

RISKS AND CHALLENGES TO TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN VIETNAM AND SUGGESTIONS ON SOCIAL WORK SUPPORTIVE MEASURES

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Abstract: The paper highlights problems faced by transgender people in Vietnam at present. There are a lot of risks involved with their health and psychology as well as challenges involved with their employment and legal procedures. They have been encountering difficulties in living with their desired gender. The transgender people are, therefore, in need of assistance from their family, community and especially from a very new and significant field - social work.

Key words: Transgender, transsexual, homosexual, LGBT, gender identity, social work.

1. Introduction

LGBT is an initialism that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. This term has been known for a few years in Vietnam. Of all the four concepts included in this term, transgender is completely new to people and it has not been understood precisely; ones often confuse it with homosexual. This has made it difficult to use the concept, although the transgender always exists in the entire history.

Transgender is a concept used to show those whose gender identity or gender expression/behavior does not match his/her assigned sex (*Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013*).

The definition of *transgender* in English includes following groups of people:

- Transsexual: This group consists of those who want to have or have already had surgeries to make their genitals match the gender identity in their brain.
- Crossdresser
- Drag queen and Drag king
- Gender nonconforming

In this paper, however, the author roughly uses transgender to show those, who feel clearly that their gender identity is different from their assigned sex, no matter they have already had transgender surgery or not.

In reality, ones usually confuse transgender with homosexual. The concept of transgender is relating to gender identity (i.e. ones identify themselves male or female); whereas the concept of homosexual and bisexual is relating to trends in sexual attraction (i.e. ones are attracted to those of the same gender or opposite gender).

Transgender people are normally divided into two groups: one is MTF, consisting of Male to Female Transgender; the other is FTM, consisting of Female to Male Transgender.

Until now, no survey on transgender people has been conducted in Vietnam yet. It is, therefore, really difficult to figure out the number of transgender people, especially

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when transgender is not limited within those who have had surgery, but it also includes those who clearly feel their gender identity is different from their assigned sex; and they therefore desire transgender surgery, although it may never happen. It is hard to collect data on transgender people, since they often do not express or reveal openly their gender identity due to social discrimination. Some transgender people even identify themselves as homosexual.

According to research findings in the world, the proportion of transgender people ranges from 0.1 to 0.5%. Some scholars carried out research on those, whose desired gender is different from their assigned gender, in many countries in the world. They assume that a more precise proportion should range from 0.2 to 0.3% (ISEE, 2012a). Transgender people in Vietnam, therefore, probably make up at least 0.2% of all population in Vietnam; i.e. the number of transgender people may be around 174,000.

Along with rapid development of the internet and websites, some forums for transgender people, such as thegioithu3.vn and lesking.com.vn, have been set up in Vietnam recently, providing a place for members to make friends, share information and help each other. In addition to the forums, MTF transgender people also join in some clubs of men who have sex with men (MSM) such as the Youth's Dream, the Green Pine, the Blue Belief, and, the We Are Students... Some of MTF transgender people have also established teams that mainly carry out fashion performance such as the Ruby and the Pattaya in Hanoi.

Among the community of LGBT, however, transgender people are the most vulnerable and have to suffer the greatest discrimination. They have been encountering a lot of risks involved with health and psychology as well as challenges involved with employment and legal issues. It is really difficult for them to live with desired gender. The major reason is that people still lack understanding or they still misunderstand about transgender people.

It is, therefore, very necessary to improve social understanding about transgender people so that basic human rights of this group of people can be protected. As members of a scientific field that provides support for difficult, disadvantageous or vulnerable people in society, social workers should perform better their role in enhancing community knowledge, protecting transgender people, advocating them living with the gender identity.

2. Risks and challenges to transgender people in Vietnam

Discrimination, treatment differentiation and violence

Like homosexual people, transgender ones have been facing severe discrimination and many types of treatment differentiation in all social spheres. They are viewed as “mental patients”, “mentally disordered” or “gender-identity disordered ones”.

