.

Such divisions are so enmeshed in society and history that norms, values, and moral sanctions are well established to regulate gender performances and presentations. No doubt, sexuality and sexual behaviours are crucial elements in these performances. Females and males are to profess femininity or masculinity respectively; and sexual practices and preferences are imperatively heterosexual. Thus, men who see themselves male and women as female are assumed to be sexually attracted to each other. This is also a pivotal cause for homophobia—a

sentiment of fear or rejection of same sex intercourse, popularly known as homosexual.

The institutionalisation of sexuality and gender contextualised by sex, constrains the possibilities to reinterpret and reconstruct or de-construct prevalent (conventional) gender identities as well as sexual practices and preferences. Additionally, when this social premise is challenged, it is seen as an anomaly or deviance, hence xenophobic judgements and resentment. Pertaining to this, Butler (1993) explains that:

hegemonic discourses make only certain behaviors, appearances, and bodily configurations culturally intelligible. Thus, those who fall outside the hegemonic discourse are seen by others as abnormal, perverse, or sick (cited in Gagne and Tewksbury 1999).

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF TRANSGENDERISM

Mainstream intellectual perspectives of identity construction frequently refer to Western theorisation and conceptualisation of identity based on race, ethnic, and/or gender. The identification of gender identity/ies is in turn, correlated with biological sex at birth. In addition, identity politics entail historical, political economic, cultural and personal experiences and development. The politics of identity/ies becomes more complicated in a multi-ethnic environment amidst diverse global influences, such as the effects of colonialism and capitalism. Malaysia provides such a location. Hence, this section discusses the limitation of the binary system of gender/sex and its implication on the identity formation of *mak nyahs* in Malaysia. Such formation comprises the intersection of gender, sex and sexuality.

As mentioned earlier, society assumes its members to behave and perform gender congruent with the sex at birth. Anyone who bends or blend genders is seen as deviating from 'normal' gender and social behaviours. However, there are individuals who transcend the gender and sex dichotomies. They perform genders that differ from the anatomy at birth. In other words, they envisage and act like the opposite sex. They inexorably challenge the dominant perceptions and social attributes of male and female, as well as heterosexuality.

In this case, the intersection of gender, sex and sexuality is not rigid. Instead, it is more often highly diversified. In addition to this, self-perception is equally important in the social construction of gender identity. The way an individual defines his or her gender is correlated with the way he or she does gender. If the performance of a gender is successfully achieved, he or she will be expected to observe the set of social sanctions and roles pertinent to the relevant gender identity. Therefore, when 'Tootsie' had successfully disguised himself as a woman, he was accepted as a person who wears dresses, high heels, and performs the roles of, and was treated as, a woman. In other words, gender/sex identity and ascribed roles are predominantly determined by gender display

or performances. However, transgenderism presents a more complicated situation than a pretend-role, like Tootsie, created in the movie.

The performances that transgress the binary divides are delineated in a transgender spectrum. This spectrum reflects the incongruity of (conventional intersection of) gender, sex and sexuality; it shows diversified characteristics within the continuum of femininities and masculinities (Table 1). There are a variety of concepts used to name/label groups of transgenderists, such as male-femaler, gay, dysphoric, transsexual, drag queen, transvestite and so forth. However, hermaphrodites, or *khunsa* in Islamic term, are not to be classified as transgenderists. Transgenderists are people who have either a female or male genitalia, whereas hermaphrodites possess both, whether they are visible or not.

While there is neither accurate 'measurements', nor a scale to quantify levels of femininity or masculinity; there are however, a few denominations used to conceptualise a few ideal types of transgender groups. For example: physical appearances, such as attire, make-up and adornments; social behaviours; sexual preferences and practices; self-confession, as well as biological structure of the human brain, hormones and so forth (see Tewksbury & Gagne 1996; Gagne & Tewksbury 1999; King & Ekins 1999).

In short, the essentialist explanations of gender identity and sexuality are assigned at birth. An individual's gender display depends on the innate feminine or masculine traits in the individual. Hence, a transgenderist's sexual behaviours and gender identity are treated as abnormal because they are different from ordinary female or male. On the contrary, constructionist theories see gender as learned or socially constructed behaviours and identity. Instead of treating gender as innate, constructionists assert "gender construction and behaviours are the result of intersecting historical, cultural and social factors at particular moments in a culture's life" (Buchbinder 1994: 7).

