



## CHAPTER 11

# The New Normal for Young Transgender Women in Thailand

*Unspoken Gender-Based Violence  
in the Time of COVID-19*

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## Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization’s Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, announced that COVID-19, a novel coronavirus, had spread to the extent that it “could be characterized as a pandemic” (WHO 2020). As of 10 July 2020, Thailand had recorded 3,202 cases of COVID-19 and fifty-eight related deaths (WHO Health Emergency Dashboard 2020). On 4 April 2020, a nightly curfew was imposed; everyone had to be at home between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in lockdowns, limitations on movement, and international travel restrictions, all of which have been meant to contain the spread of the virus. Newly published articles (see, for ex-

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ample, Pfefferbaum and North 2020) state that the impact of COVID-19 may be far-reaching and may have a detrimental effect on the well-being and safety of individuals and communities, given the possibility of being stigmatized, the lack of medical resources, and significant economic loss and subsequent feelings of isolation and confusion. Pfefferbaum and North have also suggested that this impact might include the demonstration of harmful behaviors by people who have COVID-19 as well as in the wider population, with concurrent negative mental health outcomes.

Disasters have been characterized as “extreme natural events that are outside our control,” while those affected have been described as “victims of a maleficent nature” (Spurway and Griffith 2016: 471). However, other studies have positioned disasters as events that occur “as a result of structural issues that exist within communities [and] that result in a disproportionate level of vulnerability for specific groups” (King et al. 2019: 460), such as Transgender Women (TGW) and girls. Of course, women and girls in general regularly face violence in Thailand, even when disasters have not occurred.

Rena Janamnuaysook et al. (2015) note that of 202 transgender research survey participants, 21 percent had experienced sexual abuse or violence at least once in their lifetimes. The mixed-methods exploration by Myra Betron (2009), which included twenty-seven TGW from Thailand, found that the vast majority (89 percent) had experienced one or more forms of violence within the past year: twenty-one (78 percent) had experienced emotional violence; nine (33 percent) had experienced physical violence; and sixteen (59 percent) had experienced sexual violence. Much of the existing literature indicates that girls and woman are at a higher risk of emotional and physical abuse after instances of disaster (Campbell et al. 2016; Enarson et al. 2007; First et al. 2017; Parkinson 2019; Rao 2020). One example is the rape of sixty-eight survivors of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti whom Doctors Without Borders treated in one area within a month (Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti 2010). There is no single identifiable reason for the increase in violence following a disaster; intersecting components including homelessness, unemployment, increased substance use, trauma, grief, stress and loss, and confined accommodation were identified by female survivors of Australia’s 2009 “Black Saturday” bushfires as possible reasons (Parkinson and Zara 2013).

It has been well documented that when disasters occur, those who live in poverty or come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have fewer

resources, less choice, and more logistical constrictions (Enarson et al. 2007; True 2013). Periods of disaster often leave women and girls who are already poor in a worse economic position, as Elaine Enarson et al. (2007) point out. Chaman Pincha and Hari Krishna (2008) provide one such example in exploring the impact of the 2004 tsunami in India for *aravanis* (nonbinary people), noting that while they were from low socioeconomic backgrounds prior to the disaster, their economic and social vulnerability was increased as a result.