Acts of discrimination, treatment differentiation and violence against the transgender take place rather commonly. Those acts are even more serious for the homosexual and those who have the same-

gender relationship. Apart from social discrimination due to their same-gender relationship, the homosexual are censured by their family, friends and community, because their expression does not match the roles of their assigned sex as expected by society. Like the homosexual, transgender people are also described with unpleasant words, such as: “ludicrous”, “sickly-looking”, or “imitative”. In many cases, therefore, parents of the homosexual force them to see a psychological doctor or send them to mental hospital in the hope of making the homosexual to live in accordance with their assigned sex.

The most common act of discrimination against transgender people, especially MTF ones, is that they are particularly named with slang words such as pede, effeminate, petrol mixed with lubricant, and epicene etc... Those words imply disdain, making the transgender always feel insulted and ashamed (Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013). Of all FTM transgender people, 12.4% were offended and scolded by parents; 4.1% were battered by parents; and, 4.6% were renounced or driven out of home by parents, since they lacked womanliness. Corresponding figures may be higher for the group of MTF transgender people. Of the two groups of transgender people, the group of MTF ones is viewed as “sickly-looking”, “metamorphosed”, and “monstrous” due to their “obvious” outward appearance and behavior (for instance, make-up, women’s clothes wearing, nail-polishing, and affectedly mannered); accordingly, they are the target

of teasing and taunting. In the meanwhile, the movement of Tomboy-style wearing among girls partly helps to lessen stereotypes faced by FTM transgender people (Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu, 2012). This demonstrates that male chauvinism still remains very popular in Vietnam.

Transgender people also have to suffer from acts of physical violence caused by their family members; for instance, they are battered, because of having long hair or imitating girls. Some transgender people also reveal that they have been hit by the police or militia, since their expressions were different from the assigned sex. Being teased at school and lacking assistance from family, furthermore, some transgender children/people have to quit school or leave home; they consequently encounter insecurities; for MTF ones especially, they have to suffer from violence, sexual abuse, rape and mugging (ISEE, 2012a).

On the other hand, the transgender have to face stereotypes from both male and female homosexual communities, as they often blame transgender people for social discrimination against LGBT generally. A lot of homosexual people argue that transgender people wear differently from their assigned sex (MTFs ape girls’ wearing, for instance), resulting in a common social opinion that male homosexual people like to ape women and like to have transgender surgery; this consequently causes negative impact on the image of male homosexual people. MTF transgender people reveal that male homosexual

ones, who have not yet admitted their sexual attraction, do not want to appear or join activities of transgender people (ISEE, 2012a). In addition, the mass media often confuse the transgender with the homosexual, making the homosexual community keep away from the transgender community. Those transgender people, who join activities of the homosexual community, will be ostracized or their nicknames will be removed, if they express obviously their designed gender.

Thus, the group of transgender people is the most vulnerable and suffers from the most discrimination and treatment differentiation in society. They face a double discrimination; especially, MTF transgender ones have to face a triple discrimination for same gender sex, transgender, and expressions of transition from male to female.

Difficulty in employment

One of the greatest challenges for transgender people, particularly the MTF ones, is involved with employment. On the one hand, very few transgender people can obtain appropriate qualifications to get a job in a state-owned institution or organization, due to discrimination they have to suffer at school. Because of some stereotypes that view transgender people as “sickly-looking”, “metamorphosed”, or “monstrous”, on the other hand, very few employers accept to offer them a job. Many transgender people think it will be better, if they get a job at a foreign-invested businesses or restaurants, as foreigners do not discriminate on the ground of gender so much like Vietnamese. Some transgender people also realize

unfairness between transgender and homosexual people (Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu, 2012). In fact, male homosexual people can hide their gender identity and appear in public; whereas transgender people have no chance to do the same and very few of them can appear in public, except for some showbiz well-known artists at present.