Therefore, in the constructionist's view, gender identities are susceptible to changes in a culture at different times. Homosexuality for example, is thus not seen as abnormal but may be non-normative in a particular culture at certain period of time; but may be acceptable in another time. Buchbinder maintains that, "to say that it is unnatural or immoral or repulsive is to impose a judgement upon it that has, according to this kind of theory, less to do with the reality of homosexuality than with the speaker's assumptions and the kinds of doctrine circulating in the culture" (Buchbinder 1994: 7).

Hence, societal value judgement, xenophobic views and resentment on transgenderism and transgenderists are not on Transgenderism or transgenderists per se. Instead, the resentment based on stereotypical opinion is created by the current cultural understanding, or the lack of such phenomenon diverted from existing social norms at a particular time. The constructionist paradigm offers the answer to why certain cultures are more resilient than others to transgenderism. For example, the *hijras* in India and *Berdache* in 19th century

TABLE 1. The transgender spectrum

Transsexuals	Gender Dysphorics	Cross Dressers	Cross-dressing Prostitutes	Drag Queens	Female Imper- sonators
A----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----B					

Source: Adapted from Tewksbury and Gagne, 1996: 1

North American societies; both transgender groups were (still are) well recognised and accepted in their respective cultures (Nanda 1996 & Roscoe 1996).

Referring to Table 1, this paper explores the meanings of relevant concepts or semiotics of transgender groups. Nevertheless, this is by no means to undermine other concepts used for the same purpose. However, those concepts are not mentioned here.

Briefly, as a male transgenderist moves from point A to point B, the intensity or motivation to resolve issues/confusion pertaining to gender identity decreases, or vice versa. For example, when a biologically defined man, who initially felt and behaved like a cross dresser, moves on to the level of a transsexual the intensity of his desire to be a female has increased; thus, a decrease in masculine characteristics. At the same time, the complexity of gender and sexuality also intensify. The process of moving along the spectrum is influenced by four fundamental elements: motivation, investment, audience and frequency. These elements are explained in detail by Tewksbury and Gagne (1996), they are however, beyond the scope of this paper.

DIVERSED TRANSGENDERISM: MAK NYAHISM IN MALAYSIA

Definitions and categorisation of transgender groups are indicative of the ambiguous and complicated intersection of sex, gender and sexuality. As noted earlier in this paper, these elements are not exclusive. Therefore, transgenderists are not homogenous and their expression and performance (of gender and sexuality) may not be static. This is because many of them may move back and forth along the gender spectrum, or gradually shift from one category to another. There are also individuals who ponder between two categories or possess attributes of two different groups; or they are cross-dressers only on particular occasions but ‘normal’ men for most of the time.

Table 2 presents some specific characteristics of a few ideal types of transgender groups. They are briefly discussed as follow:

TABLE 2. Transgender characteristics

Characteristics	Categories					
	Pre-operative Dysphorics	Gender Transsexuals	Cross Dressers	Cross-dressing Prostitutes	Drag Queens	Female Impersonaters
Biological sex	Male genital—may be other; ambiguous	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Sex identity	Female	Vacillates, confused	Male	Male	Male	Male
Socially ascribed	Female/ feminine	Sex- unknown/ gender, unconvincing	Male/ Masculine in private; unknown/ feminine in public	Male/ masculine not in costume; female/ feminine in costume	Male/ mixed	Male/ masculine not in costume; female/ feminine in costume
Gender identity	Feminine	Vacillates	Masculine	Masculine	Masculine	Masculine
Sexuality (biological)	Homosexual	Confused/ vacillates	Heterosexual	Prostitute's perceptions homosexual; client's perception heterosexual	Homosexual	Predominantly homosexual
Sexual identity	Heterosexual	Confused/ Vacillates	Heterosexual	(Initially) Heterosexual	Homosexual or Bisexual	Predominantly homosexual

1. *Transsexualism* This is the most common form of transgenderism. A transsexual identifies him/herself as the opposite gender incongruent to the biological anatomy. For instance, a biological man (transsexual woman) would appear, behave and play the roles of a woman, and his preference for a woman is a lifelong desire. Transsexuals are sub-divided into pre- or post-operative transsexuals. The intention of surgically reassigning one's sex is usually a result of social pressure and rejection of non-conformer, grounded on the basis of binary sex. It may also be caused by the transsexuals' hatred of their anatomies.

