

## ปัญหาทางเพศสถานะและอัตลักษณ์ของวัยรุ่นทอมบอยและเลสเบี้ยน ในเชียงใหม่และพิษณุโลก ประเทศไทย

### THE GENDER ISSUES AND IDENTITIES OF THE YOUNG TOMBOY AND LESBIAN IN CHIANG MAI AND PHITSANULOK OF THAILAND

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#### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาอัตลักษณ์และเพศสถานะของกลุ่มทอมบอยและเลสเบี้ยนรุ่นใหม่ ในมหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ และมหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏพิบูลสงคราม จังหวัดพิษณุโลก ประเทศไทย เพื่อสะท้อนปัญหาเพศวิถีของกลุ่มคนหลากหลายทางเพศในสังคมไทย โดยเฉพาะในสถาบันการศึกษา วิธีการศึกษาที่ใช้ คือ การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพผ่านการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกและการสัมภาษณ์กลุ่มกับนักศึกษาระดับชั้นปริญญาตรี ในมหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ และมหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏพิบูลสงคราม ผลการศึกษาพบว่า การแสดงออกทางอัตลักษณ์ของเพศสถานะและเพศวิถีของกลุ่มทอมบอยและเลสเบี้ยนรุ่นใหม่มีความเกี่ยวข้องกับการยอมรับของครอบครัวเป็นส่วนใหญ่ ทั้งนี้ แม้ว่าทอมบอยและเลสเบี้ยนรุ่นใหม่จะสามารถเปิดเผยตัวตนของตนเองได้อย่างอิสระ และสังคมไทยยอมรับในอัตลักษณ์ตัวตนของพวกเขามากขึ้น แต่ทว่ายังคงมีปัญหาทางเพศสถานะซ่อนอยู่ภายใต้สถานะแวดล้อมที่เปิดกว้างให้แก่กลุ่มคนหลากหลายทางเพศ ไม่ว่าจะเป็นปัญหาการกีดกันทางเพศสภาพ ความกดดันทางสังคมและความคาดหวังของครอบครัว ในมุมมองแบบความสัมพันธ์ต่างเพศ และการคุกคามทางเพศในโรงเรียนและที่ทำงาน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งการคุกคามทางเพศด้วยคำพูดยังคงเป็นปัญหาสำคัญของการยอมรับความหลากหลายทางเพศที่แท้จริงในสังคมไทย ดังนั้น ประเด็นปัญหาของการกีดกันและคุกคามทางเพศจึงเป็นสิ่งที่สามารถเกิดขึ้นได้ในหลายสถานะแห่งที่ของสังคมในช่วงเวลาเดียวกัน ไม่ว่าจะเป็นสถานศึกษา ครอบครัวและที่ทำงาน สถานการณ์ดังกล่าวสะท้อนการขาดความรู้ความเข้าใจและการศึกษาเกี่ยวกับความหลากหลายทางเพศในสถาบันการศึกษาและสังคมไทยอย่างสำคัญ

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#### Abstract

This article aims to study the gender identities of young tomboy/transman and lesbian in Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai province, and Pibulsongkram

Rajabhat University, Phitsanulok province of Thailand. It also aims to reflect the gender issues of LGBTI people in Thai society, particularly in educational institutions. The research method employed the qualitative research method with the in-depth interview and focus group with the undergraduate students. It was found that the expression of gender identities and sexualities of young tomboys and lesbians is mostly related to family acceptance. Even though the young tomboys and lesbians are freely open themselves and their identities are more accepted in Thai society, but it still has the hidden problem on gender issues behind this open environment. These include a gender discrimination, a social pressure and a family expectation in heterosexual aspects, and sexual harassment in schools and workplaces. In particular, verbal sexual harassment is still an important problem for the actual acceptance in the gender diversity of Thai society. Therefore, gender issues on discrimination and sexual violence could happen at the same time in several social communities such as schools, families, and workplaces. This situation importantly reflects the lack of understanding and education on the gender diversity of Thai schools and society.

**Keywords:** tomboy, lesbian, identity, gender

### Introduction

According to the report “Being LGBTI in Thailand: A National Survey on Experiences and Social Attitudes towards Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression” of UNDP (2018), it provided the overview of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) history in Thailand that the homosexuality behaviors have been found for a long time in Thai society since the 14th century. However, the LGBTI people and communities came out after the World War II and the 1950s to 1960s, while the proliferation of mass media contributed to increasing available information on gender and sexuality in Thailand after the 1950s (UNDP, 2018).

