Livelihood patterns of waria in Sinjai

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the types of employment, obstacles, and strategies employed by *waria* (transgender women) to earn a living in Sinjai Regency. A descriptive qualitative research design was utilized. Data were collected from seven adult *waria* informants in Sinjai Regency, selected based on their willingness to participate and provide information openly and comprehensively. Data collection methods included observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data analysis process involved three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the work undertaken by *waria* to earn a living in Sinjai Regency is predominantly within the creative industry and service sectors—such as beauty salon ownership and employment, event decoration, makeup artistry (MUA), and performing as *elekton* (electronic keyboard) singers. Additionally, employment was found in the public sector, specifically as staff members of the Village Consultative Body (BPD). This diversity of occupations reflects the socio-economic adaptability dynamics of the *waria* community at the local level.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bentuk pekerjaan, faktor penghambat, dan strategi waria dalam mencari nafkah di Kabupaten Sinjai. Jenis penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan dari tujuh informan waria dewasa di Kabupaten Sinjai yang dipilih berdasarkan kesediaan berpartisipasi memberikan informasi secara utuh dan terbuka. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Teknik analisis data yang diterapkan meliputi tiga tahap, yaitu reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bentuk pekerjaan waria dalam mencari nafkah di Kabupaten Sinjai didominasi oleh sektor industri kreatif dan jasa, seperti pemilik dan pegawai salon kecantikan, pendekorasi acara, Make-Up Artist (MUA), serta penyanyi elekton. Selain itu, ditemukan pula variasi pekerjaan di sektor publik sebagai pegawai pada Badan Permusyawaratan Desa (BPD). Keberagaman jenis pekerjaan ini mencerminkan dinamika adaptabilitas sosial-ekonomi kelompok waria di tingkat lokal.

Keywords

economic strategies; livelihood, waria

1. Introduction

The existence of *waria* (transgender women) is undeniable and constitutes a visible reality within society. The term *waria* refers to individuals biologically male who possess the traits, behaviors, and feelings characteristic of women (Atmojo, 1986). Among the Bugis people, *waria* are commonly known as *Calabai,* men who adopt a feminine appearance (Davies, 2018). *Waria* identity is not merely an individual construct but is also socially formed through the public presentation of behavior. Research on the anthropology of the body conducted by (Suharyanto, 2015) indicates that becoming a *waria* is a historical process a dialectical interaction between the individual and the social environment in which they live and were raised. *Waria* navigate this process amidst various social pressures to which they must respond, ultimately shaping their understanding of life as a *waria* (Istiqomah, 2023).

Most *waria* live independently, often far from their families, and must therefore fend for themselves to earn a living and ensure their survival. Livelihood (*nafkah*) refers to the obligation traditionally held by a husband to fulfill the needs of a wife, children, or family, specifically regarding the essentials of clothing, food, and shelter (Dharmawan, 2007).

As individuals with a sexual orientation that differs from the norm, *waria* often face social pressure (Safri, 2017) and ridicule regarding their identity; yet, conversely, their services are in demand . For instance, they are highly sought after in the fields of makeup and beauty services, a factor that facilitates their social acceptance (Handayani et al., 2025). Consequently, they employ livelihood strategies that differ from those of other individuals. Livelihood strategies encompass the tactics and actions undertaken by individuals or groups to sustain their lives while navigating existing social infrastructure, social structures, and prevailing cultural value systems (Agustin et al., 2024). A livelihood strategy involves a combination of assets natural, physical, human, financial, and social capital along with activities and access mediated by institutions and social relationships; together, these elements determine the life of an individual or household (Devita, 2024). The behavior of *waria* (transgender women) is considered deviant because it does not align with the values and norms prevailing in society. They are often perceived as a group largely involved in the sex trade (Kase et al., 2025). Their lives are frequently associated with sexuality; for instance, the study Transgender at Work: Livelihoods for Transgender People in Vietnam cites data from the United States indicating that between 24% and 75% of *waria* work as sex workers, while figures from Asia range from approximately 54% to 80%. In Indonesia, a survey found that 72% of *waria* are employed and earn a monthly income, while the remaining 28% report being unemployed. Among those who are employed, the majority about 65%n work in beauty salons. Nineteen percent identify as sex workers, 6% as general employees, and 3% as cake sellers; 2% work as street performers, and 1% are self-employed. Additionally, some *waria* report having an income but do not disclose the specific nature of their work (Atika, 2026).

