

Life in Between Identity and Profession of Waria in Semarang

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Abstract. Waria are often referred to as marginalised people who are subject to double standards in society and need to be normalised. This is evidenced by the fact that those who work in the entertainment sector are entirely accepted and have many enthusiasts even though in their daily lives they receive unpleasant treatment. The phenomenon of transvestites as an alternative form of entertainment raises new perceptions about the economic dynamics taking place in Semarang. The emergence of waria in the hustle and bustle of the entertainment world creates its own buzz because of the acceptance of various groups of people who use their services. Aided by Pierre Bourdieu's review of Capital Theory, it provides a bright spot in interpreting the position of waria in fulfilling their economic needs. Emerging as a famous entertainment actor certainly requires capital from various aspects. This capital further elaborates on the process of waria exertion in their career, which has its own impact on society's perception. Using the perspective of economic anthropology, it results in a comparative construction of the economic dynamics of waria, which shows significant differences in expressing themselves between their identity and the demands of their profession. The dynamics of waria, supported by many factors, make them engage in entertainment specialisation not only because it is their expertise but also because it is the only place that can accept their existence.

Keywords: Waria, Identity, Profession, Entertainment, Capital.

1 Introduction

The existence of waria in society is an absolute position equal to other society groups. Waria are portrayed as gender non-conforming men who dress and often live as women, thus forming their embodiment and identity through interactions with others. In the social order, waria are constructed as a group of deviant individuals. However, the pattern of community response cannot be generalized because it depends on the attitudes and behaviors presented by the waria from a heteronormative perspective. Heteronormative is an idea that influences the way man and woman, masculine and feminine, are perceived in terms of their binary existence. Society stipulates the development of heteronormative identities based on gender socialization so that most other gender and sexual identities are not given equal status. Heteronormativity is defined as a system that values heterosexuality as the natural and normative sexual orientation, thus devaluing all other expressions of sexuality [1]. Individuals with gender identities and sexual identities that do not conform to the existing heteronormative require self-development. Gender and sexual identities comprise

society-wide ideas about how a person should act, think, look, and feel [2]. This, in turn, creates its own perspective as a heteronormative value.

Waria are constantly immersed in discursive practices that shape how they perceive the wider normative group, what behaviors, identifications, and public appearances are considered appropriate, and what other choices or identifications will be appropriated or rejected as contemptible [3]. In Indonesia, the acceptance of waria in the formal sector does not yet have a safe space for them to express themselves. The only way to express themselves freely is through the informal sector, such as entertainment. In the context of the entertainment industry in Indonesia, there is a conception where calling a group with physical characteristics, such as the way of dressing, with femininity that is carried out then transforms into an impression of peculiarity in heteronormative. In Indonesia many types of entertainment are provided with varied domains so that no direct filter limits one's content, although it is still bound by social norms that must be adhered to. As an object of spectacle in the context of the cultural industry in Indonesia, waria are in an ambivalent territory: on the one hand, waria are considered a product that is not in line with the nation's morals; on the other hand, the contribution of waria in bringing profits to the industry cannot be underestimated [4]. Despite this, some individuals belong to hetero society who try to enter the entertainment world with a waria identity. There is a stigma that labels waria as a whole and disadvantages them. This is evidenced by the view that waria can recover because they see hetero people becoming waria only as a means to make a living.

In Bourdieu's perspective, capital becomes a tool as well as a person's goal to achieve or maintain certain positions. [5]. He considers that when individuals cooperate to achieve a goal, it is with individual interests that they will only be fought for; this supports the way individuals can be dynamic in meeting their needs, which affects what capital the individual carries. According to Bourdieu, capital determines what a person becomes and gets in society. In this case, we discuss about Tamara who is waria that involved in entertainment by bringing capital to support her existence. The interesting point is that Tamara utilizes her feminine side as a form of social capital to become a waria and work to fulfil her needs. Also Tamara's unique personality with captivating performances merged to make her an icon and earn her widespread recognition. Presenting herself as a waria is one way to save herself from unfavorable economic conditions. So with the opportunities and capital Tamara has brought, she has reached financial stability and let her pursue her career as a waria. The existence of a particular condition encourages individuals to utilize whatever they have as capital to survive. Similarly, Tamara will choose her life as a submissive gay if her economic conditions are good, as evidence that Tamara utilizes what she has competitively in making a living.

