

Marginalized identity in Indonesian higher education: Navigating nonbinary students' experience on campus

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ABSTRACT

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Nonbinary individuals often experience discrimination and marginalization in society. This might end up increasing the severity of their gender dysphoria, body image, and mental health in general. This research's objective is to know nonbinary students' perspectives regarding their gender identity's existence and visibility in their respective higher education institutions, the challenges they face, and potential solutions they wish to overcome their challenges. This research's method and approach are qualitative descriptive, based on primary data collected by in-depth interviews with six qualified informants. Then, the interview results were made into transcripts and discussed in three subchapters in accordance with this research's objective. The difficulties found are the lack of literature regarding this topic and the lack of informants. Based on the interview, the authors conclude that nonbinary students receive discrimination and lack of attention from their institutions. Existing gender dysphoria with added constant discrimination causes the informants to feel discomfort, depression, and stress. Potential solutions offered are gender diversity education and the increase of both physical and mental healthcare services. Inclusive healthcare services are required to ensure that nonbinary individuals are able to access gender-affirming care and tackle issues that compromise their well-being, especially issues related to their identity and expression.

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Introduction

Sex and gender are two similar yet distinct concepts. Sex (which might be addressed as assigned sex at birth or sex characteristics) is defined as a classification of male, female, intersex, and other sex based on one's biological characteristics, such as chromosomes, hormones, gonad, and anatomy (Artaria, 2016). Gender can be defined as a product of socially constructed differentiation of social roles, functions, and responsibilities between one gender and another. Gender is a dynamic concept, meaning that society's knowledge regarding gender might change from time to time, along with the continuous growth of science (Kartini & Maulana, 2019). In conclusion, sex is related to one's biological aspect, while gender is related to sociocultural aspects, although both are sometimes correlated and intersected, hence the term intersectionality (Beasley, 2021; Makhmucik, 2020; Mant et al., 2021; Trans Student Educational Resources, 2015).

Even with their distinction, the misconception of gender and sex is still a relevant problem in society. Contrary to science and reality, in the Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) dictionary, sex and gender share the same definition, which is "sex assigned at birth" (KBBI Daring, 2021a, 2021b). This condition mimics the reality in Indonesian society, where the misconception of sex and gender is still considered the norm. Current society's knowledge of gender is rooted in the norm and value system inherited by the previous generations, making gender definition remarkably outdated. Indonesian society's definition of gender is a fundamental differentiation between men and women (Cederved et al., 2021; Rosa et al., 2022; Thamrin, 2015).

Such misconception is known as genderism or gender binarism. Gender binarism defines gender as two polar

opposites—men should only be masculine, while women should only be feminine (Anzani et al., 2023; Ben-Zeev & Dennehy, 2014; Saeidzadeh, 2020; Zaslów, 2018). The rules of gender binary harm the existence of sexually diverse individuals because their identities lie beyond the binary (Ismoyo, 2020; Richards et al., 2016).

Matsuno & Budge (2017) defined gender nonbinary as an umbrella term used to accommodate a group of individuals with gender identities in between and beyond the binary, which is neither exclusively male nor female, namely pangender, trigender, bigender, genderqueer, agender, gender neutral, gender fluid, and many other diversities. In some cultures and societies, gender nonbinary is also considered to be a "third gender" (Cederved et al., 2021; Monro, 2019; Richards et al., 2016). Some gender researchers mentioned that technically, nonbinary identities can be included in the "trans-" group since nonbinary individuals' gender identity is incongruent with their sex assigned at birth (Murchison et al., 2016). However, not every individual identifies themselves as trans-, and that is also valid. Therefore, it is up to said individuals to identify as transgender or not. Gender nonbinary is closely related to the concept of gender fluidity. Gender fluidity perceives gender as a free and fluid spectrum as opposed to the rigid dichotomy of gender binarism (Bornstein, 1994; Galupo et al., 2021; Parker, 2016; Prasetyo et al., 2019; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015).

