



Image from: [Dr. Camille Cebal, a transgender activist at a... in The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World](#)

### Summary Article: **Transgender**

From *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World*

There are two strands of meaning associated with the term *transgender*. The first describes a person interested in acquiring some or many of the physical characters of the opposite sex without necessarily questioning his/her biological genitals. These people desire to express in behaviors and in interpersonal relations their feelings apart from their anatomical structure and without planning the physical alteration of their body.

The term also takes on a second, more generic meaning, and this may lead to some confusion. It may describe individuals who show a different behavior from what is often considered socially appropriate for their gender. In other words, it refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, and combine socially constructed sex/gender boundaries.

Crossdressers and drag kings and queens are included as transgender people just as intersex persons are sometimes also transsexuals. Transgender people experience the many nuances separating the “ideal” models of man and woman in their everyday lives.

The term *crossdresser*, which has taken the place of the unsuitable word *transvestite*, is generally associated with a person who feels an affinity and interest in some female or male prerogatives, such as gestural expressiveness and clothing. These persons may change their bodies by removing body hair and/or taking hormones; they do not change their sexual characteristics because they wish to “appear” to be women or men. In the past, the adoption of male clothes by women, for example, was a way to enjoy all those privileges, rights, and freedoms, which men could exclusively access. On the other hand, it was not only women in men's clothes who attracted the attention of medical doctors and researchers but also men who assumed feminine attitudes, clothes, and desires. While cases of individuals willing to live their entire lives in a guise opposite to that of their own gender were already frequent in modern times, the phenomenon seems to have increased at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This was a historic moment marked by rapid changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization, coupled with the start of the consumer society.

Examples of this include drag queens, men who make use of showy female clothes; and drag kings, females who dress up in male clothes. The message drag kings and queens convey may be very complex. They are men and women who, by transforming their bodies as a form of art and as part of an artistic performance, take over the rules determining masculine and feminine and put them on show, performing them. Through their shows, they deconstruct the genders, mix them and confuse the boundaries, showing what genders really are: undefined and constantly changing.



*Dr. Camille Cebal, a transgender activist at a demonstration for transgender people in Paris, October 1, 2005.*

## **Transgender Characteristics**

Intersex persons display mixed sexual and reproductive characteristics. Within intersexuality a distinction should be made between the cases concerning primary sexuality and those related instead to secondary sexual characteristics. Primary sexual characteristics refer to the type of gonads and genital structures (ovaries or testicles); secondary sexual characteristics refer to the bodily and physiological differences. Intersexuality regarding the primary sexual characteristics is called hermaphroditism, while intersexuality depending on secondary sexual characteristics is called pseudo-hermaphroditism.

It is extremely rare for an individual to have both testicles and ovaries present. Cases of male and

female pseudo-hermaphroditism are more common and are conditions marked by a physical appearance typical of the “opposite” sex, whose features appear normal. Male pseudo-hermaphroditism, for example, is when a genetically male man has external genitals and secondary sexual characters that are ambiguous or female. For this reason pseudo-hermaphroditism may be the cause of erroneous gender attribution of sex at birth.

## **Medial Technology**

Although the anomaly has been known from ancient times, hermaphrodites were not taken into consideration by medicine for a long time. The development of medical technology changed the situation. The gender clarification progress made by surgery generated many problems for intersex people, who were increasingly forced to undergo operations for gender correction. The criteria chosen were strongly “genital” based: if a person had grown up as a girl, with breasts and other secondary female sexual features, but also had two testicles, she was consequently coopted into the male ranks.

Intersexuality is not a sexual disorder, however. It refers, instead, to individuals born in an “intermediary” sex compared to what is culturally considered necessary to socially construct men and women. Moreover, the various degrees of intersexuality are not an illness or a deformity; they are simple bodily variations.

## **Discrimination and Intolerance**

Transgender or transsexual people have to cope with many discriminatory processes. Social institutions are often intolerant of gender diversity. Many areas of social and economic life—such as the right to motherhood or fatherhood—should be reviewed to ensure full citizens’ rights for nonheterosexual people and to reduce the power of heteronormativity. In many countries, heterosexuality and marriage have long been protected by law and given access to various rights under social security. Also, there has been a general lack of attention, and a lack of comparative research, to the complex intersection between forms of social disadvantage such as gender and sexual orientation. These obstacles have profound impacts on homosexual, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual people’s lives.

## **See Also:**

Bisexuality, Coming Out, Drag Kings, “Femininity,” Social Construction of, Gender, Defined, Gender Reassignment Surgery, Heterosexism, Heterosexuality, Homophobia, LGBTQ, “Masculinity,” Social Construction of, Sexual Orientation.

## **Further Readings**

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