# An Application of Rational Choice Theory to "Transsexual" Women's Political Strategy to Pursue Recognition in Thailand

by

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# Abstract

*Phuying-Kham-Phet*, is a recently created term of a gender political movement in Thailand.  Normally, Thai society groups all sexual minorities into "*the third sex*" community.  This categorization does not allow Thai people to differentiate each minority group and sufficiently for its unique condition.  A group of transgendered women decided to separate themselves from this community and establish a group of "*Phuying-Kham-Phet*" to pursue their exclusive goal; the recognition as women.  In this research project, I apply rational choice models of cultural coordination, conflict, and mobilization to describe political strategies of this movement.  I attain information about collective disposition, political incentive and political strategies from the interviews with fifteen members of the TransFemale Association of Thailand.  I argue that rational choice theory is a beneficial approach for describing political phenomena that relate to gender identity outside western cultural settings.

**Key Words**:  rational choice theory; transgendered politics; gender identity politics; transgender in Thailand

# Acknowledgements

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# An Application of Rational Choice Theory to "Transsexual" Women's Political Strategy to Pursue Recognition in Thailand

## Introduction

This research project has two main objectives. (1) Firstly, it tests the compatibility between rational choice theory and gender politics. I advocate rational choice theory as a beneficial instrument to study political behaviors of a transgendered women's movement in Thailand. Ontologically, rational choice theory uses micro-data to describe a macro-level phenomenon by establishing causal relationship between individuals and structural system (Lichbach, 2003, pp. 32-33). Rational choice theorists assume that, out of various alternatives, rational actors have purposeful action to maximize their personal interest, and structural entities cannot exist without the constitution of individuals (Lichbach, 2003, p. 32). Rational choice theorists use these assumptions to describe social changes by using information about individual actions.

Paul K. MacDonald (2003, p. 551) shows that there are two main epistemological positions of rational choice theory which are *instrumentalist-empiricism* and *scientific-realism*. These two positions debate whether rational choice theorists should prioritize *generalizability* or *accuracy* (MacDonald, 2003, p. 556). On one hand, supporting generalizability, instrumentalist-empiricism concentrates on the testability of predictions within the observable world. On the other hand, scientific-realism focuses on the discovery of unobservable processes in society to provide accurate reflection of human behaviors (MacDonald, 2003, pp. 551-552). In this research project, I support scientific-realism, because it is more compatible with the study of gender politics.

Scientific-realism includes domain response, thin-subjectivism, and structural influence (MacDonald, 2003, pp. 557-558). (1) *Domain*

*response* demonstrates that partially unrealistic assumptions intend to facilitate rational choice theorists to produce accurate hypotheses (MacDonald, 2003, p. 557).  Obviously, humans are not perfectly rational and social interactions are complex.  However, social interactions have repeated patterns and individuals are generally bound to social rules (MacDonald, 2003, p. 557), so these conditions enable rational choice theorists to apply rationalist assumptions to describe human behaviors in reality.  (2) *Thin-subjectivism* enables rational choice theorists to improve actual conceptualization.  For example, psychological satisfactions, such as happiness or social acceptance, are included as another form of individual benefit.  (3) Scientific-realism accepts that *structural influence* may integrate with methodological individualism; however, theoretical assumption should be accurate in particular domains that rational choice theory is applied to (MacDonald, 2003, p. 558).  This limit of scope enables rational choice theorists to create models of interactions within a specific context (MacDonald, 2003, p. 558).  These three components make the adjustment of rational choice theory to social and cultural spheres possible.

Secondly, this research project is intended to apply methodological individualism to describe the rationality of a group of transgendered women who want to be politically and legally recognized as women. Thailand has a uniquely complex system of gender categorization.  The term "*the third sex,*" or *Phet Thi Sam*, constitutes a community of people who have diverse gender identities (Morris, 1994, p. 21).  However, this term is not useful in distinguishing transsexuality from homosexuality or transvestitism, because it encompasses a broad range of gender and sexual minorities.  *Phuying-Kham-Phet*,[1] on the contrary, is a new term that is directly derived from "transsexual female," according to the president of the TransFemale Association.  This concept is still unfamiliar for Thai people when compared to the word "*kathoey*" that broadly refers to the variety of gender and sexual minorities who were born male,

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[1] *Phuying-kham-phet*, or literally "*a woman who crosses from the other sex (male)*" is derived from the word "transsexual female" or "transsexual woman". The word "*transsexual women*" is demeaning in the context of North American society.  Herein, I decide to use the word "*phuying-kham-phet*" instead of a transsexual woman, and "*phuyings-kham-phet*" for transsexual women.

including transvestite men, gay men, and transgendered women (Morris, 1994, p. 23).  Thus, this is the first time Thai people are introduced to "*Phuying-Kham-Phet.*"

Originally, Thai society referred to transgendered women's community by using the word "*kathoey.*"  However, this word does not represent some people in this community who desire to fully become women.  As a result, according to the history of the TransFemale Association, "*Phuying-Kham-Phet*" is created to separate transgendered women who want to acquire gender status as women from those who do not.  This new term specifically refers to transgendered women who are post-surgical sex reassignment and identify themselves as women.  I thus use the term "*phuying-kham-phet*" to refer to transgendered women who desire to fully become female both physically and legally.

On the contrary, *kathoey* means transgendered women in general, especially transvestite men, who do not identify themselves with a new term *phuying-kham-phet*.  In the Thai context, there are specifically political reasons for making the distinction between *phuying-kham-phet* and *kathoey*.  This context differs from the North American context in which many transpeople find the term "transsexual" to be demeaning.  For many transpeople in North American and beyond, the term transgendered is more appropriate.  This term speaks to the totality of their transition; it does not diminish their transition to surgery.

According to Rose McDermott and Peter K. Hatemi (2011, p. 89), the concept of "gender" relates to three distinct but correlated components.  The first, *sex*, is biological organs of reproduction that divides male from female.  The second, *gender*, is a social categorization that relates to characteristics, interests, appearances, or mannerisms of masculinity and femininity (McDermott & Hatemi, 2011, p. 90).  The third is *sexual preference* or *sexual orientation* (McDermott & Hatemi, 2011, p. 90).  The authors mention that the word "gender" is often confused as the term that refers to biological body, identity and also sexual preference (McDermott & Hatemi, 2011, p. 90).  These three terms should be separated since they are quite different despite being correlated.  Similarly, Judith Butler states in her book (1990, p. 24) that gender does

not follow from biological sex, and sexual desires and practices also do not follow either sex or gender.  However, the definition of *gender* is open to interpretation depending on how the field of power is articulated (Butler, 1990, p. 25).  For example, in heterosexual traditions, gender is believed to denote a unity of sex, gender, and sexual desire (Butler, 1990, p. 30).  When heterosexuality is naturalized each person is made to have coherence of sex, gender and sexuality, and interpersonal interactions are influenced by a stable and oppositional heterosexuality (Butler, 1990, p. 30).

With the support of Dennis Chong's argument (2000, p. 4), instrumental reasoning should be an important element in theories of social norms and values.  At the same time, Fernando Aguiar and Andres de Francisco (2009, p. 547) also demonstrate a similar idea in their work.  They mention that, in the frame of internalist rational choice theory, identity should be a component in the explanation of social action.  These two statements can be implied that there is a connection between individual rationality and social identifications or social movements.  From the perspective of rational choice theory, people form a group to attain self-interest that each of them cannot do alone (Chong, 2000, p. 49).  Individual interests then lead to cooperation to pursue collective benefits.  Consequently, group norms are really important for cooperation, because they facilitate members to work together (Chong, 2000, p. 81).  A set of group norms originates collective identity, predictable behavior patterns, mobilization capacity and trust among members.  In the case of *phuyings-kham-phet*'s movement in Thailand, I anticipate that the difference of interest prevents them from cooperating with gay people and *kathoeys*, and eventually makes them separate from the other two.  Good cooperation within their own community and clarity of political standpoint are expected to be the main motivation of *phuyings-kham-phet*.

The argument of this research project is that rational choice theory is compatible with gender politics in the context of Thai culture, and it is a beneficial instrument to describe political strategies of *phuyings-kham-phet*'s movement in Thailand.  This research project contains four parts.  Firstly, **Research Methodology**, discusses how the concept of identity relates to individual rationality.  The relationship between social identities

and individual behaviors suggests the possibility of integrating of rational choice theory to gender politics.  Besides rational choice theory, this section also talks about the concept of transpolitics and the narrative approach that are applied to this research project.  This part mentions the concept of transpolitics that roughly categorizes transpeople community into two political positions, and how the narrative approach is a useful method to attain information from the interviews with *phuyings-kham-phet*.  Secondly, **Background**, presents Thai cultural roots that shape how Thai people view and categorize the variety of gender identities.  This section also shows a unique social sanction, *ignorance*, that is used to exclude transgendered women community from having equal rights and freedom as other groups of Thai citizen.