A lot of transgender people reveal that they made every effort to find a job, but people always refused to give them a job, even very low-income generating ones such as dish-washing; moreover, they were sometimes insulted. Some transgender got a temporary job in a food store or a private business, but most of them had to give up the job after a short time due to unfair treatment and discrimination at the workplace. For MTF transgender people, the most common work they do is self-employed such as make-up workers, hairdressers, and performers. Because of discrimination at home, however, they do not receive much support from family to study or improve their occupation. Furthermore, they are discriminated a lot at school, so many of them quit school early, when they cannot stand the pressure as well as teasing and sarcastic comments from friends and teachers. According to a research work conducted by the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) in 2012, 46% of all transgender and homosexual people suffered at least once from discrimination and physical, spiritual, sexual or economic violence at school. Regrettably, teachers did

nothing about it (44%), after they were informed of the acts of discrimination and violence. Sometimes, acts of discrimination and violence were caused by the very teachers or staff of school (18%) (CCIHP, 2012). Accordingly, MTF transgender people have greater difficulties in finding a job, as they lack assistance from their family; they have no educational certificates; and furthermore, they encounter social stereotypes.

In Ho Chi Minh City, a lot of MTF transgender people gather together in small groups that give singing performances at the funeral to earn a living. Yet, they sometimes become victims of violence at the funeral. Some other groups in Hanoi hold musical or fashion shows (usually at cafes). The transgender people, who take part in the fashion show, reveal that they make a lot of investment into the show to indulge their passion, but they always get a loss. Since they love to do it for their own enjoyment and make fun events for community, they persist in holding the shows. Although they apply for permission to hold the shows, they hardly get permission from authorities, because of being transgender people. When they hold a show on their own initiative, they are always afraid of being fined (Pham Quynh Phuong, 2012). In addition to the above-mentioned jobs, to prostitute is also a job that they have to do as the last resort in order to earn a living. The earnings, however, are just enough to buy food and some clothes. They are sometimes sexually abused, since customers think that they can do anything they want,

when they pay money (Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu, 2012).

For the group of FTM transgender, they also encounter certain difficulties, although the difficulties are not as big as those of MTF ones. As revealed by many FTM transgender people, it is the easiest for them to get a job in hotels, tourist service, bars, and restaurant kitchens. For them, it is not too difficult to get a job, since people just think that they are simply the girls who want to wear clothes of Tomboy style. Nevertheless, some of them have been discriminated at the workplace. For they ticked the box of female in the employment application, they are forced to wear a Vietnamese traditional long dress and heels, when they work at a hotel. At that time, they decide to give up the job. In some cases, they are thought to be male, so they are asked to carry heavy things, but in fact they are physically weak like female (Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013).

It is, therefore, visible that transgender people generally meet a serious challenge in getting a job to do. Because of the self-respect relating to their gender identity, they decide that they would rather have no job to do than make the changes.

Risks involved with health

Physical health

Although a lot of medical centers on HIV and sexuality health for gays are found in Vietnam at present, there is no medical center specialized in gender transition. Indeed, a lot of transgender people, especially MTF ones, are thirsty for changing their

biological body, but they lack information. At present, particular hormones are mainly imported illegally from Thailand and China. This results in a serious problem that transgender people do not know how to use the hormones correctly or how much a dosage should be. They just get unwritten information transmitted within the community, but there is no precise information officially provided for them. They usually learn experience by word of mouth from those who used to do it before. As informed, there are two ways to get the hormones, including: taking pills and having injections. With the former, they have to take two pills everyday; whereas with the latter, they have an injection once a month. Many FTM transgender people, however, do not go to a doctor for injections, but they mainly ask someone in the group to do it. Consequently, they are not injected with the hormone once a month, but once every ten or even five days. Though they know that it is very dangerous, even life-threatening, they accept it, since they aspire to live satisfyingly with their gender identity. MTF transgender people also reveal another way used by many of them, which is to take contraceptive tablets to change hormones in body, helping them to have bigger breasts and smaller muscles. For FTM transgender people, they use the testosterone hormone. At the beginning, they get it once a month (costing about 300 thousand VND); if they overdose it, it may cause cancer (*Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu, 2012*).