Gender fluidity is able to explain the existence of gender diversity beyond binarism. However, it is often considered a relatively fresh "Western" concept, when in some pre-colonization cultures, gender binarism is, in some cases, the norm. History proved that gender binarism is a Western concept spread through colonization. Instead, the existence of nonbinary gender identities already existed in local

communities all over the world, hundreds of years ago. Such traditional gender identities are *femminielli* in Italy, *kathoey* in Thailand, *hijra* in India, *mollies* in England, and *machi* in Chile and Argentina (Alnoza & Sulistyowati, 2021; Vincent & Manzano, 2017).

In Indonesia, a unique variety of nonbinary identities exists in Bugis culture. The Bugis culture recognizes the existence of five genders, all with their own roles, functions, and responsibilities in society. Those genders are *oroané* (cisgender men), *makkunrai* (cisgender women), *calalai* (masculine women), *calabai* (feminine men), and *bissu* (androgyny or nonbinary) (Alnoza & Sulistyowati, 2021; Artaria, 2016; Davies, 2001). Different from the other four, *bissu* is considered a blend of other gender identities existing in Bugis culture, making them very respected in Buginese society. They also believe that *bissu* is a sacred and holy being, capable of speaking “heaven’s language”, thus making *bissu* their very own spiritual guide and priest, while attaining their nonbinary and meta-gender identity (Midayanti, 2021; Pattinama et al., 2020; Untara & Rahayu, 2020). However, threats from other religious groups and the *bissu*’s slow regeneration caused their role to decrease in society. Many people even see them as regular ladyboys as opposed to their nature, a highly respected and sacred Buginese priest (Suliyati, 2018; Syaifullah et al., 2021)

The existence of gender nonbinary is considered controversial. Currently, discrimination and ignorance still surrounding them. Many people believe that nonbinary individuals are defying the laws of nature, dishonoring God, and are mentally ill (CNN Indonesia, 2021). Discrimination faced by nonbinary individuals might lower their mental health and body image (Beasley, 2021; Currie, 2021; Tabaac et al., 2018; Veldhuis et al., 2018). Discrimination is always a relevant subject since it can happen

anytime, anywhere, and in many forms (Goldie & Chatterjee, 2021; James et al., 2016; Kattari & Begun, 2017).

Issues ranging from access gap, discrimination, and degradation of mental health faced by nonbinary individuals, along with the lack of attention to said issues in Indonesia cause an urgency to study this topic. This research’s objective is to assess the perception of nonbinary students in correlation to their existence and visibility in their respective higher education institutions’ campus climate, the reason behind such perception, and suggestions of potential solutions or actions necessary to help them overcome their issues. The authors hope that this research will serve as evidence of their existence and visibility, to prove that they should have the same voice as the rest of us, and further motivate higher education institutions to recognize and accommodate their very existence. The authors also hope that this research will stimulate further research in Indonesia to increase the visibility of marginalized gender identities. After reading this paper, the knowledge acquired will hopefully grow some sense of sensitivity and tolerance regarding gender issues, especially in Indonesia.

Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method. Primary data were collected by conducting online in-depth interviews during the course of a month (late November to early December 2021). Eligible informants are those who were active undergraduate or graduate students and identified as nonbinary. Before conducting the interview, simple explanations of the research were given to the informants, including data confidentiality, informant anonymity, and the informants’ consent statement to participate in this research. In total, there are six qualified informants who

are willing to participate in this research (see Table 1). The interviews were done using chat and direct message features on social media applications, such as Line, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

After conducting the interviews, the data collected was transcribed to be analyzed. The data were classified into several subchapters to answer the research's objectives. Various questions were asked to the informants,

Table 1. List of informants in this study

No.	Pseudonym	Institution	Age	Gender Identity
1	Anis	Universitas Indonesia	19	Nonbinary
2	Biru	Universitas Indonesia	21	Nonbinary female
3	Cinta	Calvin Institute of Technology	19	Bigender (questioning), transmasculine
4	Dara	Universitas Terbuka	23	Nonbinary
5	Elang	Universitas Bunda Mulia	17	Nonbinary
6	Gaga	Universitas Multimedia Nusantara	24	Nonbinary (agender)

Source: Authors' data (2022)

namely regarding the existence of nonbinary individuals on campus, freedom of gender expressions as a nonbinary individual, recognition, and attention given by the institution, issues relating to their gender identity, the solution to the issues, and additional information that might be useful for the research.