However, most of the mass media frequently portrayed the negative images of LGBTI people through using the sensationalistic headlines to humiliate LGBTI individuals, especially the news media. Even today the news media continue presents the negative portrayals and stereotypes of LGBTI people (UNDP, 2018). This situation reflects the general lack of acceptance of LGBTI people in the wider society. Meanwhile, it helps to create gender issues on discrimination and stigma against LGBTI people in society. As the report titled “A Tool for Change: Working

with the Media on Issues Relating to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression and Sex Characteristics in Thailand” presented that the portrayal of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) community in media of the Asia-Pacific region, has been largely negative, reflecting a wide unacceptance in sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) of LGBTIQ individuals. Also, it provides the perpetuation and legitimization of widespread stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ people in the Asia-Pacific region, including Thailand (Burapha University and UNDP, 2017).

Moreover, many research studies found that lesbian has been marginalized and discriminated in various countries. For instance, the Chinese women and lesbians are usually excluded from the ownership of lands and businesses in their families, and from access to education and secure employment. Although this situation has been improved greatly in modern Chinese society. That is to say, the Chinese women can access to better education and employment, but woman’s position within a family is still following traditional patriarchal values that unmarried women (included lesbian) are considered as the lower-class people in families. Meanwhile, tomboys are those who dress and act against the traditional oriental expectation to women in China. Toms are more often to be targeted and discriminated in society because feminine lesbians are perceived as less deviant and more capable of reversion to mainstream sexual normalcy (Sim, 2008).

Similarly, the report of UNDP (2018) found that many Thai LGBTI people faced with a high prevalence of internalized stigma and discrimination in the forms of verbal harassment against them at home and in schools, and frequent occurrences of sexual violence towards transwomen. In the meantime, the LGBTI people also faced mockery about their appearance and mannerism. In particular, the transgender students who identify as female or male often experienced sexual harassment and physical violence at school (UNDP, 2018).

From the above mentioned, it is a situation of what a feminist theory called the “intersectionality” which explains the multiple of gender discrimination of LGBTI people in social communities. That is to say, the LGBTI people could face gender discrimination in various aspects and in different communities at the same time. The intersectionality is as a tool for analysis which aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities (Women’s Rights and Economic Change, 2004).

Subsequently, the LGBTI people could encounter with the different types of discrimination from communities that they are a member such as families, workplaces and schools. It shows that the LGBTI people are not fully accepted by many societies included Thai society, due to persistent prejudices and lack of understanding about different sexual orientations and gender identities. As the report of International Labour Organization (ILO) and the PRIDE Thailand (2014) found that the Thai LGBTI individuals still face persistent stigma and gender discrimination in many forms in the workplaces and schools (International Labour Organization, 2014). This situation contradicts with the outward appearance of acceptance, and higher visibility of transgender people in Thailand than other countries, especially in Asia.

Therefore, this article attempts to examine the gender issues on discrimination, social acceptance, and violence against the LGBTI persons especially the young LGBTI people in education, as they are one of the important LGBTI groups which frequently faces with the gender stigma, discrimination, and violence.

The article focuses on the young transman and/or tomboy, and lesbian students in the universities of Thailand. Because they are infrequently studied and reported much in the issues of gender discrimination and violence in the schools and workplaces when compared with the transwomen people. Thus, the article shows the life experiences and attitudes of the young tomboys or transmen and lesbians from Chiang Mai University and Pibulsongkram Rajabhat, to describe the issues on social acceptance, the stigma on gender identity, and gender discrimination and violence against the young LGBTI individuals.

#### **The Definitions of Lesbian, Transman and/or Tomboy**

Lesbian or Dyke means women who experience sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction to other women. In other words, lesbian means a homosexual woman (Vanderbilt University, 2018). Meanwhile, transman is people who are assigned female at birth but who identify as a man (also female-to-male, FTM, or transgender men) (UNDP, 2018). And tomboy means a girl who behaves in a manner usually considered boyish (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

In a definition of UNDP (2018), tomboy is usually used in the Thai language to describe a female who may inwardly feel more like a man. Tom (in an adaptation of the English word “tomboy”) may appear masculine in appearance. Thus, for the report of UNDP in “Being LGBTI in Thailand” (2018), tom is categorized as a transman.

