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**FEMINIST STANDPOINT IN GIVING MEANING TO SYMBOLIC EXPERIENCES IN TRANS-WOMEN DISCRIMINATION**

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**Abstract:**

The construction of gender in the social environment is closely related to external sex. Transwomen and women are symbols representing equality in a society with a patriarchal cultural system. Social construction in a patriarchal society forms gender based on external sex so that women's gender is seen as different from transgender women to provide more profound discrimination against women. The feminist standpoint sees marginalized groups getting a more objective view of the dominating group. Transgender women are placed as strong objectivity to obtain how the social environment views and the discrimination they experience. The feminist movement that struggles for equality has various considerations to build a perspective on the existence of transgender women and women equally. Standpoint is a result of giving meaning to the symbolic reality that shapes each individual's experience, including the symbolic transwomen in the social environment.

**Keywords:** Social Construction, Discrimination, Transwomen, Feminist Standpoint.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The debate about gender and sex is constantly rolling and is a part that never escapes the attention of feminist researchers and activists. In the "encyclopedia of feminism," gender can be interpreted as a group with culturally formed attributes and behaviors that exist in men or women (Humm, 2002). Shulamith Firestone in *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) states that gender distinguishes the structure of every aspect of our life with an undeniable framework. This distinction is how society views men and women. Gender is not the result of social construction but comes from biological differences. Foucault's views relate to the post-structuralism theory that socio-cultural factors are influential in defining bodies with scientific, universal characters, which depend on time and place.

The characteristics of the body of both men and women have different meanings at different cultural levels. It can be seen in several cultural systems in Indonesia, for example, the Minangkabau cultural gender system, which adheres to a matrilineal view, where the body is used as a determinant of gender (Blackwood, 1998; Davies, 2018). Blackwood in *Tombois in West Sumatra: Constructing Masculinity and Erotic Desire* state that in Minangkabau society, gender is believed to come from biological sex and is naturalized as biological. In general, Indonesian people use the basic genitalia as a potential marker played by individuals in reproduction and as a basis for gender possibilities and limitations. For example, women are seen as having the ability to give birth to children. Based on the biological facts that occur in individuals, it is believed that a baby boy will

not become a woman because to become a woman, he must have a woman or be called a woman (female). Vice versa, male individuals (men) will have maleness (male) (Davies, 2018).

Feminists have a view on gender issues, as expressed by Seidman in *The Social Construction of Sexuality* 3rd Edition, that humans are not born male and female. Gender identity is obtained from a long and forced social learning process. Feminist groups also see that gender and sexuality overlap and create significant gaps (Seidman, 2015). The order of heterosexuality expressed by Adrienne Rich in "*Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*" Sign 5 (1980) states that the formation of male and female individuals is a complex social process. Social pressure forms a mandatory heterosexual order based on gender formed by ideology so that heterosexuality is referred to as fairness. So heterosexuality is understood as a rule of the natural order (Seidman, 2015).

Indonesia, dominated by a patriarchal culture in its social system, only accepts gender normatively based on external sex, male and female. The construction built about gender in society positions sex and gender as having no difference. If the role is as a man, then it is a requirement to have penis genitals, a well-built body, short/cropped hair, big and loud voice. Meanwhile, a woman's role requires vaginal genitalia, breasts, mammary glands, grace, a softer voice, and other symbolic forms of being a woman outwardly. So, if there are roles outside of gender that have been determined in a patriarchal society, then this is considered an aberration and one of them is transgender. Transgender in a patriarchal society is not accepted as an actor in their chosen role. It is because it is seen that there is a conflict between the outward sex and the gender roles being carried out. Conflicts that occur are usually based on religious, cultural, and political values.