TGW in Thailand often have limited access to employment opportunities as a direct result of discrimination based on their gender expression and identity (Cameron 2006; Nemoto et al. 2016). While as Scott Berry et al. (2012) note, TGW may be employed as hairdressers, cooks, sex workers, models, dancers, performers, hostesses, and waitresses, those particularly vulnerable to the financial impacts of COVID-19, according to Jack Burton (2020), are those employed in the informal economy, such as sex workers and those who work in massage parlors, bars, and karaoke venues. This is because most of these workers are excluded from government financial relief stimulus packages (UNAIDS 2020) and may not have other rights or entitlements, as Marc Theuss et al. (2014) note. Internationally, TGW are a “very high burden population for HIV” (Baral et al. 2013: 214). In their systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature on prevalence, the frequency of HIV was found to be 12.5 percent (in the range of 5.1 to 19.9 percent) for Thai TGW. Preliminary research (see MacCarthy et al. 2020) has identified the significant impact of COVID-19 on sexual minority men and TGW in the US. Sarah MacCarthy et al. (ibid.) undertook a study that included thirty-six Latinx sexual minority men and sixteen Latinx TGW, and the participants reported that 23.1 percent had increased their alcohol consumption, 67.3 were having sleep difficulties, and 78.4 percent were having mental health difficulties. Within the sample, 34.6 percent stated that their medication attention was lower, and TGW indicated that there were delays in accessing hormones and gender-affirming procedures. Furthermore, it was also noted that of the eighteen participants who were using pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), 33.3 percent had disrupted access to this medication.

The overarching aim of this study was to explore how COVID-19 had an impact on the different facets of the lives of TGW, specifically their access to employment, use of government services and aid, help-seeking for

health issues, and decision-making about sexual relationships. Preliminary questions investigated each participant's income, educational level, and employment details to obtain further insight into their current situation. These were followed by open questions that helped unpack the impact of COVID-19. We used probing questions to clarify, seek additional depth, and discuss specific experiences in greater detail.

## Methods

We conducted the data collection for this study in July 2020. Following Gina Higginbottom et al. (2013) and Pranee Liamputtong (2013), we identified the participants using purposive sampling, since this allowed us to select participants who possessed information and experiences that were relevant to our research. In line with the model offered by Pranee Rice and Douglas Ezzy (2000), in-depth interviews were used to obtain thick and deep explanations of the experiences of the participants. This allowed for a clearer understanding of how COVID-19 had had an impact on their lives. The interviews took place over two weeks from early to mid-July 2020 and were conducted via Line, Skype, or Zoom because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, but also because of the different locations of the participants. The majority ( $n = 19$ ) of the interviews were conducted in Thai and were typically an hour long. The participants provided informed consent to audio-recording of the interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim. All authors contributed to the design of the interview guide. All the researchers involved in the study were members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer (LGBTIQ) community, and the majority ( $n = 4$ ) held insider status as Thai citizens who had worked extensively in their communities to further the rights of LGBTIQ people. Familiarity with the community and a high degree of experience in undertaking research in this context can be identified as a significant strength of the researchers' contribution to this chapter.

Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of the Faculty of Public Health, Mahidol University, Thailand. Since the research team anticipated that the participants might become upset or distressed, contingency plans were included in the ethical protocol for easy access to the Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand for counseling and additional assistance. Strict adherence to the protocol and

the intentional design that allowed for breaks and the presence of a support person meant that these possibilities did not occur.

## Participants

The key informant group was comprised of young TGW who ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-five. Most of the participants were students, who came, typically, from the middle class. Within the student group there were only a few who were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; it was these students who explained that they were having economic problems since losing their part-time employment as a result of COVID-19. Two participants who identified as students were recent graduates who had already begun working. Others worked as cabaret dancers or in night entertainment sectors in Pattaya and were less educated than the graduates since they had started working immediately after completing secondary school. All the cabaret dancers had been working in the industry for less than a year; they said that they had worked in factories and as salespeople, waitresses, cashiers, and bartenders prior to employment in the entertainment sector.

## Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis using the six stages articulated by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). We began by actively reading the research transcripts in an attempt to identify relationships and meaning. We developed preliminary codes and arranged portions of the data into sections. We reviewed the preliminary codes and combined similar codes into central themes. We reviewed these themes critically to ensure that they represented the data accurately, and we then named the themes, defined and reviewed them, and analyzed each portion. All the authors reviewed the themes and the coding to increase the rigor of the analysis.