In Thailand, lesbian identity is “largely framed in terms of “butch-femme” gender role-playing, with the masculine woman referred to as “tom” and the feminine woman “di” (in an adaptation of the English word “lady”) (Sinnott, 1999). The gender roles of these two are different and more in a sense of binary, a varied version of heterosexuality. Also, due to such division, toms in Thai society are considered by both tom and di to be the “active partner” in sexual relations. Moreover, the untouchability of masculine lesbians is a common phenomenon on a worldwide scale (Jackson & Sullivan, 1999).

The definition of gender identities (lesbian, transgender, tom and di) among Thai homosexual persons occurred from the changing of social and economic structures both at the international level and national level after the 1970s. Additionally, the gay and lesbian rights movements which happened widely in the Western countries and America during the 1970s. It has contributed to a creating of new meanings of gender identities and a coming out of homosexual people or the LGBTI people (an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) in societies. Moreover, it was a challenge to the heterosexual perspectives and the raising up of the power of homosexual people who had been marginalized in a society for a long time. In this regards, it is what Michel Foucault called “the sexual revolution” which happened in Western societies and culture. The sexual revolution has led to the progressive movement of homosexual people and the Enlightenment era in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Spargo, 1999).

In Thai society, the coming out of tom and/or transman and lesbian shows the progress of rights movement and expression of LGBTI people. In addition, it reflects more social acceptance on the diversity of genders in society. However, even Thai society provides an open environment for LGBTI people, but it is still hidden with many gender issues such as a social bias and discrimination, sexual harassment in school and home, gender inequality and a negative portrayal of LGBTI people’s images and identities as previously mentioned.

#### **Research Methodology**

The research conducted by the qualitative research method through using the in-depth interview with ten undergraduate students (aged between 20 to 23 years old) who identify or open their characteristics as a lesbian and transman/or tomboy, and also willing to participate in the in-depth-interview from Chiang Mai University and Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University in Phitsanulok province. The interview is provided in the semi-structured interview with the three main

research questions: 1) Life experiences: to show the experiences of becoming tomboy/transman and lesbian of the key informants; 2) Factors that related to the expression of gender identity and sexual orientation such as family acceptance, friends and media; and 3) The gender issues which faced or experienced by the key informants such as social discrimination, sexual harassment and the least access to employment and education opportunities.

Moreover, some information also came from the focus groups of Northern Thailand Survey Implementation and Focus Group Discussions in Chiang Mai and Phitsanulok of UNDP which I participated in the team survey and focus group discussions during December 2017. Accordingly, the focus group has been provided in four groups with the LGBTI people. Each group was comprised of eight participants which have three lesbians and tomboy or transman students participated in the groups. This information has been used as a secondary data to support the in-depth-interview of this article.

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed through an interpretative understanding and rationalized from the key informants' point of views, experiences, perceptions, attitudes and the social contexts that formed their identities as a tomboy/transman and lesbian as well as a reflection of gender issues from their experiences. Transcripts were anonymized in order to protect participants' confidentiality.

## **Results**

The in-depth-interview with ten undergraduate students from Chiang Mai University and Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University showed how their gender identity were formed. Meanwhile, family acceptance is an important factor for the expression of gender identity and sexual orientation of the young tomboy/transman and lesbian students. Moreover, the life experiences of them reflected the gender issues on social discrimination and sexual harassment, especially in the workplaces and schools in Thailand.

### **1. Gender Identity Formation (Lesbian And Tomboy/Transman)**

Actually, there is no specified reason why the key informants became lesbian and tomboy. This is because gender is about sexuality which means an integral part of who we are, what we believe, what we feel, and how we respond to others (a sexuality resource center for parents, 2018). Sexuality included gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation, sexual experiences, thoughts, ideas, and emotions. The gender identity formation of young lesbian and tomboy/transman

was mostly related to family acceptance. They knew themselves what are their sexual orientation and emotion, while most of them felt free to open their gender identity.

Ann (pseudonym), a fourth-year student in Political Science program at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University said "I felt comfortable to be myself because my parent accepted me what I am. I accepted that I am tom (tomboy). Now, I have a girlfriend who I have accompanied for a long time" (Ann, personal communication, January 4, 2018). Concurrently, May (pseudonym), a young lesbian student in Phitsanulok also mentioned that her family accepted her when she told her mom that she liked a woman. So, she did not feel weird with what she is (May, personal communication, January 4, 2018).

The same experience also happened with Bee (pseudonym), a young tomboy in Chiang Mai said that "My dad laughed lightheartedly at me and said you look like me when I was a teenager" (Bee, personal communication, December 24, 2017). Also, Qiu, a fourth-year student in Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University said "My mother thought that if you two (me and my girlfriend) are happy to live together and both of you could take care each other, it is not a problem (Qiu, personal communication, November 11, 2017). Therefore, family acceptance for the young LGBTI people is a big step for their self-acceptance and gender identity formation.