A transgender person is a person who has a gender identity or gender expression that is different from the sex assigned at birth. Gender dysphoria is the suffering a person feels due to a discrepancy between the external sex and the gender roles carried out in their environment with the perceived gender identity. There are two groups of transgender people, namely transmen (F2M) and transwomen (M2F). The term for a man who is trans-sexual or simply changing gender roles in Indonesia is called waria or transwomen (male to a female). According to Nadia in her book "*Waria: Curse or Nature?*" waria/transwomen have three characteristics, namely, *first*, transsexual identification must have persisted for at least two years and is a symptom of another mental disorder or related to intersex, genetic or chromosomal abnormalities. *Second*, there is a desire to live and be accepted as a woman, accompanied by feelings of embarrassment and incongruity with the body one has. *Third*, there is a desire to receive hormonal therapy and surgery to make the body as similar as possible to that of a woman (Nadia, 2005). The existence of transgender women who are very different from traditional binary society, so transgender people often experience discrimination (Debineva & Paluppesy in Alnoza & Sulistyowati, 2021).

The main problems of transgender women arise from biological, social, and religious aspects. Biologically, not all transgender people experience significant abnormalities. Furthermore, transgender women must face problems in social life. Almost researchers on transgender (transwomen in particular) reveal that in a social environment, transgender women as a marginalized group often get rejection, insults, insulted, exclusion, and discrimination as the most prominent consequences received. Socially, both in the work and educational environment, it is increasingly difficult for transwomen to qualify for fulfillment according to their expectations and rights. The complications and difficulties for trans women in religious life are weighty. The view of society based on religious values positions transgender women as if they have to relate to sin. Rejections against transgender people make it difficult for transgender people to carry out their worship. In addition to this, polemics in matters related to death have become problematic for the community and transgender groups themselves. As revealed by Ida (2010) that transgender is seen

as a disease and must be cured as a result of misperceptions that are motivated by the meaning of the message that is presented incorrectly. Also, the lack of adequate references about transgender broadly, such as how the origins of why being transgender/ transwomen, how is their sexual behavior, what are their views and expectations of themselves as transwomen.

Yogyakarta, a social environment with a patriarchal cultural system, influences the community's perspective on the existence of transwomen. Transgender is symbolically interpreted as a deviation from heteronormative provisions. Non-verbal symbols of physical and sound are seen as a deviation between the outward sex and the gender roles carried out. The social environment, which then forms the position of transwomen as a marginalized group from the agreed gender group, results in transwomen having to face discrimination in all fields, sexual harassment, and violence in society and the family (domestic violence). Representation of discrimination and negative labeling that befalls transwomen perpetrators is generally due to their weakness in dealing with various insults, insults and physical violence. This submissive attitude makes them easy targets for hate and negative stereotypes. The role of transwomen has the same position as women, namely being a marginalized group, experiencing discrimination, violence and harassment due to male power in a patriarchal culture.

Transwomen are marginalized and sub-marginal groups of normative gender role groups in a patriarchal culture. The Yogyakarta Feminist Group uses a feminist point of view to help women as a marginal group that can bring women's experiences to be understood and fought for so that they become heard and accepted. Another thing will be different in their struggle against other marginalized groups, namely transgender women, who need incredible strength in interpreting their experiences and have a background of multiple struggles regarding their representation in the context of their gender roles. Feminist movement groups in a patriarchal cultural system will not find it easy to convey the meanings conveyed by trans women as communicators who have meaningful messages. Based on the description above, the authors chose the study's title, "Feminist Standpoint in Giving Meaning to Symbolic Experiences in Trans-Women Discrimination".

## METHODS

The paradigm used in this study is the feminist paradigm as a rationale. It strengthens the presentation of research results in analyzing the symbolic behavior of transgender groups using the interpretivism paradigm. This research was conducted using a qualitative research method, which will be used in examining and studying the perspectives of the feminist movement group on the existence of the role of transwomen in the circle of social interaction on all the problems that occur over symbolic meanings that are formed from the point of view of transwomen's lives and society because of their construction. Qualitative research is used for a subjective approach to studying social phenomena by emphasizing various research techniques that focus on qualitative analysis, such as personal interviews, participant observation, individual calculations, personal construction, and others (Liliweri, 2018: 415). The approach that the researcher will take in case research that occurs in transgender as a reality that is the same as in women, then based on the case phenomenon, will know how the feminist perspective in the Yogyakarta Feminist Group is based on the Theory of Feminism Viewpoint from Sandra Harding & Julia T. Wood.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The symbolic reality of women and transwomen has the same symbol in physical appearance as a result of society's construction of the female gender. The non-verbal meanings that emerge about the concept of women in social construction are long hair that can be loosed, dressing up, wearing skirts, soft and weak voices, physical bodies with small bone structures, and graceful gestures.