Discrimination in employment has become a daily reality for *waria*. This aligns with the findings of the study Discrimination Regarding the Right to Work for Transgender People (Case Study: Three Transgender Individuals in Jakarta), which describes transgender people as a group marginalized by society. They frequently face discrimination due to their characteristics; *waria* are often viewed as immoral and at odds with social and religious norms (Sidjabat, 2026). Their identities do not align with the culture of the society in which they live. From an anthropological perspective, culture is defined as patterns of behavior and beliefs mediated by symbols that are learned, integrated, rational, shared, dynamic, adaptive, and dependent on human social interaction for their existence. Culture influences the behavioral processes through which individuals construct their worlds. By creating their own world, individuals are able to position themselves and realize their lives (Maryam, 2019). Transgender women and the culture associated with them often give rise to negative perspectives; for instance, when they present themselves as women, they attract societal stigma.

In a socio-economic context, *waria* (transgender women) are classified into two categories: sex workers and non-sex workers. *Waria* sex workers are those whose primary occupation is in the sex trade, whereas non-sex worker *waria* are employed in various other fields—such as beauty salons, the civil service, or trade or hold other types of jobs. In Sinjai, for instance, my preliminary observations in Balangnipa Urban Village (North Sinjai District) revealed that *waria* there work outside the sex industry; most are employed in beauty salons, as bridal makeup artists, or as wedding stylists. However, precise data regarding the number of *waria* in the area is currently unavailable.

Choosing to live as a *waria* entails facing various risks, including social stigma. In Sinjai Regency, *waria* are viewed as a minority group living within a broad, pluralistic society. The prevailing social and cultural order in Sinjai does not yet fully place *waria* on an equal footing with other gender groups. This significantly impacts their lifestyles, particularly regarding how they earn a living. *Waria* must contend with societal norms and regulations that often leave no space for them.

It is difficult for *waria* to enter the formal labor market, as they are rarely afforded opportunities in that sector. One *waria* in North Sinjai District reported struggling to find employment. Despite holding a bachelor's degree from a public university, she found it difficult to secure a job aligned with her qualifications and education; she repeatedly applied for positions but was ultimately rejected. Observing this phenomenon, the author became interested in examining and exploring the livelihood strategies employed by *waria* in Sinjai Regency.

2. Method

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study. This choice was made because the social situation under investigation specifically regarding *waria* (transgender women) is complex, holistic, dynamic, and rich in meaning, yet remains not fully understood; furthermore, the researcher sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the *waria* situation and to identify patterns, theories, and hypotheses (Suhartono, 2000). Qualitative cultural research is akin to capturing a panorama with a wide-angle lens (Ratna, 2016); it allows the researcher the freedom to explore connections between concepts that have not been rigidly predefined. In this study, the element of observation is crucial to the research's success (Rahman, 2022).

The research site is the setting where a specific cultural phenomenon unfolds; it may be an open or enclosed space. Open settings include public fields, markets, streets, and the like, whereas enclosed settings typically refer to specific spaces used for cultural activities (Koentjaraningrat, 1991). Sinjai Regency was selected as the research site because the author observed the *waria* phenomenon there and took into account factors such as distance, time, and location feasibility for conducting further research.

In qualitative research, the scope of the problem is defined as the research focus. This focus encompasses the core issue, which remains broad in nature. The research focus is established after the researcher conducts a general exploration often referred to as "grand tour observation" and "grand tour questioning (Ahmadin, 2013)." Through this general exploration, the researcher gains a comprehensive, albeit surface-level, overview of the social situation of the *waria* community. The specific focus of this study encompasses *waria* themselves, the types of work they perform, the obstacles they face in securing employment, and the strategies they employ to earn a living.

