

Transgender Persons in Contemporary Vietnam: Marginalisation and Livelihood Challenges

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Abstract: On 24 November 2015, the National Assembly passed the amended Civil Code, which officially legalises sex reassignment surgery (SRS) in Vietnam and introduces the right to legal gender recognition for transgender people who have undergone such surgery (Article 37). It is an important breakthrough, marking the efforts by the movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people for equality. However, transgender persons have still been facing challenges. While both the groups of trans women (or transgender women, or MTF: Male to Female) and trans men (or transgender men, or FTM: Female to Male) encounter social prejudices, the former are more vulnerable, isolated and marginalised in a patriarchal and male-dominated society. This article analyses a number of challenges and barriers faced by transgender persons in general, and the MTF in particular, regarding their livelihoods, and argues that social prejudices have driven transgender persons to the point of desperation in their search for livelihood and made them prone to poverty.

Keywords: Transgender, prejudice, livelihood, poverty.

Introduction

The date of 24 November 2015 marked an important milestone when the National Assembly passed the amended Civil Code which officially legalises sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Though the revised legislation would not take effect before the first day of 2017, the decision was welcomed with great joys by the Vietnamese transgender community. Until not long ago, the term “transgender” was still relatively new, sounding strange, in the Vietnamese society, and transgender persons were not

recognised². Given the legalisation of the right to sex reassignment surgery, transgender persons can now live a life of being true to themselves though their difficulties and challenges remain.

Transgender persons are divided into two groups: *trans women* (MTF: Male to Female) and *trans men* (FTM: Female to Male). Of the two groups, the former encounter more barriers and challenges than the latter. In a patriarchal and male-dominated society, while the FTM are more easily accepted by the society, that considers them girls with the “tomboy”

personality, as long as the women conform to the social norms of getting married, bearing children and “building a family” [17], the boys of femininity in their characters are said to be “ái”, “ẻo lả”, “bệnh hoạn” – derogatory words for “being womanlike”, “weak”, “sick”, and must be “treated” or “cured”. It is for the reason that issues faced by trans women are more severe than those of trans men, especially regarding livelihood.

This article provides a sketch of several issues regarding the current employment conditions of trans women, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, where they more openly express themselves, and analyses the many barriers that they are currently facing in an effort to survive. The article is based on research conducted by us under a project by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment (iSEE) on general issues of transgender persons in 2012 and livelihood of trans women in the end of 2013. The article argues that the stigma and discrimination from family, school and society are barriers against opportunities for education, employment and development of transgender persons. In other words, though the right to sex reassignment surgery was going to be officially legalised on January 2017, transgender persons in general and trans women in particular were still marginalised in a society limited by standards that do not accept differences in gender expression.

A sketch of transgender persons in Vietnam

As compared with trans men, trans women in Vietnam are given more attention to by

researchers. However, they are often grouped together with male homosexuals, the MSM (men having sex with men), though also called “*bóng lộ*” (open gays) to be distinguished from “*bóng kín*” (closet gays) [10, 16, 4, 3, 11, 1, 2].² People who have a gender expression that is different from their biological sexes are often called in a discriminating manner as “*pê-đê*”, a derogatory noun for “gay”, “*ô môi*” – for lesbians, “*bóng lộ*” - open gays, etc. In Hanoi, transgender persons lead a quiet life and are reluctant to express themselves and rarely show up alone in public places. In contrast, Ho Chi Minh City seems to be a more open environment where there are more vibrant community activities and transgender persons have more opportunities to express themselves [14]. For the reason, in the decades after the war, one could easily encounter groups of trans women in travelling singing bands across southern provinces, or, more recently, in performances at funerals, whereas in the North, transgender persons very rarely appear in public, or they hide themselves taking part in religious activities such as “*lên đồng*” (ritual of spirit medium, also translated as “going into a trance”). Owing to reasons of the culture and beliefs, on the one hand, the Vietnamese society was accepting towards transgender persons in the performance of religious rituals, thus providing the transgender persons, who play the role of the medium to communicate to the universe during the ritual, a certain social status. On the other hand, the society still does not accept “deviations” in gender stereotypes [17]. Transgender persons suffer from severe