## Results

Five key themes emerged during the interviews: the negative economic impact of COVID-19; increased tensions in self-quarantine; discrimination in online learning; the dissolution of relationships as a result of COVID-19; and difficulty in accessing hormone treatment.

## *Economic Impact and State Aid*

### The Frustrated Dancers

Unsurprisingly, the participants who were more vulnerable to the economic impacts of COVID-19 were TGW who were less educated, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and working in the entertainment industry. This last aspect reflected the fact that when COVID-19 reached Thailand, many cities that relied heavily on the income from tourism were shut down. The cabaret dancers had lost their jobs because their theaters had closed. All the cabaret dancers reflected that before COVID-19, their lives had been improving because they had managed to find employment in prestigious cabaret theaters. They had been earning a significant salary in their previous roles—between THB 11,000 and 20,000 (approximately USD 350 and 650) per month on average. A number of the participants supplemented this income by working additional jobs in bars after finishing their shifts in the theaters. This income also allowed them to afford the hormone treatment necessary to feminize their physical appearance and enabled them to send money back to their families. All the cabaret dancer participants expressed their disappointment in having their employment terminated, since working in cabaret shows was what many called the “dream of [my] life,” and they had worked hard to retain their employment in this role. Ping, a 23-year-old from Buriram province, said,

It's been my dream job since I was young. I used to write an essay when I was in Grade 4 that I wanted to be in the cabaret show or a designer—something like this and I could do it. I have reached my dream but not for long, and now there is COVID-19. Then, I had to stop and will try again when there is no longer COVID-19. I'll resume my dream again.

When COVID-19 struck Thailand, many of the shows stopped. Some of the participants still attended rehearsals for a few weeks, but some lost their jobs as soon as the state of emergency was announced and the curfew was introduced. Many of the participants working in Pattaya, stressed, upset, and feeling that they were starting all over again or that they had lost all progress made toward their goals of working as cabaret dancers, decided to return to their home provinces. Jenny, a 21-year-old from Loey province, said,

I've kept thinking about this. Why is my life like this? Why have I ended up where I started . . . back to be[ing] a 7-Eleven staff [member].<sup>1</sup> I used to work at the cabaret show, which is my highest dream. Now, I have to start my life all over again. I feel so frustrated.

The economic constraints of COVID-19 meant that the cabaret dancers were saving as much money as they could, and this often meant living in their family homes. The dancers entered new forms of employment, such as selling street food and working at the night market or at 7-Eleven. They said that they would prefer to work in their own businesses rather than in factories or what they called “hard jobs,” as Ping explained:

From what I've seen, those who are in the cabaret business turned themselves into entrepreneurs. For example, the star of Tiffany Show, she's now selling products at the market. Most of her friends also turned to become entrepreneurs, selling things. People working in the cabaret shows are good-looking, they definitely wouldn't go to work in factories because it's hard work.

While a number of respondents tried to find new jobs in the Pattaya area, many were unsuccessful. Jenny had been hired at a 7-Eleven but stated that the salary was half what she used to earn and that she was struggling to cover her expenses, pay her debts, and still send money home to her family. She said, “I used to give 2,000 to 3,000 Baht to my family, now it is only 1,000 Baht.”

June, a 23-year-old from Mahasarakham province, described the difficulty of finding a new job during the COVID-19 pandemic when she said that

[o]ther[s] still try to find [a] new job in their hometown but as the economy is getting worse, finding a job is very hard. The problem is not linked to their gender. Everyone, males and females, [is] also facing the same situation. But they think that some people still have prejudice and discriminate against transgenders.

June also stated that trying to find a job outside of the entertainment or sex industry was difficult given the prevalence of current stereotypes and stigmas. She explained, “Transgender women are more unlikely to find jobs due to stigmatization. We are stereotyped to be in the cabaret show or work in Pattaya to do that kind of [sex] work.” The cabaret dancers were still hopeful that after the pandemic they would be rehired in their previous positions.