Thirdly, **Interviews**, I summarize the information from the interviews with fifteen *phuyings-kham-phet* in Thailand.  They are members of the TransFemale Association which is the only one and the first *phuyings-kham-phet* supporting organization.  This section is intended to reveal personal background and experiences as *phuyings-kham-phet*, and identify collective identity of members in the association.  At the same time, the interviews aim to discover their political strategies to attain a political goal, the recognition as women.   In the last section, **Analysis**, I apply rational choice models from Dennis Chong's work (2000) about rationality of social norms and values to describe political strategies of *phuyings-kham-phet*'s movement in Thailand.  This section aims to answer two questions, (1) why do *phuyings-kham-phet* separate themselves from *the third sex* community and establish their own group?, and (2) how do they strategize to attain social and political recognition in Thailand?

## 1) Research Methodology

In this research project, I focus on the topic that instrumentalist-empiricist rational choice theory intentionally ignores.  Mainly, this position pays attention to action according to pure rationalist assumption, maximization of material interests, but excludes social structural

influences (MacDonald, 2003, pp. 556-558), as some authors mention that many rational choice theorists prefer generalizability and simplicity. According to Adam Gifford Jr. (2005, p. 130), personal decision making consists of three main parts -- perception, cognition and action. However, in the study of human behavior, perception is problematic due to its unpredictability, so most rational choice theorists neglect it, and instead focus on cognition and action. Mark L. Lichbach (2003, p. 39) describes that rationalists believe that the constraint of the objective external world can influence the desires and beliefs of the subjective internal world, so they can only focus on objectivity and avoid subjectivity. Michael Hechter (1994, pp. 319-320) also discusses a similar topic. He shows that some rational choice theorists avoid dealing with instability and subjectivity of human perception, and claim that this topic is unnecessary to the study of human behavior.

Here, I argue that accurate reflection of human behaviors is not less important than hypothesis testability. In reality, we cannot overlook subjective, psychological, symbolic and social factors that can motivate human behaviors, because people do not only respond to the temptation of materials, but to symbolism, social influences, and emotions as well (Bates et al., 1998, p. 604). Rationality that influences individual decisions is not timeless and universal (Chong, 2000, pp. 74-75), but instead it is conditional on cultural norms in each society (Lichbach, 2003, p. 78). People actually have distinctive identities, preferences, knowledges and perspectives, but common knowledge and norms are the origin of intersubjectivity and collectivity of people in a particular society (Lichbach, 2003, p. 78).

Identity and Rational Choice Theory

In his work (2004, p. 6), Kath Woodward demonstrates that identity contains elements of choice, awareness and active engagement. This statement reflects instrumental side of individual identity, because identity is another way to pursue self-interests from the society. The active engagement shows that people have some freedom to choose desirable

images of their own.  Identity requires interpellation that is a process whereby people recognize themselves in a particular identity and embrace that identity as a part of themselves (Woodward, 2004, p. 19). However, identity is not only personal, but also social and political.  It is a way of being a part of a group (Woodward, 2004, p. 6).  Through the aspect of rationalism, a group is formed to fulfill self-interests of its members, so people choose to refer themselves to a particular group, because they want to join it for their interests.

As identity contains both internal and external structure (Woodward, 2004, p. 8), it is necessary to consider both individual decisions and social structural influences in the study of identity.  Although people have some freedom to choose their individual images, the perception of others restrains their self-expressions (Woodward, 2004, p. 6).  They cannot freely present themselves without the consideration of what is proper in their community.  Culture is the shared meaning, values and practices of a community (Woodward, 2004, p. 22),[2] and it shapes people's perception toward who they are, how to see the world, and how to deal with others.  For this reason, culture becomes the rules of interaction, both cooperation and competition, within a society.  Normally, people with similar identities are grouped together, and separated them from others who are different.  People who were born in the same community are more likely to share similar values.  The similarity of physical appearance, lifestyle, and language helps them bond with each other.  On the contrary, the differences of culture can create discomfort, misunderstanding, fear, conflict, or hatred toward strangers.

According to Fernando Aguiar and Andres de Francisco (2009, p. 547), internalist rational choice includes identity as an important element of social action.  The writers define identity as a people's set of beliefs about themselves, that are shaped by beliefs about the concrete portion of the world to which they belong (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 560). Similar to Woodward's explanation, this definition demonstrates that identity is the bridge between individual decisions and social structures.

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[2] *This is one of many definitions of "culture."  The whole of the discipline of anthropology is devoted to the study of culture and one can find in that literature other definitions and approaches.*

They summarize the implication of identity in rational choice theory into four theses.

(1) *Beliefs that shape social identity are explicit, indexical and shared* (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 561).  Social identity does not only reflect belief about one's self, but also indicates how a person should act and think.  Self-reference has indexical quality that shows a causal link between beliefs and an agent's actions.  In addition, a set of beliefs also expresses a shared identification of members within one community.  Members should share some beliefs in common to maintain the unity of thoughts and actions.

(2) *Beliefs that are involved in social identity are robust and subjective* (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 562).  Although social identities are not completely fixed, they tend to be quite stable and not exposed to unexpected or dramatically changes.  Beliefs do change when they become fragile and weakened.  However, normally, people maintain their original beliefs, despite receiving new information.  Original beliefs provide them with a perception to evaluate incoming information.  Identity beliefs make people confident that what they believe is true, so this makes them refuse to accept other new beliefs.  If new information opposes their original beliefs, they mostly choose to conserve what they are familiar with and reject that new information.

(3) *Social identity embeds a clearly emotional component; at the same time, emotions are constitutive of identity beliefs* (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 565)*.*  A perception of an individual is accompanied by feelings in a necessary and constitutive manner (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 564).  The writers also refer to Martha Nussbaum's argument that identity beliefs have emotional and psychological significance for people who have them.  The sense of belonging provides psychological security for people in a group, and creates attachments which prevent them from leaving their community (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 564).  Self-recognition requires certain feelings of either pride for oneself or hatred toward others.  The notion of emotional attachment demonstrates that psychological benefits, such as security from having membership of a community, are quite important, besides material interests.

(4) *Identity beliefs are based on complicated but open structures* (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 564).  Social identities are constructed on complex structures that combine interconnected different matters together.  Identity belief structures have power to establish connections between different identities.  One community can consist of people who have different beliefs.  However, the complexity does not reduce flexibility of social beliefs revision or reinterpretation (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 566).  If people desire to fit in their community that constitutes their identity, they need to reduce conflict of interests or incompatible prescriptions.  The flexibility of open social belief structures enables people to lower their demands to satisfy other members or be compatible with others in the community (Aguiar & de Francisco, 2009, p. 566).  As a result, people from different backgrounds can form a community by finding common values among them.

Some parts in the concept of identity beliefs above also parallel Dennis Chong's (2000, p. 11) work about rationality of social norms and values.  Identification and values can reflect personal preferences, and the study of individual incentive can help understand the change of social norms and values.  Incentive and disposition are the main components of individual preferences in his model (Chong, 2000, p. 54).  Incentive is defined as a motivated drive to attain personal interest, while disposition is described as a deep-seated influence that is constructed from early socialization (Chong, 2000, p. 47).

He describes that disposition can restrain individual incentive. People do not directly pursue personal interests without considering social pressure, especially from their immediate environment (Chong, 2000, p. 13).  Membership represents an assurance to gain personal interests from a community that people are in.  As a result, it is rational for people to follow group norms to protect their long term interests.  Furthermore, early socialization also restrains people's capacity to adjust (Chong, 2000, p. 14).  Besides emotional attachment, deep-seated influence makes it difficult for some people to accept new values, because they do not have an ability to do so.  They consequently choose to conserve original values so that they can attain self-interests easier.  However, the change of a social norm is still possible when disposition loses its strong impact on

9

personal incentive.  If people realize that old norms can no longer provide them with satisfactory outcome, they will have an incentive to change and accept a new set of values (Chong, 2000, pp. 71-72).  The change of norms lead to the transformation of identifications, preferences and incentives that will work as a defense mechanism to protect new norms.

The Model of Transgendered Politics

According to Katrina Roen (2002, p. 501), passing as the other sex is an important normative issue in transgendered politics.  A transition from one gendered expression to another can possibly be interpreted as a transition from one level of political consciousness to another (Roen, 2002, p. 504).  Similar to rational choice theory, this notion demonstrates that gender identity is not only self-expression, but it is also the realization of political goals.  Roen categorizes political positions of transpeople into two groups, *either/or* and *both/neither*.  However, it should be noted that it is not accurate to divide transpeople into two distinctive categories (Roen, 2002, p. 504).