Beside sex, transsexuals change their gender identity as well. They live as the opposite sex and gender. In order to be accepted by the society and its subsequently ascription of roles, transsexuals have to conform to prevalent bipolar gender. Due to the fact that transsexuals see themselves as the opposite sex, their sexual preference and partners are essentially the opposite of the adopted gender identity. Hence, transsexuals see themselves as heterosexual. For instance, a transsexual woman (whether pre- or post-operative) would be sexually attracted to men. The transsexual performs the role of a woman, hence defines sexual encounters with men as heterosexual, despite the same genitalia engagement.

2. *Gender Dysphoric* Gender dysphoric is close to transsexualism but both categories are apparently differentiated. Dysphorics recognise the inconsistency of their sex and gender identities. They may possess the male anatomy but portray female identities. However, their female presentation is weak due to the uncertainty of their biological sex. A dysphoric may persist in the current state; or maintain coherence among biological sex, sex identity and gender identity; or matches the sex and gender identities, despite incongruity with biological sex. Due to their poor presentation of feminine characteristics, dysphorics are socially defined as male. They are therefore generally seen as homosexuals or bisexuals. However, their sexual interactions may be homo- or heterosexual.

3. *Cross Dressers or Transvestites* Both cross-dressing and transvestism refer to biological male who dress and behave like female. The fetishism may be for erotic reasons as well as gender presentation. In most cases, transvestites are masculine in nature and are recognised as male, but they strive for feminine displays. Majority of transvestites are heterosexuals. However, due to their public female presentations and inherent eroticism in cross-dressing, they have high potentials in homosexual commitments.

4. The other transgenderist groups i.e. cross-dressing prostitute, drag queen and female impersonator are men who perform female roles, although the intensity and motivations may differ. The purpose for cross-dressing prostitution is often understood as for money acquisition, but social effects and personal aspirations are not to be discounted. For example, cross dressers are often

shunned by employers; thus, prostitution appears to be an easy solution for unemployment. Although they are frequently seen as men and homosexuals, their successful female performance may be accepted by their customers as heterosexual. The majority of drag queens are male. Similar to female impersonators, they often cross dress for stage performances or entertainments.

Studies of drag queens and female impersonators are scarce. Tewksbury and Gagne (1996) observe that both groups are exclusively male-to-females. They are biological males and possess congruent gender and sex identity, except when they are in costumes. Their female performances are done deliberately to defy sex and gender dyphomism, and they show a combination of masculinity and femininity. Also, because majority of them are gay, their sexual identity is hence, homosexual.

Mak nyahs, a unique and diverse group of male to female transgenderists in Malaysia presents an intriguing and complex category. Although some researchers and *mak nyahs* identify themselves as transsexuals, nonetheless *mak nyahs* possess more complicated intersections of sex, gender and sexuality. Thus, they represent different groups of transgenderists. *Mak nyah* is an all-inclusive term, which entails the types or groups of male transgenderists mentioned above. A *mak nyah* may be a cross-dresser or transsexual; a drag queen or a transvestite sex-worker; or the combination of two or more of these categories. While their sexual interactions with men are homosexual in practice (particularly for non-transsexuals), their sexual identities may be hetero-, homo- and bisexual.

There is another concept used to address transvestites in Malaysia; that is '*patah*' or literally, bent. In this particular transgender group, there are different levels of cross-dressing or femaling. For instance, a bent male-to-female's sex identity is male but prefers to wear female clothing, make-up and adornments; or behaves in effeminate ways but dresses like a man.

In general, *mak nyahs* refer to biological males who aspire to be females, identify themselves as females, dress in feminine attires and perform female roles. However, many *mak nyahs* dress in ambiguous ways that often reflect their dubious identities or an indecisive mind and body. This is not unusual to many *mak nyahs* who experience dilemmas in the process of identity (re)construction. This ambiguity may be caused by social intolerance or the inherently confused personality. It is also founded on the *mak nyah's* understanding of hegemonic discourses of dualistic gender and sex categories, but at the same time, recognises the incoherence of sex, gender and sexuality in herself. In my own research, *mak nyah* respondents would occasionally voiced their thoughts of reverting or conforming to male sex identity due to social and religious pressure, even though they overtly claim that they are females. It is common to find *mak nyahs* asserting that they are born like that, i.e. effeminate; or that their female instinct is innate. Therefore, they think, act and play like women.

Their sexual identity is similar to transsexuals, i.e. homo- or bisexual. However, they also have cross-sexual identities commonly found in transvestism and dysphoria. No doubt, if the female presentation of a *mak nyah* is successful, her sexual partners will see their sexual interactions as heterosexual. On the other hand, due to the lack of confidence in her sex identity or a poor performance of female roles, she is either seen as homosexual or bisexual. In fact, there are *mak nyahs* who have wives and children, they live as a man and perform male roles.

