

## Cohabitation and Social Roles of Homosexual Couples: Ethnography of Lesbian Couples in Tasikmalaya City

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### Abstract

*This study aims to determine the views of lesbian couples in interpreting the cohabitation they do and the social roles they live. The method used in this research is a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. Data collection was carried out using interview, observation, and documentation techniques. The interview technique was carried out for lesbian couples who performed cohabitation actions at a boarding house in Tasikmalaya. The observations in this study used participant observation techniques carried out for one year. The results showed that cohabitation by a lesbian couple could be seen from three things. First, cohabitation is done as a meaning based on compassion, protection, and responsibility. Second, cohabitation is performed because the boarding environment does not hinder or interfere with their existence. This condition can occur because lesbian couples conduct good social interactions with their surroundings. Third, the actions of cohabitation can cover up their sexual orientation in the name of friendship as fellow women. The social role of lesbian couples is not different from heterosexual couples; men are played by "Butchy", while women are played by "fame". In Tasikmalaya, the existence of lesbian couples tends to be closed. They are not free to carry out their social roles. The openness of roles is limited to the environment they live by conducting reference groups.*

### Keywords

homosexual couples; lesbians; cohabitation; social role



### I. Introduction

Sexual deviant behavior such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or often abbreviated by the acronym LGBT, shows a tendency to continue to increase in number in Indonesia. LGBT is a term used since the 1990s to replace the phrase "gay community" (Setyorini, 2011; Dayani, 2014)). This LGBT phenomenon raises pros and cons in various circles. For those who agree with deviant sexual behavior such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender or often abbreviated by the acronym LGBT, according to several sources, the number shows a tendency to continue to increase in Indonesia (Boellstroff, 2014; Mariani, 2014). LGBT is a term used since the 1990s to replace the "gay community". This LGBT phenomenon raises pros and cons in various circles (Wijaya & Davies, 2019). Those who agree with the existence of LGBT expect their existence to be respected based on humanity, no longer seen as behavior of mental disorders, and to have access to politics, economics, and in all other fields which are the same heterosexuals. Those who are against LGBT view this behavior as deviant, sinful, causing damage to the social order of humanity and leading to the extinction of the human species. LGBT is also seen as a mental disorder and requires assisted therapy to cure it (Yudiyanto, 2017). LGBT existence expects its existence to be respected

based on humanity, no longer viewed as a mental disorder, and to have equal access to politics, economy, and in all other fields as heterosexuals (Herdiana & Beta, 2019; Kasnadi, 2014). Those who are against LGBT view this behavior as deviant, sinful, causing damage to the social order of humanity and leading to the extinction of the human species (Nurmala, 2006). LGBT is also seen as a mental disorder and requires assisted therapy to cure it.

In Indonesia, there are no verified statistics on the number of homosexual couples, this is because not all homosexuals are open and easy to admit their sexual orientation, but it is estimated that it will continue to grow (So'langi et al., 2021). The growth in this number is also accompanied by the increasing number of organizations related to the community. Movements that encourage acceptance of their existence are also increasingly being campaigned worldwide. Some homosexuals are not ashamed to open themselves up to society (Khanis, 2013). There have been several associations of homosexual organizations formed and growing, especially in Indonesia (Yansyah & Rahayu, 2018). The legalization of homosexuals in western countries is a reference for them to continue to realize their desire to legalize homosexuality in Indonesia.

Various forms of efforts to introduce and image that LGBT is common in society continue to be carried out. Through mass media, both electronic and print, they report on the legalization of LGBT in various countries in the world (Sullivan & Jackson, 2013; Manik et al., 2016). Through various films, soap operas, and television programs, we often encounter the LGBT lifestyle as if it is imaged normal. It is as if these shows encourage young people to imitate the homosexual lifestyle.

