



## The Transgender Spectrum

Lisa J. Lees

Sex and gender. At birth a quick look between your legs determines whether an “F” or an “M” appears on your birth certificate. What they see between your legs is your “sex,” what they put on your birth certificate is your “gender.”

The first question anyone asks about a baby is, “Is it a girl or a boy?” They don’t ask if it has a vagina or a penis. No one is going to care about that for well over a decade. They want to know whether to give it a pink or a blue blanket, whether to call it pretty or handsome, whether it will play with dolls or trucks, be a cheerleader or a football star. They want to know the baby’s *gender*, not its sex.

Based on the answer to “Is it a girl or a boy?” people have preconceptions about the entire life of this little person. If it conforms to those expectations, the ones predicated on being a girl or a boy, fine. Otherwise it is transgendered, and it is in for some rough times.

Many people are transgendered to some extent. Some girls are tomboys and some boys are sissies. (You’ll notice that at all ages, females are given much more leeway with gender expression.) Women in professions traditionally dominated by men are pressured to act like men. Men in jobs traditionally dominated by women (women don’t have *professions*) are assumed to have some feminine streak, or be gay (which is considered an effeminate trait by most of those who aren’t gay).

At the extreme are the classic transsexuals who totally disagree with their initial gender label and seek to change their public presentation of gender and even their sex to match what they believe their true gender to be. (If our culture did not claim such a rigid correlation between sex and gender, and such rigid definitions of gender, would there be any transsexuals? Excellent question. I don’t know.)

There seems to be a whole range between being totally happy with one’s initial gender label and being a “classic” transsexual. Sorting that out looks to me to be an impossible task. Why bother?

If your assigned gender and your felt gender conflict to the point that you are having trouble living a happy, functional life, then you must do something about it. What you must and can do varies, and is at least partially determined by how accepting our culture is of gender variation.

It’s sad to think of all the permutations and combinations of talent and ability that have been lost because their expression hasn’t conformed to one of the two standard genders. It’s worse than sad to think of all the people who have had their hopes and dreams crushed because “boys don’t do that” or “girls don’t do this.” Many of us have been beaten, raped, tortured, or murdered because we are not just exactly like some ideal to which almost no one, in truth, conforms.

I think one of the things about me that most upsets people is that I am living proof of just how tenuous is the distinction between female and male. I can tell that some people (men, generally) are really upset knowing that a little purple pill can do this to a supposedly male body. It shakes their foundations. If I catch their eyes looking at the usual places men look, I can almost see their minds churning, wrestling with their reaction to me. I suspect that the inability to cope with these feelings is behind some of the hatred of transsexuals.

What's it feel like inside to "change sex"? As I've said other places, this does not seem like much of a change to me. I have not changed gender. I have always known that I was a woman. What I'm doing is a little more dramatic than losing weight, but it's kind of the same thing. I look in a mirror and I think, "I look pretty nice." But I still see me, I see the transsexual woman I've always been.

What is very much different is that now I am happy. I no longer hold back from social events and activity. I no longer sit or stand silently in a group, hoping no one will notice me. I'm learning to use personal pronouns and first names again, now that I have ones that fit me. It is easier for me to live as a known transsexual woman than it ever was when people assumed I was a man.

So what does it mean to be transgendered? I guess, bottom line, it means to be different. If you really, truly support diversity and individuality, you are supporting transgendered people. You don't have to label us; we'll do that ourselves if we feel it is needed. You don't have to understand us. You certainly don't have to approve of us. I never did or will ask anyone if it is okay for me to be a transsexual woman. I am. That's a given. I accept it. All I ask is that you, also, accept what I am.

Once you accept me, then you can move on to decide where and if I fit into your life. Just like anyone else. And—who knows—maybe I have something unique and important to contribute to our culture and our future, something that I would never have been able to do if I had spent my energy and my life pretending to be something I never was.