It is also not a surprise that *mak nyahism* consists, although not exclusively, erotic elements. Some of them are also involved in sex trade, or have been sex workers at some points of their lives. This is partly due to the denial of employment opportunities, and public resentment which drives them to dark (sex trade) lanes. For the same reason, there is limited space of social interactions and activities for *mak nyahs*. Although their gender presentation is essentially of the opposite sex, majority of the *mak nyahs* do not envisage a sex change even though many of them have thought of it (Teh & Khartini 2000; Wan Azmi Ramli 1998; Lee 2001). There are several reasons. The high cost of sex reassignment surgery is pivotal as most *mak nyahs* face limitation in monetary terms. In addition, they recognise the consequent problems due to a high possibility of malpractice (especially for low budget cases), medical complications and various psychological effects. The latter usually involves the inconsistency, within the post-operative *mak nyah*, of pre-operation expectation/imagination and the reality after the sex change. The fundamental expectation of ascribed roles, sex and gender identities or acceptance by society after the sex-change eventually collapsed when all these did not come into reality. Further, despite full sex-change surgeries, post-operative *mak nyahs* may not perform sexual intercourse satisfactorily. Some *mak nyahs* also express their regrets in not being able to get pregnant. Although adoption is a potential choice, it is however, a difficult process as transsexuals are a non-entity in the legislation.

There are stories about post-operative *mak nyahs* who were rejected by their former boyfriends. This is perhaps the eradication of the erotic elements in sexual attraction of *mak nyahs* after sex-change surgeries. In other cases, particularly in sex work, *mak nyahs* may be requested by their customers to perform the role of a man in sexual intercourses. Although, this may be disgusted by some *mak nyahs*, monetary returns may appear to be attractive.

EXPERIENCING TRANSGENDERISM

The following excerpts are narratives of two *mak nyahs*, Lisa (40 years old) and Azlina (21 years old). The names are fabricated for obvious reasons. Both respondents are Malay-Muslims and are experiencing a long process of de- or re-constructing their identities and sexualities. The dilemmas of abiding or not to

existing social and religious values, ways to deal with stereotypical judgments, personal aspiration and self-perception are unveiled throughout these stories.

LISA

Lisa started to recognise the strange experience in his body, sex identity and desire of being a female when he was very small. By the time he was 9, he found himself wearing his mother's clothing and enjoyed playing with girls, and at the same time developed sexual attraction for boys. Lisa started to cross dress occasionally at the age of 15 and started to have sexual encounters with boys. However, there were girls who expressed romantic feelings to Lisa. He used to bring his female clothing to school, and change at some back lanes after school. Even though she feared that her family might find out, she enjoyed cross-dressing. Knowing the fact that her father would have killed her had he come to know that she was cross dressing, she kept her ambiguous identity a secret until a couple of years ago.

Lisa left home to work in Kuala Lumpur when she was around 20 and she had never been home since. She went home dressed and behaved like a female two years ago. Her father and the whole neighbourhood welcome her home. She told me that she was very glad.

While in Kuala Lumpur, she revealed that life had been tough for her because it was difficult for her to get a job, and to be what she wants to be. She became a full time transvestite and learnt to sew. She had worked in the industry for a while, but the shops she worked in closed down eventually. Due to constant stigmatisation and rejection of job application, she resorted to sex trade and has been a prostitute for about 6 years. Throughout these she had had at least 3 serious (sexual) long term relationship with men.

She recalled how difficult the journey of transgenering has been since she started to feel good in female attire and roles. In her teenage years, she used to be rejected by some girls and boys who found her neither a boy nor a girl. She sometimes got battered in the street or at school but because her father was strict and her mother passed away when she was 9, she could not refer to anyone at home. In the influence of her *mak nyah* friends, she thought it would be a good idea to leave home and earn a living. Meantime, she has the freedom to cross dress any time she wanted.

However, this was not without constraints. As a Muslim, she realised her responsibility. However, she cannot deny what she claimed to be essentially an innate instinct. She said, "we are born like this. We don't do it for fun!" She continued: "God made me like this, what can I do?". Nonetheless, she asserted that religion was used by the public and the State to condemn and stigmatise transgenderists. Lisa maintained that she has faith in God but the authority and 'religious people' do not give them a chance by trying to understand the nature of transgenerism. Further, without the support and understanding from the

family and the public, many *may nyahs* failed to conform to binary gender system.