The position "*either/or*" refers to transpeople who choose to transition from one sex to the other (Roen, 2002, p. 505).  This standpoint represents people who privilege passing as men to women or reverse.  On the other hand, the "*both/neither*" standpoint refers to transpeople who desire to liberate themselves from any sexual binary categorization.  Thus, they support a space for the third gender. The *neither/both* thus covers the variety of gender identities which are ambiguous and unidentified (Roen, 2002, p. 508).  I realize that this generalization cannot reflect an accurate image about transpeople, as Roen mentions that this concept still overlooks some important factors, such as socioeconomic aspects (Roen, 2002, p. 511).  However, I decide to apply the concept of two transpolitical positions to support me in identifying political perceptions of *phuyings-kham-phet* who participate in the interviews, whether they value passing as women or outing as transgendered women.

<u>The Narrative Approach</u>

Aguiar and de Francisco (2009, p. 548) argue that the integration of identity topic into rational choice model requires researchers to analyze language to understand behavior that reflects one own's character. Lichbach's book (2003, p. 80) also presents a similar notion that the best way to discover intersubjectivity of culture requires linguistic aspects. This is because culture is a form of discourse where its meaning needs to be accepted and be known by people in a society (Lichbach, 2003, pp. 80-81). In this research project, I decided to apply the narrative approach as another main research instrument. According to Andrew D. Brown (2006, pp. 731-732), the narrative approach is a beneficial instrument to study collective identity, because it can provide additional interpretive lens that facilitate the development of insightful theory.

An application of rational choice theory model in this research project requires information about collective identity, norms and political goals, and the narrative approach is one of the most practical instruments to attain them. This approach is able to detect collective identification of people in one community through each member's story telling. Brown suggests that a group does not have its own identity, instead the group identity is linguistically constructed by its members, and collective identity is what members share (Brown, 2006, p. 738). Narratives of one member is a partial reflection of the whole group. It is true that each person can tell a story from personal interpretation that possibly contains bias and misconception. However, a person cannot arbitrarily narrate a story, because that person has to consider narratives of other members who are in the same community as well (Brown, 2006, p. 740). It is important not to present the image of a group that is totally different from other members' narratives.

In addition, the narrative approach can also detect self-interests of story-tellers. This ability is really important to the application of rational choice theory in this project. Brown mentions that collective identity is generated from narrators who are motivated to relate story-lines to serve their self-interest (Brown, 2006, p. 743). Also, narrators also have to consider the importance of external images when they communicate with

the outsiders (Brown, 2006, p. 745).   As a member of a group, a narrator will not intentionally say anything that will harm the group and consequently impact one's membership and their interest.  To identify the collective identity of *phuyings-kham-phet*, rational choice theory requires information about actions of each individual.  Thus, the narrative approach is compatible with rational choice theory, because it attains collective identity of a group through narratives of each member.  At the same time, it is capable to discover self-interests and strategies of narrators as they are members of a group.  For this reason, I apply this approach to obtain information from *phuyings-kham-phet* who participate in the interviews.

## 2) Background

### Thai Culture and Gender Identity

Normally, the topic of homosexuality and transsexuality can be expressed and discussed in Thai society (Morris, 1994, p. 29).  Thai people are quite familiar with same-sex relationship and cross-dressing.  Besides male and female, Thai culture accepts the existence of "*the third sex*" that originally referred to the hermaphrodite, or "*kathoey*" in Thai language (Morris, 1994, p. 19).  The word does not do away with the concept of male and female; however, it constitutes the third category of gender identity that demonstrates the combination of both sexes and the ambiguity of gender identity (Morris, 1994, p. 21).  It is quite difficult to compare the word "*kathoey*" to any word in English, because *kathoey* covers both transsexualism and transvestitism (Morris, 1994, p. 23).  The system of three sexes, containing *male, female and kathoey*, has been the main perspective of how Thai people typically view individual gender identity.

The complexity of gender categorization was added when Thailand embraced modernization (Morris, 1994, p. 26).  Thailand received the concept of binary genders (Morris, 1994, p. 27), and homosexuality from the western world (Morris, 1994, p. 29).   This created another system of gender categorization that contains four sexualities;

heterosexual men and women on one side, and homosexual men and women on the other side.  The system of three, *male, female and kathoey*, overlaps with the modern gender categorization, and the combination of two systems constructs a unique culture of gender in Thai society (Morris, 1994, p. 34).  Clearly, gay people and the transpeople cannot fit themselves in either male or female according to heterosexual traditions, so they are grouped in *the third sex* community.  For this reason, *the third sex* becomes a large community of various gender and sexual minorities.

Gender categorization in Thai society covers the variety of gender identities, yet this categorization is quite under-inclusive (Winter, 2011, p. 252).  This is because it generalizes the variety of gender identities without considering each group's distinction.  The word "*kathoey*" is not only used to refer to transgendered women and transvestite men, but sometimes also refer to gay men (Winter, 2011, p. 252).  Thai people consider *kathoeys,* as another class of men (Morris, 1994, p. 24), because people in this gender identity group were born male.  As a result, homosexuality, transsexuality, and transvestitism are easily confused as similar or correlated terms.  Typically, for example, people are familiar with the *kathoey*'s stereotypical superior skill in imitating femininity (Morris, 1994, p. 24).  As a result, people misbelieve that all gay men and transvestite men have this talent.  When *phuyings-kham-phet* are categorized in this group, they are assumed to share similar characteristics.

It is misleading to assume that everyone in *the third sex* community is similar.  For example, Sam Winter (2006, p. 21) shows that not all transgendered women agree on the perception of gender identity. The majority of transgendered women perceive themselves as "women." However, a significant minority identify themselves as "the second type of women" or as "*kathoey*" (Winter, 2006, p. 21), which means they believe that they are not male, but also not female.  The difference of self-identification of transgendered women implies that the word "*kathoey*" is under-inclusive.  It does not differentiate those who perceive themselves as female from those who want to be neither male nor female.

<u>Ignorance as Another Form of Violence</u>

In general, Thailand does not have a reputation for discrimination against gender and sexual minorities, especially when it is compared to other countries in South East Asia, such as the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia (Winter, 2006, p. 59). With the influence of Theravada Buddhism, Thai culture supports people to tolerate and accept gender minorities better than people in some other countries (Winter, 2011, p. 253). The concept of Karma strongly prevents people from harming others, regardless of gender. If a person assaults another, the assaulter will eventually receive punishment for the action. For instance, some people believe that if they assault a transgendered woman, they will be born as transgendered women in their next life and will suffer from the same treatment (Winter, 2011, p. 253). In addition, there is also no religious stance that obviously opposes homosexuality or transsexuality in Thailand (Winter, 2011, p. 253).

Superficially, transgendered women seem to be well accepted by Thai society. However, under this apparent, some still struggle to find their place in Thai society. Thai cultural roots neither aggressively oppose homosexuality and transgender nor support them. The modern interpretation of Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy reproduces the denial of sexual pleasure and discourages the study of homosexuality and transgender in the scholarly literature (Morris, 1994, p. 16). Although these topics can be discussed in the public and many Thai people recognize the existence of *the third sex*, the lack of understanding perpetuates misunderstanding and ignorance toward gender and sexual minorities.

Here, I argue that Thai society is not completely free from discrimination against gender minorities. Similar to other societies, transgendered women in Thailand also have to deal with stigmatization and irrational hatred (Winter, 2011, pp. 252-253). As Winter cites Cameron that, with more subtle mechanism, Thai society ignores, rejects, or alienates those people instead of harming them (Winter, 2011, p. 254). Ignorance becomes one of social sanctions that excludes transgendered women from having equal rights and freedom as other groups of people.

Furthermore, when Thai society embraces the discourse that refers transitioning from the sex assigned at birth as mental illness (Winter, 2011, p. 264), transgendered women are also assumed to be mentally deviant.  For this reason, they are viewed as inferior to men or women, due to the lack of both masculine characteristics and biological ability of female body.  This stigma prevents transgendered women from working in many careers, especially jobs that have to work with children, because the adults do not want children to learn from bad examples.  According to Winter's work (2011, p. 256), from 216 undergraduate students in urban areas, 49 percent cannot accept if their son wants to become a transgendered woman, 28 percent refuse the rights of transgendered women to marry a man, 16 percent do not support transgendered women to be a lecturer, and 13 percent do not think transgendered women should work with children.

Difficulties of Transgendered Women in Thailand

According to Winter (2011, p. 260), transgendered women experience various forms of difficulty in daily life.  The cause of all problems is the discrepancy between their personal documents and their physical appearance.  Some transgendered women successfully passed sex reassignment surgery to become women, but their gender status is not approved.  This affects various activities that require their identification documents, such as traveling, bureaucracy, and law enforcement (Winter, 2011, p. 257).  In addition, this problem also violates the rights of personal privacy.  For example, Thai male citizens who have not passed reserve-officer training during secondary school are called for military service at age twenty, and transgendered women are not excluded (Winter, 2011, p. 257).  The recruitment process and physical examination are mostly held in full public view (Winter, 2011, p. 257).  Thus, the identity of transgendered women is disclosed to people in public without their consent.

