

Adopting a global perspective, explore how being trans can be understood.

Transgenderism has become an increasingly prevalent topic of conversations in the media, laws, medical and education system over the past few years. Transgender is a term used on a person where their gender identity does not match to the one they were assigned biologically at birth. Referrals rose from 250 in 2011/12 to over 5,000 in 2021/2022 to the NHS part-run service GIDS (Gender Identity Development Service)¹ which provides trans associated care. However, with the increasing awareness of transgender identities and expansion of trans spaces, conflict and misconceptions are also rising against the community, especially against 'non-passing' trans identifying people.

'Passing' is a transgender term used in the circumstances where someone can dress and act the opposite gendered sex they were assigned at birth without suspicion of them doing so. Passing when someone is suffering from gender dysphoria is usually a main priority, as they wish to be perceived as the gender they are, not what they were biology assigned with, hence why medical procedures and social transitions are practiced. Not passing however, may not be a trans person's priority, or even necessary. 'Passing' is not just a physical biological change that one undergoes to whatever lengths they feel comfortable, but also will have to be done socially as clothes and behavior also play a major part in how we are perceived by individuals and society.

Judith Butler argues that 'masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed'², meaning that all gender is performative and as a society we reinforce these roles with 'we act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman'.³ Everyday actions from as little as hairstyles, perfume scents, clothes, hobbies and lifestyle choices all influence and solidate our gender presentation which further reinforces societal expectations. For example there is no biological reason why women wear dresses and men don't, however there is an invisible social barrier which prevents this, and enforces the foreignness of a man wearing a dress if a man decides too. The actions of gender conforming can seem natural to a person, due to it being indoctrinated to us since birth, so not a reason to question why we act the way we act if one considers themselves cis. However to those who don't, these actions could be practiced as a facade to stay within societal expectations and prevent being singled out.

With the rise of the trans community and its many different identities, these social constructs are seen as 'under attack' by other communities such as the 'TERF' community due to people daring to cross gender boundaries. TERF stands for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist, and its main focus is protecting women's spaces, as they disagree with the trans ideology that trans

¹<https://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/spec-services/npc-crg/gender-dysphoria-clinical-programme/implementing-advice-from-the-cass-review/> <Accessed on 06/05/2023>

² <https://breakingdownpatriarchy.com/episode-46-gender-trouble-by-judith-butler/> <Accessed on 06/05/2023>

³[https://canlitguides.ca/canlit-guides-editorial-team/queer-theory-and-canada/performativity/#:~:text=In%20contrast%2C%20for%20Butler%2C%20%E2%80%9Cpag.\).](https://canlitguides.ca/canlit-guides-editorial-team/queer-theory-and-canada/performativity/#:~:text=In%20contrast%2C%20for%20Butler%2C%20%E2%80%9Cpag.).) <Accessed on 06/05/2023>

women are women. The question brought up in the media is, what is a woman/ what makes a woman? If socially constructed, it can be someone with soft features, long hair, a well groomed appearance and feminine clothing, if biologically, then it will be identified with two X chromosomes and the associated genitalia. However, how can we say what is female and feminine and what is not when it's been socially constructed, and slowly moldable to change over the years? Applying make-up is an example of a feminine exclusive activity, however with the rise of Gen Z and online make-up influences, in April 2020 "male makeup looks" increased by 80%⁴ and a 2019 study in the U.S reported around '1/3 of the male population under 45 said they would consider trying make-up'.⁵ This also does not mean that trans or homosexual men (who are stereotyped to be more feminine) are now more confident to purchase and wear make-up, but that biological men are testing masculine boundaries and with its increase, make-up among men could be accepted fully as a male/masculine activity in the future.

Gender dysphoria is the medical definition used on patients who identify as transgender and wish to undergo gender reassignment surgeries, such as hormone replacement therapy, mastectomies, and voice replacement therapy, vaginoplasty, penectomy. However these treatments are fluid and personalised to the patient, to treat wherever their dysphoria needs relieving in order to live a comfortable and content life.

The Sexologist Dr Harry Benjamin in his book *The Transgender Phenomenon* 1966 explains the spectrum of gender identity and expression, and how in severe cases that sex reassignment surgery is recommended and performed, these case studies are discussed and in the legal aspects in regard. He developed the SOS (Sex Orientation Scale)⁶, which is a reflection to the Kinsey scale but suited to assessing (and differentiating) biological males who experienced transexualism and transvestism. This was used by assessing the patient's psychological sex, social sex and physical sex (biological sex assigned at birth), management of transexualism and transvestism was determined by this scale.

