

GLBT¹ People' s Rights- and Media (Re)presentation in Thailand

Cultural codes are typically attributed and fixed to normatively gendered citizens who are expected to be consistent with national values. This is apparently intended to ensure the growth of the nation through the formation of families.

Sexual- and gender transgressors in this context, thus appear to be a threat to national values, seeming to disrupt the so-called 'natural' (heterosexual) order that is meant to support the nation in its growth. However, despite having the same duties as heterosexual and normatively gendered citizens, they are not considered as valid citizens and therefore they do not have equal rights.

Some attempts are made to regulate and control unwanted images of sexual and gender dissidents, censoring and banning any kind of 'offensive' media. Since Thai media only very seldom covers explicit gender issues in a balanced way, the voices of women, homosexuals or people's voices with alternative lifestyles are rarely heard.

The Thai government, that controls the majority of the Thai media and recently claimed even more control over the nation's radio- and television stations², and its Board of Censors, either ban media that causes controversy and that offend national values, or they expect media representatives to do self-censorship.

Thanks to events like the Mekong Media Forum in Chiang Mai (2009), attended by some gender-issues-activists, like Dr. Michael Tan (Philippines), Lu Pin (China), or Yanapon Musiket (Thailand), matters on gender and sexuality are now gaining some exposure in public through those scholars and media representatives.

Dr. Michael Tan suggests some gender issues needing to be raised and reflected through the media namely; to cover 'emerging roles and categories or statuses of individuals in society'³. Only in writing about matters like those of changing gendered roles and sexualities, can society challenge its stereotypical perceptions of men, women and normativity.

Questions that arise when thinking about representations of gender issues in the media are, just to name a few:

- How gender-issues are reported / talked about, how are they portrayed in movies?
- Are there special images that are reproduced when reporting about gender and sexualities?
- What kind of language is used (gender sensitive / politically correct)?
- How gender-fair / diverse are the reports / talk shows / movies?
- What does the media look like when viewed through lenses of a non-normative gender position?

1 Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender

2 See Bangkok Post, January 7, 2010

3 See Terraviva, December 9-12, 2009

In times of rapid change and globalization, it is crucial to report on gender issues while keeping in mind the settings of economic transformation, political reform and social reconstruction, since those settings have got a huge impact on gendered roles in societies⁴.

Reports on kathoei⁵, women and homosexuals, or gender issues in general, tend to be written by gender unaware journalists, who often either victimize so called 'minority groups', or make them 'legitimate victims'. Through their style of reporting they perpetuate stereotypes and gendered roles.

The recipe for a greater gender sensitivity in media reports is not - as often rather falsely assumed - to just raise the number of female reporters, since they do not necessarily have a greater gender awareness in regard to certain topics, but to educate journalists how to be gender-sensitive, because the 'framing and representation of a story depends on what the author thinks is right, or different' (Tan).

There are definitely specific improvements in media reporting such as; the issues faced by single mothers, domestic husbands, lesbians, gays, transgender- and transsexual people, sex-workers, and discrimination based on maternal statues. But, as it was just mentioned, as important as it is to write about those issues in the first place, the effect of such media coverage largely depends on the way in which a certain journalist covers these issues. The media ought to have a huge impact on peoples' perceptions and thus in a way influences and controls the subjects they are writing about as well as their readers. Therefore, reports need to be intelligent, which means topics need to be presented in an interconnected social context.

Recently, the media have reported about ongoing discussions concerning kathoeis and the issues they have to face at the few universities that do not allow kathoeis to wear university uniforms for female students. Whereas it is good that issues of so called minority groups find some space in the public through the media, it is still questionable, whether some of these issues are reported about appropriately.

In two newspaper reports, one published in the Bangkok Post on the 11th of December 2009 and the other one in The Nation on the 13th of December 2009, there was a transgender activist quoted who said that cross-dressers would 'suffer a mental condition called transsexualism, which could be "treated" by allowing them to dress the way they want, or by having a gender reassignment operation'.

Although this 'cross-dressers' -rights activist surely aims to fight for kathoeis' right to wear the female uniform at university; she as well pathologizes kathoeis through the way she is talking about this issue.