Secondary data were acquired from various sources, such as ScienceDirect, DOAJ, Google Scholar, and Academia. The secondary data used were journal articles, organizational reports, and websites. Challenges were met during the literature collection stage, or perhaps, lack thereof. Works of literature that intersected gender nonbinary and higher education were scarce. Even, zero literature was found in the authors' native language (Indonesian).

Results and Discussion

The existence and visibility of nonbinary identities on campus

The existence and visibility referred to in this research are the existence of nonbinary gender individuals and communities in certain environments (in this context, the higher education environment), as well as

the acknowledgments of these individuals by other people in the academic community. Visibility can be shown by involving nonbinary students as parts of organizations and/or as important decision-makers, as well as guaranteed freedom of gender expression that recognizes and ensures the validity of various nonbinary genders. Furthermore, the acknowledgments of nonbinary individuals can also be shown with gender-friendly infrastructures, the existence of related communities, and the use of gender-neutral pronouns and titles as default (Budge et al., 2020; Knutson et al., 2019; Mujugira et al., 2021).

Based on the interviews, all six informants admitted to not having groups or nonbinary gender communities at their respective universities. Anis added that the absence of communities in their campus environment is possibly caused by online learning implemented since the COVID-19 outbreak. It is unfortunate since communities are significant for marginalized people as it increases the sense of belonging, solidarity, helping and caring for each other, and creates safe surroundings for the community members. Members of said communities can also lighten the burden for each other by

feeling that they share the same experiences (Alaydrus et al., 2023; Budge et al., 2019; Cederved et al., 2021; Goldberg, Beemyn, et al., 2019).

Concerning freedom of expression in campus environments, the informants offered various insights. Their diverse experiences can be caused by either internal or external factors. The internal factors are factors that come from the informants themselves, such as personal fear and insecurity. Meanwhile, external factors are defined as factors that one does not have control over, such as campus environments, ideologies adopted by higher education institutions, and so on (Flint et al., 2019).

Two informants (Anis and Biru) mentioned that their academic environment was generally supportive of their identity and expression, though Biru felt uncomfortable in disclosing their “true self”. The other three informants (Cinta, Dara, and Elang) stated that they are unable to express their gender identity because of the heteronormative values held by their campus, faculty, and fellow students. Meanwhile, Gaga expressed a relatively unique answer because they mentioned the informal “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on their campus.

“No. I don’t face discrimination, but I can say that there is no safe space for transgender and nonbinary students in my university environment. Most of the students don’t talk about their gender identities, including me. It is like there is this unwritten rule of ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ amongst us” (Interview with Gaga).

Anis mentioned their faculty, which is the Faculty of Humanities. They claimed that the Faculty of Humanities’ environment is not overly judgmental, and it does not bother them to express themselves as a nonbinary individual. However, further study is needed to acquire accurate data on the aforementioned faculty and university in

the context of progressivity and acceptance of students’ gender identities and expressions. The study, then, could be expanded into a comparative study that compares the degree of progressivity of certain faculties and universities with others.

In the decision-making and administrative affairs of a higher education institution, the role of the rector, dean, and lecturer becomes very important. This also applies to the matter of nonbinary genders. Outside Indonesia, several higher education institutions such as the University of London, England, and the University of Oregon, United States of America have provided a third choice of pronouns for the members of their academic institutions. Options are no longer limited to the “Mr.” and “Ms./Mrs.”, but also “Mx.”, which is a gender-neutral pronoun (*Mx Join Mrs, Mr, Miss, and Ms 2017; Using Pronouns 2022*).