3. Results and Discussion

Defines a *waria* as a person born with a male body but possessing a female soul. Adorning themselves with cosmetics and

adopting a feminine appearance are practices *waria* engage in to align with their feminine spirit, a process that brings them a unique sense of happiness (Kholis, 2014). The emergence of the *waria* identity is a long process, involving both individual and social dimensions (Khasan, 2018). Living as a *waria* entails three potential social processes: first, the socialization of *waria* behavior within a socio-cultural context; second, the perception of objective reality shaped by their behavior; and third, the process of deriving meaning and understanding from the *waria* identity (Koeswinarno et al., 2026).

There are three categories of *waria*. The first is hermaphroditism, referring to individuals possessing both sets of genitals or neither; the second is transsexualism, involving individuals with gender identity disorders who perceive a mismatch between their physical and psychological selves, leading them to attempt to eliminate either their male or female characteristics; and the third is transvestism, referring to individuals who wear the clothing of the opposite sex to satisfy sexual urges (Koeswinarno, 2003).

Within the social order, *waria* are constructed as deviant individuals (Syafi'i, 2018). Society may be receptive to certain behaviors, gestures, or messages while remaining resistant to others; societal response patterns are not uniform . This aligns with Koeswinarno's view that societal response to a *waria* depends heavily on the attitudes and behaviors the individual displays within the community, regardless of whether or not they engage in sex work (Annisa, 2023). *Waria* (transgender women) are still viewed as pathological individuals within social life; consequently, they are objects of both pity and scorn (Zain & Firdaus, 2020). The reality of being a *waria* entails a life fraught with various challenges that must be navigated across multiple dimensions.

In a socio-economic context, *waria* are classified into two categories: sex workers and non-sex workers. Sex-working *waria* are those whose primary occupation lies within the sex trade. Conversely, non-sex-working *waria* are employed in various other fields, such as beauty salons, the civil service, commerce, or other trades. While working outside the sex industry presents significant challenges, it affords a better social status. These individuals face few obstacles regarding their place in the social landscape particularly those who have achieved success in their respective ventures (Kholifah & Susanti, 2023).

Work is an activity undertaken to earn a living or secure a livelihood. To work means to perform an action or carry out a task. A "job" or "occupation" refers to the specific tasks, duties, or activities performed by an individual. It constitutes a planned series of tasks to be executed by a person, accompanied by remuneration such as wages or salaries determined by the nature and difficulty of the work . Beyond merely meeting basic needs, people work to earn financial compensation. Thus, it can be concluded that humans work not only to sustain their survival but also to improve their individual quality of life (Suyanto, 2014).

There are various types of work, ranging from jobs that produce goods to those that provide services. Goods-producing jobs yield tangible results, whereas service-oriented jobs offer benefits experienced through the service itself. A "job type" is a classification of work involving a shared set of tasks; it refers to a collection of jobs with sufficiently similar duties to be grouped together. Job types characterize work performed by a specific group, with distinctions based on specialized skills (Sairin et al., 2002).

Obstacles to realizing the right to work remain greater for *waria* (transgender women) than for other vulnerable groups. Several factors make it difficult for *waria* to earn a living. One factor is that, as a Muslim-majority country, Indonesia's social norms are deeply rooted in Islamic values. Heterosexuality is the prevailing sexual paradigm; consequently, individuals within the LGBT community including *waria* face challenges regarding social acceptance. As a result, society often views *waria* as representing a form of social deviance (Listyani, 2023)

A lack of formal education or having received no education at all hinders *waria* in securing employment. Even those who

hold university degrees struggle to land their dream jobs. This is largely due to their distinctive and unconventional appearance, which often triggers a negative public reaction. Societal perceptions viewing them as immoral and in conflict with social and religious norms make it difficult for *waria* to lead decent lives in a judgmental society. *Waria* in Sinjai Regency engage in various types of work to earn a living. Some hold multiple jobs; for instance, an informant named Elli Margareth works both in a beauty salon and as an event decorator. The following details the results of the interview conducted with her.