The same activist said in the interview for The Nation, that students should be allowed to look/dress 'according to their sexual preference'. In saying this she once more creates a rather false image about transgender people, namely that there

4 See Terraviva, December 9-12, 2009

5 Kathoei is the Thai term for transgender

is inevitably a homosexual desire which is followed by a desire to adjust oneself to heteronormativity⁶ through transgenderism.

This serves to confuse people further by stating that gender and sexuality are interlinked and not highlighting the fundamental differences in the two terms. It is common for homosexuals to not change their gender identity. Furthermore, heterosexual men transitioning to a female, may subsequently be termed as homosexual as they take a same gender partner. Gender is not on a continuum scale, sexuality is.

Prempreeda Pramroj na Ayuttaya, former project secretary for the 'Thai Queer Resource Center' and currently project manager for "Thai Kathoei: Media, Health, Rights, and Ways of Life," in Bangkok, who was so kind to be available for an interview regarding kathoeis' rights and media (re)presentation, said that in Thai society a person's desire would be less important than a person's gender.

Prempreeda's aim is to raise awareness for gender sensitivity and gender diversity through and within the media. In doing so, she especially focuses on the (re)presentation of kathoeis in the media, which, as she says, sets kathoeis in a rather devastating picture.

Prempreeda is concerned that media representatives often ask inappropriate and insulting questions in respect of transgender women's sexual organs or transgender women's sexual desires. Television show moderators tend to make fun of kathoeis publicly, she says, which leads to a certain image about kathoeis being presented to society which strengthens the effect of discrimination against kathoeis in their everyday lives.

In order to raise awareness for discrimination against kathoeis, Prempreeda attends television shows in which she stands up for kathoeis' right to be treated with respect and in order to represent kathoei identity in an appropriate and diverse way.

One problem that arose through the media, Prempreeda points out, is that media 'representations' of kathoeis as beauty queens put a lot of pressure on 'ordinary' transgender women, who are discriminated against even more, if they do not conform to a certain perception of beauty that is related to the kathoei image.

Kathoeis are said to be tolerated in Thai society in connection to specific locations and occupations. These occupations are often located in the realm of amusement and entertainment such as in fashion shows and beauty salons. In many cases there is also an association with sex work. Male to female transgendered kathoeis are tolerated, since they represent images of femininity that are ascribed to these occupations. Hence transgender women have to face gender based discrimination, but are considered less 'threatening' to society and therefore not as exposed to homophobia as gay men whose desire is gender-homogenous⁷, a trait often perceived as perversion since it disrupts the importance of the maintenance of the gender heterogeneity of desire.

⁶ This term describes the constructed framework of normativity that is ascribed to heterosexuality.

⁷ Gender homogenous desire means, for example, the desire that two masculine gendered men have for one another.

As a result of this, as Nikorn from the Bangkok Rainbow Organization, a non-profit organization for GLBT- issues, founded in May 2003, points out, gay couples cannot show themselves in public as 'free' as a kathoei with her (male or female) partner could, but they can easily work in any kind of occupation, since they do not face gender based discrimination.

For Prempreeda, as well as for Nikorn, it is very important to mention that the issues that kathoeis have to face are very different from those that gay men have to face. Not only gay and kathoei, but also tom⁸, dee⁹ and lesbian represent alternative sexualities and/or identities. However, the issues each person - who identifies with one or more of these categories - has to face are very different from one another.

Politics & Institutional Discrimination

Although there is a law in Thailand that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, the governors who would be supposed to act according to their duty are doing little against these discrimination matters.

Prempreeda and Nikorn thus raise the topic of discriminating regulations, in reflecting, amongst other matters, the discussion that is going on about whether to allow the change of ID cards of post operated transgender women or not.