Transwomen also present the same nonverbal symbolic displays as women. However, the outward biological difference is used as a difference and also a rejection of the existence of trans women as women.

The patriarchal cultural system forms differences in gender roles, namely binary gender, where there are only men and women based on external sex. In the social environment in which women's groups have been determined to get a place in their duties and obligations as the second tier after men, this view is based on Islam as the majority religion adhered to by society.

A Transwoman is a figure of female identity in her gender role and was born as a man. The physical change from a male physical form to a female physical form has gone through a long process experienced by trans women. Even though the results of physical changes in expression as women are successful, symbolically, the constructions that are built in symbolic trans women physically still have the basic anatomy of the male body, which is outwardly stronger than women, transwomen when they appear are more conspicuous in expressing themselves as women's gender both in dress, makeup, styling hair, changing voice and having gestures that are different from women outwardly.

Transwomen, as a reality in a patriarchal social environment, are seen as a form of deviation and cannot be included in the part of gender identity defined in the social environment. Transwomen have different symbolic expressions in the eyes of society and still have different meanings from women outwardly. In nonverbal concepts, trans women can be identified clearly. The following are symbols of women and transgender women in society:



Source: Document bbcnews.com & qureta.com

**Figure 1.** Transwomen and women.

Society has not been able to widely accept the existence of transgender people in social life, causing transgender groups to be increasingly marginalized. Transgender people find it difficult to gain recognition, enter the social environment, and access services and public facilities efficiently. This situation continues to shape the stigma of transwomen as a social disease or community waste. Under these conditions, the transgender group to survive in their lives will build exclusive relationships among fellow transgender actors. This relationship is more felt to have strength in living life.

Yogyakarta is one of the cities chosen by trans women to live their lives. Trans women from various cultural backgrounds, occupations, city origins, and activities carried out by trans women, will still have the same problems in the social environment, culture, and the stigma given to trans women. From this situation, several communities were formed that housed transwomen in Yogyakarta. Three significant communities support transgender women to survive in the social environment in Yogyakarta, namely IWAYO, Kebaya NGO and Al-Fatah Islamic Boarding School (Ponpes Waria). Because as a community of conspicuous marginal groups and is in the middle of

the social environment, it does not mean that the existence of this community is also easy to carry out activities due to the stigma that has been formed in society.

In a transgender environment, the communication pattern that is carried out is more of a group (community communication) and closed. Many of the communication activities carried out show the form of messages that are symbolic in both non-verbal and verbal messages so that the meaning of the messages conveyed is only within the transwomen community who understand. Exclusive communication based on the same culture as transgender individuals make it pleasant for transgender people. The use of language in a transgender environment is known as *waria language* or *salon language*. According to Liliweri, language is a symbol system that has a role in human communication (Liliweri, 2014). It is the same with transgender language, created in the transgender community environment as a medium of communication within the group.

Constructions about transgender, especially for transwomen groups in a patriarchal social environment, provide a position that is very vulnerable to experiencing discrimination, violence and sexual harassment. It is because transgender groups do not have access privileges in all fields, be it economic, political, legal, social, or cultural. The view of the patriarchal system towards transgender is that the meanings of gender and sex are incompatible as they have been formed and are considered a form of deviation. Stigma and rejection of the existence of transgender women, starting from the family, environment, and society due to the view that transgender women are contrary to religious, cultural and social values, make transgender women face discrimination, violence and harassment.

Rejection received by transgender women in the family and social environment has made transgender women face various pressures that make transgender women increasingly excluded, both in the economic field (work), in the field of education, law, population services and in the health sector. Discrimination in employment, transwomen in Yogyakarta only have three non-formal jobs that are common among transwomen, namely sex workers, buskers, and salon workers/owners. In addition, many also do not work. Transwomen with their gender expression get rejected if they work in the formal sector, both in government and private sector work environments.