Lesbians are part of the homosexual community whose existence continues to attract controversy in Indonesian society. Lesbian is a term or designation for women who have sexual and emotional desires for other women or consciously identify themselves as lesbians (Karongora et al., 2013).

An important difference between being gay and being a lesbian arises in everyday social life because of gender discrimination. There is still strong pressure for gay and lesbian women to marry heterosexually but being a wife and mother carries different obligations than being husband and father. As someone who holds full responsibility in the domestic sphere, wives are bound by rules that narrow the space for movement. To protect 'self-respect,' women tend to be placed in supervised positions, even before they are married, so their space for movement is limited (Rakhmahappin & Prabowo, 2014; Balgos et al., 2012).

The history of the lesbian movement in Indonesia has been going on for quite a long time, since the founding of Perlesin (Indonesian Lesbian Association) in 1982. Then there was Suara Srikandi, who struggled by collaborating with Indonesia's largest LGBT organization, Gaya Nusantara (Fitriana et al., 2021). After not being heard for a while, in 2007, the Ardhanary Institute was established, initiated by Saskia Wieringa and Rr. Augustine. Perhaps the Ardhanary Institute has the complete resources and references regarding the lesbian issue in Indonesia. In Surabaya, there are many lesbian groups. There are at least 185 lesbians in Surabaya who are members of 14 small groups of 10-20 people. These groups are active in the world of movement and groups united by interests. Most of them gather regularly in public spaces, and although there are still many that are not visible on the surface, some are still open (Yullius et al., 2018).

In big cities like Surabaya, lesbians can also be found in small towns like Tasikmalaya, West Java. The city of Tasikmalaya has several predicates, one of which is the title as a santri city. Based on data from the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, Tasikmalaya is an area that has many Islamic boarding schools in the province of West Java. In the city of Tasikmalaya, the number of Islamic boarding schools recorded by the Ministry of Religion reached 213 Islamic boarding schools.

In the city of Tasikmalaya, lesbians are known as “belok”. In the Sundanese dictionary, the turn is often used in the context of a direction or a path that is not straight. The term turn is used because lesbians are homosexuals or same-sex enthusiasts who deviate and are not directly proportional to religious teachings and social life in general.

Considered illegitimate, lesbians in the city of Tasikmalaya try to continue to live their lives with their inherent sexual orientation. Even among them decide to live together or cohabitation with their partners.

## II. Review of Literature

The concept of this symbolic interaction theory was introduced by Herbert Blumer around 1939. Within the scope of sociology, this idea had been put forward by George Herbert Mead but was later modified by Blumer to achieve certain goals. This theory has a good idea, but it is not as deep and specific as G.H Mead proposed (Boellstroff, 2006).

In summary, the theory of symbolic interactionism is based on the following premises:

1. Individuals respond to a symbolic situation; they respond to the environment, including physical objects (objects) and social objects (human behavior) based on the media these environmental components contain.
2. Meaning is a product of social interaction; therefore, meaning does not look at objects but is negotiated through the use of language; negotiation is possible because humans can color everything, not only physical objects, actions, or events (even without the presence of physical objects, actions or events) but also abstract ideas.
3. The meaning that individuals interpret can change from time to time; in line with changes in situations found in social interactions, changes in interpretation are possible because individuals can carry out mental processes, namely communicating with themselves.

In symbolic interaction, there are three main concepts in looking at something:

### a. Mind

Thought, which Mead defines as the process of one's conversation with oneself, is not found in the individual; thought is a social phenomenon. Thoughts arise and develop in social processes and are integral to social processes. Social processes precede thought; social processes are not products of thought. So the mind is also defined functionally rather than substantively (Astuti et al., 2017).

A special characteristic of the mind is the ability of the individual to elicit within himself not only a single response but also the response of the community as a whole (Saiman & Afifah, 2015). That's what we call the mind. To do something means giving a certain organized response, and when a person has that response in himself, he has thoughts. Thus the mind can be distinguished from other logical concepts such as the concept of memory in Mead's work by its ability to respond to the community as a whole and to develop organized responses (Usman, 2018). Mead also sees the mind pragmatically; namely, the mind involves thinking processes that lead to problem-solving.