### The Students

Students who described themselves as being from the middle class did not face as many economic difficulties as did their cabaret dancer peers. Some had additional support from their parents, but others could not rely on this support since their parents worked in lower-paid positions as farmers, street vendors, and drivers. The parents of Patty, a 22-year-old fourth-year

student from Petchabun province in Chula, sell food in their village. As a result of COVID-19, their earnings have been reduced by 50 percent, and they are not able to send her any money. Patty lost her part-time job as a makeup artist and hairdresser. She said,

When there [was] COVID-19, all my work schedules were canceled, which were tremendous. It was the income that would have made me independent without asking for money from my parents. Now that it's been canceled indefinitely, it's been very shocking, very shocking indeed. For this income, I could have bought anything, hormone[s], purses, shoes, clothes. My parents usually send me weekly stipends but they're not a lot. Now, they cannot do it regularly because [their] income has [also] been reduced. With my current study, I have to use a lot of money to complete my assignment [as a project]. Some of my friends were in trouble and had to find the money.

Some of these participants worked as makeup artists, hairdressers, or wedding organizers, so they were financially self-reliant before COVID-19 struck, and this had a significant impact on their ability to support themselves. Patty explained,

When COVID came, it is all gone, all events have been canceled. I used to earn 5,000 to 8,000 Baht, sometimes even up to five digits. With this money I could buy clothes, bags, shoes, and hormones. I didn't have to ask my parents. It is all gone so I have to ask my mom to support me for my rent, my living cost[s].

COVID-19 also represented an opportunity for some participants. Yaya, a twenty-year-old from Bangkok, started her own online business. She decided to sell chili paste online to earn money to help support her family. She explained,

I like cooking, so I decided to try. It's a recipe from my aunt who came from Isan, northeastern Thailand. In Bangkok there are a lot of people from Isan and good Jaew Bong [fermented fish chili paste] is hard to find. So, I decided to make [it]. I sell it for 30 Baht per box. I gave it to my aunt, and she sold it for 35 Baht. It is [a] small business, but it is going well. I plan to make something else too, try other recipes.

The student participants also stated that social distancing had had a negative impact on their studies and everyday life. Many stated that they had lost motivation and enthusiasm and that online classes made it difficult to follow the course. Other students faced more practical difficulties, like not possessing suitable devices to connect to the internet or having a limited understanding of technology. Many students applied for a scholarship or other funding to support themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Government policy required universities to give THB 5,000 to students who were in financial difficulty, but those who were struggling said that this was not enough. The students suggested that the universities should reduce their fees by 30 to 50 percent since they were not using on-campus facilities.

### *Tensions during Self-Quarantine*

Fourteen days of self-quarantine was required for all participants who returned to their hometowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the cabaret dancers experienced quarantine in their own homes; some were confined to a room in their family home, and this resulted in tension and stress. Many of the participants were afraid of being infected with COVID-19. June said,

I had incoming money in my pockets every day. Now, not at all, but only expenses. It's stressful, actually very stressful. I've got myself medications because I thought that I had migraines and I think it's depression, perhaps. I have been thinking in a loop over and over. I stay alone. At first, I barely left the room. I'm usually a very serious person. I think a lot all the time. When I just got back home, I had a fever and I thought that I actually had COVID-19 because there was another person in my neighborhood who actually had it. I was afraid that I would have been infected as well. And there is the stuff about work, so I felt stressful. I think I have stress as well.

There was an overarching lack of understanding from some family members as to why the TGW were not outside and working during this period. For those who had more strained relationships with their families, these deteriorated while they were in the home. Jenny explained,

My dad does not understand why I only stay at home. But actually, I work online with my smartphone. I'm not close to my dad, but more to my mom. She understands me more. Now that I'm at home, he's not that okay and keeps asking me why I don't go out to work. We don't talk to each other much.