The patriarchal system environment places women as a marginalized group over men in a patriarchal social environment, but women have power and domination in their gender environment as entire women. Women currently in their gender group have privileges and easy access to the economic, political, legal, social, and cultural fields, thus allowing them to rule and carry out patriarchal values inherent in socio-cultural teachings learned since childhood. In this position, women can create gaps, violence, and harassment against other women in women's groups, trans women, making it possible for men who do not have power and privileges.

The presence of trans women will not be recognized as the gender role they choose as a women's group. This rejection does not only come from the male gender group but also rejection from the female gender group based on external sex. The male gender domination group outwardly perceives those transgender women are neither women nor men. It resulted in the emergence of discrimination against transgender women as a form of rejection of the existence of transgender women, symbolically seen as a deviation from gender identity that does not match the outward sex.

Discrimination, violence and harassment have been faced by transgender groups since the beginning, starting from their family, school and social environment. Their environment more often carries out the pressure experienced by the transgender group, namely verbal and discrimination in fulfilling worship activities is also experienced by the transgender group. The community's unique view of the presence of transgender women in their worship activities creates an uncomfortable situation for transgender women in worship. The stigma of deviance, even the label "sin" that should not enter a house of worship as a holy place, makes transgender groups avoid this. With the term

pretext of sin in violating the nature of external sex, transwomen experience difficulties in fulfilling their spiritual needs to interact with their God.

Women and transwomen have different positions in the view of society. Society has shown a symbolically different view of women with external genitalia and women as a gender expression of trans women. The view of a patriarchal culture that only accepts dual gender in gender identity means that women have a more powerful position than transwomen. The rejection of the position of transgender women as a female identity from groups of women and men outwardly has an impact that makes it difficult for transgender women to build relationships in society, making it difficult in many conditions.

Yogyakarta Feminist Group that the position of transwomen is the lowest in a social location that adheres to a patriarchal system. Whatever the choice of gender role, it is still accepted as a human right choice. If a trans woman conveys a symbolic message about herself from her physical appearance and the emotions felt as are women, then this shows that trans women want their gender role to be accepted as a woman. Transwomen as women are accepted by the Yogyakarta Feminist group because, symbolically, transwomen have physical characteristics that women's groups share, and the role played by transwomen in the social environment is as women. This feminist group does not refer to transgender biological aspects, but the right to freedom in determining gender role orientation is respected and accepted.

The difficulty experienced by the Yogyakarta Feminist group in building interactions with transgender groups is the distrust of transgender groups in accepting their position as women, so transgender women always withdraw from the social environment and perceive transgender women as having a terrible stigma in society. Stigma, as a symbol built and negatively interpreted by the environment, makes trans women keep their distance from the broader social environment. The existence of women as a result of the formation of social construction can be played by trans women because trans women can learn the meaning of women in terms of their role in society, so it is only valid if trans women can also be called women.

This study uses the perspective theory of Harding and Wood, which uses marginalized groups. As Harding stated, knowledge from marginalized groups offers strong objectivity because of the growing motivation to understand the point of view of groups with power. For Harding, economic conditions, race, and sexual orientation are different cultural identities that can draw people into society or push them to the margins. Thus, the intersection of minority positions creates a highly looked down upon location in the social hierarchy (Harding, 2004). Trans women experience this position. A trans woman position replaces this marginalized group, and the group with power is the dominant group in terms of gender, built by social and cultural structures. Dominant group practices create and generate inequality. Transwomen, in this case, are objects of greater inequality than women.

The standpoint of feminist theory brought by Harding has not clearly defined who is a marginalized group other than women or the specification of what is called a marginalized group. Transwomen, in this case, deal with two dominant groups based on external sex and gender roles, and transwomen are also part of these two groups. Cultural differences and social structures in the social environment may create different perspectives, hoping to achieve equality and greater justice and reduce levels of discrimination, violence and harassment for marginalized groups.

The Yogyakarta Feminist Group, a group that works to free women's organizations from patriarchal tyranny, believes trans people should be treated equally with other women and have the right to justice and equality in society. Transwomen are in a submarginal position from women, which makes it difficult for transwomen to develop themselves as women's roles. For the Yogyakarta Feminist group, the role of women as expressed by trans women positions trans women as a group

of women who experience oppression, injustice, weakened and marginalized again, where this is the principle of the struggle carried out by the feminist movement group to liberate the female gender group from injustice and oppression. The reality of transgender women creates political and social conflicts to maintain the position of men to remain in positions of authority and regulate all rules in the social structure.