2 Methods

This research uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive design derived from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and netnography. In-depth interviews were conducted with the main informant, Tamara (forty-six years old), who is a waria living in Semarang. The netnography approach was used to search for additional data online involving the use of social media, TikTok. The data that has been obtained will be analyzed to identify the issues that occur to produce an understanding of the problem being explored. Assisted by other sources of writing in the form of books and related articles to strengthen the content of this paper.

3 Result and Discussion: A Portrait Of Resilience

3.1 Behind The Waria: More Than a Label

Picture 1. A street performer named Tamara



Waria are often defined as men who dress, groom, and act like women [4]. This portrayal is close to how they present themselves to the general public, as with Tamara. Tamara is a waria who has had a career for 20 years. She chose her way of life to become a waria based on the urge for economic fulfillment armed with her feminine side since childhood. She started her career when she failed to start a business as a distributor and then shifted her source of livelihood by becoming a street performer. With her distinctive style, Tamara brought herself to a higher social status until she expanded her wings to become an MC (Master of Ceremony) at certain events. In addition, she also received endorsements on social media, especially Instagram. Of course, this is a breakthrough where she can be dynamic as a waria in fulfilling her needs, where in society itself there is a stigma that is permanently attached to waria.

With her entertaining skills and eccentric make-up, Tamara has become an icon in her own right. Despite this, the family does not accept Tamara's feminine side. This shows a rejection of her internal relationship with her family and her acceptance on the streets. A supportive environment can also be considered as the primary capital for Tamara's continuing her career. On the other hand, there is the phenomenon of suppressed gender expression, but Tamara can survive in the existing competition.

3.2 Unveiling Some Blind Side of Waria From Society

The existence of waria in society is not something that can be avoided. Waria lives in the shadow of the stigma formed in society itself. There are double standards formed due to heteronormativity that participate in the dynamics of waria. Using Bourdieu's capital theory perspective, we can see that Tamara, by utilizing her experience as a street performer, can bring herself to an acceptable point in society with her waria identity.

3.2.1 Navigating Stigma: Transcending Double Standards in Economic Dynamics Through Waria

Goffman in Bourdieu's review defines stigma as a trait that can determine individuals based on the prevailing norms, so it requires identity management in their social interactions [6]. The position of waria in the dynamics of society, especially in Indonesia, is in the realm of negative stigma in society. However, the media still notices and widely publicises their existence. Waria are in an ambivalent position where waria are considered failed products that are not in line with morals. On the other hand, waria are needed in several industrial sectors [4]. This is undoubtedly influenced by the heteronormativity that has been running in society. Heteronormativity is a system that focuses on the value of heterosexual values as a normative orientation or life guide [2]. Heteronormative brought by society considers other gender identities or expressions to be inferior. This statement is evidenced by the stigma attached to waria.

In Indonesia itself, the acceptance of waria in the formal sector has not been able to create a safe space for them to express themselves. The space owned by waria is relatively small and limited to the informal sector, such as the entertainment industry. This view can be seen in TikTok, where waria can work and promote their services well. In the entertainment industry in Indonesia, there is a view that those who have feminine physical characteristics that are not follow hetero norms will be transformed into the impression of oddity [4]. This impression of strangeness encourages the exclusivity of waria in offering their services. The understanding and loopholes that waria have in the entertainment world result from effective bonding through self-expression and public appearance. Behind the space utilized by waria due to the double standards that occur, there is competition between those who declare their gender and sexual expression as waria and hetero individuals who package themselves as waria for economic fulfillment. This encourages a new stigma that considers waria as a profession and not an identity for individuals. This stigma further pushes waria into a compromised position, forcing them to try harder to maintain the opportunity to work.

People who the services offered by waria entertain begin to question the integrity individuals bring behind their frenetic profession. The initial cordial acceptance turns into a view that demands hetero values to be presented.

"*Waria*¹ is a different kind of entertainment. If you can sing with two voices, you can be a boy or a girl, so it's funny. That's why there are a lot of MCs now, like normal singers who are made to look like *waria* (who) wave, but originally they were normal. Because jobs become money, right?" (Tamara, June 1, 2024).

According to Tamara, it shows a condition where the existence of waria is on the threshold between identity and profession. Hetero groups that are involved in the sphere of waria create an ambiguous situation for the community in accepting the existence of waria. Being on the borderline of identity and profession makes it clear that a double standard encourages waria to fulfill society's expectations of them. There is a projection of hetero life behind the self-expression of being waria due to hetero individuals who provide an overview of their lives. In Tamara's dynamic, she experienced several conditions that put her on the threshold of profession and identity. Her life choice to become a waria is not focused on fulfilling her needs, but in her development, she feels more comfortable being a waria. Tamara became an iconic identity even though being a waria in itself is not following heteronormative values. Tamara's journey seems to deny the continuous rejection addressing the existence of waria. In the end, all the challenges and obstacles that exist on the streets are one of the self-formation processes that make her well-accepted in the heteronormative environment.