Those who had positive relationships with their family members were welcomed home, and this allowed them to spend time with relatives. These families demonstrated an understanding of the situation in which the TGW found themselves and the impact of COVID-19 on them.

The cabaret dancers faced questioning from neighbors about whether they were sick or affected by COVID-19 because they had returned from Pattaya, which is a tourism hub. Ping described her feelings of being observed during her quarantine when she said, "During the quarantine at home, I felt like people looked at me because my house is a grocery store."

Jenny described her neighbors' fear that she would transmit COVID-19 to them, saying, "My neighbor asked me why I came back home. They were afraid that I would pass on the virus."

### *Discrimination during Online Learning*

In the student group, there were a few individuals who faced discrimination on the basis of their gender identity and expression, despite the shift to online forms of learning. Jade, who is a nineteen-year-old first-year university student from Samutprakarn province, wanted to wear a female uniform, but a number of professors in her faculty said that they did not agree with her decision. During the opening ceremony and orientation, which was broadcast via Zoom, Jade was openly chastised by a professor in the presence of her peers. She explained,

I went to talk to professors in my department, [saying] that I would like to wear female uniform. She asked, "Why [do] you want to do that?" I said I wanted to be [a] woman. I want to be a teacher and my gender has nothing to do with how I teach. The professor said that it is too much, and asked why I request[ed] this, it is too soon because I am just in first year. She said that there were a lot of processes, the welcoming of new students and the training in a school. She added, "You have to wear male clothing. And do you know clothing is not as important as studying? Do you know that our university is so open to people like you, to be able to wear female clothing in [the] graduation ceremony?" I was shocked with her answer. She said that my request was not appropriate.

Subsequently, Jade posted photographs of herself wearing the female uniform on social media. Her actions were seen as controversial by the wider transgender community on the internet and provoked a reaction from the involved professor. Jade explained,

The professor talked about my case in [a] Zoom meeting. There were thirty students in this section. She said, "Why did you do this?" She blamed me [for] what happen[ed] [on] social media because I plan[ned] to make a complaint to the president of [the] university.

Despite the shift to online learning by many universities, discrimination is pervasive and has continued. Rules on uniform are still in effect at many Thai universities, and the rules about which uniform can be worn are based on binary conceptualizations of sex and gender. Transgender students often have to wear the uniform of the sex to which they were assigned at birth when on campus and when using university facilities. They are considered male and have Mr. as their title.

### *Love in the Time of COVID-19*

For many couples, COVID-19 created instant long-distance relationships, since travel was restricted and couples faced additional barriers to meeting face-to-face. A number of participants had broken up with their partners as a result of the economic impacts of COVID-19, and because long-distance relationships were perceived as being difficult to maintain. As Yaya stated about a friend, “It is because [of] the distance, they didn’t have time to spend together, and her boyfriend was really addicted to online games. So, they broke up.” This left some participants in an even worse economic position, as Jenny explained,

It is because of COVID-19 that he left me, and left me with his debt . . . We bought a house together but because of this COVID-19, my boyfriend dumped me. He went back to his home, leaving with all the debts to only me.

Additionally, Jenny’s boyfriend of six months had left her to return to his home and to his ex-girlfriend, with whom he had a child. She said,

We were disconnected. I saw the photo of his girlfriend. They lived together. One day he was gone. He probably got back to his ex-girlfriend, who they had a kid together. . . . If there had [been] no COVID, we would have continued to date . . . Once the COVID-19 came, we went separate ways. Actually, we still love each other but we had to part. When he left, he didn’t tell me at all. I was trying to probe whether he already ha[d] a wife and kids so that I [could] make up my mind.

The ending of relationships because of COVID-19 left some of the TGW chatting online with other men, including *farang* (foreigners). Despite the pressures resulting from the pandemic, many participants persevered and tried to maintain online relationships with their intimate partners. Engaging in sexual relationships became less frequent for the participants since many were living with their parents and avoiding going out and hosting parties during this time.