prejudices and discrimination of the family, school and society [5, 12, 15]. Given the development of the internet in Vietnam, and especially since 2008, when the first LGBT organisation was established (with the full name of “Information Connecting and Sharing”, or “ICS” for short, and now known popularly as “ICS”), the campaign for LGBT rights has been strongly developed. The recent passing by the National Assembly of the article in the revised Civil Code that legalises sex reassignment surgery was a result of such efforts. However, the issue of livelihood for transgender persons remains the big challenge.

Employment of transgender persons

"I asked many employers but never got any offer. Companies, street shops, restaurants, all kinds... I applied in every place that put up a sign requesting an assistant. But none of them accepted me because they needed a male or female person, not a transgender one like me... I wish that decent jobs were available for people of "the third world" like me. At the moment I work as a sex worker because I can't get any other job ... I just hope people will give us homosexuals opportunities for jobs" (Y.K., aged 22, Ho Chi Minh City).

The story of Y.K., a trans woman, shows that desperation has driven her to the last resort of working as a sex worker every night in the park to earn her living day by day. And, she was not the only case.

The lack of jobs that leads to poverty among LGBT people is an existing issue. Three studies by the CARE International in

Vietnam [7, 8, 9] have pointed out that the core reasons of poverty among them are prejudice and discrimination. And, among the LGBT groups, employment is one of the biggest challenges for transgender persons, especially the group of trans women. To gain an understanding of the issue, in the end of 2013, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment (iSEE), sponsored by CARE International, carried out an online survey on trans women. The results show that, of the 233 trans women who responded,³ only 39 (17.49%) had a full-time job. 18.4% of the respondents were still in school and had never worked before. The rest were studying and working at the same time (17%) or did not have a regular job (8.52%). Specifically, 21% had worked before but were then unemployed.

Among those who were working full-time or part-time (89 people), the majority (34.8%) were working at private companies, hotels, restaurants; 15.7% assisted their family businesses; 12.4% had their own businesses; 10% were working in government offices and the rest worked as professional singers, art performers in the community, hair and make-up artists, singers at funerals and festivals, sex workers, etc. As for those who were unable to find employment, of the 123 people who answered this question, 35% said that they were rejected due to their outward expression and 31.7% were turned down because they did not have enough qualifications and experiences. In reality, for many of those refused due to “the lack of qualifications and experiences”, the real reason was that the potential employers would not accept their outward expression.

Our in-depth interviews with 18 trans women also show that, although they all tried hard to find a job, only a few succeeded. Even for those who had found work, 18% were pressured to change their outward expression, nearly 15% were ridiculed or distanced by their managers or colleagues, 16.3% were treated unfairly and 13% were fired because they expressed themselves outwardly as female or were discovered to be a transgender person.

Barriers against Transgender Persons

The survey results show that there seems to be a labyrinth of barriers against transgender persons. Once they have decided to stay true to themselves, whether surgery has been performed or not, transgender persons all make an effort to change both their appearances and behaviours with respect to the “standards”, or expectations of gender stereotypes. Trans women must use birth control pills with estrogens and progesterone while trans men use testosterone, to increase the female or male hormones, to make them more feminine or masculine. Staying true to themselves means that transgender persons must express themselves differently from their biological sexes and hence this is a start of a process filled with difficulties and challenges in the relationship with family, in the search for lovers, in facing social stigma and inequality, in the search for jobs, and in health risks.