> I have two jobs: working at a salon and working as a decorator for weddings and other events like birthdays, *aqiqah* ceremonies, and so on. My primary job is actually at the salon; decorating is my secondary job. I prioritize the salon work because I enjoy it and it's the kind of work I prefer. My income from the salon depends on the number of customers; if it's busy, I can earn upwards of two million rupiah a month. My earnings as a decorator also depend on the number of weddings. During busy wedding seasons, I can make around ten million rupiah a month. I usually earn 1.5 million rupiah per wedding that covers everything from setup to teardown. The amount I earn also depends on the specific decor the couple wants; there are cheaper options, but the more luxurious setups are quite expensive" (Interview, February 18, 2026).

The primary occupation of the informant, Elli Magareth, is running her own salon, where she also resides. She spends her days serving customers at the salon, located in Bikeru, South Sinjai District. Additionally, she works as an event decorator whenever she receives a request; she considers this a side job. Elli earns approximately 2 million rupiah per month from her salon business. This income fluctuates depending on the number of customers. Meanwhile, her earnings from decorating depend on the volume and type of decorations requested by clients; there are certain months when orders are scarce. However, during busy periods for decorating work, she can earn between 5 and 10 million rupiah per month. Swinandar, another "waria" (transgender woman) informant, also holds two jobs; the details from the interview are as follows:

> I currently have two jobs: the first is with the Village Consultative Body, and the second is as a singer. I only started singing about six months ago. As for the Village Consultative Body, I've been there for two years. That body acts like the village's parliament, and my term there runs for five years—so I'll be there until 2025, since I started in 2020. Regarding my past work history, I used to be a TV broadcaster; I worked there for many years. But I chose to quit back then for several reasons mainly because I couldn't manage my time properly. You know how it is: as a broadcaster, you have to be on standby 24 hours a day. Plus, my mother was ill at the time. So, I just left—I stopped being a broadcaster." After that, I looked for other work, and thank God I now perform as a singer at events, often joining friends, while also working as an employee at the local village bank (BPD). My monthly income from singing varies; it depends on the number of bookings if there are many weddings or events, I earn more. For a single performance, I usually make between 250,000 and 500,000 rupiah. "At the BPD, I earn around 750,000 [rupiah] per month" (Interview, February 20, 2026).

Swinandar works as an official for the Village Consultative Body (BPD) in his village, located in the East Sinjai District. He began this role in 2020, serving a five-year term. Additionally, he has a side job as a singer a role he has held for approximately six months. He earns between 250,000 and 500,000 rupiah per performance as an *elekton* (keyboard-accompanied) singer. As a BPD official, he receives a monthly salary of 750,000 rupiah. Another informant, Anita, works solely at a beauty salon; here is her statement:

> I work at a salon; I've been doing this job for about 20 years. Over those two decades, I've experienced plenty of ups and downs. I meet many customers with different personalities, so while I work, I also learn to understand people's characters. Besides serving customers here at the salon, I also visit clients who can't make it in for instance, women who have just given birth and want to visit but can't; in those cases, I go to their homes. So, anyone who can't come to the salon just needs to call, and I'll go there. It's also a strategy to keep attracting customers; there are so many salons these days, so you have to be smart about finding opportunities and making things convenient for the customers. My monthly income ranges from 4.5 to over 5 million rupiah. That's the gross amount, though. I still have to pay the employee who helps me—usually around 750,000 to 1 million rupiah, depending on how much we've earned" (Interview, February 18, 2026).

Anita stated that she has been running her salon business for over 20 years. Throughout this time, she has gained a wealth of valuable experience. In addition to serving customers at her salon, she also travels to their locations or homes a service provided for customers who are unable to visit the salon in person. Anita earns upwards of 5 million rupiah per month, though her actual income depends on the volume of customers. Another informant, a *waria* (transgender woman) named Ciwank, also decided to run a salon business; here is her statement: "I've been doing this kind of work running a salon, cutting hair since the 2000s. My monthly income varies; sometimes it's low. It's around 2 to 3 million rupiah a month that's the net income" (Interview, February 19, 2026).