However not all transgender people suffer from gender dysphoria, with transgenderism being a wide umbrella which can house other terms/identities such as transexual, non-binary and gender fluid with Healthline listing 65 other terms⁷. Although these seem quite new to the western world, some of these identities have been present in indigenous communities before their discovery by colonization.

Transgenderism from a western perspective can seem one dimensional and new, due to the increase in the community in society and in social media. However, transgenderism is found around the globe and has been present in ancient cultures which are still present today. These communities however have their own associated mythology and culture according to their beliefs, and further expands the western view of transgenderism and presence of third genders.

⁴ <https://www.nssmag.com/en/beauty/23248/how-gen-z-is-revolutionizing-the-men-s-makeup-industry>
<Accessed on 10/05/2023>

⁵ IBID

⁶ Benjamin, Harry (1966). *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. The Julian Press.

⁷ <https://www.healthline.com/health/different-genders#e-h> <Accessed on 06/05/2023>

The Sekrata are used to describe a gender role in Madagascar (the Sakalava people) where young boys who are developing into feminine mannerisms and appearance are then raised by their parents as girls, and treated as females for the rest of their lives. They live every aspect as girls/women during their lives by dress, speech and mannerisms that they forget that they are biologically male. There is no prosecution towards the sekrata as in Madagascar culture the Sakrata are considered to be sacred, but are also feared as it's believed they possess supernatural spirits.⁸ Sekrata are also used for entertainment in important tribal events, which in return from chieftains receive admiration and lavish gifts.⁹ Raising children in this third gender is accepted and considered natural in the culture, especially due to the factor that sexual preference is insignificant.

Native American and First Nation People had an alternative third gender for those in their community who considered themselves neither men nor women which were called in their native language 'two spirits'. Two Spirits were people who performed the actions of men and women, and due this were considered valued members of the community as they could see through the perspective of both a male and a female.¹⁰ It is thought that supernatural intervention is involved for those who are two spirited due to them having two spirits, and in return these people became healers and visionaries due to being so gifted.¹¹ However with colonisation two spirited people have decreased with homophobic attitudes becoming introduced and dominated by the settlers who followed Christianity, two spirited people were even placed into residential schools which forced them into heteronormative roles meaning the roles they had have deeply diminished in society, however with education two spirited individuals are making a comeback and the sacred position is being restored in native american/ first nation people culture and society.¹²

In Hawaii, 'Mahu' is a word which can be roughly translated to 'inbetween' or 'in the middle'. However with the introduction of Christian missionaries where heteronormative and same-sex marriage is not accepted, this term also adapted into slang to describe/insult someone who was gay or hermaphrodite. The Mahu are transgendered males who transition however not fully to women, as being in between genders is their definition of transgender, as opposed to the west where only fully transitioned individuals are considered 'correct' transgenders and females can transition into men. Similar to the first Nations/ Native Americans these people were considered gifted due to having two spirits and would be healers or story tellers in their communities, however again with colonisation and christian missionaries these roles diminished and were ridiculed. Education on pre-colonisation Hawaii culture is spreading through Hawaii, which increases its practice, this has allowed a new rise of the Mahu, and the reclaiming of their place in society.

⁸ <https://student-activity.binus.ac.id/aiesec/2016/06/places-where-third-gender-is-accepted/> <Accessed on 11/05/2023>

⁹ <https://introtoqueerstudies.wordpress.com/2015/02/12/sekrata/> <Accessed on 11/05/2023>

¹⁰ <https://www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/the-history-of-two-spirit-folks> <Accessed on 11/05/2023>

¹¹ IBID

¹² IBID

In rural Albania and the Balkans we see the Burrnesha, where women socially become men and sworn virgins by being sworn in front of village elders. This is done by women who wish/have to become the male head of their household, most commonly due to the absence of one, like a father, this allows them to become the breadwinner and look after the family as wealth and patriarchy is inherited by men. Women may have also chosen to become Burrnesha to be able to live an independent life, as a woman this would not have been possible. Burrnesha live like men in every sense, they work, groom, dress and act (such as smoking, swearing and drinking) and are in charge of the households finances, however sexual relations of any kind are forbidden, as Burrnesha are also sworn virgins. With the fluidity of the western concept of trans, the Burrnesha doesn't medically transition, there is no need too as it's not done in a place where the person has dysphoria, just socially. The Burrnesha practice is five-centuries old, and to break the oath is to be punished by death, however in present day it is not sure what the punishment will be now.¹³ However, the Burrnesha in Albania are dramatically in decline, with the estimated figure being 'only 12 Burrnesha remaining in Northern Albania and Kosovo', it is speculated that this is due to the rise of more rights for women, making it unnecessary, due to the societal changes which occurred with the fall of Communism in 1990s.¹⁴ In rural communities where self-reliant lifestyles are more strong and financially strained, Burrnesha were necessary to keep families supported, however with modernisation Burrnesha are becoming more redundant. Women who choose to become Burrnesha are treated with the utmost respect for their sacrifice and determination; however with the last Burrnesha being 50 years old¹⁵, it could be within 50 years that such a tradition becomes extinct due to the progression of women's rights and cultural acceptance of women's independence.