Furthermore, any job opportunity is limited to a few types of career, such as tourism, hospitality, and beauty salons that are considered as

lower-class professionals (Winter, 2011, p. 259).  Transpeople face more barriers to work in better careers, especially when they have to be interviewed for a job and have to reveal their gender identity.  To avoid discomfort of clients and possible conflict with coworkers, many transgendered women are rejected an opportunity to work in a particular position despite their ability and knowledge.

Employment discrimination leads to financial vulnerability.  Many of transgendered women have to take risks just to conduct a normal life.  For instance, many unemployed and uneducated transgendered women who migrate from rural areas choose to enter sex work industry for many reasons.  Since they have less chance to find a job, this industry seems to be the best way to easily and quickly earn money without sacrificing their gender identity (Winter, 2011, p. 259).  At the same time, they have an opportunity to meet foreign clients who are able to provide financial support, and take them to countries where marriage is possible (Winter, 2011, p. 261).

Unfortunately, this "Cinderella's Story" is not for everyone.  Transgendered women who choose to work in this industry are exposed to many kinds of violence and harm, such as the risk of sexually transmitted disease and police harassment (Winter, 2011, p. 261).  Transgendered women who are older and less attractive have less power to negotiate with clients to use condoms (Winter, 2011, p. 261).  Thai HIV health treatment services also pay most attention to women and, just recently, gay men, but ignore the risk among the transgendered women's community (Winter, 2011, p. 262).  In addition, as sex work industry is illegal in Thailand, sex workers, regardless of gender, have no legal protection from abusive treatment from police officers.  Some transgendered women might be lucky enough to make a better life from this pathway, but most of them still suffer from consequences of limiting career opportunity.

The lack of recognition of gender status also possesses other problems.  In the past, the law on rape could be applied to only female victims.  The law did not recognize the transgendered women's body as female (Winter, 2011, p. 260).  The rape of transgendered women seemed

to be justified by the absence of recognition, because a person who raped a transgendered woman received less punishment than one who raped a woman. Although the law on rape is currently gender non-specific, the lack of gender status still limits the rights and freedom of transgendered women in other aspects. For example, when transgendered women do not have gender status as women, they have no right to marry a man they love. Her marriage is legally considered same-sex marriage that is still not approved by Thai state.

## *3) Interviews with Members of the TransFemale Association of Thailand*

According to the information from the TransFemale Association, the population of *phuyings-kham-phet* in Thailand is around two or three thousand people. Since the amount of population is considered low, there is currently only one organization that supports the rights of *phuyings-kham-phet*. To approach them, I directly contacted the president of the TransFemale Association. I received wholehearted support from the president and other members in the association who were willing to participate in this research project.

I interviewed fifteen participants, including the president herself. The eldest participant was in her early forties and the youngest was twenty years old at that time. Almost all participants are graduated at least with a Bachelor's Degree, except one who was studying. Most of them were working in private business sector or are the owner of their own business. According to some participants, *phuyings-kham-phet* in Thailand can be found in various social settings. One participant in the interview came from Thai-Muslim family, and is interested in transsexuality in the aspect of Islamic culture. One participant mentioned another member who has hearing impairment and has to communicate with sign language. A few of them talked about one of the eldest members who recently had a chance to have sex reassignment surgery in her sixties. There are many more interesting cases of *phuyings-kham-phet* who come

from really unique backgrounds.  However, given the limitation of time, I do not have an opportunity to interview some mentioned cases.

I divide twelve interview questions into two parts.  The first part, which contains six questions, aims to discover personal background since their childhood, perceptions toward Thai society and beliefs about how Thai people view *phuyings-kham-phet*.  In relation to rational choice theory, this section is designed to reveal collective disposition and the incentive of members to join the association.  The second part, which also consists of six questions, is intended to discover collective strategies to pursue a political goal and how each member contributes to the group.  This section also concerns a topic of free-riding, group interaction, calculation of cost and benefit, and possible strategies to attain recognition.

The First Part: Disposition and Incentive

At the beginning of the interviewed, I asked each participant about her background as a *phuying-kham-phet*.  Almost all participants claimed that they realized their identity since they were really young, except one who recognized her identity when she was about fifteen years old.  At that time most participants were too young to recognize the difference between male and female.  However, they knew that they were falsely grouped with boys.  Almost all participants experienced the socialization of masculinity and male gender roles.  Some participants said they were exposed to many masculine activities, such as sports, but it never changed the fact that they always wanted to be women.  In the end, they chose to become women as soon as they gained financial independence and were mature enough to take responsibility for their own decision.  Their responses seem to support the assumption that transsexuality is inborn, and socialization cannot overcome this natural drive.

I applied the *either/or* and *neither/both* concepts from Katrina Roen's article to discover their gender identity and political standpoint.  All participants identified themselves as female, which paralleled to the *either/or* position.  However, a few of them claimed that they supported

the *neither/both* position. The majority who supported the *either/or* said that there were two sexes, and people could be only one of them. Some participants clarified their opinion by separating physical sex from sexual orientation. They realized that there were various sexual preferences, but there were still only two sexes. On the contrary, three participants chose to support the *neither/both* position, despite recognizing themselves as female similarly to the *either/or* supporters. They believed that all personal interpretations of gender identity should be respected. It did not matter to them if other people had no desire to be either male or female.

Regarding to the topic of gender identity, all participants could describe the difference between *phuyings-kham-phet* and other gender groups. The youngest participant mentioned an interesting point. According to her, personal gender identity was determined by the owner. For instance, *phuyings-kham-phet* realized that they were female; even though, they did not pass sex reassignment surgery. *Phuyings-kham-phet* viewed themselves similar with people who were physically born female. Thus, they wanted others to see them as women. On the other hand, *kathoeys* did not recognize themselves as female or male. Some only enjoyed wearing female clothes. Some had had sex reassignment surgery, but still identified themselves as *kathoeys.* Thus, the interpretation of femininity of *kathoeys* is different from that of *phuyings-kham-phet*.

When asked about the perceptions of Thai people about the *phuyings-kham-phet*'s community, the majority of participants claimed that conservativeness was the main problem. Similar to other societies, the dimorphic concept of sex and gender were quite strong in Thai society. People who did not conform with gender roles which were dictated by biology needed to be put back on track. Many Thai people still perceived transsexuality as mental illness. One participant mentioned an example of her friend who was refused a position as a teacher in the field of socio-psychology. The committee believed that her "mental illness" condition would not be a good example for her students, especially in the field of psychology. Other participants expressed how they were alienated by people's sight in the public when people realized they were *phuyings-kham-phet*.

Furthermore, many Thai people still perceive sex reassignment as an unnecessary cosmetic surgery.  However, for *phuyings-kham-phet*, having male genitalia causes them great discomfort.  *Phuyings-kham-phet* view the surgery as an important treatment that removes "a tumor" and heals them from psychological trauma.  The eldest participant, who had the surgery in her thirties, described how she suffered from having the unwanted part in tears.  She said every time she saw her reflection she really wanted to break the mirror.  The surgery released her from a male body and let her live the life she always wished.

Another aspect of social perception toward transsexuality is misunderstanding.  Elder participants stated that Thai people became more accepting toward transsexuality; however, people did not clearly understand this topic.  Most Thai people cannot differentiate transsexuality from transvestitism or homosexuality.  Some people still confuse *phuyings-kham-phet* with *kathoeys* and gay men.  At the same time, many people falsely believe that *kathoeys* have to be vulgar, loud, and have an uncontrollable sexual appetite for men.  Since some people still believe that *phuyings-kham-phet* are similar to *kathoeys*, the negative stereotype is also attached on them.  Many participants said they were uncomfortable to be stigmatized by this stereotype, because it did not reflect who they really were.

Nowadays, more people realize the existence of *phuyings-kham-phet*.  However, this recognition does not translate into real understanding.  They know that "some *kathoey*s" are different from the stereotype, and look really similar to women.  Some participants mentioned *phuyings-kham-phet*'s "obligation to be beautiful."  People expect *phuyings-kham-phet* to have above average beauty, but do not really recognize their real talents in any other fields besides the cosmetic industry and entertainment.  Beautiful *phuyings-kham-phet* seem to be accepted more, while less beautiful *phuyings-kham-phet* have harder time to have the same treatment.  Although Thai people are recently more open-minded toward *phuyings-kham-phet*, the rights and freedom of this gender group are still limited.

The most obvious problem of *phuyings-kham-phet* is unrecognized gender status.  They already have female body, but cannot use their rights as female citizens.  Unrecognized gender status affects their career opportunity and financial independence.  *Phuyings-kham-phet* are required to produce further documents to approve their identity when they travel, do business transaction, or apply for a job.  Some participants were refused a job position due to their gender identity, and some lost promotion opportunity for the same reason.

