



Gender Variance: A Primer

Transgendered people are perhaps the most stigmatized and misunderstood of the larger sexual minorities (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender). In order to better understand transgendered people, it is useful to make a sharp distinction between two terms that are often used interchangeably. Sex is the anatomy and biology that determines whether one is male, female, or intersexed (formerly called *hermaphroditic*). Gender is a psychosocial construct most people use to classify a person as male, female, both, or neither.

Gender Identity is a person's sense of their own gender, which is communicated to others by their **Gender Expression**. Since most people conform to societal gender norms, they have a Gender Identity congruent with their Gender Expression. However, Gender, like sexuality, is fluid and can change over time, in individuals and in human society. For some people, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and sex do not correspond with each other. Those who cannot or choose not to conform to societal gender norms associated with their physical sex are **Gender Variant**.

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe Gender Variant people who have gender identities, expressions or behaviors not traditionally associated with their birth sex. Transgender is preferred over *transvestite* or *transsexual*, older terms which do not accurately describe all transgendered people, and which also have a clinical or stigmatizing connotation. Transgender also can mean anyone who transcends the conventional definitions of 'man' and 'woman'. Thus transgender also can include Butch Lesbians, Radical Faeries, Drag Queens, Drag Kings and many other kinds of gender variant people who use a variety of terms to self-identify.

Transgendered people are often categorized by their **Gender Vector** : Male-to-Female (MTF), or Female-to-Male (FTM). Although transsexual women (MTFs) have dominated the public's perception of transsexualism and transgenderism, there may be just as many transsexual men (FTMs) and female-bodied transgendered people. There also are transgendered people who do not believe in gender at all, seeing many possibilities beyond the male-female binary system for living their lives and expressing themselves.

Transgender is often mistakenly understood to mean **Transsexual**. Transsexual men (FTMs) and transsexual women (MTFs) actually comprise a minority within the transgender community. They feel profoundly unhappy with their bodies and gender norms associated with their birth sex. This unhappiness, combined with feelings of frustration and anger, are all symptoms of **Gender Dysphoria**, a psychological condition commonly associated with transgendered as well as transsexual people. In order to seek relief from their Gender Dysphoria, transsexual men and women go through **Gender Transition**, in order to live full-time in the gender that corresponds with their Gender Identity.

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While in transition, most transsexual people take hormones (clinically, this is called **Hormonal Sex Reassignment**) to develop the secondary sexual characteristics that reflect their chosen gender. Some undergo surgical procedures to modify their bodies in different ways. The proper term for the 'sex change operation' is **Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS)**. Both hormonal and surgical sex reassignment are generally obtained by following a set of guidelines called the **Standards of Care**, promulgated by the **Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA)**, an international group of sexologists, psychotherapists, physicians, attorneys and social scientists. Hormonal and Surgical Sex Reassignment, along with other cosmetic surgical procedures, psychotherapy and speech therapy are all parts of **Transgender Care**, which is typically not covered by health insurance plans. Moreover, the sensitivity and awareness of medical providers are very important concerns for transgendered people when accessing routine health care.

However, it is important to remember that most transgendered people do not alter their physical anatomy. Those who live full time in genders not associated with their physical sex and take only hormones may identify themselves as **Transgenderists** or simply **Transgenderers**. Still others who self-identify as **Stone Butch** or **No-ho/No-op** live full time without hormonal therapy and sex reassignment surgery. The largest single group of transgendered people are **Crossdressers** (formerly called transvestites) who wear opposite-gender clothing. Crossdressers are usually heterosexual men who crossdress privately, but there also are women who crossdress. Many transgendered youth prefer the term **Gender Queer** to describe themselves.

Intersexed people (formerly called *hermaphrodites*) are born with chromosomal and/or physiological anomalies, and/or ambiguous genitalia. Many intersexed infants born with ambiguous genitalia are surgically "normalized" at the wishes of their anxious parents, a controversial procedure which later results in loss of sexual response in adulthood. The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) has called this practice **Infant Genital Mutilation**. Some intersexed infants have even been sexually reassigned – without their consent – and later in life develop gender identity issues strikingly similar to those of transsexual people. Some undergo SRS as adults, but their medical procedures may be covered by health insurance plans.

It's easy to become confused about the **Sexual Orientations** of transgendered people. Many refer to their sexual orientations on the basis of their gender identity, without regard to their existing or former (if a post-operative transsexual) anatomy. Others identify themselves as gay or lesbian, because of cultural reasons or affinity needs, while still others refuse to classify their sexual orientation. However, due to **Trans-ignorance**, transgendered people are often misperceived to be gay or lesbian because of their appearance, which is often that of a masculine woman or a feminine man – the cultural gendered stereotypes of lesbians and gay men.

Because this misperception is so pervasive, transgendered people often become victims of homophobia, which many of them call **Transphobia**. How much Transphobia they encounter is a function of **Passing Privilege** – which allows its possessors to pass as non-transgendered. Some but not all transgendered people who seek to live full-time can gain passing privilege, through the medical technologies of Transgender Care. However, it can take years to affect these physiological changes, as well as to adapt to new social roles. Transgender Care also is commonly quite difficult to obtain, due to the lack of willing providers, the lack of health insurance coverage, and its expense. All of these reasons explain why transgendered people are particularly subject to a disproportionate amount of anti-gay violence and discrimination.