Thus, lacking information and support from specialized medical service, transgender

will face increased risks involved with health, when they try to have a body appropriate with their gender identity. They will have to suffer from harmful side effects; they obviously will get cancer, death, and a shorter lifespan, if there is no medical service providing them with proper information and support.

Spiritual health

One of the risks involved with health of transgender people is spiritual health. The transgender almost receive no assistance from psychological doctors or medical service. They do not know where to have surgery or how to take hormones correctly. Due to the pressures resulting from social discrimination, family rejection, unemployment as well as their pessimistic view of love, transgender people often feel disheartened and depressive. Many of them decided to ruin themselves physically or commit suicide, after they became isolated by people in family, school, and society. According to data of the research conducted by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (ISEE) on LGBT street children, 21 children feel seriously depressive and lonely; 13 ones used to hurt their body with a knife (ISEE, 2012b). A research on the transgender in 2012 also shows the same finding; many of them had intention of committing suicide; many hurt themselves; and many tried to commit suicide, when their gender identity was not approved by family or when they failed in love (ISEE, 2012a).

For transgender people, it is extremely difficult to get a long-lasting and stable

emotional relationship, as they often tend to love anomalous partners. Most of the partners have a relationship with transgender lovers for the sake of material interests. After a period, however, they will leave the transgender lovers, because they are forced to get married by the family or because of the real sexual desire. Transgender people, consequently, always find it very difficult to have a long-lasting lover. For they have to change lovers so often, they are always haunted by the fear of abandonment and desolation.

Many transgender people have to experience a spiritual crisis, when they make important decisions, for example, whether they should reveal publicly their gender identity (to wear and have hair the same as girls or boys); or, whether they should have surgery. They also may fall in a crisis, when they have stressful quarrels with family members. Those, who have already had surgery, say that they often suffer from depression for several years, after the surgery, because their physical appearance looks like neither a girl nor a boy at that time. They have to take endocrine pills, which will help to maintain a minimum amount of previous genital hormones and create new hormones to make their body adapt to a new life. In addition, the pills help to prevent from osteoporosis and premature aging. Owing to those hormones, transgender people may keep the physical appearance suitable for their new gender (*Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013*).

Under the pressures resulting from discrimination, some transgender become autistic, pessimistic, disheartened, timid, and too reserved.

In conclusion, transgender people encounter a lot of psychological problems that cause damage to their spiritual health, but they do not receive any official assistance from institutions, organizations, consultancies or social workers.

Sexuality health

Transgender people, especially MTF ones, have a high risk of catching sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. FTM ones have fewer problems involved with sexuality health, because they do not have sex with many different partners; whereas, MTF ones face high potential for sexually transmitted diseases.

Of the group of MSM, MTF transgender people are usually mentioned in programs on HIV prevention at present. In reality, they have the highest risk of being infected with HIV, as they often have a lot of sexual partners, including both male and female, and they do not use condoms; their awareness of HIV infection is very little. For those, who earn a living by working as a prostitute, most of them do not use STD preventive measures, when they have oral sex or when they use no condom in order to indulge customers, although they may have heard information about HIV and STDs (*Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013*). For those, who do not work as a prostitute, they also use no preventive measures, when having sex with partners. To indulge their anomalous men, they think that to use no condom in having sex will express their faithfulness and keep the men longer (*Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu, 2012*). This group, consequently, face a

very high risk of being infected with STDs and HIV.