The biggest barrier is the stigma from family, school and society, in both the ways they are called and in behaviours towards them. Trans women (MTF) are often

insultingly called “*pê-đê*”, “*ái nam ái nữ*” (hermaphroditic), “*bóng*”, “*đồng cô*”, “*xăng pha nhớt*” (“gasoline mixed with lubricant oil”), “*lại cái*” (“mixed with the feminine” - Vietnamese derogatory equivalents of “gay”) whereas trans men (FTM) are usually called “*ô môi*” (lesbian). In a patriarchal and male-dominated society, trans men - considered girls with “tomboy” personality - do not suffer from stigma and discrimination as much as trans women. For people who decide to dress as women, whether surgery has been done or not, social stigma is the biggest barrier to their search for jobs. Prejudices against transgender persons such as being “perverted”, “sick”, “thieves”... have resulted in very few employers accepting them. While male homosexuals (gays) can hide themselves, participate in office work, appear in public as well as participate in many popular art competitions, trans women have hardly any opportunities, and very few of them can appear in public. Huong Giang Idol, an MTF, can be considered the most successful case recently. She is viewed as a symbol for the efforts by the transgender community to challenge prejudices.

The lack of education/qualifications has become the first barrier in their search for jobs. As trans men (FTM) suffer from less stigma and are themselves tougher and more willing to face challenges, many have graduated from university. Meanwhile, most trans women (MTF) are not able to cope with the pressure of stigma in schools, which leads to a high school drop-out rate at the lower and upper secondary school levels. In-depth interviews also show that very few can

study further to get enough qualifications to apply for jobs in government offices. This is also due to the fact that while gays and lesbians are only aware of their sexual orientation at puberty and can hide it, trans women, from a young age, are unable to hide their gender identity because of their desire for outward expression. Therefore, the stigma and discrimination happen to them right at school and the stigma is more severe and straightforward. Having low self-confidence due to a lack of qualifications and limited education, a trans woman said:

Goodness, I love office jobs the most. I like office jobs. I would like to become a government officer. I also would like to be a teacher. If I am highly educated, when I apply for a job, they would think that their company is in need of a person with such an education and able to do that job. They may need an English translator. They would think that "this girl is gay but she can do English translation, so we can accept her". That's the way it is. Otherwise, if I am not well educated and do not have much expertise or skills, who would accept me, someone so unskilled".

Many trans women believe that even if they pursue higher education and gain qualifications, they would still not be able to find jobs. Consequently, many young trans women are not motivated to finish high school: *"I would only study for a vocation and never study for a higher degree of knowledge again... Even if I finish the 12th grade and get a high school qualification, given my gender, nobody will accept me. Now I just need a vocational qualification, not a learning one".* They do not dare to dream of getting jobs like many

others: *"Apart from jobs such as laundry or working in a bar that I have worked before, I have never dreamt of any better job. Now in my job profile, of course the gender written there is "male" and not "female". I do not dare to apply for jobs in large companies, high positions and high-status jobs for the educated"*.

A trans woman who had finished college but was still unable to get a job said:

Since the law has not acknowledged a different gender, transgender persons do not have opportunities to look for legal professions. No one wants to be a sex worker. But to be honest, other than sex work, they cannot find any other job. And why must we sing at funerals, why not sing at tea rooms or music places, why at funerals. It is because the government does not recognise transgender persons and hence they cannot find any decent way to earn a living. They have to do anything to survive.

Thus, for other people, the higher the education, the more the opportunities available, whereas for transgender persons, things are not that simple. Apart from education, many other factors, such as gender expression and social stigma, can have great impact upon. Hence, even for people who have earned the bachelor's degree, the road ahead of them still seems very misty. Continually experiencing difficulties in looking for jobs, many have been forced to work at socially degrading jobs to earn their living, such as sex work or performing at funerals. These jobs, in turn, bring them further social stigma.

Evidently, a vicious circle seems to surround the lives of many trans women. Due to social stigma, they become poorly educated and lack qualifications. Without

qualifications, they are unable to apply for jobs and hence, to earn a living, they must work at socially degrading jobs such as performing in fairs, singing at funerals, and sex work. As they appear with such jobs, they are subject to further social stigma and are continuously living in poverty. That vicious circle keeps continuing without a way out.