Unfortunately, this has not been implemented in Indonesia. The reason is that Indonesian people are still very conservative. In other words, the general public of Indonesian demography still upholds cis-heteronormative values, hence gender binarism still dominates nearly all aspects of life (Arbani, 2012). The absence of gender-neutral pronouns or degrees is still a major problem that more often than not, causes nonbinary students to feel uncomfortable in the campus environment (Flint et al., 2019; Goldberg, Kuvalanka, et al., 2019; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

In August 2022, an undergraduate student from Universitas Hasanuddin (Unhas) was removed from a session on student orientation day because they are nonbinary. Unhas’ Vice Dean III harassed the student by making them choose whether they were a woman or a man, and the student explained that they were neither. The issue was resolved not long after, as it incited backlash for both the student (most people still deem that it is unacceptable) and the

campus as a whole institution that should have accommodated all gender identities instead of openly bullying and discriminating against a student for being “different” from the norm. The narrative proves that higher education institutions in Indonesia still fail to acknowledge gender diversity and create a safe space that accommodates every member of the said institutions (BBC News Indonesia, 2022; Pasa’buan, 2022; Rusdianto, 2022; Simbolon, 2022; Tawakal & Chozanah, 2022).

The interviews also showed that the overall human element in the higher education environments of the six informants does not consider and acknowledge the existence of nonbinary identities. Although uncommon, it should also be underlined that there are indeed some students and lecturers who are concerned about this issue. For example, in the nonbinary student from Universitas Hasanuddin’s case, there are still people who stood up for them, demanding that the university apologize for openly discriminating against and bullying the said student. However, it is far from sufficient when the hate outweighs the support (BBC News Indonesia, 2022; Pasa’buan, 2022; Rusdianto, 2022; Simbolon, 2022; Tawakal & Chozanah, 2022).

The lack of attention towards gender minorities, such as nonbinary, should be a concern. Campuses should improve the creation of safe spaces for all students, both in academic and non-academic contexts. Thus, the attention of decision-makers on the campuses is very important to the existence, comfort, and safety of nonbinary students. Ultimately, nonbinary students are also part of the institutions. This means that it is their right to be given equal attention just as the other students whose gender identities align with the binary concept (Budge et al., 2020; Flint et al., 2019; Haverkamp, 2018; Hoxmeier & Madlem, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021).

Issues faced by nonbinary students

As established in the previous narrative, Indonesia is one of many cis-heteronormative societies that only approve of the dichotomy between man and woman. This results in the discrimination of other genders outside the supposed pair, such as nonbinary identities. The discrimination against nonbinary identities could cause discomfort that would affect poorly their mental health. The constant discrimination faced by nonbinary individuals will likely worsen their gender dysphoria (Başar et al., 2016; Galupo et al., 2021; Harry-Hernandez et al., 2020; MacDonald et al., 2016; Pfeffer, 2008; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020). The answers from the informants, when they were asked about issues, they encountered related to their gender identities, reflect the previous statement.

“I feel like I have the wrong body (I was an AFAB—assigned female at birth), and the feeling gets stronger each time I go through my menstrual cycle. I would be depressed and even experience mental breakdown if I feel that I look or dress femininely, or when someone addresses me as ‘ma’am’ or ‘miss’. I don’t fully feel like a boy, and I’m quite neutral about having breasts and female genitalia; but if I could afford myself a gender-affirmation surgery, I would take it. I also often feel guilty/sinful in front of God, because all my life, I had been taught that being transgender is a sin. Aside from that, I’m afraid to pursue a romantic relationship with other people, because I feel that nobody would entirely accept me for who I am” (Interview with Cinta).

“The problem I often encounter is related to how I express myself through my physical appearance. I grew up being taught how to be a girl, but the moment I realized that I didn’t want to express myself as a girl, I started finding other ways to do just that. But my parents have forbidden me and I still live with them, there are so many things that are stopping me. Especially the fact that

my family is strict and religious. If they notice that I'm starting to deviate, it would be a huge problem for me" (Interview with Elang).

"My gender identity is almost always not acknowledged, since how I dress aligns with society's expectation of my biological sex (AFAB or assigned female at birth). I almost always get mistaken as a girl even though I already said I am nonbinary. Because of that treatment, I oftentimes doubt my own gender identity—am I a nonbinary person or am I just a cisgender girl? But I never feel like I fit the definition of a 'girl'. I feel like I don't belong anywhere" (Interview with Gaga).