### *Access to Healthcare and Hormone Treatment*

The TGW who experienced negative impacts from COVID-19 said that purchasing hormones had become difficult. Already living with parents, these young women were using the last of their money to cover their costs for the next three to four months. Jenny, who was able to find a position at a 7-Eleven, stated that her income was not sufficient to cover her costs in addition to buying hormones. She said,

At the moment, I don't have much money. I can't afford hormones. And I don't normally use [them] anyway. I will use [them] when I can really afford [them]. When I was [in] Grade 10, I could save the money for 1,000 Baht. I could buy hormones for two months. Then again [in] Grade 12, I could buy them for two months. Now that I'm working, I take hormones from time to time but not frequently. Now, let alone with the hormones, I can't even afford food.

Most of the participants stated that they were stressed and worried about the impact of COVID-19. The cabaret dancers said that they had experienced depression, and some were so concerned about their futures that they cried every day. Many said that they experienced an increased number of migraines and headaches. The stressors for students were amplified since they were often trying to balance studying from home and managing financially. The consumption of cigarettes increased for many participants, since they were stressed at home, but alcohol use decreased because the curfew meant that TGW could not go out and party with friends. Some had stopped drinking alcohol because they could no longer afford it, while others drank more alcohol because they had free time that was spent with friends or partying at home instead. As 21-year-old Kath from Chiang Mai province stated,

I wanted to go out so much but when everything closed, I didn't go out at all. I wanted to party a lot. It was very boring. But the good side was I could take some rest. Healthwise, it was a good thing because I didn't get to drink alcohol at all. My face would look a little plump because I drink too much beer, sometimes almost every day in a week. But for this, I felt my face [was] smaller and my skin [was] actually brighter. But COVID-19 has made me smoke a lot more [laughing] because it's stressful. Now, I almost smoke two packets per day.

## Discussion

While the impacts of COVID-19 have been widespread and significant for most communities worldwide, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, TGW were already stigmatized and discriminated against, and this resulted in limited economic opportunities. The impact of this outbreak has put them in a more difficult situation, since they have gone from economic independence to economic desperation. For TGW from low socioeconomic backgrounds or for those who are already living in precarious positions, relying on income from tourists, life has become exponentially more difficult. Progress made toward life goals has seemingly dissipated

and for many, alternative and less lucrative careers have been sought as a matter of necessity. This affects their access to health services, and, in turn, their mental health and social well-being. Access to proper transgender healthcare has shifted from being difficult to almost nonexistent.

Reliance on family for assistance and physical distance in interpersonal and intimate relationships have also resulted in the deterioration of connections for some, which may have wide-reaching impacts on the dynamics of the family in the future and the amount of support that may be given to TGW. Since Thailand is a collectivist community in which the family is often the primary source of support for TGW rather than the government, such changes may be far-reaching and significant. The state quarantine has not only affected economic lives but has also resulted in the separation of many couples who still have no legal status because their union is not recognized in law. As expected, the discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity employed by educational gatekeepers that was evident even before the pandemic continues to exert its influence, albeit through digital platforms such as Zoom and the monitoring of social media.

It is evident that the outbreak of COVID-19 has detrimentally affected many aspects of the lives of TGW in Thailand. It is most likely that their lives will have changed forever. The current movement working on human rights for these TGW is focused mostly on their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is surely time to consider a more inclusive approach in relation to human rights that does not exclude them. This has raised an important question for policymakers, health practitioners, and social workers in respect to how their policies and programs should be designed and redesigned, and how resources should be reallocated to cater to the needs of TGW, which have changed because of COVID-19, and to ensure that they are not excluded. This research also demonstrates the significant resilience and flexibility of TGW living in Thailand, who have, in some instances, made significant life and personal changes to adjust to their communities' new normal.

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## Note

1. 7-Eleven is a chain of convenience stores.

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