Barriers to employment opportunities for trans women also arise from health problems and their own gender prejudices against themselves. Since trans women either have slender figures compared to men or use hormones or undergo surgery, causing their health to worsen, most of them desire jobs that are light and suitable to their physical conditions. However, when they look for a job, the disparity between the gender specified in their curriculum vitae and their outward expressions cause the recruiters to immediately reject them. Or, the “male” gender in the CV forces them to be able to look for only the heavy manual labour for men. And, if accepted, just after a short period of time, due to poor health, they are unable to cope and quit or get fired.

An acquaintance from the neighbourhood introduced me to a place for a job... She told me to show up there at 6 a.m. and work until 11 a.m. The pay rate was VND 70,000 per day. That sounded like a lot of money. I thought probably they would ask me to wash the dishes, clean the house or something like that. That day, she told me to cut my hair, tie it up higher, and wear a shirt or a male T-shirt. She also said that I should wear trousers, or my complexion would become darker. I thought I would have to sit in the sun so I

agreed. When I went to work, I cut my hair higher and wore male clothes. It turned out they asked me to wear male clothes because they would hire me to work as a motorbike watchman. Oh my god, my body was very weak from taking drugs, I could not carry a motorbike. However, [when working for them for the first day], I carried the bikes for three hours and then asked the lady boss to let me go home, telling her I was too tired. My arms were exhausted. My face turned pale without a trace of blood. I got sick for two days straight”.

Their own gender prejudices against themselves - perception of “femininity” – among trans women are often barriers to the way they approach different jobs. For those who have undergone surgery or publicly expressed their female identity, they want to choose jobs that are considered light, feminine and “female jobs”. Since they themselves feel they must conform to the “standards” of *masculinity - femininity* of the society, trans women find it hard to work at jobs that are considered male ones, such as “*xe ôm*” (taxi motorbike drivers), drivers, masons, or motorbike keepers. Also, they are very concerned with how their appearance will be impacted by the jobs, i.e. jobs requiring standing in the sun, which will harm their skin.

Thus, the issue of employment for trans women is closely related to their gender identity and expression. The more they hide their gender identity, the more job opportunities are available for them as male. The more they express themselves outwardly as female, the fewer the opportunities they have to get jobs. A trans woman who was engaged in our in-depth

interviews in Ho Chi Minh City said: *“In general, in the male looks we can get a job but in the female ones, we will not get any”*. Therefore, once they bravely decide to be true to themselves - “to be female”, it also means they would embark upon a rocky road of finding livelihoods and many fall into poverty. This forces many transgender persons to make a very difficult choice between getting a job or being their true selves. A trans woman in Hanoi said that she would get a sex reassignment surgery and live as a woman completely only if/when there was a company that pledged to give her a job. Otherwise, she would keep her appearances as those of a male person and would only express herself as female when she went out in the evening, so that her life would be easier. However, there are also other consequences when they choose to live “inauthentically”. Due to the desire for job opportunities, many trans women must hide their gender identity, making them easily prone to sadness, depression, restlessness and causing impacts on their mental health.

“Living outside the coverage area”

There have been many social policies addressing disadvantaged or socially vulnerable groups. As a “disadvantaged” group with many existing issues, transgender persons seem to be living “outside the coverage area”. While a number of social groups such as women living with HIV-AIDS, sex workers, drug users, near-poor groups... are considered social groups that are in need of assistance,

transgender persons, with very specific difficulties in terms of economic and social opportunities, have not been paid attention to. They are not entitled to policies of lending funds or of vocational training. They are even not able to make identity cards in line with their true gender due to the difference between their names and outward expression. In the hope to borrow funds to set up a business, many trans women in Ho Chi Minh City tried very hard to seek assistance but always failed:

“I haven’t got an identity card and hence I can’t borrow from a bank. When I asked my parents for help, they sought support from the local authorities so that I could learn hairdoing. They said there was a programme of teaching poor children that I could register for. But, even as a programme designed for teaching poor children, they asked me to pay VND 12 million. Think about it, I didn’t even have VND 200,000, let alone VND 12 million. So I thought I shouldn’t bother them and I should borrow from other sources. However, when people looked at my family conditions and doubted whether I could make it given that I was too young, none of them wanted to lend me any money”.