Laws are also being created and extended to include the trans community. With the revised and updated version of the Equality Act 2010, the act now protects trans people in healthcare, social care and employment 'on the basis of protected characteristics, one of which is gender reassignment'.¹⁶ This act also includes children in schools which are required to extend their anti-bullying policies with 'the Act says protections apply to those who are undergoing, have undergone, or are proposing to undergo, a gender reassignment process.'¹⁷ However there are new policies which are being brought to be considered added to the Equality Act such as the change of the definition of sex with 'attempting to make "sex" refer exclusively to "biological sex", i.e sex assigned at birth. This means that trans people would be excluded from single-sex spaces *by default*, with no justification required.'¹⁸ Although this has not come into effect yet and there have been no further updates apart from the initial proposal, such

¹³<https://www.dailysabah.com/balkans/2014/03/14/meet-the-last-sworn-virgins-of-the-albanian-alps> <Accessed on 10/05/2023>

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63904744> <Accessed on 10/05/2023>

¹⁵<https://www.dailysabah.com/balkans/2014/03/14/meet-the-last-sworn-virgins-of-the-albanian-alps> <Accessed on 10/05/2023>

¹⁶ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8969/> <Accessed on 11/05/2023>

¹⁷ IBID

¹⁸<https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/59606/1/kemi-badenoch-ehrc-trans-rights-legal-sex-definition-conservatives-labour> <Accessed on 11/05/2023>

as change in the act can diminish the initial protections put in place to protect trans people, and exclude those who identify as non-binary.

Although the conversion therapy ban is not yet in effect it was first being created to only protect homosexual victims. However, 8% of transgender respondents in a UK LGBT survey reported that they had been offered conversion therapy and 4% said they have attempted such treatments.¹⁹ Conversion therapy is used to 'suppress someone's sexual orientation or stop them identifying as a different gender to their sex recorded at birth.'²⁰ Conversion therapy can come in many forms such as mental and emotional which could be prayers and 'counseling' and physical such as food deprivation, shock therapy and sexual treatments. These will all be considered abuse under the new law, protests were created due to the outrage that conversion therapy would not include trans conversion treatments and only homosexual ones, as abuse is abuse. Again this can be seen as another way the government has neglected trans rights.

The strongest arguments used when discussing trans rights and care is those who identify as trans that are underaged. In the UK a patient who seeks physical transgender treatment must be over the age of 17, with under 17 year olds being offered therapeutic services and hormone therapy by a pediatric endocrinologist.²¹ However in the U.S recent changes in law in certain states have extended trans affirmative care to be performed on minors. In Northern Carolina out of 417 pediatric gender-nonconforming/ transgender patients 'eighty-nine patients underwent gender-affirming surgeries, mostly before age 18 and most frequently mastectomies (77%).'²² To allow children to have treatments that are physically irreversible and can leave them sterile for life, how is safeguarding children differing from country to country? Although treatment for dysphoria can save children from devastating mental health consequences, such consequences cannot be comprehended by underaged patients, leaving trans care in children still in debate for today. It can also be implied that cultures such as the Sekrata can be considered abuse to children through a western lens, if a male child was showing an interest in female items, and the parents then raise the child as a female, it can lead to confusion as the child may not be trans.

In conclusion, trans is a wide umbrella which houses many lifestyles, medical definitions and belongs to many cultures with associated mythology. With the increased presence in social media and law hopefully with the exposure of the community, there will be more acceptance and inclusion for the community in society. Whereas cultures who had third genders for generations acceptance is already present and seen as natural as just the men/female gender. However around the world cultures that were affected by colonialism are now starting to reclaim their identities post colonialism and reclaim their place back in society, and with the Burnsha women's rights are making the practice redundant. Governments should be able to take examples from these ancient cultures where trans people are not seen as different or other, but ordinary functioning members of society who deserve acceptance just like everyone else.

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64304142> <Accessed on 11/05/2023>

²⁰ IBID

²¹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8969/> <Accessed 12/05/2023>

²² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6855897/> <Accessed 12/05/2023>