Ciwank has been engaged in the salon business since the 2000s. She owns a salon in Bikeru, South Sinjai District. Her net monthly income ranges from 2 to 3 million rupiah. Meanwhile, another *waria* informant, Muhammad Yusuf, also chose to open a salon. Here is the result of his interview:

> After graduating from college, I looked for work and applied whenever there was a vacancy, but I never got hired I kept getting rejected so I ended up working in a salon like this. Back then, I applied all over the place with my degree in hand, but ultimately, I couldn't find a job that would accept me given my identity as a *waria*. I earn about 3 million rupiah a month. It depends on how many customers come in, though; since there are so many salons around, my income fluctuates (Interview, February 20, 2026).

Muhammad Yusuf, the *waria* informant, stated that he had previously attempted to apply for jobs using his bachelor's degree. However, the results were fruitless; at the time, no employer would hire her given her identity as a *waria* (transgender woman). Consequently, she decided to learn hairdressing and eventually opened a salon business that remains in operation today. Her salon is located within the Sinjai Central Market area. She earns approximately 3 million rupiah per month. Fahmi the informant both owns and works at the salon. The following is an excerpt from the interview:

> I only finished elementary school, you see, and the only thing I really enjoyed was cutting hair, so I decided to work in a salon. I used to tag along with a friend at their salon and watch what they did; that got me interested and made me want to have my own salon. Thank God, that dream has come true now, even though I'm still renting the space. As for the income thank God, it's decent; the salon is enough to cover my daily needs." "It's nearly 3.5 million a month, but that doesn't yet account for daily living expenses (Interview, February 18, 2026).

She enjoys salon work, which is why she decided to open her own salon an interest sparked by a friend. Consequently, Fahmi established her own salon located at the Sinjai Central Market. Her monthly earnings from salon work reach up to 3.5 million rupiah. In contrast, another informant a *waria* (transgender woman) named Mahdi who holds a bachelor's degree chose to work as a makeup artist (MUA). She mentioned that she had loved the world of makeup since childhood. She began offering makeup services while still in college, covering events such as engagement ceremonies, wedding receptions, graduations, and the like. Below are the results of the interview with her:

> My job is bridal makeup. It's my own private business; I don't work for anyone else. I've been doing this for nearly five years; I started while I was still in college specifically, during my fourth semester. My income varies, dear; sometimes in a month, I might handle two or three brides, earning around 4 or 5 million rupiah. But during busy periods, it can approach 10 million a month, because bridal work is seasonal" (Interview, February 18, 2026).

Informant Mahdi Amir began working as a make-up artist (MUA) while still in college. During that time, alongside his studies, he diligently learned and practiced proper make-up techniques. As his skills improved, he began to secure clients for his services, and he continues to work in this field to this day. His income as an MUA depends on the volume of bookings;

during months with many weddings, he can earn around 10 million rupiah, whereas during quieter periods, his monthly earnings drop to approximately 4–5 million rupiah. Interviews with seven *waria* (transgender women) informants in Sinjai Regency revealed various ways they earn a living, with the most common roles being salon owners and employees, decorators, make-up artists (MUAs), *elekton* (mobile organ/keyboard) singers, and staff members at village consultative bodies.

4. Conclusion

In this study, the ways in which *waria* (transgender women) in Sinjai Regency earn a living are dominated by roles as salon owners and employees accounting for four of the seven informants followed by roles as decorators, makeup artists (MUAs), *elekton* (mobile organ/keyboard) singers, and staff at village consultative bodies. Factors hindering *waria* in earning a living in Sinjai Regency include low levels of education, inadequate skills, and the social stigma prevalent in their communities. Four of the seven *waria* informants in this study completed only primary school, a factor that subsequently influenced their skill sets. Societal views and stigma also contribute to the difficulty *waria* face in securing employment.

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