Based on the theory of the feminist point of view used in this research on the reality of transgender women resulting from the perspective of the Yogyakarta Feminist group, the existence of transgender women who act as women's gender is accepted as women. The existence of women as a result of the formation of social construction can be played by trans women because trans women can learn the meaning of women in terms of their role in society, so it is only valid if trans women can also be called women. The viewpoint of the Yogyakarta Feminist group on trans women is not bound by the concept of gender actors from the construction built by patriarchal culture about gender actors based on external sex. In addition, the Yogyakarta Feminist group still adheres to the meaning of "womanhood" symbolically through the formation of patriarchal culture in its physical appearance and nonverbal concepts. The meanings that arise in the social and cultural environment for social interaction and transwomen's communication behavior will still be interpreted differently for each actor according to the subjectivity carried. Is that wrong? From the researchers' point of view, it is the meaning obtained from the experiences of individuals and groups on the reality that is around. How far someone owns the range of experience will still create a subjective point of view.

Looking back at the reality of women and transgender women, who then know the viewpoints of the feminist movement towards the existence of transgender women, the researcher can say that the point of view as a result of giving meaning to reality can be divided into two, namely, first, a point of view that subjectively interprets reality by the giver. It can be called an independent standpoint without being bound by existing rules or regulations. Second, a dependent standpoint is called the point of view that gives meaning to reality subjectively but is bound and follows according to the rules or regulations in the social environment. As stated by Harding that knowledge is not singular but plural, so each individual and group with different frames of reference and frames of experience make points of view have many meanings.

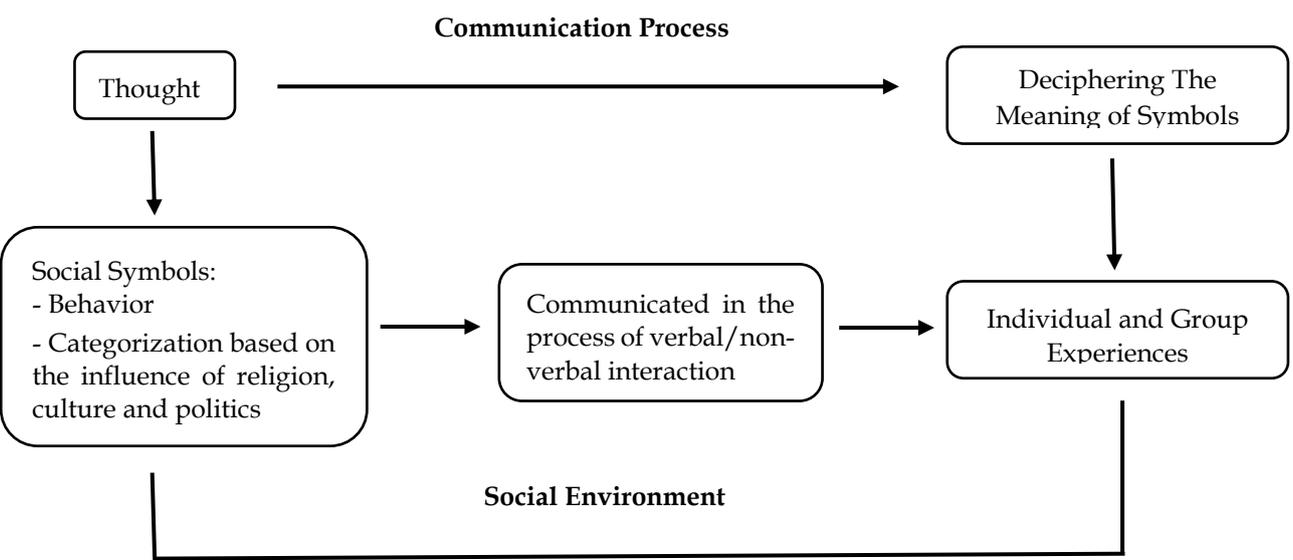
Social and individual experiences are difficult to separate. It is because individuals are also part of the social structure and social order (Mead, 2018). Likewise, in terms of views on transgender groups, because the social environment and social behavior have shaped the meaning of gender symbols based on outward sex, transgender women experience difficulties in accepting their group as the female gender because of the social environment's provisions regarding equality between outward sex and gender roles. Alternatively, gender expression played out. Wood revealed that the social environment primarily influences the experience, opportunity and understanding of group members (Wood, 2004).