Regarding the support from the Thai government, all participants unanimously agreed that *phuyings-kham-phet* in Thailand were ignored. Although there is no opposition from the government, it never supports the improvement for their rights, freedom and well-beings.  Participants did understand that for the last few years, there had been more serious issues, such as political conflict and flooding.  However, it was unacceptable to them that the Thai government usually puts the issue of rights and freedom inferior to other issues, and did not take it seriously enough.

The dispositions of *phuyings-kham-phet* who participated in the interviews were similar.  All of them recognized themselves as female, and could differentiate themselves from other gender groups without hesitation.  They had experienced social pressures that forced them to be male.  Hence, all of them had incentive to make people recognize them as women.  Recognition of gender status will support them to have better life quality, especially in the aspect of financial security and family life.


The Second Part: Political Strategy and Interaction within the Group

On the subject of working to attain the recognition, the majority of participants preferred working within *phuyings-kham-phet*'s community. The TransFemale Association enables *phuyings-kham-phet* to present their clear political standpoint and political goal.  The clearer their identity is, the easier they will be recognized by the public and the government. Only a few participants, on the contrary, did not mind working with other gender groups.  They believed that working with other gender groups

would make the movement of gender and sexual minorities larger and stronger. However, these participants recognized that it was also easy to encounter conflict, bias and misunderstanding within *the third sex* community. One participant said that each gender group should have its own organization to clarify its political goal, and then all groups should move together to fight for equality of all gender and sexual minorities. Unfortunately, she continued, presently it was quite difficult to work with other groups because they did not understand *phuyings-kham-phet* well enough.

All participants unanimously agreed that working as a group was really important to make a change in society. According to them, a small number of *phuyings-kham-phet* could not convince people that the violation of their rights and freedom was a serious problem. When people realized that there were at least two thousand of them in Thai society, people could not ignore their existence and their problems anymore. Besides a large number of members, some participants mentioned other factors that help their movement successfully attain the goal. A few participants pointed out the importance of leadership. One participant, for example, said that without an inspirational and dedicative leader, it would be more difficult for other *phuyings-kham-phet* to stand up for themselves. Since the president had more financial stability, charisma and fame, some members were convinced that the leader could make the fight for equality more promising. Thus, many *phuyings-kham-phet* decided to join the association.

Another group of participants showed that positive images of the *phuyings-kham-phet*'s community was really important. Since *phuyings-kham-phet* claim themselves as women, not as *kathoeys*, it is necessary for them to commit this identity. *Phuyings-kham-phet* want to eliminate negative stereotypes from heterosexual traditions out of themselves, unless it will be harder for them to gain support from the public. Furthermore, participants also valued the spread of knowledge about *phuyings-kham-phet* to the public. Thus, they were really willing to be interviewed, because this gave them a chance to support their association in its desire to spread understanding of transsexuality to other people. In another case, other participants mentioned scientific research findings as

evidence to convince people that transsexuality was natural.  Hence, it was really important for the government to adjust the law to fit *phuyings-kham-phet*'s condition, because it was not their choice to live this way. Participants said that people seemed to be easier convinced if a claim was supported by scientific studies.

Many participants also highlighted the importance of having attention from Thai people.  They believed that Thai people typically paid attention to currently popular or notorious issues.  As a result, to be in the spotlight can be considered as another important strategy of *phuyings-kham-phet*.  Although some people oppose them, at least more people recognize their existence and problems.  If *phuyings-kham-phet* are continuously presented in the media, they will have an opportunity to gain additional supports from others.  This is because more people can understand them better and possibly do not feel like transsexuality is threatening to Thai society.

With respect to limitations in the association, each member had her own career, so some members could not fully work in the association. Members who had more financial independence, such as the president, could contribute more to the association.  On the contrary, members who had less financial stability would have less time to attend many meetings and activities, because they had to spend more time working.  This limitation delayed their plan from time to time.  For a solution, the association relies on social network to provide information and news for other members who absent from some meetings or activities.  They also try to make the schedule flexible enough, so many members can participate.

Another problem within the association was the lack of financial support for activities and projects.  Sister Hand Project, for example, requires a large amount of money.  The project supports *phuyings-kham-phet* who are chosen by the committee of the association to have sex reassignment surgery.  The surgery costs around 120,000 Baht, or about 3,815 Canadian Dollars, per person.  This does not include other surgeries, such as breast implant or facial surgery.  Recently, members of

the association have tried to spend their personal budget to support some activities and projects.

"Sisterhood" was the main theme of interaction within the association. Similar experiences became the origin of bond and trust. Understanding united *phuyings-kham-phet* from different backgrounds and helped them mobilize their group with ease. Many participants described about close relationship and emotional support within the association. One participant, for instance, said that when she experienced difficulties, elder members would give her useful advices. In some cases, they took action to help her solve problems. Furthermore, the bond of *phuyings-kham-phet* also made them overlook some conflicts, and preferred compromising.

Interestingly, free-riding is not a big problem in the association. Many participants said that they voluntarily dedicated themselves to improve the well-being of *phuyings-kham-phet* in Thailand. One participant said that stepping up to fight for *phuyings-kham-phet*'s rights was sometimes exhausting and discouraging. Members of the TransFemale Association exposed themselves to prejudice, discrimination and many kinds of verbal attacks. However, they willingly volunteered to improve well-being of all *phuyings-kham-phet*, because they wanted to do so. Some participants believed that there were more *phuyings-kham-phet* who were less fortunate. *Phuyings-kham-phet* from lower class, for instance, were not in a position to make a change, because they might not aware of their rights or they had to pay more attention on their daily basis. As a result, they believed that people who had more should support those who had less.

A few participants provided another reason why free-riding was not a serious issue. They said, in the end, if they worked hard to get what they were waiting for, they would not care much about the number of free-riders. Their goal was simply to have a better life, not to encourage all *phuyings-kham-phet* to be politically active. Furthermore, the limitations of money and time of each member were widely known by members of the association. As a result, many participants claimed that if some

members could not give financial support or attend some activities, it was understandable.

## 4) Analysis of Political Strategy of Phuyings-Kham-Phet's Movement

In this section, I apply rational choice model in Dennis Chong's *Rational Lives: Norms and Values in Politics and Society*, to information from the interviews with members of TransFemale Association. As discussed in the first section, rational choice theory is compatible with the study of political behaviors that relates to identity and culture. In this research project, I use the model of cultural coordination and conflict, and cultural mobilization in Chong's work to describe two topics, that are (1) separation from *the third sex* community and (2) pursuit of being recognized as women.

Separation from the Third Sex Community

In the third chapter in his book, Chong (2000, p. 76) demonstrates a rational choice concept of coordination and conflict regarding culture. Culture is a mechanism to create unity in a community and also a behavior guide for its members. It importantly supports material and psychological security, because group coordination facilitates cooperation to attain collective goals, and also reduces conflict from the fear of unknown or unpredictability (Chong, 2000, p. 80). Identities and values can impact material and social consequences (Chong, 2000, p. 114), because they influence how people choose who they will cooperate with or compete against. Typically, people assume that others who have different values from them must be on the opposite side of their community (Chong, 2000, p. 82). Hence, the conflict between groups of people that do not share the same value can easily happen.

The majority of Thai people have been familiar with the concept of binary sex and heterosexuality, since Thailand exposed itself to western

cultures.  For instance, between 1938 to 1944, the administration of Phibun Songkhram supported modernization of lifestyle in both public and domestic sphere (Morris, 1994, p. 39).  Men and women were required to wear clothes according to their sex; shirts and trousers were for men, and skirts and blouses were for women (Morris, 1994, p. 33).  Clothes, as a result, became an indicator of binarized gender identity, while cross-dressing became illegal (Morris, 1994, p. 34).  Nowadays, according to some participants, this regulation still lasts in Thai society.  Many *phuyings-kham-phet* prefer not to work in governmental organizations where they are forced to dress in male clothes, despite their female body.

Typically, gender identities are categorized by using the combination of biological evidences, and social factors that interpret genitalia through cultural perceptions (Woodward, 2004, p. 75). Categorization of gender identities are mostly influenced by the concept of stereotypical masculinity and femininity (Woodward, 2004, p. 75).  In Thai culture, gay men and transgendered women are still considered as male (Morris, 1994, p. 24), so they are expected to strictly follow male gender roles.  For this reason, homosexuality is considered as the betrayal of biology (Morris, 1994, pp. 27-28), and transsexuality is perceived as psychological deviance (Winter, 2011, p. 264).