3.2.2 Empowerment through Entertainment: Creating Safe Spaces for Expression in Non-Formal Sectors

The development of the entertainment industry in Indonesia is snowballing in various media; of course, this has an impact on the dynamics of waria in society. By utilizing the feminine side and other abilities possessed by waria, it forms a separate market and has quite a lot of enthusiasts. Despite the diversity of entertainment options available on social media that often transcends norms and values, waria still face limitations in their professional endeavours due to societal biases. The entertainment industry is the only safe place for waria to express themselves and work freely. Waria utilizes entertainment to offer a type of performance that is unique and different from heteronormative standards, then it becomes a show that is offered as an interesting stage of social discomfort because it contradicts the concept of hegemonic masculinity². This makes it a place for waria to become themselves and fulfil their needs dynamically.

¹ Waria (*wanita-pria*) is a reference for people who were born male, but practice various types of femininity. [3]

² According to Cornell, hegemonic masculinity is the dominant conception of men characterized by strength, powerful and aggressive in heterosexual dynamics. This conception affects the way individuals perceive the position of men expected to meet these masculinity standards. [7]

Waria continues to work to negotiate public opinion to improve the projection of hetero society towards their existence.

“If the track record is good, it's easier to be accepted compared to a waria with a bad track record. For example, when I meet on the street, many people greet me, ask for photos, and paid things for me.” (Tamara, 1 June 2024)

Tamara emphasized that her acceptance was not an instant journey. The process begins with being a street performer who can spread her wings to become a host and place herself on social media. Apart from the image and fame that Tamara already has, she also efficiently utilizes the entertainment industry in which she is engaged. This is proof of how society can pave the way for waria to continue working because of the assumption that indirectly undermines the existence of waria.

3.3 Viewing The Issues Through The Lens of Economics Circumstances

From an economic perspective, the dynamics of waria and entertainment can be further elaborated with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's capital theory. According to Bourdieu, when individuals do business, they are investing the capital they carry either consciously or unconsciously to get a position and capital in society. He argues that the element of human subjectivity as an agent also determines the formation of a social condition. Capital determines the position of an individual in society [8]. However, the third dimension adds a temporal component to life chances, indicating the 'evolution of the volume and composition of time' of capital [9]. Capital is considered to change over time as values and norms continue to evolve.

Bourdieu's conception of capital is divided into four types: social capital, economic capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. Social capital is not material and is carried by individuals either from birth or through individual achievement. In Tamara's case, she gained social capital from her efforts to pioneer her career for approximately twenty years on the streets so that she had fame and an iconic stage name. This brought her to a higher social status. Economic capital refers to the context of materialism in the form of money or assets, and it can get individuals one step ahead of others. Tamara uses her economic capital to support her appearance and pay assistants who help her when she has a job somewhere. Cultural capital refers to the operational skills, values, and norms individuals acquire through their environment. In Tamara's context, she can be accepted in society because she has a value that provides a new perspective on waria in the entertainment industry. The three capitals will then produce a symbolic capital. Symbolic capital takes the form of reputation, an icon, or an individual's value that leads them to the intended social hierarchy. Tamara's symbolic capital takes the form of reputation and how she is accepted in society. According to her story, her fame provided convenience and was recognized by many circles.

Tamara's four capitals provide convenience and an overview of her journey as a waria to where she is today. In the entertainment world, especially for Tamara, many aspects of capital need to be utilized. Using feminine identity as social capital has made her a

successful and competitive street performer. The stigma and dynamics of waria who are in an ambiguous condition do not prevent Tamara from continuing to work until she is accepted in society. Tamara can place herself between identity and profession regardless of the stigma circulating in society.

4 Conclusion

Heteronormative is an idea that influences the way man and woman, masculine and feminine, are viewed in terms of seeing them as a binary existence shaped by the dynamics of society. This results in the emergence of standards that become a reference in social life. In the context of waria's lives, this leads to a mismatch of self-expression with the standards that exist in society. The double standard attached to waria has an impact on the way they live. With the help of Bourdieu's review, Tamara has capital that supports her career for approximately twenty years, making her an entertainment icon in Semarang without being limited by the heteronormative norms that bind her as a waria. Tamara proves that being an excellent waria who does not harm and is not criminal encourages her to be accepted in society.

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