This discussion deals with several issues, one of them is a problem connected to class, Prempreeda says. Since kathoeis are often abandoned from their families at a young age, there are rather few kathoeis who are able to attend university and even if they were able to pay university fees, there is still the problem that in some few universities, as discussed before, kathoeis are not allowed to wear the uniform for women, or to use women's bathrooms, or to sleep in women's dorms. So in this respect it is rather unlikely that many kathoeis are seeking comprehensive or higher education or getting influential, responsible well paid jobs. Without a university degree transgender women are often not even considered for a job (outside the tolerated occupation realm for kathoeis), especially not when the employer recognizes that the applicants' gender is not congruent with her ID.

Many kathoeis do not have the money to pay for a sex change operation. Some kathoeis who were able to pay for it, reported to Prempreeda - who is, as the manager for kathoei issues, responsible for the collection of these reports - that they have been facing medical doctors' harassment. There have been a few individual cases in which medical doctors intentionally performed a rather unprofessional job, Prempreeda said, so that the kathoei had to come back for further treatment with all the connected additional costs.

A further issue in the discussion about the ID card is that those transgender women who have had the money for a sexual reassignment surgery and thus would, according

⁸ Tom is the Thai term for the English equivalent tomboy, or butch, which describes a masculine gendered woman.

⁹ Dee (meaning lady) is the Thai term for the English equivalent femme, which describes a feminine gendered homosexual woman whose desire is targeted at masculine gendered women (toms).

to the government, be in a position to change their ID (which they are not so far anyway), would be able to travel across national borders, but those who have not had gender reassignment surgery would have either to stay where they are, or, as Nikorn says, provide a medical doctor's certificate about their gender 'treatment' to the border patrols.

Prempreeda and Nikorn both said it is unfair to allow only post operated kathoeis to have a passport change but Nikorn pointed out that the official argument, raised by authorities, to only allow post operated kathoeis to change their passports, would in essence be preventing crime and abuse by all people.

There is not only harassment that transgender women have to face from the side of University directors, employers or medical doctors, but there have as well been reports about police harassments against kathoeis in that transgender women are sometimes picked up by the police against their will without having committed any crime, and then been asked to pay a fine, just because they are kathoei, Prempreeda says.

Another serious issue for Prempreeda is that most kathoeis don't know about their rights and thus don't know how to respond to harassment or discrimination against themselves. But even if they would know, sewing is not affordable for many kathoeis and also not the 'Thai way' of dealing with discrimination matters.

Prempreeda and also Nikorn want to inform the public through media that kathoeis and homosexuals are often not treated well. They want the media to become more gender sensitive and diverse, encouraging kathoeis and homosexuals to raise their own voices and to speak for themselves rather than be spoken about. Prempreeda and also Nikorn are not only cooperating with media representatives but also with the Human Rights Committee in Bangkok, in order to change the situation for transgender women and homosexuals.

Important for Nikorn is that in Thailand's past discourses have been dominated by academics and medical professionals who have positioned homosexuality as a moral and psychological perversion, (whereas it is claimed that these discourses were influenced by attitudes of western society).

Regarding this, Nikorn mentioned that only since 2005, transgender women and homosexuals are no longer exempt by the Military because of 'suffering from a mental illness' but, as he says: the military now finds other reasons to exempt gay men and transgender women from serving in the Army, like bodily incapability, which he finds less insulting. Nikorn also highlights another achievement for the GLBT community, talking about some movie-directors doing their bit in improving the public perception of GLBT people in Thai society through gender sensitive film making with depictions of sexual diversity in an appropriate and respectful setting.

These positive developments provide Prempreeda, Nikorn and other GLBT-rights-supporters, like Mr. Narupon and Natee Teerarojjanapong, tremendous support to their commitment to a change in many Thai people's minds. The work they do, especially their media-related efforts, can contribute to the promotion of GLBT rights, addressing the majorities' sense of justice on the one hand and also being outstanding examples for any person in a marginalized gender subject position.

Unfortunately, there is common opposition to these opinions and well established throughout society. Nonetheless, overcoming the pathologization of identities outside the mainstream and the opening up of narrow stereotypes is an achievable step. In due course, when more and more people throughout time adopt a broader understanding and become more compassionate, Thailand will enjoy a respectful, fair and diverse society. Tolerance and solidarity are not a concession towards a minority but a social feature that sooner or later and in various ways pays off for each member in society.