

LGBT and Their Struggle with COVID-19

A brief ethnographic paper.

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1. Introduction

The treatment given by the Indonesian government towards our LGBTIQ friends. They are treated as people with social problems therefore they have to be helped. They are regarded in the same category as people with disability who need to be rehabilitated in order to “help him to be acceptable” by the whole society.

The COVID-19 situation has made the life our LGBTIQ friends more miserable, especially those who fall under the category of transwoman. Their appearance is usually easy to recognize. Many of them left home very early because of family rejection. Accordingly, many of them do not have high education. They are usually educated at the junior high school level or the most the senior high.

If they are lucky, they would be able to go to university or colleges, and obtained a degree that would enable them to have a good position in the society. Otherwise, many of them ended up working in beauty salons, or working in the catering business. The rest ended up standing on the road to sell their bodies. Some who are a little more affluent were able to buy cell-phones and join the prostitution online.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lifestyle of most Indonesians. And this phenomenon happens also among the LGBTIQ communities, especially the transgender.

In this short paper, I would like to try to describe the life of our LGBTIQ friends, especially the transwomen, and I will show you how they struggled during this period and survived.

This paper is based on some interviews that I conducted through the phone. However, I have known the resource persons for some years, so I know their stories and life some of their life experiences. It helped me to get a fuller picture of their lives.

2. Interviews

a. May

May is a Catholic Papuan transwoman living in Flores. She was a brother in the Catholic church, and was on her track to become a priest. However, she had a very serious struggle with her sexuality.

After a few years of struggling she came out to her abbot. Her coming out was a big surprise for the community. Her abbot tried to persuade her to abandon her plan and urged her to return to "normal"

However, May was determined. She finally left the monastery and moved to Java. She had difficulties in surviving in Flores. In her desperation, she went into prostitution although she knew that it was against her faith. Sometimes she felt very sorry about her life, and several times she was tempted to commit suicide.

One day she met with a researcher from Java who understood the LGBT issue very well. She urged May to get into contact with some Christian religious leaders, and in the end she was convinced that she was fine and should try to accept her condition.

Last year she ran for an election and was elected to become one of the house of representative on her village level. Now, she became a prominent leader of a transwoman community in her area.

When I interviewed her, she said, this time of the year has been a very difficult time. The very dry season has made the crops failed. This has created a very difficult life that has been made even more difficult by the COVID-19 virus.

Most transwomen have to face a very difficult life because most of the population have stopped organizing parties: wedding, birthday, etc. The trans community who depend their life on catering to parties and decorating the people who would go to those parties now do not receive any income anymore.

So what could they do? May and her friends try to organize some help by collecting money from their own savings for those who are less fortunate. Of course, without other help from outside, this help would be difficult to maintain. Other than that, they also try to help the younger transgender to survive. They do not only help them financially but also by giving them counselling, especially on cases when one is trying to commit suicide because of pressures from families and the bad economy situation at present.

b. Reza:

Reza is a Sundanese Christian transman from Bekasi. He shared his story about his effort to help his friends who have lost their jobs. As a transman, Reza finds that his situation is not as bad as many transwomen. His middle name, Reza, sounds manly enough that he can escape scrutiny from other people regarding his sexuality.

Reza told me the story of his Identity Card. He was able to change his sexual status from male to female in his ID card when his mother's status was mistyped.

His mother asked Reza to go to the hamlet's office to change it. She was identified as the head of the family, which is usually a male. At the same time, Reza also said to the officer there that his sexual category was also mistyped, and should be corrected into "male". The officer believed his story and did the "correction". However, he also said that he still has a problem with his birth certificate that said he was born as a girl. It would be difficult when it comes the time for Reza to apply for a passport.

Being a transman, Reza doesn't have much problem with his life. He still can maintain it without people suspecting his status.

Reza said that the trans people are usually involved in video production, being photographers for various events such as wedding, birthday etc. The transwomen are usually involved in doing make up and catering for parties. But with the COVID-19 threats, most of those activities have stopped.

Because of it, Reza tries to collect money together with his trans friends to be donated to their other trans friends who are less fortunate. He has done it once, and was able to collect around Rp 7 million and it was distributed to about 10 trans friends. In Bandung, he said, there are a few other communities who do the same thing, collecting money for their friends.

c. Sisca:

Sisca is an Acehnese Muslim lesbian and she is quite fortunate because her status is not known to most of her friends in her office today. Sisca used to be an activist among her laborer friends. She often got involved in demonstrations against the government. Sisca has left her Muslim faith because she felt uncomfortable of the rejection that she experienced. She once even dated a Christian, but it didn't work out.

However, last October she got an opportunity to work in a government office. "At first I felt ashamed because this is exactly the office that I used to be demonstrating against," she said. But, what can she do? She needs a more permanent job as she is getting older. Sisca is in her 30's right now and feels that she needs to settle down.

Sisca used to work in an organization that advocated for women. Now, working for the government she can get a much better salary. But it is a difficult choice that goes against her consciousness. "But there are people who work for this same office, who would often go out and join the demonstrations anyway," Sisca told me. It is really difficult to choose between your idealism and the pressing economic need in your life.

d. Christina:

Christina is a Chinese Indonesian from Jakarta. She comes from a mixed religion family. Her parents are Buddhist, her two sisters are Muslim because of marriage, her brother is a Protestant, but she herself is a Catholic. She was baptized when she was 19.

