

## CHAPTER 17

# Sociocultural Context of Sex Work among Mak Nyah (Transgender Women) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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### SUMMARY

In Malaysia, transgender women (*mak nyah*) are a highly stigmatized and persecuted group. Mak nyah have little to no access to gender-affirming healthcare and are exposed to widespread societal stigma, employment discrimination, persecution by Islamic religious authorities, and police harassment. Violence, HIV risk, and criminalization are further compounded for mak nyah who engage in sex work. This study aimed to explore and describe the health and social needs of mak nyah on the basis of in-depth qualitative interviews with 18 mak nyah sex workers in Kuala Lumpur. We adapted grounded theory and qualitative descriptive methods to analyze the themes that emerged. Narratives of mak nyah illustrated a complex web of mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities. Mak nyah faced hypervisibility in public settings, where they endured routine intimidation and harassment, and near invisibility when seeking access to and information about hormone use and other health needs. Faced with these and other injustices, many mak nyah engaged in a beneficial informal network of support with peers and allies, though the mak nyah's needs extended well beyond the resources available. Study results suggest that public health and advocacy efforts to improve mak nyah's safety and well-being will require the commitment of a broader human rights agenda.

**KEY TERMS** *mak nyah*; Malaysia; sex work; transgender women

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