According to Chong (2000, p. 109), the majority have interests in conserving the dominant cultures.  They will resist the change that potentially threatens their domination.  The majority will use social sanctions to convince the minority that conforming is beneficial, while rebelling will lead to punishment (Chong, 2000, p. 109).  The majority's norms and values also have defense mechanisms to conserve its domination.  Old values that people hold prevent them from accepting new values by shaping how they perceive unfamiliar cultures (Chong, 2000, p. 89).  Stereotype, for instance, fosters misunderstanding (Chong, 2000, pp. 93-94), or it makes people assume that one bad example represents the entire community of the outsiders (Chong, 2000, p. 95). Consequently, people believe that they have no interest in leaving their original culture to embrace new values that seem inappropriate or disadvantageous.  Similarly, original cultures make the majority of Thai

society perceive homosexuals and transgender people as prohibited lifestyles, even though they do not aggressively oppose the minority.

In the interviews, every participants described how they could not fit themselves in Thai society. When they were younger, they felt awkward wearing male student uniforms or spending time with other male fellows. Two of them had parents who attempted to "heal" them from being female. They were sent to all male schools with an expectation that the school could possibly make them more masculine and eventually made them follow male gender roles, but the attempt failed. Additionally, all participants mentioned how they were discriminated against and insulted by people due to their gender identity. Many were disqualified from job or scholarship interview, and some experienced problems during traveling or business transactions. Discrimination against *phuyings-kham-phet* reflects social sanctions of the majority. It is to convince *phuyings-kham-phet* that their "decisions" to challenge the norms are disadvantageous. If they need to receive benefits, they should conform the majority's cultures.

When the minority do not have the capacity to adjust to the majority's cultures, they decide to resist the mainstream and attempt to change the norms (Chong, 2000, p. 107). In another case, they will separate from the society to establish their own community where they can communicate or cooperate together for their own interest (Chong, 2000, p. 109). As a result, it is quite rational for *phuyings-kham-phet* to separate from the society to form their own group. However, the decision to separate from the society in this case raises another interesting point. *Phuyings-kham-phet* are not only the minority of Thai society, but also the minority of *the third sex* community. According to the interviews, some participants mentioned minor conflicts between *phuyings-kham-phet* and other gender groups.

A few participants said that *phuyings-kham-phet* once worked with gays, lesbians, and *kathoeys* in *the third sex* community to fight for equality. However, *phuyings-kham-phet* realized that their problems were not well represented in the movement, so they decided to separate from the group and established their exclusive community. Participants who

preferred working with their own group claimed that the difference of goals was the main reason why they could not work with other groups.

Gays and lesbians have no intention to pass to the other sex. They pay more attention on the topic of same-sex marriage. On the contrary, *phuyings-kham-phet* concentrate on the recognition of gender status as women. They cannot remain to use the rights and freedom as male, because their body is already female. Different goals, according to a few participants, do not support the cooperation between gay people and *phuyings-kham-phet*. The president of the TransFemale Association and another participant, claimed that in 2007, the approval of female gender status for men who had sex reassignment surgery was almost passed. Unfortunately, the ambiguity of *the third sex* community caused the concern that female gender status might be misused. For example, if a male criminal, who wants to change his identity by dressing in female clothes or having breast implant surgery, might be improved to change his identification and can escape from arresting or other legal charges. It is important to separate those who have male genitalia from those who already passed sex reassignment surgery. Only the later group should be approved to have female gender status. For this reason, separating from homosexual community possibly supports *phuyings-kham-phet* to have gender approval easier, because their gender identity is made clearer and distinctive from gay people.

When asked about the difference between themselves and *kathoeys*, many participants claimed that their beliefs and lifestyles were not similar to *kathoeys*'. A few explain that *phuyings-kham-phet* desired to be women, so they thought it was important to act like one. In contrast, they thought *kathoeys* were proud of who they were, and did not express femininity as same as how women did. *Kathoeys* are believed to possess superior sense of beauty in fashion and cosmetic to women (Morris, 1994, p. 24), and sometimes their personality is represented through flamboyant femininity. *Phuyings-kham-phet* claim not to follow the same pathway. The conflict between *phuyings-kham-phet* and *kathoeys* more likely is rooted in the difference of self-identification and values. This conflict can also be described through the concept of disposition and incentive.

Different from gay people, there was still no mention about political standpoints of *kathoeys*. According to participants, no one could clearly identify the political standpoint of the *kathoey* community. I have no intention to assume that *kathoeys* do not have political goal, and I really suggest that this topic requires further research before making a conclusion. However, according to Roen (2002, p. 507), some transgendered people who choose not to pass to the other sex may interpret the either/or position as the opposition to gender revolution. The either/or, passing to be the other sex, perpetuates the oppression of sexual binary world (Roen, 2002, p. 508). Thus, I believe that it is possible for *kathoeys* to perceive *phuyings-kham-phet*'s movement as the opposition to *the third sex* community.

*Kathoey* is the original gender identity concept of Thai culture to describe people who cannot be labeled as either male or female. The word is later used to describe men who do not fit heterosexual traditions, such as drag queens, lady boys and transgendered women. Thus, this word covers a variety of gender identities that do not require clarification. In Thai society, the *kathoeys* community is a part of original values that provides some spaces for various gender and sexual minorities. On the contrary, transsexual female, or *phuying-kham-phet*, recently identify themselves by using a word that is derived from English. Different from *kathoey*, *phuying-kham-phet* refers to a woman who was born in a wrong body and who identifies as female. This term intentionally excludes transvestitism and homosexuality.

Chong (2000, p. 82) argues that emotional attachment to individual identity makes people perceive difference as opposition. The *kathoey* community has been constructed as a distinctive group apart from male and female. They might have pride in the uniqueness of ambiguity that blends masculinity and femininity together. The creation of a new term, "*phuying-kham-phet,*" can be interpreted as a betrayal to *the third sex* community. Political strategies of *phuyings-kham-phet* are possibly perceived as a threat to the original gender system that already provides *kathoeys* with spaces in Thai society. Also, *kathoeys* possibly have the main intention to create positive images for themselves not as women, but as who they are. Thus, this goal is clearly different from

*phuyings-kham-phet*'s, and prevent the two groups from cooperating with each other.

For another plausible cause of conflict, *kathoey*'s community consists of the variety of gender identity groups that possibly share political interest with gay people. According to participants, many of them described *kathoeys* as transvestite men who were still physically male. For this reason, some people in the *kathoey* community do not have desire to fully become female. Same-sex marriage, on the contrary, possibly interests them more. In another unique case, some of *kathoey* cannot be identified as either male or female, because they have both breasts and male genitalia. Female gender status might not be appropriately applied to them. As a result, they possibly have no interest to support *phuyings-kham-phet* to attain the recognition of gender status. Consequently, it is less likely for *phuyings-kham-phet* to gain support from *kathoeys* because of unmatched political goals.

Pursuit of Political and Legal Recognition as Women

After separating themselves from the society, the next strategic move of *phuyings-kham-phet* is to mobilize their group to attain political and social recognition. In the fourth chapter of Chong's book (2000, p. 116), he argues that the main intention to form a group of people who share common values is to mobilize to attain political goal. The more united a group is, the more successful mobilization will be.

Creating common frames of reference will influence people to pay attention on certain topics and ignore others. This is because the frame of references can influence individual decisions and change incentives to support a certain value (Chong, 2000, p. 118). In the case of *phuyings-kham-phet*, it is quite important for them to convince Thai people to accept a new frame of reference, because the major obstacle of *phuyings-kham-phet*'s political strategies is the disposition of the majority in Thai society.

Chong (2000, p. 118) argues that the impact of information that people receive depends on their dispositions to receive it. The majority of

Thai people are familiar with the traditional gender categorization system that clearly draws the line between heterosexual people and *the third sex* community. For heterosexual people, it will be quite unusual, if people from *the third sex* group want to be accepted as a part of them. Presently, the majority of Thai people still perceive *phuyings-kham-phet* as a part of *the third sex* group, and confuse them with *kathoeys*. Thus, the majority believes that *phuyings-kham-phet* should stay in *the third sex* community, and should not be accepted as women. If *phuyings-kham-phet* succeed in making people perceive that they are another group of women, it will be easier for them to gain recognition, and have equal rights and freedom as other female citizens.

Chong (2000, pp. 123-125) provides four strategies of cultural mobilization. All four strategies require an opinion leader to control frames of reference and to manipulate people who choose to favor his or her position. (1) *General framing strategy* is the manipulation of a widely supported frames of reference to favor the leader's interest. (2) *The element of surprise* refers to the exploitation of a topic that can evoke the public's strong reaction. (3) *Convergence on a focal point* means the tactic to increase popular support through coordination. (4) *Using principled appeals* is defined as the public motivation by using credibility of the opinion leader and convincing messages. Here, I apply these four strategies to the case of *phuyings-kham-phet*'s political mobilization. Instead of using one strategy, the TransFemale Association combines different tactics to attain political and legal recognition.

