

## The Transmen Community is Still Overshadowed by Phallogocentric Logic in Malaysia



**Alicia Izharuddin** asks why the transmen community in Malaysia is regularly marginalised and continues to be poorly understood even within liberal and activist circles. This article has been published collaboratively by [LSE Equality and Diversity](#) and [LSE Engenderings](#) blog to mark LGBT History Month.

In several scenes from the recent but quickly forgotten Malaysian film, 'Aku Bukan Tomboy' (I'm Not a Tomboy, 2011), masculine women and transmen alike were disparaged as not being 'real' men for lacking a biological penis. The film makes clear that not only are the various means to transition and establish a gender identity wilfully ignored, but the idea of what it means to be a man is reduced to the possession of a penis.

'Aku Bukan Tomboy' is nonetheless a rare Malaysian film that tackles female homosexuality, female masculinity, and transmasculinity, but its atypical accolade is tarnished by its homophobic script. The film joins another recent phallogocentric 'social commentary' film about gay, and transgender characters, '[Anu Dalam Botol](#)' (Penis in a Bottle). The latter film focuses much on the repudiation of the penis by the main character who initially identifies as a woman then returns to a male identity only to be undone by a bottled penis on his wedding day.

Both films offer a homophobic and cis-centric perspective on what being lesbian, gay, and transgender means in Malaysia; both feature the main protagonists' struggle with expressing their gender identity due to the hostile intolerance towards people who do not conform to the exacting heteronormative mores.

Public awareness about masculine women, tomboys, and transmen was raised by the [notorious fatwa in October 2008](#) banning women from adopting masculine dress, behaviour, and forming relationships with other women. The ban was prompted by several cases of young female individuals seen dressing as men and the paranoia surrounding female homosexuality within Malay-Muslim communities. The pejorative term used to describe transmen and masculine women, 'pengkid', became the narrative basis for 'Aku Bukan Tomboy' for an audience who now recognise the term, but have little understanding or exposure to the realities of life as a transman in Malaysia.

This was not the first time Malaysia became gripped by the largely sensationalist media representation of masculine women. In 1996, the story of Rohana and Azizah appeared in the local media, poised to shock the nation: a couple was married by a *kadi* (a religious official) but unknown to the *kadi* and even the bride (Rohana), Azizah identified as a man in the marital proceedings. Although Malaysia does not have a law against female homosexuality, Azizah still had to be punished. The media focused significantly on the 'predatory' character of the masculine Azizah who preyed on the 'innocent' Rohana. Her official crimes were the usage of a counterfeit identification card and male impersonation, an audacious attempt to access male heterosexual privilege.

The Malaysian media's preoccupation with non-normative individuals as sexual predators of unsuspecting women and men, snatching from the heteronormative public their pool of potential partners, is a recurring pattern. Last year, a discussion on a Malay-language women's television programme about the [supposed threat transsexual women posed to cis-gender women](#) came under fire. Transsexual women were believed to be in direct competition with cis-women for the affections of men (and jobs in the beauty industry), a competition that transwomen have no right to be in. The subtext of this recurring allegation is that transpeople cannot be allowed to form loving

relationships with members of society lest they corrupt the vulnerable facade of heterosexuality and cis-gender binary.

Malaysian transmen live in relative seclusion from the public cacophony of phallogocentric debates about the illegality of anal sex, often perceived as the cornerstone of homosexuality in Malaysia. Transsexualism and transgender issues meanwhile are often regarded as issues that concern male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals, trans women, or 'Mak Nyahs'. The voices of transmen however are rarely brought to light and at times treated as afterthought in discussions about LGBT identities.

If one is allowed to generalise, one can say that much of the general public anywhere have little knowledge about and much less exposure to transmasculinity. The most high profile media and cinematic portrayal of a transman was **Hilary Swank's Oscar-winning performance as Brandon Teena**, the ill-fated transman who was murdered because his gender identity threatened the masculinity of his cis-male friends.

In Malaysia, however, there is much confusion about the transmen community over terms, their gender and sexual identity. It would be a fallacy to suggest that the experiences of transmen are just like transwomen, and that the transmen community is monolithic. According to one Malaysian transman, Shamin, the transmen community distinguish themselves from tomboys by binding their breasts and using masculine pronouns and terms of address for each other.

In agreement to some extent with Dennis Altman's thesis of **global queering**, that is that globalisation of gay identities and subcultures emanates almost exclusively from the US and Western Europe, individuals who identify as 'transmen' adopt the term and discourse learned from English-language material on the internet. The global nature of transmasculine identities in Malaysia is also reflected in choice of role models. Those who have paved the way for others to lead a public life as transmen and are sources of life-affirming information for **transitioning** mainly hail from English-speaking countries. But later the internet became instrumental for Malaysian transmen to form communities via social media and chat-based forums and hold up a number of local transmen as role models, creating a full circle that traverses the global-local continuum of LGBT discourse.

As Malaysian LGBT activists approach the federal court to claim the **banning of Seksualiti Merdeka**, a local festival championing gender and sexual diversity, as unconstitutional, a number of questions arise as to what the LGBTs as a community means in Malaysia. LGBT, LGBTIQ (LGBT plus intersex and queer), and the newly formed acronym **QUILT BAG** are discursive shorthands with plenty of class baggage that is yet to be unpacked in Malaysia. Those who identify with the LGBTIQ cause are more likely to be members of the more educated, middle-class elite. For two Malaysian transmen, Shamin and Hayd Hanake, many transmen do not view themselves as part of the LGBT community nor do they identify with what the class-distinct LGBT discourse *connotes*.

In a country where a de facto ban on homosexuality is upheld (and indeed contested) within the illegality of sodomy, sex reassignment surgery is inaccessible (on Islamic grounds for Malaysian Muslims), the official change of name and gender is unrecognised by the state, the initialism 'LGBT' is misunderstood yet demonised, and the open support for gender and sexual diversity is threatened with a brutal crackdown, communities who fall through the cracks of human rights and anti-discrimination activism due to class-based discursive language will continue to be poorly understood, misrepresented, and subject to prejudice and transphobia.

But despite the many challenges faced by non-normative Malaysians and their allies, the increasing spaces for expressing hegemonic subversion such as the internet form a welcoming salve for a society grappling with the heteronormativity that will break at its seams of repression.

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