The interview results show that the issues the six informants face vary but are otherwise similar—which evolve around self-acceptance, gender dysphoria, body image, and mental health. The issues mentioned are caused by discomfort. The discomfort itself is a product of discrimination, misgendering, microaggression, and invalidation that are constantly given to the informants (Clements, 2018; Currie, 2021).

Misgendering can be defined as an intentional or unintentional gesture in the form of using the wrong name and/or pronoun and misdescribing someone as having a particular gender identity they do not identify with (Alaydrus et al., 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2019; Truszczynski et al., 2022). For instance, *"mas"* (a pronoun in Bahasa Indonesia that is used for traditionally a masculine-presenting and/or a male person) was used to refer to Anis on many occasions. They were also often described as a "male student," though they were not comfortable with the terms used. This is why it is important to ask one's pronouns and what they prefer to be called (Knutson et al., 2019).

Cinta and Elang also brought up their self-acceptance issues, caused by religious doctrines that had taught them that transgender individuals (including

nonbinary transgender people) are "deviants" and that they are sinners (Murdiyatmoko et al., 2017). Self-acceptance issues also correlate to Elang's fear of expressing themselves. This is mainly caused by their hostile home environment, and both informants are parts of religious families and religion-based higher education institutions. For Cinta, this issue caused their identity crisis, in which they are struggling to balance out their religious belief and their gender identity (Widiastuti et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, discrimination seems like a recurring theme in regard to nonbinary students, not only on campus but also out of campus, just like what Cinta mentioned. Discrimination itself is highly responsible for the disruption of gender and sexually diverse students' mental health (Beasley, 2021; Peng et al., 2019). Compared to transgender binary and nonbinary individuals who were assigned male, uniquely, transgender binary and nonbinary individuals who were assigned female are more prone to mental health disorders, suicidal, and self-harming tendencies. It is suspected that this issue is correlated to the fact that this has something to do with the patriarchy (Arbani, 2012). As a result, gender-based discrimination often harms women and or feminine-presenting individuals more than men and or masculine-presenting individuals (Rimes et al., 2019).

Nonbinary youths also experience difficulties in school. A study in England concluded that nonbinary youths face multiple challenges and hardships in school. It is caused by fear of being transphobia-based bullying, expectations to submit to the binary system, difficulties in expressing their gender identity, the lack of access, the use of binary-based curriculum, and feeling some degree of discomfort and invisibility (Paechter et al., 2021). Correlating to the previous study, a study in China showed high rates of abuse, neglect, and bullying in schools and households. These actions

might further deteriorate nonbinary individuals' mental health, even pushing them to have suicidal thoughts (Jarrett et al., 2021). Tragically, the study found that an indication of mental health disorder is a common trait found in nonbinary youths (Peng et al., 2019).

Other than school, discrimination might occur in healthcare services. In accessing healthcare services, studies in multiple countries stated that there are visible discrepancies and discrimination. In Canada, nonbinary youths' experience when accessing healthcare is worse in comparison to transgender binary individuals (Clark et al., 2018). Nonbinary individuals often experience invalidation and invisibility of their gender identity when accessing mental healthcare services (Johnson et al., 2020; Knutson et al., 2019). Therapists and mental healthcare workers hold a very influential role. On one side, they can cause more damage to nonbinary individuals' mental health if they deny the patient's gender identity. But on the other side, they also have the unique ability to encourage mental healing and positively contribute to the patient's mental health development (Goldberg, Beemyn, et al., 2019; Goldberg, Kivalanka, et al., 2019).

The informants' experience proved the heartbreaking reality of discrimination on campus, which was also supported by many works of literature (Flint et al., 2019; Hoxmeier & Madlem, 2018). Regarding campus administration, nonbinary students often feel discomfort due to the provided binary options (man and woman) in the gender identity section (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018). Nonbinary students also experience stress caused by the campus' exclusive environment, for example, campus facilities (men's and women's toilets) and the behavior of lecturers and fellow students in reaction to nonbinary students' mere existence (Budge et al., 2019). Nonbinary medical students tend to hide their gender identity

due to the fear of facing discrimination. This perspective is also relevant in engineering culture, which might be caused by the existing binary-based curriculum that often defends and justifies transphobia (Dimant et al., 2019; Haverkamp, 2018).