(1) *General framing strategy* requires the opinion leader to offer incentives that do not oppose people's dispositions (Chong, 2000, p. 126). The *phuyings-kham-phet*'s political interest is obviously against the majority's values. As the outsiders of original culture, *phuyings-kham-phet* are less likely successful from straightforwardly exploiting original values to help them attain self-interests. Instead, they should create a new frame of reference and convince the majority to accept it. One possibility is to take advantage of the heterosexual traditions by convincing people that *phuyings-kham-phet*'s political goal does not threaten existing social values.

According to a few participants who were in love relationship, nowadays some men were more generous toward *phuyings-kham-phet*. Their loved one, for instance, accepted them as women, and their past of being born male did not affect their relationship. According to them, men who were in relationship with *phuyings-kham-phet* were not homosexual, because those men were attracted to women. *Phuyings-kham-phet*, as a result, did not destruct the foundation of heterosexual relationship. However, this argument seems to influence only intimate personal relationship. The majority of people are still not convinced that *phuyings-kham-phet* are not different from those who were born female. This is because people still fix on the fact that *phuyings-kham-phet* were not originally born female. Although they passed sex reassignment surgery, they cannot have natural female reproductive system.

(2) Some participants mentioned how the topic of transsexuality received media attention around 2010. The president of the TransFemale Association has appeared on a number of television programs to introduce the definition of *phuying-kham-phet* and their problems. This made more people begin to hear the word "*phuying-kham-phet*." *The element of surprise* helps bring the existence of *phuyings-kham-phet* to the public's view, and starts a discussion on the topic of transsexuality in Thai society.

Chong (2000, p. 130) mentions in his work that the opinion leader of this strategy has no full control over the direction of the debate, because it also depends on the public. In one television program, the discussion led to emotionally intense debate and started strong responses from a few members of audience. One of the most controversial issues was how *phuyings-kham-phet* identified themselves by using the definition of transsexualism according to World Health Organization under the code F64.0.[3] This definition refers a *phuying-kham-phet* as a woman who has a disorder from being born with male genital. She needs to have a

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[3] International Identification Diseases-10: **Transsexualism** (F64.0): 1. The desire to live and be accepted as a member of the opposite sex, usually accompanied by the wish to make his or her body as congruent as possible with the preferred sex through surgery and hormone treatment; 2. The transsexual identity has been present persistently for at least two years; 3. The disorder is not a symptom of another mental disorder or a chromosomal abnormality.

permanent treatment by having sex reassignment surgery, including taking some hormones.  However, a few spokespersons from *kathoeys* community strongly disapproved the consideration of transsexualism as a disorder, because this possibly made others believe that the entire gender minorities were mentally deviant.

Another contentious topic is self-identification of *phuyings-kham-phet*.  The president of the TransFemale Association always used the word "completely female" to describe self-identification of *phuyings-kham-phet* in the aspect of psychology.  She did not deny the fact that *phuyings-kham-phet* were all born in male body.  She confidently argued that every *phuyings-kham-phet* realized that they were completely female from the inside.  However, other people on the show perceived that *phuyings-kham-phet* were denying their own past of being born as male.  Others argued from the standpoint of physical sex.  *Phuyings-kham-phet* were born in male body and still did not have complete female reproductive system.  From their point of view, it was unacceptable for *phuyings-kham-phet* to use "completely female" to describe themselves, because clearly their physical body was not.

These two issues in the debate prove that *the element of surprise* strategy does not give full authority to the opinion leader to control how people interpret her messages.  Hence, it does not well support *phuyings-kham-phet* to convince people to embrace a new frame of reference.  The majority still prefer original gender categorization that views *phuyings-kham-phet* as another class of men.  On the bright side, this strategy makes more people recognize the existence of *phuyings-kham-phet*. From the responses of participants, some of them claimed that to have attention from the media was quite beneficial; although people could not fully understand what they were saying.  At least, to be more visible was a big progress for their movement.

(3) For the *convergence on a focal point*, Chong (2000, p. 134) describes that a successful case has a power to convince people to follow.  This is because when people find the leader's message convincing, they expect that other people will follow the same trend and everyone will be rewarded when jumping on the bandwagon (Chong,

2000, p. 125).  The TransFemale Association is in progress to create support from the public.  Presently, *phuyings-kham-phet* have recruited more members through the official website and via members in the group. Many participants anticipated that in the future the association would increase its size and capacity to mobilize.  The success of the association would directly encourage more *phuyings-kham-phet* to join the group. The large size of the *phuyings-kham-phet* population and solidity of their group are expected to make the public realize that discrimination against them should not be overlooked.

The association also requires advocacy from other groups of people.  One of the main limitations of the TransFemale Association is the lack of a stable source of finance.  This limits the progress of the association's plans and activities, especially a campaign to provide treatment in a form of sex reassignment surgery for *phuyings-kham-phet*. Many participants remarked that to have financial support from other organizations would strongly improve the association's success. Presently, the TransFemale Association has support from some business corporations that are familiar with some notable members in the association.  Also, the connection with powerful people in politics is consequently important to the association's success.  Some participants claim that the association was seeking for the support from other organizations, both locally and internationally, that could support their movement.  Even though it is too early to determine whether c*onvergence on a focal point* will make *phuyings-kham-phet*'s association successful, many members considered popular support as an important factor of their success.  The more people accept their movement, the more opportunity to attain recognition they will have.

(4) According to participants, credibility was one of the most mentioned elements of success.  As the minority in Thai society, *arguing with principles* is the most practical strategy when compared to the other three.  Chong (2000, p. 142) describes that a good principled argument should appear to be objective and altruistic to be more persuasive.  From the interviews, a few participants talked about using scientific and medical evidence to improve credibility of their arguments.  For example, the president of the association always refers to definition of transsexuality

that is internationally approved and uses the definition of transsexualism from World Health Organization to strengthen her claims.

The TransFemale Association also pays attention to their images in the public.  Every participants stated that all members volunteered themselves to support the association not solely for their personal interests.  They intended to improve life quality of all *phuyings-kham-phet* in Thailand; even though some *phuyings-kham-phet* could not contribute. The association is claimed to be established on the basis of helping people.  This quality possibly produces positive images of the group, and can convince people to support *phuyings-kham-phet*, because the society in general still admires altruism (Chong, 2000, p. 142).  Additionally, justice, for instance, can legitimate an argument through social approval (Chong, 2000, p. 145).  *Phuyings-kham-phet* can argue that discrimination against them is unacceptable because it violates human rights, freedom and equality in society.  To improve gender equality can reflect not only the interest of *phuyings-kham-phet*, but will also make the society a better place for everyone.

Besides admired qualities, credibility of their claim is also important.  One participant made an interesting statement about the image of *phuyings-kham-phet*.  She said that it is necessary for *phuyings-kham-phet* to behave and think like women, since they claim themselves to be women.  They need to commit this identity and convince the public to think they are not different from other women.  This statement parallels Chong's argument (2000, p. 146) that consistency in action will increase credibility of the message.

At the same time, *phuyings-kham-phet* do not overlook the importance of relationship with other gender groups.  Although they prefer being within their community and attempt to differentiate themselves from others; they do not intend to cause opposition from other gender groups. A few participants, for example, said that self-identification was a personal freedom, and they should respect it.  They identified themselves as female, but others should be able to determine themselves as anyone they wished.  Many participants also claimed that the separation from *the third sex* community did not represent superiority of *phuyings-kham-phet*.

They believed that every gender group was equal, but it was also important to concentrate to each group's goal. This is similar to Chong's argument (2000, p. 149) that principle of neutrality works as a defense mechanism that prevents third parties from interfering or opposing. Thus, if *phuyings-kham-phet* do not have much opposition, the possibility to attain their goal will increase.

As the minority, *phuyings-kham-phet* have to change frames of reference to convince the majority that they do not threaten the social fabric of Thai society. Instead, they will beg the majority to help them overcome difficulties in their life by giving them recognition of gender status. The major obstacle is the majority's disposition that does not accept *phuyings-kham-phet* as women. *General framing strategy* dose not enable *phuyings-kham-phet* to convince the majority, because there is no original value in Thai society that recognizes *phuyings-kham-phet* as female. *The element of surprise* is beneficial for a short time. It brings the attention of *phuyings-kham-phet* to the public, but it is difficult to control how the public responds to their argument. Again, original disposition makes people reject the a new frame of reference.

*Convergence on a focal point* is expected to be a good long term strategy for *phuyings-kham-phet*. They intend to recruit additional support from more *phuyings-kham-phet* and other organizations that can support them politically and financially. Thus, in the future, popularity and approval from many people will help them gain further support and advocacy from the public. Presently, *arguing with principles* is the main strategy to pursue recognition from Thai society. Positive images are considered an important component of success to gain support from the majority, and to reduce conflict with possible oppositions.