Living “outside the coverage area”, when transgender persons encounter health problems, they do not know where to go, who to ask and where to seek information for help. Unable to change the name or gender, transgender persons lead unstable lives on the margins of the law. In case of being raped, they are unable to sue the criminal, since the crime of raping is considered to have been constituted only if the victim is female. As an adult, like any other citizen, they need a job to survive.

However, with a CV as a male and the outward expression as that of a female, they are easily rejected whenever applying for jobs. Living outside the coverage area, with none of the capital needed to set up businesses, many trans women must resort to a life “on the margins”, such as sex work and performing at funerals, causing further stigma from the society. As said by some transgender persons, the society does not seem to discriminate against the so-called “beautiful” transgender persons like Cindy Thai Tai or Huong Giang Idol, etc., while holding special prejudice against “ugly” transgender persons - those who express themselves as female but still have many masculine features, especially in their looks. Meanwhile, as the number of successful trans women like those in the showbiz is small, the majority are still facing innumerable difficulties on their journey to live and stay true to who they are.

Conclusion

Though trans women in Vietnam have gained more attention only for some past years now, their revealed lives show that this is a special social group with very specific difficulties with regard to education, mental and physical health and, especially, the livelihood. They have to face various barriers to employment opportunities, including the barriers related to education, health, their own perception and, especially, social stigma from family, school, office and colleagues. Their choice of doing “last resort” jobs like sex work or singing at funerals, on the one hand, reflects the only opportunity for some transgender persons to

live on. On the other hand, it acts as a form of defiance and rebellion against a society filled with stigma. While the right of economic participation can be understood as one where each citizen has equal opportunities in vocational training, job orientation, job search, borrowing funds for businesses... and is not limited by any factors that differentiate them from the surrounding community, it is obvious that the very right among trans women has been infringed.

In terms of capability, trans women can work in many different jobs. As shown by the online survey of this research, their past working experiences show a variety of jobs. However, due to health limitations as well as their perception of *masculinity-femininity*, trans women tend to want “light” jobs. In terms of interest, owing to the desire to express their true gender identity and to be more recognised after years of living in the form of a man, trans women love jobs that allow them to express their appearances, such as singing, modelling, performing on stage or beauty-related jobs like doing make-up or hair...

In fact, the majority of trans women are living in poverty because they have been and still are facing many barriers from family to society and especially those that originate from social stigma. These barriers act as a labyrinth of darkness that makes many of them feel hopeless without a way out. Leading the life confined within their own community, trans women have compassion for and help one another. However, there are also conflicts and competitions right within and among groups of transgender persons. As citizens,

they have the right to hope for equal and non-discriminating job opportunities, and to hope that bright gates shall open so that they can live as capable citizens who are useful to the society. Their public appearances at recent contests in the fields of arts and culture have marked a necessary presence of transgender persons in order for the society to have a fairer recognition of them. All the above have given trans women more hope of a society with less stigma and more equality. However, this obviously depends largely on the law and social policies to be issued and implemented in the upcoming future.

Notes

² There have not been any official data on transgender persons in Vietnam. However, surveys in the world show results that a range from 0.1% to 0.5% of the population are transgender.

³ The online questionnaire was created on *SurveyMonkey.com*, a world-leading website providing data-collecting tools. The banner with the link to the online questionnaire was posted on *Thegioithu3.vn*, the biggest forum of transgender persons in Vietnam with the number of members reaching 135,526 during the period of 3 months (May, June and July of 2013). At the same time, the link also was shared on the Facebook pages of ICS and iSEE joined by many people in the LGBT community, and via emails and messages to the researchers' acquaintances in the community. In some cases, these people continued to forward the link to the friends in their community. Within only 1 month since the questionnaire was uploaded, 223 transgender women (MTF) visited the link to respond to the questionnaire (with an IP filter). Among them, 50% live in Ho Chi Minh City, 10%

in Hanoi and the rest in other provinces, such as Dong Nai, An Giang, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Can Tho, Tay Ninh and Tien Giang...

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