Involvement in several aspects of transgender reality, and as the acquisition of experience in interaction and communication behavior in the social environment both individually and in groups, that transgender involves two characteristics of men and women, in this case, the view of imitation in their role as women. The social environment does not involve psychological elements or desires that transgender women feel because the internal elements are abstract and cannot be interpreted. The symbolism of transgender women in the social environment is the result of an experience that is formed from the different symbolic meanings between men and women so that transgender is interpreted as a form of conflict with gender reality that has been agreed upon in patriarchal social groups based on culture, religion, politics and even norms.

The Yogyakarta Feminist Group was able to change their point of view both individually and as a group based on their experiences, including regarding the meaning of gender roles. The

Yogyakarta Feminist Group interprets the reality of transgender as a symbol of the role of women as women. Because if it is based on the symbolic meaning of women, transwomen are women because transwomen have a choice of gender expression as women. This viewpoint is influenced because the Yogyakarta Feminist Group has a source of experience that not only comes from their social environment but also receives experience from cases that cause pressure on women's gender in various aspects that lead to discrimination against women's gender and create gender bias.

The symbolic meaning of women and transwomen is as a marginalized group in a patriarchal culture. Women and transgender women have the same symbolic and nonverbal roles and are under social constructions that ignore external gender elements. The standpoint of the experiences of transwomen marginalized groups has made the Yogyakarta Feminist Group accept transwomen to be called women based on the real experiences of transwomen, who are a sub-marginalized group of women and men who experience the most significant levels of discrimination and violence. Recognition as a woman for the role of transgender women is a human right to be recognized as having the same existence as women's groups in a patriarchal cultural environment. It can be seen in the schematic below:



**Figure. 2** Communication Process and Social Environment

Two aspects, social and psychological, epistemologically influence standpoints in communication science. *First*, socially, the process that occurs in constructing symbols is the interaction between individuals and social groups. Experiences that have been given meaning according to the social and cultural environment built in society will be experiences with the same meaning for group members. An example that can be illustrated is the view on the meaning of gender. *Second*, the standpoint involves psychological factors that will see how the communicator, in the communication and interaction response to the symbols, has received. Symbols become meaningful experiences according to the communicant's perspective.

The standpoint will shape the behavior of individuals and groups towards objects in social life. Standpoint feminism is part of an independent perspective because the feminist point of view has many references both from the social environment, individual and group experiences, knowledge, politics and ideology from feminism, which tries to see marginalized groups, in this case, women as victims of male domination in all fields. The feminist standpoint of the Yogyakarta

Feminist group interprets transgender women as a reality in society, namely accepting transgender women for their choice of role as women, and using symbols attached to women by the nickname mbak, ibu, bunda other terms that represent women. In addition, trans women also exist under the construction of women in society. So transgender women also have the same rights to get justice and equality that are the same as the male and female gender groups.

## CONCLUSION

Society forms an identity in each role according to the culture behind it. The social construction of the meaning of gender places transgender people in society politically as a marginalized group because transgender people are considered a form of deviation in gender roles that do not match their biological sex. These conditions form different perspectives in each social group on the existence of transgender women. In society, the transgender group is included in the LGB group based on sexual orientation, even though transgender leads to a role orientation over gender identity. Everyone's experience of being involved with other social groups will shape different perspectives on transgender women.

The Yogyakarta Feminist group believes that trans women are women. Trans women carry out their gender roles symbolically and psychologically as women because women's roles are the result of construction and culture, not because of human nature from birth. The existence of women because of the formation of social construction can be played by trans women because trans women can learn the meaning of women in terms of their role in society, so it is only valid if trans women can also be called women.

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