## Conclusion

This research project introduces an application of rational choice theory to the topic of *phuyings-kham-phet*'s political movement in Thailand. For academic contributions, it advocates rational choice

theory's capacity to explain political behaviors outside both economic sphere and western cultural settings. Rational choice theory can include non-material factors and structural influences to modify accurate reflection of human behaviors, as Dennis Chong (2000, p. 213) suggests that individual choice should not be separated from social context. In this research project, Chong's rational choice models of social norms and values are applied to describe a prominent change of gender politics in Thai society.

The concept of incentive and disposition is used to describe social dynamics in this case study. Chong (2000, p. 218) concludes that social changes occur when a lower status group is prevented from having equal benefits as other groups, the group will attempt to change original norms. On the contrary, a group that receives benefits from an existing system and is threatened by the change will oppose new values (Chong, 2000, p. 218). *Phuyings-kham-phet* have experienced discrimination that excludes them from having the same rights and freedom as other citizens. The main goal of their political movement is to be recognized as women by the government, so they can live just like other female citizens. The majority oppose this strategic move because it harms traditional gender categories in Thai society. In the majority's views, *phuyings-kham-phet* should belong to *the third sex* community, and should be accepted as neither women nor heterosexual. As a result, *phuyings-kham-phet* have to construct a new frame of reference and convince the majority to accept that they are another group of women. According to participants in the interviews, popular support was perceived to be an important element of their political mobilization. Positive images and credibility of their claims were mainly used to recruit more *phuyings-kham-phet* and gain support from other people.

Furthermore, rational choice theory can also provide distinctions between *phuyings-kham-phet* and other gender groups by using the concept of incentive and disposition. Generally, Thai culture groups all gender and sexual minorities in *the third sex* community. The lack of knowledge and sensitivity toward gender topics makes many Thai people unable to differentiate *phuyings-kham-phet* from other gender groups, especially *kathoeys*. *Phuyings-kham-phet* separate themselves from

other gender and sexual minorities, because of differences of self-identification and political goals.  *Phuyings-kham-phet* identify themselves as female, and they are fighting for the recognition of their gender status.  Gay people recognize themselves with the sex they are assigned at birth, and *kathoeys* do not label themselves as either male or female.  Gay people concentrate on the topic of sam-sex marriage.  As kathoeys have no desire to fully become women, they are not interested to have gender recognition from the state.  For this reason, language matters in rational choice calculations as Aguiar and de Francisco (2009, p. 548) argue.  In this case, as they insist not to be called "*kathoey,*" the term "*phuying-kham-phet*" is created with the intention to support a group of transgendered women to attain recognition as women.

For normative contributions, Chong (2000, p. 230) recommends in his work that his model's contribution is to make the world a better place. I suggest that this application of rational choice theory in this research project also aims to make people understand rationality behind social norms, and help people develop tolerance for others who are different from them.  Difference should not be the origin of conflict between identity groups.  People have been socialized to perceive that their groups and values are better than others.  However, actually, individual decision is rational in its own way, and rationality is not universal.  It depends on how people are brought up and where they grow up.  When people realize that individual interest makes them take different decision, they have a chance to learn to respect choices of others, because no choice is ultimately right or wrong. This will reduce a chance of prejudice, discrimination, intolerance and conflict regarding to individual identity.

For limitations of rational choice theory, I agree with the statement of Lichbach (2003, p. 135) that all knowledge is partial, and laws of nature are not total concrete reality, but only selected aspects of it.  Definitely, rational choice theory cannot provide a perfect explanation of social phenomena without any flaws.  Rational choice theory still demands a specific focus to maintain the level of simplicity and stability, as Lichbach references to Clifford Geertz's words in his book (Lichbach, 2003, p. 69). In this case study, the TransFemale Association is established with clear political purposes and explicit collectivity of identity and norms.  All

members share similar experiences and know the goal of their group.  For this reason, it is possible to apply rational choice theory to describe political behaviors of this group.  I believe that in cultural settings where individuality is higher and groups are less organized it will be more difficult for rational choice theory to explain political behaviors in those cases.

This research project is based on fifteen interviews with members of the TransFemale Association of Thailand.  I realize that their responses may not reflect the entire *phuyings-kham-phet*'s community.  Most of participants in the interviews are middle class and live in urban areas, so their responses possibly reflect opinions of only a small group of this community.  Those from other backgrounds can possibly provide different responses from what I present in this project.  Also, information about gay people and *kathoeys* are solely based on perceptions of *phuyings-kham-phet* who claim that they have interacted with those mentioned two groups.  This information may not reflect real political purposes of both gay people and *kathoeys* in Thailand.  I recommend further research about political activities of these two groups.

The knowledge and information about *phuyings-kham-phet* is underdeveloped.  Moreover, it is too early to determine whether their political strategies will support them to attain recognition from Thai society in the future.  This is just the beginning of one noticeable change of gender politics in Thailand.  This research project will pave the way for researchers who are interested in expanding knowledge about transidentity and politics in Thai society.

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# Appendix: Interview Timeline, Consent, and Approval

<u>Interview Timeline</u>

| | |
|---|---|
| 18 January 2012 | - Interview Participant 01 & Participant 02 |
| 24 January 2012 | - Interview Participant 03 |
| 2 February 2012 | - Interview Participant 04 |
| 8 February 2012 | - Interview Participant 05 |
| 16 February 2012 | - Interview Participant 06 |
| 22 March 2012 | - Interview Participant 07 |
| 26 March 2012 | - Interview Participant 08 |
| 28 March 2012 | - Interview Participant 09 |
| 6 April 2012 | - Interview Participant 10 |
| 8 April 2012 | - Interview Participant 11 |
| 16 April 2012 | - Interview Participant 12 |
| 18 April 2012 | - Interview Participant 13 |
| 21 April 2012 | - Interview Participant 14 |
| 16 May 2012 | - Interview Participant 15 |

# Consent

(*The consent is going to be informed to participants in Thai language.*)

You are asked to participate in a research study by Narut Supawantanakul, M.A., from the department of political science at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada.  This study is being done under the auspices of Simon Fraser University.  You should be informed about details of the study and the interview.  You can ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.  If you desire to withdraw or discontinue, you can do so at any time without consequences.

**Title of the Study**: An Application of Rational Choice Theory to "Transsexual" Women's Political Strategy to Pursue Recognition in Thailand

## Goals of the Study
- To study how Thai transsexual women pursue political recognition and social acceptance.
- To support the significance of gender issues in Thai politics.

## Procedure, Privacy, Confidentiality, and Risks
- If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a list of questions.
- You will <u>not</u> be asked to provide any information that possibly causes negative impact on your well-beings, professional status, safety, or reputation.
- Your identification are <u>not</u> disclosed to the third party.
- If it is necessary to mention specific participants, you will be mentioned by aliases.
- You have the rights to refuse to answer some questions, withdraw the consent, or discontinue the interview without consequences or penalty.
- You have the rights to approve or deny the re-contact from the principal investigator without consequences or penalty.
- The exposure of participants' identification possibly affects career and social reputation, as mentioned above.  Thus, it is a priority of the principal investigator to keep your identification confidential.
- Documents that contain your identification will be kept in secured storages and will be disposed <u>within 2 years</u>; before the end of 2013.
- You can obtain the research results by directly contacting the principal investigator.

## Anticipated Benefits
- Participants may receive no direct or monetary benefits from the study.  However, the awareness of transsexual women movement possibly increases more knowledge of gender relating issues in Thai politics and supports political scientists to find solutions to discrimination regarding to gender identity or sexual orientation in Thai society and other countries.

**Complaints to be directed to**
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Department of Political Science, Simon Fraser University
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nsupawan@sfu.ca // narut.sp99@gmail.com

I have read, or someone has read to me, and I understand the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

**By signing this form, I am willing to participate in this research study.**

_____    _____    _____
Name of Participant    Signature of Participant    Date

**I have explained the research to the subject, and answered all of your questions. I believe that you understands the information described in this document and freely consents to participate.**

_____    _____    _____
Name of Investigator    Signature of Participant    Date

สมาคมสตรีข้ามเพศแห่งประเทศไทย
TransFemale Association of Thailand

September 7, 2011

Narut Supawantanakul
5/178 Mooban Chaiyapruek So. 37  .
Watcharapon Road
Bangkhen, Bangkok 10220

Dear Narut Supawantanakul,

In response to your request, I am pleased to inform you that TransFemale
Association of Thailand is willing to support you to conduct your research study on
the topic of "The Application of Rational Choice Theory to Transsexual Women's
Political Strategy to Pursue Political Recognition in Thailand." TransFemale
Association of Thailand would like assist you by contacting and recruiting
participants for your interview.

Sincerely,

Yollada Suanyot
Founder & President of TransFemale Association of Thailand