### b. Self

The self, according to Mead, is a characteristic of humans. What animals don't have? Self is the ability to accept oneself as an object from another person or society (Offord, 2016). But the self is also a special ability as a subject. The self emerges and develops through social interaction and language activities. According to Mead, it is impossible to imagine the self emerging without social experience. It, therefore, contradicts the solitary self-concept of the Cartesian Picture (Pratama et al., 2018). The self also allows people to

participate in conversations with others because of the sharing of symbols. A person can communicate, then realize what he is saying and consequently be able to listen to what is being said and determine or anticipate what will be said next (Papilaya, 2016).

We are no longer personal responders but personal stimuli at once. How can it be that we become both the subject and the object of perception? The self is a very important concept for symbolic interactionist theorists. Rock states that "the self is a very important symbolic interactionist intellectual schema. All other sociological processes, and changes around the self, are drawn from their analysis of meaning and organization (Mazdafiah, 2011).

### **c. Society**

At the most general level, Mead uses society to mean the relentless social process that precedes the mind and the self. Society has an important role in shaping the mind and self. At another level, according to Afriteyani & Mulyani (2021), society reflects a set of organized responses that the individual takes up in the form of "me" (me). According to this individual sense, society influences them, giving them the ability, through self-criticism, to control themselves. Mead's most important contribution to society lies in his thinking about the mind and the self. The economic consists in the development of wealth of a country, an area or a society. The status or class is the level of wealth of people in the society (Ramlan, 2018). The concept of human-centered society is expected to be one of the keys to restore the nature of humans (Nugroho, 2021).

According to Marpaung et al. (2020), social institutions should only define what individuals should do in a very broad and general sense and should provide sufficient space for individuality and creativity. Here Mead demonstrates a very modern concept of social institutions, both as coercion of individuals and enabling them to become creative individuals.

## **III. Research Methods**

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative with an ethnographic approach. Research data was obtained from two sources. First, primary data is the main data directly obtained by Delly and Nancy, who are a lesbian couple and decide to live under the same roof (cohabitation) in a boarding house in the Sukalaya area, Tasikmalaya city. Second, secondary data supports data obtained from families of lesbian couples, neighbors where they live together, community leaders, and the Regional Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAID) of Tasikmalaya City.

## **IV. Discussion**

Delly is a lesbian with the butchi category who is 26 years old. Delly comes from the Rajapolah sub-district, Tasikmalaya district, who then decided to live in a boarding house in the Sukalaya area, Tasikmalaya City. Delly's decision to live in a boarding house was made to live under the same roof (cohabitation) with her partner. In meeting the needs of daily life with her partner, Delly works as an online motorcycle taxi driver.

Since childhood, Delly has looked like a boy. His physical appearance, hobbies, and games are habits inherent in boys his age. Short hair, dressed as a boy, and playing taekwondo was a picture of Delly when she was a child until she was educated in elementary school (SD).

Delly's interest in fellow women emerged in junior high school. While in junior high school, Delly dated her female friend for the first time. Delly is aware that the love problems she is experiencing are considered abnormal. Therefore, at first, Delly did not openly express

her feelings of love, especially to her friends. He is only limited to giving more attention to the girlfriend he loves.

“Well, when I was in middle school, I started to feel pubescent, but instead, I liked girls. Well, I'm also a question mark up to that point; it's just that I still don't dare to reveal it because I also feel different from the others. So, I just dared to give attention to the girl under the guise of being a friend. But, over time, the girl I like responds to my attention differently like a normal partner, and finally, I dare to express my feelings. Then we date. But, there, I don't know these types of bends, just doing what I feel.”