Lisa also work in The Pink Triangle Foundation, an NGO in Kuala Lumpur which offers support and shelter for marginalised group including, drug addicts, gays and lesbians, transgenderists, prostitutes and women (rape, domestic violence victims, etc.), as an advisor for its transsexual programme. Lisa reveals that many transgenderists are confused about religious teaching, the self and body. They understand that Islam preaches its believers to be kind and accept what was given by Allah. So they ask, if Allah made them what they are, why are they stigmatised? Why did Allah not make them as ordinary men or women? Apart from these questions, there were *mak nyahs* who have tried to revert to their male identity and roles but failed. There are others who face dilemmas of maintaining their male identity so to be accepted by the religion and family; or to enjoy being a female as they feel and aspire to be; or to retain 'normal' social interactions in public and live their 'abnormal' life in a closet; or enjoy whatever they want now, and will perform male roles when they want to build a family of their own, and so on and so forth.

After many years of living as a *mak nyah* and working with others, Lisa asserted that not all *mak nyahs* intend to undergo sex reassignment. For cross-dressing sex workers in particular and *mak nyahs* in general, they may possess different opinions about the penis, although the opinions are all far from romantic. Some sex workers and entertainers create various ways to hide the penis when they work. Others may not mind it particularly if their customers think the same. In some cases, their customers may request the sex worker to use the penis. However, sex workers see sexual intercourses with their customers as trivial and merely for monetary returns. For those who have long-term romantic sexual partners or boyfriends, they enjoy sexual intercourses as heterosexuals do. Lisa claimed that, ... it doesn't matter who is on top... some women like to be on top as long as they both enjoy it. Apparently, she acknowledged a heterosexual encounter by using suggestive metaphors such as 'women' and 'be on top'. More than often, *mak nyahs* also assert that there are love sentiments involved in such encounters.

Lisa revealed that she aspires to have a family with her current boyfriend but it is impossible to get married officially. Nonetheless, she does not mind maintaining the love affair as it is. She is contemplating to adopt some children in the future.

AZLINA

At the age of five years, Azlina has preferred to mesmerise with female clothes, toys and make-up items. She asserts that all that attitudes came naturally and inherently, she wants to be a woman. Being the youngest in the family, she does not dare to cross dress or behave like a woman while at home. Her older brother,

mother and uncle despise her 'soft' attitudes. Her uncle is the head of a state-level religious department. He often shows his anger and frustration at Azlina and scolded her for her 'deviant' feminine behaviours. Azlina claims that, "there are things difficult to change, like the way we (*mak nyahs*) walk and talk....they come from inside"; and that, "it's my instinct and I can't deny that!". Again, the claim of intuitive nature of feminine qualities is pronounced. Such rhetorics are also traced in other *mak nyahs*' narratives; possibly as a means to solicit support and recognition from others.

Azlina discovered that she started to have desire for men's attention since she was small. When she was 15, she acted implicitly like a female and had worn female clothes outside the house. She had also fantasised to have sexual relations with men and had always been attracted to men instead of women. She explained that her first sexual encounter with a man was intense although there was no sexual intercourse. She was only 13 then. She has since enjoyed intimate sexual relations with a few men whom she called boyfriends. She claimed that she like to be a passive actor in sexual intercourse, for she reckoned a female should be in a heterosexual relationship. Apparently, she dislike the penis and claimed that the contraceptive pills that she is taking help to reduce erection, enhance the 'breasts' and improve the skin.

In terms of religion, Azlina maintained that, ... it is wrong in Islam to be like this. We (men) are not supposed to dress like this, to have desire for men or to behave like a woman but it comes naturally, what can I do?... Perhaps as a way to avoid feeling guilty, she added ... who cares! People like us just want to have fun! For Azlina, fun is equated with shopping, eating out, roaming in town to attract men, and to having boyfriends. However, when she was asked about her responsibility as a Muslim, she admitted that she does not pray on a regular basis, but out of respect and fear of her mother and uncle, she pray like a man at home. Otherwise when she is outside the house (she rents an apartment with friends), she does not do prayers as requested by the religion. She asserted that it is wrong to pray when one is not sure of her/himself in terms of gender and sex. She explained that the Quran states that a man is not supposed to have the intention to be the other gender. This include wearing female attire and adornments.