In the meanwhile, they do not go to medical service for examination and treatment, as they are afraid of being inquired or discriminated by doctors. When they catch a gynaecological disease, they buy medicines on their own and take them; or, they just let it go in the hope of getting well soon; they sometimes learn about how to treat it from others in the same group. The disease, therefore, may become more serious, increasing the risk of spreading into community and resulting in unfortunate consequences.

Some legal issues involved with transgender people

As the group of transgender people has not been yet considered a group of special concern, there is neither particular medical system nor legal regulations on their rights found in Vietnam at present. According to the current laws, transgender people are not allowed to change their gender in legal documents. Consequently, they are now encountering a lot of difficulties involved with employment, travel, residence registration and suffering from discrimination/treatment differentiation in family and society as well.

Disapproval of name changing and gender re-identifying

Many MTF transgender people feel their names sound too masculine; whereas, many FTM ones feel shy of using feminine names. In fact, most of transgender people rarely use real names in daily communication, but they usually use nicknames, instead. Especially, the fact that they cannot change

their name in legal documents to be appropriate to their outward appearance causes difficulties for them, when they travel or do identity-related procedures.

According to the Article No.1 of the Decree No.158/2005/ND-CP on 27 December 2005 of the Central Government on residence management and registration, one of changes that can be made involved with residence registration is “to change last names, first names, or middle names that were written in the original certificate of birth and the register of births, but individuals, who want to make the changes, must show legitimate reasons in accordance with the Civil Code”. The *legitimate reasons* mentioned in the articles No.27, 37 and 38 of the Decree include: the same name; easily confusable names; and, re-identification of blood relations or gender.

Re-identification of gender regulated in the Article No.36 of the Civil Code and the Decree No.88/2008/ND-CP on gender re-identification just allows innate handicapped people to have surgery and change gender. As regulated in the Article No.5 of the Decree, the medical identification of gender innate handicap is mainly relating to “genital abnormalities”. This is appropriate for inter-gender people, but it closes the door on the possibility for transgender ones, because the Article No.5, Term No.1 of the Decree regulates clearly that “acts of gender transition are forbidden for those whose gender has been already complete”. The regulation makes it impossible to re-issue documents of gender identification for transgender people, causing a great preoccupation for them.

In accordance with the full process, it is necessary to have a real life test in order to see whether it is really essential to conduct gender-transition surgery beforehand. The test is made and acknowledged by a psychological doctor. Yet, transgender people cannot find a doctor to make and acknowledge the test in Vietnam, when they want to have surgery abroad. On the other hand, they face another difficulty, when they come back Vietnam afterwards. The customs do not accept their documents of identity, when the documents show that they are male, but they are female in appearance. Transgender people, therefore, hope that legal regulations will provide favorable conditions for gender-transition surgery and recognize their gender identity after the surgery. In reality, those who have already had gender-transition surgery cannot change their gender in legal documents, such as: the identity card, the curriculum vitae, and the residence register. Although some of them changed the outward appearance from male to female, even married (by holding a wedding ceremony with a husband), and have been living like a wife since then, they still cannot change their gender in those legal documents. Many transgender people claim that they have encountered a lot of difficulties in purchasing and possessing property or even traveling by air, because the gender in their identity card does not match their outward appearance.

On the 1st of July, 2012, a regulation on bearing gender in the identity card was passed. Before that, there was just information about full name, date of birth, native area,

the address of permanent residence, ethnic, and religion in the identity card. According to the new regulation, however, there must be full names of parents, other names, and gender borne in the identity card. This makes transgender people face a dilemma, as the gender borne in the legal documents are different from their gender expression. They, therefore, would like to have another choice of gender borne in the identity card; instead of male or female, they can have “transgender”.

Rejection of marriage, antecedent rights and property

Transgender people expect their marriage or cohabitation with those of the same gender will be legally recognized so that their relationship can be more stable; antecedent rights and property can be protected for their cohabitation. Some FTM transgender people also share concern about legal regulations on acknowledgement of transgender marriage. Although they do not care much about themselves, they are afraid their children will get disadvantage, if their marriage is not legally recognized (Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu, 2012). Thus, if transgender marriage is not acknowledged by law, antecedent rights and property of transgender people cannot be protected.