Bunga's knowledge and experience about her sexual orientation as a lesbian became more open when she entered the Department of Physical Education, Health and Recreation (PJKR) at a state university in the city of Tasikmalaya. While living this campus life, Delly found confidence in her identity as a lesbian with the butchi category. Delly does not feel alone because several friends in her major are also lesbians. Delly's environment at that time was enough to support her to be open and not hesitate to express her love to fellow women.

The lecture period was when Delly was quite open with her identity as a lesbian in the campus environment and her parents. Delly's recognition of her identity to her parents, especially her mother, became a very dilemmatic phase in her life. On the one hand, Delly does not want to make her parents sad, embarrassed or angry over her condition. On the other hand, he doesn't want to deny his true identity.

Delly's confession to her mother regarding her identity as a lesbian began when she was in a slump due to feeling hurt by a woman. Delly was frustrated, had no appetite, didn't leave her room, and kept crying. Seeing Delly's condition, Delly's mother tried to find out the cause by inviting her to have a chat that was neither interrogative nor intimidating.

“Mama's not angry, just advised her like that. He said, calm down first. Then, he will come back to Dede one day. He said it like that; the Mama was hugging. Indeed, maybe in his heart, there must be a sense of disappointment in his name as well as his parents. But, what if the child is like this? Just support it as long as it's positive. The positive is like this if, for example, I have a girl, I have to be enthusiastic about each other, help each other. But, Mama also tried to heal me, asked smart people, until I was brought to smart people to be ruthuzed.”

Delly and her lesbian partner have lived together for two years in a boarding house in the Sukalaya area of Tasikmalaya city. Delly decided to live together for romance and responsibility to protect Nancy as her fame partner. Living under the same roof (cohabitation) will make Delly more intense and free to express her affection for her partner. Not only that, Delly, who acts as the head of the household, can also show responsibility to her partner. Delly's view is implied in the following interview excerpt.

“If you share a boarding house, you can meet him (his partner) every day. Have fun together, hard together, pouring love as often as possible. I can also pay attention to him all the time.”

In this cohabitation, Delly considers a household life in general. Delly, as a butcher, acts as the head of the household who is fully responsible for the continuity of her household life. He is the one who provides for all the household needs that they live in even though their income is smaller than their partner.

“Even though the income is greater for the femme, it's still the head of the butcher family. Because, as a man, I have to direct him to be better, such as managing the finances that he usually spends on spending time with his friends using the proceeds from his work to buy drinks, clubbing, and so on. I also want to have a serious relationship not just for fun and want to be responsible as a man.”

In carrying out her role as the head of the household, Delly must also be nurturing towards her partner, especially since she already has a child from her previous marriage with her husband. Therefore, Delly always tries to be wise about various problems that occur. Delly sometimes prefers to remain silent and doesn't escalate the problem.

Nency is a female partner (famme) of Delly. Before pairing with Delly, Nency had previously lived a domestic life with a man who eventually divorced. Nency's household life only lasted for 5 years, and they were blessed with a son who was 4 years old.

Nency has a Junior High School (SMP) educational background. Nency works as a Ladies Escort (LC) in a karaoke place in Tasikmalaya city. Nency is no longer worried about her son's condition, who was left to work because he was being cared for by Delly. Occasionally, he would leave it at his mother's house. This condition makes Nency feel more comfortable at work, especially since Delly can be a good "father" figure for her child.

Nency, a lesbian with the category of everyday famme, looks like a woman in general. Nency has shoulder-length hair, brushed eyebrows, lips that often wear red lipstick, and a mix of clothes and pants that women usually wear to make her not look like a lesbian.

As explained by Delly, Nency is quite a sensitive person. Sometimes he also still likes to splurge because he works in the nightlife. However, Nency is the type who is loyal to her partner. Even to maintain a relationship with her partner, Nency is always careful and understands her conditions. This is as stated by Nency.

"I'm smarter to maintain my relationship in other environments; for example, when I'm out with him (his partner), I don't show affection in public, so I just look like friends, not close."