In reaction to the public negative views and ill treatments against *mak nyahs*, Azlina asserted that, ... they are all hypocrites! Men like *mak nyahs* too. They are not God, they have lots of sin too and they have no rights to condemn us!... She had been scolded and beaten up while in school, and worse still, she was gang raped by seven men in a car. Although she eventually reported to the police, she was told to leave without further action taken by the police. The police told that they could not help her because it was not considered a rape case. Instead, they made fun of her ambiguous disposition. Apart from this unfair encounter, Azlina was once threatened by other *mak nyahs* who suspected that she was soliciting clients at the street they occupied. In fact, she

was there waiting for a friend. Such marginalisation amongst *mak nyahs*, who represent a minority community in society, also justifies the formation of different groupings within the community itself. These groupings may be based on peer, parochial, taste or preference for particular type of fashion, style of living, profession, etc.

Azlina is getting a tertiary degree soon. Although she admires commercial models and actresses in the show business, she realised that she lacks relevant qualities. Knowing the extent of social stigmatisation, she simply hopes to get a job, no matter what it may be, after her graduation. If she fails, she will register for a Masters degree in the university.

CONCLUSION

Mak nyahism is a complicated and interesting phenomenon. It is particularly intriguing especially in a Muslim society where the religion overtly prohibits transgender desire and behaviours. More research is required to further understand *mak nyahism* as well as to curtail societal resentment and stigmatisation. The marginalisation of transgender groups in society has implication in the deprivation of transgenderists' employment opportunity, substantial social interactions with society in general, and the rights of *mak nyahs* to live a normal life. All these are spurred from the ambiguity of their (ungendered) identities as neither a male nor female, and society's reluctance to accept something outside of the social norms.

Mak nyahs are not gays or homosexuals. As a result of their inherently strong feminine desires and demeanours, and in many cases biological build up, they are essentially women; or at least they think they are. In other words, they are gendered, despite their ambiguous and dubious identities. The peculiarity of such ungendered yet gendered disposition propels curious sexual preferences and activities. *Mak nyahs* are therefore, seen by many as not men nor women; and they can be homosexuals, heterosexuals or bisexuals.

Therefore, it is apparent that femininity, masculinity and sexuality are not supposed to be singular terms. Mainstream studies of gender or feminism take for granted that men have similar experiences and lives, and that masculinity is a universal unilateral inclination—an innate quality originated at birth. In fact, women and men alike have different experiences in life that reflect various degrees, intensities or versions of femininities and masculinities (see for example Cheng 1999 & Buchbinder 1994).

Suffice to say, *mak nyahism* or transgenderism is beyond conventional binary gender/sex. From the standpoint of dominant masculinity, gay and male homosexuals are alternative but marginalised versions of masculinity (Cheng 1999). However, I contemplate on the thought that even though *mak nyahism* could be seen as peripheral to hegemonic masculinity (they were indeed born

with the male genitalia); *mak nyahs* are not men; not in their belief, demeanours and aspiration. However, in the eyes of society, they are not women either because their biological anatomy proves so.

Hence, transgenderists or *mak nyahs* are a non-entity because they do not exist in the binary system of gender/sex as society adamantly holds. So, unless we see transgenderists as human beings who are entitled to human rights as anyone does; they remain at the edge of society. In this case, the state plays a crucial role in making transgender groups legitimate. In Malaysia, *mak nyahs* are not recognised in the state legislation, and sodomy is clearly documented as illegal (Penal Code 377A). However, sexual abuse and violation against *mak nyahs* are not penalised. In addition, the politics of religion further curtails and stigmatises *mak nyahism* and render it a social ill (Lee 2001). All these state-level and religious sanctions against transgenderism limit the place and space for *mak nyahs*' to survive and to negotiate their rights and identity.

There is an irony in the transgenderists' strive for survival though. Despite their consistent challenge against the binary system of gender/sex, transgenderists are however, agents for the perpetuation of the same system. Their self-perception and confession as transgenderists are, in a way, to justify their feminine behaviours and sceptical sexuality, but at the same time, defy their biological (male) sex and gender. The fact that transgenderists construct and perform perplexed sex and gender identities so to be (either erroneously or based on post-surgical appearance) accepted as the opposite of their biological anatomy, is ironically abiding to conventional dualistic gender and sex. A *mak nyah's* physical presentation and/or endurance of various dimensions of sex-reassignment are fundamentally conforming to existing social expectation of a female. With this, they could fit in to society, gain society's recognition as women, and ascribe female roles.

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