## **2. Family Influence and Social Acceptance**

As described above, family acceptance is an important factor for gender identity formation and expression of the young lesbian and tomboy/transman persons. The family attitudes and behaviors are the key influence for the young lesbian and/or tomboy to express their self-identity. According to the research of San Francisco State University (2010) found that family support is the most meaningful thing for stimulating confidence and psychological comfort for the young LGBTI group. The LGBTI youth who has highly accepting families, it shows that they have significantly high levels of self-esteem and social support in young adulthood (San Francisco State University, 2010). In contrast, the family rejection attitudes may cause some bad influences for the young LGBTI such as tension and self-suicide.

Nevertheless, most of the key informants in this research have positive attitudes toward their families. Their families accepted them when they opened their gender identity. This is according to the report of UNDP (2018) in "Being the LGBTI in Thailand" that "75% of LGBTI persons have been accepted by family

members, with over 95% transmen (tomboy) feel accepted by their family” (UNDP, 2018). Likewise, the experience of Pee (22 years old) who studies in Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, Phitsanulok, she said that even her family lived in the local district of Phichit province and her parent had divorced since she was very young. Her family has no problem with being tomboy of her. This might because her young brother is kathoey (transwoman) too. Nevertheless, she has a problem with some relatives of her girlfriend, but it gets better now and the girlfriend's parent feels fine with their relationship (Pee, personal communication, January 5, 2018).

On the other hands, some of the young lesbians have faced unacceptance from family and friends. As Noon said, "at first I didn't feel much awful about my sexual orientation, but after my family, friends, and others started knowing about my sexual orientation different, they felt like I am weird, against nature, being a woman liking other women." (Noon, a lesbian student, personal communication, December 24, 2017).

Moreover, even the tomboy key informants have been accepted by their families, but they have to attempt for acceptance from their partner's parents. For instance, Gee (pseudonym) said “I tried to prove myself with a parent of my girlfriend that I could be a good man and I could have capacities and knowledge that are better than some men. Then, they accepted me” (Gee, personal communication, January 6, 2018).

Some lesbian students also have got some pressures from their families and neighbors about a marriage expectation in heterosexual perspective. May (pseudonym) said “my neighbors asked me when I am going to get married, while my family expected me to marry with some guys (May, personal communication, January 4, 2018).

In these regards, family expectations and social pressure could cause the gender stigma and discrimination against the young lesbian and tomboy. Even most of the families of the young LGBTI accepted on their gender identities. This reflects Thai society did not accept the LGBTI people in reality. The heterosexual ideal is still dominating the ideas and perceptions about the sexual relationship and sexual orientation among Thais such as the heterosexual marriage. This is also because the images of marriage are usually represented for a heterosexual relationship rather than a homosexual relationship in Thai society. In addition, it might be involved with a concern of family about the future of their daughters' life, because the heterosexual marriage is a legal marriage, and a spouse has the



rights in manage and assign a property with their partner. Thus, the heterosexual marriage can be more advantage in many legal benefits, social opportunities and government policies than same-sex marriage. Hence, it creates a stable life for a man and woman partner rather than same-sex partners.

Consequently, even many Thai young lesbians and tomboys/transmen felt freely open of their gender identities and accepted by their families, but they still have a problem on social pressure and expectation from families and neighbors in the heterosexual perspectives.

### **3. Social Discrimination and Violence against Young Lesbian and Tomboy/Transman**

Even though Thai society freely opens an environment for LGBTI people, the life experiences and attitudes of young Thai tomboys/transmen and lesbians expressed the several gender issues in Thai society such as social discrimination and sexual harassment, especially in the workplaces and schools.

According to the life experience of Ann (pseudonym), she had ever applied for a full-time job during a summer semester as a human resource officer in the factory at Samutprakarn province (the Eastern region of Thailand). At first, she had faced social discrimination by the gender disrespected sense and verbal from the officers who interviewed her. She said, "they asked me which sex are you?". Then, she answered "I am what I am", while it was obvious that there was no tom (tomboy) in the office. So, she thinks that it is very difficult for her to get this job. However, she can get the highest score in the test of job recruitment among the competitors. That's why the human resource officers have to accept her to do this job, but it is not easy for her to show them that she can do her work well. She tried to entertain her colleagues during the meetings and workings. Then, her boss and colleagues liked her and wanted her to work back again (Ann, personal communication, January 4, 2018).

