

BEING TRANS

Inside the trans world

The trans community is made up of a broad spectrum of gender nonconforming people. In describing this diverse community I will use the term ‘gender identity’ (who you know yourself to be), which may be as a man or woman or a mixture of both or neither. I recognise that individuals should be free to self-identify in any way they choose. However, for convenience, I have grouped the people whose voices I convey in this book as trans women, trans men, non-binary people and cross-dressing people. A trans woman is someone who was assigned male at birth but self-identifies as female and therefore transitions from male to female (MTF). Once transitioned, she may refer to herself as a woman with a trans history. A trans male is one who transitions in the other direction, from female to male (FTM). Once transitioned he may refer to himself as a man with a trans history. After transition, some men and women do not wish to disclose or ever refer to the fact that they have a trans history and this is sometimes referred to as ‘being stealth’.

Laura, trans woman. ‘It is like you’ve been wearing a really itchy suit your entire life and didn’t know, until now, you could take it off. In the trans community

we call normally gendered people cisgendered. Quite frankly, most of us would prefer to be that way given the choice. If we have the choice and luck to transition, then we too become cisgendered since our brain sex and physical sex are the same. What every trans person can say is that they just “know” their gender is wrong for their biological sex and that this has no bearing on sexual preference.’

It is important not to forget that being a trans person is entirely about gender and is independent of sexual orientation. Trans people can be lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual, just like everybody else. These days, being trans is an issue that is steadily becoming more visible, more talked about and ultimately more acceptable, after centuries of suppression and denial.

Shirley, trans woman. ‘As a teen in the ’60s I thought I was homosexual. That was the definition given to us, and when I was old enough to search medical and psych books, I discovered I was a transvestite. Of course, that definition didn’t fit either. I also discovered that treatment was with heavy psychotropic drugs, then electro shock therapy and finally lobotomy.’

Every year more and more trans people who previously felt too isolated and alone to admit the truth about who they are become more confident to declare their true identities. There is now more social exposure from social media, and the trans community is continuously gaining allies from this. The law now provides them with a large measure of protection. It is a big breakthrough for many, which has resulted in freedom from having to

live a life that made them feel separated and different to other people.

Numbers

Whilst it is difficult to ascertain a true approximation of how many trans people there are in society, it is reasonable to assume that as the stigma crumbles a truer statistical picture will emerge. At the moment it is thought that trans people make up less than one per cent of the population, meaning that ten people out of every 1000 feel that the sex they were assigned at birth and the gender they identify with do not correspond.

New phenomenon?

There have been accounts of trans people since the beginning of recorded history. There are biblical quotes in Deuteronomy: *No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off be admitted to the assembly of the Lord and The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment for all that do are an abomination unto the Lord thy God.* Unfortunately, these examples of scripture show little understanding and tolerance for trans people but the quotes must be viewed in the same context as many other biblical views and opinions on minorities, which are in today's world viewed as outmoded rules and discriminatory. I use these quotes as a reference to illustrate the point that trans people are not a new entity and being misunderstood is a long-standing fact.

Molly Houses, which were a cross between a gay club and a brothel, existed in larger English cities in the

18th century. They were social venues where people could come to sing and dance and men could sit on each other's laps. Men were also allowed to dress in women's clothing and pretence weddings were also re-enacted as rituals amongst members. These were ideal outlets where trans people could go and express themselves without fear. Up until the 1960s it appears that clandestine options like this were the only viable means by which trans people could escape the emotional turmoil that resulted in them having to keep their true identity secret.

Trans people are coming more and more to the forefront of life in the Western world, but in other global cultures, though an established part of life, they face exclusion and separation in most instances. For example, in India the *hijras* are male to female trans people who belong to a religious sect devoted to a particular goddess. Among many Native American groups there is a tradition of categorising such individuals as 'two-spirit' people – people with male bodies who identify and live as women, people with female bodies who identify and live as men, individuals of either sex who are sexually attracted to same sex others, or anyone who lives outside the traditional definitions of gender and combines elements of both female and male genders. Having two spirits is considered a special gift and some people are given special roles in religious ceremonies. In parts of Polynesia, a category called *mahu* incorporates males who adopt a female appearance and perform women's work.

Between the '50s and '70s, trans issues started to emerge in Western media when a small number of people who were publicly identified as having undergone gender reassignment surgery came to prominence. Since

the 1970s we have seen hormone treatment and surgery becoming more readily available and the development of the internet has allowed trans people to explore their transition options more easily. The numbers of people coming out as trans is increasing quite rapidly and it is estimated that the number of gender nonconforming people who seek medical care is growing at 20 per cent per annum among adults and more than 50 per cent per annum among younger people.

David, trans man. ‘During the ’80s and ’90s, trans people primarily went through the medical system and after genital reassignment surgery went back to living their lives. For many people, this was because they didn’t want to be visible as trans people and preferred to go stealth. The disadvantage of this was that whilst they had corrected the physical aspect of their problem, their inward side received little emotional support to allow them to grow with confidence in their new lives. Although whilst things have changed for the better, different health authorities approach surgery differently, and often restrict the number of people it puts through surgery because of cost. This has led to more people travelling abroad to Thailand and Belgium for surgery. Many choose the latter because it is closer to home and whilst it is more expensive, family and friends have the option of visiting whilst they recuperate after surgery.’