Christina, who is about 37 years old, is a graduate from a vocational high school, but she was able to get a job as a Kindergarten teacher. She had been working for about 15 years as the only "male" teacher in a Catholic kindergarten which is located about 4 km. from her home.,

She was discharged from her job as a teacher because many parents were feeling uncomfortable with the fact that a male person is teaching in a kindergarten.

Christina also has an experience of being a Sunday School teacher in her church. However, about two years ago she left the position, after having served for a 2 periods of 4 year term of service. She felt hurt when one Sunday she came to teach and parents started to shout at her, "Oh, si Bencong datang..." (Oh, the Sissy man is coming"). It hurt her very much.

Since that time she left her church and she goes just anywhere "because I can worship God anywhere," Christina told me. Sometimes she attends the Gereja Komunitas Anugerah in central Jakarta, a church that declared itself open to LGBT.

Christina now helps her mother with her business, selling household needs, such as eggs, rice, flour, cooking oil, etc. She gets some money from her mother for doing it. Christina would go to the homes of her mother's

friends in the area, and could make quiet a modest income. "But I can give less to my mother than before," Christina said. "Before I could give about Rp 1.500.000 per month. Now I can only give her Rp. 500.000 per month."

About 17 years ago Christina worked as a prostitute in the famous area of Taman Lawang in Central Jakarta. She did it for about 15 years. But then she felt that it was against her faith as a Catholic person. She also felt that she had been doing wrong because at the same time she was also serving as a Sunday School teacher. "I felt bad because while on Sundays I taught my children not to do bad things, not to commit sin, here I was doing things that went against the teaching of my faith." So Christina quit it and has never practice it anymore.

Christina is generous. She often shares whatever that she has. For example, she would give her lipstick that she has used some of it to her less fortunate trans friend. She confessed that she doesn't use much make up except when she is asked to serve as an MC, etc.

At home she never wears make up because "I don't want to hurt the feelings of my parents."

e. Orchid:

Orchid is a transwoman in her 30's. She hails from Eastern Sumatra and she ran away from her families. Only about 5 years ago she returned to her family and her parents now understood her situation and accepted her.

About three years ago she made a film of her reunion with her mother. It shows her mother acceptance of her, and also her exposure to her friends who worked at Taman Lawang as prostitute. Orchid told her mother there that she used to be like them, too.

During this COVID-19 season, many of her friends go to online prostitution. "I don't know whether they would wear a mask or not during the time they did their job. Ah, of course no..." she said laughing.

Most of her friends did work during day time as caterers and hair dresser, but the COVID-19 threat has made them stop doing those jobs.

She herself is doing some part time job such as holding a cooking demo for her friends. In the end the participants would receive some cooking utensils. This program is sponsored by PKBI, an organization in Jakarta.

Recently Orchid created another film featuring her mother fighting against LGBTIQ ignorance. At the moment she is working for another film. "It cost about 80 million," Orchid said. It's expensive to create a movie because she has to rent the equipment and pay the fee for the editing. "The money comes from my own saving, some contributions from my friends, and also from PKBI."

At the moment, Orchid is thinking what to do next because her contract with PKBI is expiring soon.

3. Analysis:

In this analysis I would like to say that most LGBT persons that I interviewed have had difficult life, due the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them have to struggle in order just to exist.

Some of them can survive better because of their status as a transman and a lesbian. However, those who are transgender have had a more difficult life.

Some of them who have a more stable jobs were luckier. This is also supported by the fact that they are not transwomen. Transmen, for example, could go unnoticed of their gender identity. Some, like Reza, were lucky, because they could even change their identity in their ID.

One thing is interesting is the life of these people in this time of pandemic. They showed a very strong solidarity in their communities. They collected money from their savings and then distributed it to their friends who are less fortunate.

Many of them felt rejected by their faith communities. As a result some of them have left their faiths, e.g. Sisca and Orchid. When I started sending my students to the LGBT communities I could find that most of them had abandoned their faiths. Many of them had become agnostic or atheist. However, since we started our activity on this issue, some of them have returned to their former faith. Some said that they began to read the Bible again. Another said they had started to practice the sholat (daily prayers) and practice their fasting.

Sisca and Orchid are lucky because they have good paying jobs. However, their future is still unknown because once people find out about their sexual orientation, they might be in trouble. Orchid is lucky because the place where she is working now is open to LGBT. But very soon, she

needs to find a new job, since her term is expiring, and that would not be easy, unless she can find an LGBT friendly firm.

Some, like Reza, is quite fortunate to have the opportunity of passing as a male, and was able even to change his Identity Card. However, she is not able to attend conferences abroad, because her birth certificate still mentions her as a girl.

Finally, I would like to say that the struggle of our LGBT friends is still a long way to go. The Indonesian government is still very homophobic. Just recently about 20 military officers, Army, Navy, and the Air Force, were sacked after the government found out that they were gays. The government still treats them as "social problems" that have to be "healed". And religiously, they are considered as sinners who need to repent and be healed. The struggle still has a long way to go.