Domestic life that ended in divorce was a factor that caused Nency to become a lesbian. Nency felt that she did not get the affection of her ex-husband. They often clashed. On the other hand, Nency admits to getting love, comfort, and peace when dealing with other women.

"So, if it's the same with Delly, what's in the men is in Delly. And conversely, what's not in men's is in Delly too. So Delly can complete what I need, maybe because she is a fellow woman, so she understands how I feel like a woman. Even though he is a woman, the male figure is there; he can take care of me and protect me. He is responsible for me. So he really can replace a husband figure for me and a father figure for my children. Apart from that, his appearance is very similar to that of a man; his movements are not feminine. He also provides for my inner birth, so we complement each other. I also often bring children to our boarding house, and he can also accept taking care of my children."

In Nency's view, apart from the affection factor, there is a traumatic factor that she has experienced from her ex-husband. Men have more severe emotional actions than women. Based on the experiences she has experienced, emotional actions against men can lead to acts of violence that make her feel deeply traumatized.

"If it's the same guy, it's tough. For example, like my ex before, if there is a fuss, it will use physical violence. That's one of the things that traumatize guys. If it's the same as butchi, I'm the one who is rude to him. Especially if he cheated on another femme, I'd be really mad at him. So I'm never worried if she's with a guy because she's really like a guy, she can't turn to a guy. But if one day she has to marry a man, I'm sincere even though there will be a little hurt, but it's her destiny."

Nency's identity as a lesbian with the famme category does not make her feel anxious or worried about the environmental conditions in Tasikmalaya, which are known to be religious. For Nency, the most important thing in dealing with the social environment is taking care of oneself and understanding the surrounding conditions.



Nency's decision to live with Delly in a boarding house makes her happy. For Nency, living together (cohabitation) makes her protected, she can express her feelings at any time, and someone is responsible for her both physically and mentally. Nency's view is even more meaningful, considering she needs a "father" figure for her child.

“If I live together like this, I will have someone who cares all the time, protects and takes care of me. He (Delly) is my man, so as the head of the household, normally, he is the one who gives me physical and spiritual support. So glad that someone is in charge of me. That's the point of living together.”

#### **4.1 Cohabitation in the Perspective of Lesbian Couples in Tasikmalaya City**

In the Big Indonesian Dictionary, Cohabitation is defined as "a matter of living in the same house without marital ties". The practice of cohabitation is not a new phenomenon in society, although it is still a controversial phenomenon. In Indonesian social culture, cohabitation is considered taboo and not justified, especially for same-sex couples such as lesbians (Mazdafiah, 2011).

The cohabitation carried out by the lesbian couple Delly, and Nency is a rare social phenomenon in the social life of the well-known religious community in the city of Tasikmalaya. The existence and behavior of those who are not open about their sexual orientation make the social interaction of the lesbian couple different from the social interaction of couples in general. In the context of symbolic social interaction, Herbert Blumer provides three main premises for the pattern of life of social interaction that occurs in society (Sulistiyawan & Utami, 2021).

First, humans act on the meanings that things have for them. The cohabitation behavior carried out by Delly and Nency in a boarding house in the Sukalaya area of the city of Tasikmalaya has certain meanings and meanings for them. Delly thinks that she will be more flexible in giving love to Nency as her partner by cohabitation. This meaning is motivated by the condition of society that has not been able to accept a lesbian. In addition to affection, Delly's cohabitation act protects Nency as her partner. The act of cohabitation can be a means for Delly to show responsibility as Nency's "man", giving out responsibilities such as providing a living and internal responsibilities.

In line with Delly above, the act of cohabitation for Nency was carried out based on love and seeking protection for herself. Protection for Nency is not only limited to material fulfillment of life. More than that, Nency needs a "father" figure for her child. Nency believes in cohabitation to provide for herself and her child.

