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SURABAYA JOURNAL

For These Transvestites, Still More Role Changes

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By **JANE PERLEZ**



Kemal Jufri/Imaji, for The New York Times

Nancy Iskandar, right, a transvestite social worker, trains other transvestites in hairdressing as part of a government-sponsored program to help them find jobs outside their traditional roles as entertainers.

SURABAYA, Indonesia, July 18 — For two years, Merlyn Sopjan lived with her boyfriend. Using his name, she became Mrs. Nanang. She was known in the neighborhood as his wife, and tucked his photo into her wallet. She was admired for her feminine looks: with liquid eyes and pancake makeup, she has the allure of a model.

Merlyn, 30, is a transvestite. The women on the block knew, she said,

that under her demure clothes and despite her "wiggling" walk, she was physically a man.

"I lived in his house and I was part of the community," she said, showing off a snapshot of herself with Mr. Nanang as they posed as a couple in casual clothes, her arm on his shoulder.

Transvestites go back many centuries here in the world's most populous Muslim country, and their recognition stands in contrast to the relative disapproval of homosexuality, sociologists say.

Now Merlyn and others like her are trying to create roles for themselves beyond their long tolerated positions as television stars, entertainers and beauticians, moving even into the political arena.

Last month Merlyn tried to register as a candidate for mayor in Malang, the town in East Java near here where she is now finishing her civil engineering thesis at the university.

Her application was denied by city officials on the ground that she missed the filing deadline by five minutes. It was not an explicit rejection on the basis of gender, though Merlyn suspects that had something to do with it.

The rejection received sympathetic press coverage, with reporters asking why a "waria" — a combination of "wanita" (woman) and "pria" (man) — should not have the same rights as anyone else. "I want waria to have a role in government," Merlyn said. "That's my mission."

They have before. Public records of transvestites date from a 14th-century ruler, Hayam Wuruk, who is described in court annals as dressing as a woman in front of his ministers and using a woman's name. Later, after the arrival of Islam, men often played the role of women in the village dance dramas of East Java, and they still do.

The first president of independent Indonesia, Sukarno, writes proudly in his memoirs of playing female roles when he was a young man, putting powder on his face and rouge on his lips, and stuffing "two sweet breads" in his blouse.

"With this addition to my shapely figure, everybody said I looked absolutely beautiful," he said. "After the show I pulled the breads out of my blouse and ate them."

Under the autocratic rule of Sukarno's successor, Gen. Suharto, and even more so now, transvestites have won some rights. While they are still sometimes rounded up and held in detention if working as prostitutes, in some cities they court business openly in what amounts to a late-night transvestite parade down the main thoroughfares.

In the major cities of Java, including this one, local governments provide training programs for transvestites who want to run beauty salons and wedding businesses (gowns, decor and makeup, all in a package).

At a training session in Jakarta, the supervisor, 56-year-old Nancy Iskandar — she changed her name from Nandy to Nancy at 21 — encouraged a group of young transvestites who had just been picked up off the street by the police to learn the art of hairdressing.

She had hired a professional, Iwan, 34 and also a transvestite, to primp the hair of the young transvestites like Bella, 23, who sat in front of a mirror, polish on her nails, while Iwan teased her long black hair, coaxed it into a bouffant and coated it with lacquer.

"This is a way for the old waria to help the young waria to be independent, to earn money," Nancy explained.

In many places, self-help groups founded by transvestites stress AIDS

prevention. In Malang, where Merlyn heads the local transvestite group, a weekly volleyball game has been held for more than a decade.

"The lifestyle of most waria is to sleep all day," Nancy said. "The sport is to get them out of bed and up in the morning." In the last several years, she has organized the distribution of free condoms at the games.

On Indonesian television, transvestites are regular hosts on comedy shows and appear as characters in a popular puppet show.

In 1977, when sex-change operations were still relatively unusual in the West, government television showed a movie called "I Am Vivian." Based on a true story, it showed how an Indonesian boy who felt more like a girl was finally accepted by his family as a transvestite. In one of the more striking scenes, a doctor advises Vivian to have a sex-change operation. The movie ends with her in a white wedding gown, complete with veil, being carried by the groom to the bridal suite.

These days, sex-change operations are out of vogue, and for reasons of religion, many of the advocates say they do not encourage them.

Here in Surabaya, Irma, 38, a former teacher who left the classroom because she was not allowed to dress as a woman, said that according to her interpretation of the Koran, it was against the tenets of Islam for a person to change sex. "When we die, what will we say to God?" said Irma, who runs a beauty business and leads the local transvestite support group.

In keeping with Indonesia's mostly relaxed practice of Islam, the imams appear to be tolerant, too. "The imams say: 'Follow your heart,'" Nancy said. When she visits the elders of the Islamic Council, Nancy wears a jilbab, the head covering worn by some women here. But when she goes to the mosque, "to pray, I must go as a man."

For Merlyn, the breakup of the eight-year relationship and two years of living with Mr. Nanang came when he decided he needed to marry and have children, she said.

She gets solace, she said, from the fact that the women in the neighborhood still show her respect. And she has moved on to a new boyfriend, a young handsome policeman whom she met when trying to release some transvestites from the police station. His photo is a new addition in her wallet.



The New York Times

A Surabaya man, "Mrs. Nanang," tried to run for mayor of Malang.

Al-Fatiha Foundation is a US-based organization dedicated to Muslims who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning and those exploring their sexual orientation or gender

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