Meanwhile, Pee has experienced verbal sexual harassment from guy colleagues, when she worked as a waiter in a local restaurant in Phitsanulok (Pee, personal communication, January 5, 2018). Similarly, Zee (pseudonym), a tomboy student in Chiang Mai said "I got bullied and teased all the time for being a tomboy in the workplace. The guy colleagues simply played flirting with me" (Zee, personal communication, December 24, 2017).

Verbal sexual harassment also happened in schools. It mostly occurred from the heterosexual perspectives of Thai teachers and families and lack of

education in gender diversity in Thai schools. As Som (pseudonym) a tomboy student in Chiang Mai told her experiences in a high school that “the principal spoke in front of everyone during the parental meeting annually saying there is a female student being in a relationship with another female student. My relative was there and brought the issue back to gossip. It was me. Many people knew it. My grandmom said she felt numb-face after being told about the rumor. I gotta calm her down.” (Som, personal communication, December 24, 2017).

Simultaneously, Jane (pseudonym), a lesbian student in Chiang Mai said “at my all-girl school the annual meeting of all the parents in the hall heard what a teacher bashing me for being in a relationship and holding hand with another girl in the school. I got very embarrassed and frustrated. I don’t know why the teacher has to bash my relationship” (Jane, personal communication, December 24, 2017). Therefore, the verbal sexual harassment frequently happens in the workplaces and schools from the experiences of young lesbian and tomboy/transman in Chiang Mai and Phitsanulok. It reflected that even Thai society open environment for lesbian and tomboy, but it conceals with several issues on gender identities and rights.

## **Discussion**

The research found the hidden problems of young lesbians and tomboys/transmen in Thai society. In particular, social discrimination and sexual harassment in Thai schools and workplaces are considered as serious issues for the safety and respect environment for the LGBTI people. This finding is consistent with several pieces of research about LGBTI youth in schools in various countries. As Poteat & Scheer (2016) studied the LGBTI youth in Massachusetts high schools, they addressed that LGBT youth are frequently victimized in schools at rates that are much higher than those of their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers and experience rates of mental illness at much higher rates as well (Poteat & Scheer, 2016). In particular of the mental illness, the research of Wei & Liu (2017) which studied the LGBTQ students in 29 Chinese provinces/municipalities in the Mainland China, they also found that even though most LGBTQ students felt comfortable about their sexual orientation and had come out to someone such as siblings, parents, and/or teachers. But they were at great risk for psychological distresses because many Chinese schools were not inclusive for LGBTQ students (Wei & Lui, 2017).

Meanwhile, the research of Tangmunkongvorakul et al. (2012) which studied the LGBT youth in urban Chiang Mai addressed that many young LGBT Thais freely opened to describe themselves as gay, kathoey, tom, di, bisexual or something else. However, the sexual lifestyles which encountered among Northern Thai LGBT adolescents could lead to negative health consequences. Hence, they proposed an improvement of relationship education, counseling, and sensitive sexual health services for the Thai LGBT youth (Tangmunkongvorakul et al., 2012). Simultaneously, the researches in Massachusetts, USA. and China concerned in promoting of training and counseling for mental health and well-being of LGBTI students specifically in the school policy.

Accordingly, this article agreed that the situations of gender discrimination and sexual harassment in schools and workplaces could threaten the mental health and safety live environment for the LGBTI youth. Also, a need for improvement of education policy and curriculum in Thai schools, it could enhance the better understanding of gender diversity within Thai society.

However, family expectation and social pressure are still important factors for actual acceptance in gender's identities and sexual orientations of LGBTI persons. Therefore, this article fulfilled the report of USAID and UNDP on Being LGBT in Asia 2014 that it is not only being filial, conforming to accepted family roles and being a good person in a family of LGBTI persons. It is a struggle of LGBTI people over family expectation and social pressure in the heterosexual aspects. This issue is related to the actual acceptance from families and society, while it needs more research studies in the future.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, understanding the young LGBTI should be understood base on their sexuality or sexual orientation, not only accepting their identity. Meanwhile, the problems of social discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplaces and schools, are still the crucial issues for LGBTI persons in Thai society. The education on gender diversity is needed for Thai schools and universities in order to decrease the unsafety and disrespect environment for the young LGBTI. Also, a promoting of positive portrayal of LGBTI people in the media could enhance actual understanding and acceptance to LGBTI persons in Thai society.

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