Proposed solutions and coping mechanism

Based on the interviews, five out of six informants proposed "education" as a potential solution to solve their issues. Their solution is also supported by many pieces of research prior. Many works of literature concluded similar things that highlight the role of higher education institutions and policymakers in evaluating the current gender-biased or exclusionary system to create a more inclusive and gender-friendly campus climate (Goldberg, Beemyn, et al., 2019; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021).

Education plays an important role in stimulating social change while enhancing the quality of human resources for generations to come. Education serves as a medium to bridge relatively traditional customs with progressive values. Through gender education, the informants hoped that younger generations could further broaden their mindset and increase the acceptance and recognition rate of nonbinary identity. Other than developing the student's knowledge and critical thinking, gender-friendly education might also increase comprehension of human diversity and heterogeneity, encouraging some level of openness, and growing the seeds of tolerance (Chakrapani et al., 2021; Hoxmeier & Madlem, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021; Paechter et al., 2021; Rahmawati, 2021; White & Jenkins, 2017).

Of course, the desired change will not happen instantaneously. However, social change is inevitable and highly possible (Chisholm & du Bois-Reymond, 1993; Ho

et al., 2015; Russell & Fish, 2019; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Therefore, the authors would like to quote one of the informants: “Now, it is up to us [the youths or students or victims]” to drive the said change to the “right” course.

While continuing to hope for a better, more inclusive future for nonbinary individuals, an informant stated that they had accepted the status quo. They realized that changes to achieve gender equality is a long process, so in the meantime, they are focusing on expressing themselves and making changes on a smaller scale. In doing so, Elang changed their appearance bit by bit to affirm their gender with the purpose of slowly reintroducing themselves and making the people around them not be taken aback by their drastic change in gender expression.

Similar to transgender individuals’ preferences, some nonbinary individuals often feel the need for medical intervention. Cinta stated that they were experiencing depressive episodes each time they menstruate. There are two types of intervention to deal with said issue. First, medical interventions such as gender affirmation surgery, hormone therapy, and the use of contraceptive pills to prevent menstruation (Harry-Hernandez et al., 2020; Klein & Golub, 2020; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Secondly, counseling with psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals. Counseling held a significant role in communicating possible medical interventions needed for nonbinary individuals (Barnes et al., 2020; Budge et al., 2020; Mujugira et al., 2021). Both types of intervention should be known by all nonbinary individuals to maintain their health and well-being. It is hoped that increased access to physical and mental healthcare for nonbinary individuals can boost their comfort and self-acceptance levels (Boyle, 2022; Matouk & Wald, 2022).

Conclusion

Cis- and heteronormative society defines gender as a sex-related dichotomy when it is actually a relatively free and fluid concept compared to sex. Nonbinary is a gender identity that exists outside of the said dichotomy. Individuals with nonbinary identities are no strangers to discrimination and marginalization, causing their mental health, body image, and gender dysphoria to rupture from time to time. In the Indonesian higher education climate, nonbinary students experience hardships related to their gender identities, such as gender-based discrimination, the lack of validation from the higher education institution, the societal stigma surrounding their identity, and limited space to express themselves. Nonbinary students often feel like their gender’s existence is erased and invisible. The informants proposed the implementation of gender-friendly education in the curriculum. Another perspective recommended the government and policymakers to further increase and guarantee equal access to both medical and mental healthcare as a potential solution to cope with issues related to their gender identity. Understanding the perspectives and experiences of marginalized individuals allows us, academicians, and other stakeholders (policymakers, non-governmental organizations, student bodies, and many more) to understand and further expand our knowledge and practice on inclusive education—one that involves nondiscriminatory practice against all gender identities. An insight provided by this research might also act as a catalyst for gender rights reform in Indonesia.

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Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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