Second, the meaning is obtained from social interactions with other people. The meaning of affection, nurturing, and protection felt by the Delly and Nency couples above can be obtained because the boarding environment in which they live does not hinder or interfere with their existence. Their identity as a same-sex couple at first shocked the boarding house community. However, their behavior and social interactions are quite good with their boarding house neighbors, so their existence is not a problem (Juniarti & Sinurat, 2020).

Third, these meanings are perfected when the process of social interaction is taking place. Delly and Nency that their sexual orientation is a deviant act, especially in the city of Tasikmalaya. However, their cohabitation actions can cover up their sexual orientation in the name of friendship as fellow women, in contrast to heterosexual couples who cohabit, where they have to show a marriage certificate as an administrative requirement for boarding house residents to the local authorities.

Delly and Nency continue to show good and acceptable behavior during their life together in their social interactions. This is done so that the meaning and purpose of cohabitation can be achieved without being hampered by the social relationships they direct.

## 4.2 Lesbian Social Role in Tasikmalaya City

In the city of Tasikmalaya, lesbians are known as "belok". In the Sundanese dictionary, the turn is often used in the context of a direction or a path that is not straight. The term turn is used because lesbians are homosexuals or same-sex enthusiasts who deviate and are not directly proportional to religious teachings and social life in general.

Lesbians are a vulnerable group with social problems because of low self-acceptance and social sanctions from a society that follows their lives. This may bring a negative self-assessment on lesbians so that lesbians find it difficult to actualize themselves or modify their behavior following applicable norms. This condition disrupts the social aspect of lesbians because of the limited space for interaction of lesbian individuals with their family, friends, and environment. The community will question the moral aspect because of the emergence of inappropriate social norms so that lesbians tend to be considered a disease that must be "treated".

Therefore, the social role of lesbians in society is not very visible. They tend to be closed to their sexual orientation in society, especially in religious communities such as in the city of Tasikmalaya. Delly, as a butchi, realizes that religious norms and decency prohibit her existence as a lesbian. Therefore, he does not show up or openness in social life to the actual conditions (Pawestri et al., 2019).

In their daily life, the social role of lesbian couples does not differ significantly from that of heterosexual couples. In the patriarchal culture adopted by most Indonesians, men have a role as the head of the household who is obliged to protect their partners both physically and mentally. Women tend to play a role in the domestic area.

The description of the roles of heterogeneous couples above is not too different from the roles of lesbian couples in the city of Tasikmalaya. The male in the lesbian couple is played by butchy, who presents himself as a man in appearance. Delly, as a butchy, recognizes her position as the head of the household (Manalastas et al., 2017). He is required to be responsible for the continuity of the household with his partner, both physically and mentally. By birth, Delly tried to support Nancy and her child by working as an online motorcycle taxi driver. The role as a leader in the household makes Delly try to direct Nancy to be better, such as using income according to needs, not just having fun.

The female side is played by Nancy, a lesbian with the femme category. The feminine and graceful nature of Nancy's femme confirms her role as a partner who needs protection and affection. Nancy plays like a woman in a heterosexual couple. It plays a role in the domestic area where they cohabit. Nancy is more likely to clean up the boarding house than Delly and other domestic areas.

## V. Conclusion

The act of cohabitation carried out by lesbian couples in the city of Tasikmalaya can be seen from three things. First, cohabitation is carried out as a meaning based on affection, nurturing, and responsibility. Second, cohabitation can be done because the boarding environment where they live does not hinder or interfere with their existence. Third, lesbian couples have good social interactions with the surrounding environment during the cohabitation process. This condition can occur because lesbian couples have good social interactions with their environment. Social roles in lesbian couples do not have a striking difference with heterosexual couples. First, the built values are the same as for heterosexual couples, with Butchy as the Head of the Household and Femme as the Housewife. Second, need recognition like other heterosexual couples by seeking same-sex marriage information.



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