There has not been yet the law on prevention of gender-identity based discrimination

It is visible that transgender people face a lot of barriers and difficulties resulting from discrimination and treatment differentiation in society; whereas, there have not been yet any particular laws that protect rights of

transgender people from gender-identity based discrimination; in addition, there is no law on protection of homosexual and transgender people in Vietnam at present. When a transgender person is sexually abused, he/she is not considered as a victim, because there is no law relating to male rape. There is a case that a transgender person broke the law and was arrested. The person already had breast surgery, but male genitals were not cut out. When the person was imprisoned, jail officials did not allow imprisoning the person with women, as they were afraid the person might make the women pregnant (many female criminals wanted to get pregnant to avoid the death sentence). Such examples show that gender-related sensitive aspects of transgender people have not been taken into account in the law (*Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu, 2012*).

Thus, transgender people have a strong desire that their gender identity will be recognized by society. Many of them hope the law will protect them so that they will not be threatened or bullied in family and society, after they reveal publicly the real gender identity.

3. Suggestions on social work intervention and supportive measures

At present, rights of homosexual, bisexual and transgender people have been protected and performed via some programs and organizations, such as: the Information for Social Change (ISC), the Sexual Rights Alliance (SRA), the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (ISEE), the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health

and Population (CCIHP), and the Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender-Family-Women & Adolescents (CSAGA). To get success in clearing up discrimination and treatment differentiation against transgender people, however, it is necessary to have participation of the entire society, in which social work - a new scientific field in Vietnam - plays a significant role. Following are some social work impending and long-term measures that aim at providing support for transgender people.

- To include the social work content on homosexual, bisexual and transgender people in the syllabus of social work training at universities and colleges in Vietnam. By now, the Department of Social Work at Hanoi National University of Education is the only department that started to carry out for the 2012-2013 school year a pilot training program, in which this content was included, replacing the graduation examination with credit-training before. This is a strategic and long-term measure that aims at: equipping students effectively with academic and correct knowledge on LGBT; providing opportunities for students to practice consultancy skills and methods to work with both individuals and focus-groups of transgender people and their families as well.

- To hold training courses for university/college teachers and social workers in community, in order to enhance their knowledge and skills to work with these very new and sensitive objects. This will help to make proper support and intervention, when an act of discrimination or violence against transgender people happens.

- To carry out propagation and education as well as family-visits to make parents understand correctly about their transgender children, sympathize with their feeling, and prevent acts of violence or hurt each other; to give psychological advice to parents and relatives of transgender people, when they fall in a psychological crisis; to discuss with them measures to protect the transgender children as well as their basic and legitimate rights.

- To give psychological advice to the very transgender people. As they suffer from a lot of depression and both physical and spiritual pressure as well as violence, they need social workers, who really understand them and share difficulties, especially when they make their own decisions.

- To provide legal assistance for transgender people, when they are victims of violence, discrimination or when they have difficulty in employment etc...

- To disseminate information and improve awareness at school and community, making people understand correctly about sexual orientations, owing to which discrimination against transgender people will be reduced and cleared up (this can be done via different means of communication such as the radio broadcast, newspapers, television and internet...).

- To mobilize and gather resources to provide support for transgender people. Since transgender people encounter a lot of difficulties and challenges in life, social workers need to gather all resources available from families, communities, governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions to help them overcome the

difficulties as well as to ensure their basic rights.

- To submit policy recommendations relating to transgender people specifically and LGBT generally to ministries, authorities, and policy-makers, aiming at ensuring the rights of transgender people so that they can live with their real gender identity without disguising themselves (for example, they can change their names, gender in legal documents; or they are allowed to adopt children; etc.).

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