



# The "Third Sex" Box

*Issues examined from a transsexual perspective*

By ANNE OGBORN HIJRA

**A** packet from an Indian lesbigay organization came today on behalf of a young transsexual woman in India with this postscript.

*P.S. We respect <male name's> desire and decision to change his sex. But some of us can't help feeling that he was not counselled properly, that he should have been helped to come to terms with his true sexual orientation—that of a homosexual man. Perhaps we have our own biases working inside us. It would be helpful of you if you could educate us on transsexuality, in spite of our differences—sexual and cultural.*

I want to thank them for putting this young woman in contact with other transsexuals, and acknowledge the considerable help they have given her. They have acted as best they could, their comments are common in the South Asian lesbigay community, and I don't want to criticize. But they asked me to educate, and so I am educating.

My first concern is the assumption that being transsexual is a "tragedy" that can somehow be cured by proper counseling. Many of you may have been pressured by a psychiatrist to cure you of being gay or lesbian. This young woman deserves that sort of treatment no more than you do.

For gay men to be gay men takes at bare minimum two gay men, a park, and a condom. But transsexuals need medical care, and become what anthropologist Anne Bolin aptly calls "medically colonized." This young woman's letter was accompanied by a thick

packet of information by psychiatrists. The reports are outrageous and insulting. They uniformly refer to her as a man and treat her as an object. We have to deal with these creeps to get medical care. We don't have to give them any respect.

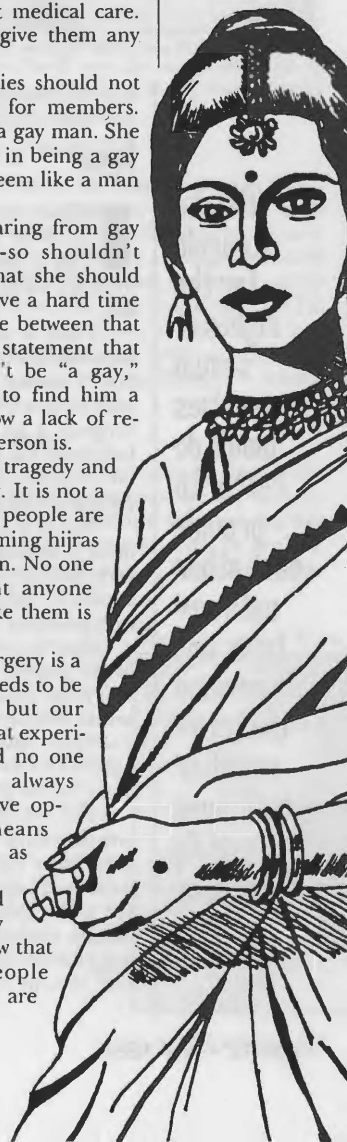
Our communities should not be in competition for members. This woman is not a gay man. She seems uninterested in being a gay man. She doesn't seem like a man of any sort.

I tire from hearing from gay men that so-and-so shouldn't change her sex, that she should be a gay man. I have a hard time finding a difference between that statement and the statement that so-and-so shouldn't be "a gay," that we just need to find him a nice wife. Both show a lack of respect for who the person is.

My life is not a tragedy and I don't need saving. It is not a tragedy that young people are going off and becoming hijras rather than gay men. No one wants to hear that anyone who wants to be like them is a sad case.

For anyone, surgery is a serious step that needs to be thought through, but our community has great experience with this, and no one takes it lightly. I always want people to have options, but that means options for as well as against.

No one should be forced to justify their life, but I know that transgendered people always are. So here are





*Gulbahari Hijra and Anne Ogborn Hijra*

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the standard replies to the standard reasons gay men and lesbians give for my not having human rights.

■ didn't do this so I could have sex with men. I'm bisexual. This is not about who I sleep with. It's about how I live my daily life.

I am a woman. I was born anatomically male and raised as a boy. I found being treated as a man intensely distressing. I paid a surgeon a lot of money and he fashioned me a set of female genitals. I dealt with my body like any differently abled person.

Nor is it a misguided attempt to be a feminist man or some bizarre anti-feminist plot. It is about a purely personal need to deal with powerful issues of identity.

And no, forcing transgendered people into a "third sex" box is no solution at all. A transsexual woman is not a hijra—she's a woman. Making her try to be a hijra is no less cruel than trying to make her be a man.

The role of a hijra is a special one that some people take on. My experience has been that it is extremely dangerous to allow oneself to be labeled a third sex. It usually immediately predates being labeled non-human. No person should have a "third sex"

status forced on them, and no one has the right to force it on another.

When we find ourselves in a safer environment, sometimes we feel freer to identify ourselves with some "third sex" category. It is a testimony to the creativity, power, and courage of transgendered people that so many of us do manage to find a place where it is, if not safe, at least not immediately suicidal.

In the U.S., I say, "I'm a woman," and ignorant nontransgendered people say, "No, you're not." Among the lower class Muslim community where my hijra family lives, and the average sort of middle-class people we danced for, we have such a place. In India the nons say, "You're just like women," and we say, "Yes, but we're also special."

Besides this question of who one is, there is the question, "What rules around gender must one follow?" This difference is why many hijras see it as consistent to struggle to be registered as women when we vote, yet can say, "We are neither men nor women." I often see drag as questioning these rules, more than doing anything that has to do with women per se.

So to return to the postscript: If these gay men want to help, they could begin by referring to the young woman in their midst by a feminine name and pronoun. And they could refrain from worrying if she wouldn't be happier being a gay man, a straight man, or Japanese.

I believe that we who struggle for the rights of sexual minorities would do better to provide each other with options, not demand that others alter their lives to justify our own. And we should respect and support each other's choices. ▼

*Anne Ogborn Hijra is a non-South Asian transsexual woman who joined the hijra community in 1994.*