

Introduction to Intersexuality & Intersex Activism

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Intersexuality Basics

"Intersex" is the word that describes those of us who, without voluntary medical interventions, possess bodies that doctors can't neatly classify as male or female. This includes people who have chromosomal sex other than XX (female) or XY (male), or primary or secondary sex characteristics that defy the medical definitions of male and female. When a newborn baby is found to be intersex, many doctors will mutilate her or his genitals to conform them to the doctors' idea of what a normal baby should look like, even though intersex conditions usually do not threaten the health of the infant. Parents are often not given enough information or support to make an informed decision regarding their babies' care.

Intersex Genital Mutilation

Since the mid-20th century, doctors promoted early surgeries on infants with visibly intersex genitalia on the assumption that they would grow up confused about their identities and possibly end up queer otherwise. They believed that if they could surgically construct "normal" genitalia, everything would be fine. However, there is no medical data to support this bizarre and perverted (as in a bad way) theory.

In 1993, with the formation of Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), some intersex people who have experienced intersex genital mutilation (IGM) in infancy and/or childhood came forward with testimonies of their pains—both the physical pain of repeated unsatisfactory surgeries, and the emotional pain of having one's body and sexuality violated in addition to all the isolation, secrecy, and shame they were forced to live with. People who have had IGM performed on them often experience post-traumatic responses similar to those resulting from child sexual abuse (because it is a form of child sexual abuse). ISNA and other intersex activists aim to end "secrecy, shame, and unwanted genital surgery."

Language Matters

HERMAPHRODITE: An old medical term describing intersex people. Many intersex activists reject this word due to the stigmatization arising from its mythical roots and the abuse that medical professionals inflicted on them under this label. Some intersex people use this word as a "pride word" like "queer" and "dyke," but non-intersex people should avoid this term.

AMBIGUOUS GENITALIA: Many intersex activists contest the use of this phrase to describe their bodies because the ambiguity is with the society's definition of male and female rather than their bodies.

TRUE HERMAPHRODITE AND MALE- OR FEMALE- PSEUDO-HERMAPHRODITE: Medical taxonomy of intersex people, also known as "herm, merm, and ferm." Aside from the fact that these distinctions are virtually meaningless in the lives of intersex people, the terms imply authenticity and ranking of intersex people and thus are disempowering.

Intersexuality end Transsexuality

Some transsexual people and their advocates argue that transsexuality is a form of intersexuality that manifests in the brain, citing preliminary research suggesting a possible biological "cause" of transsexuality, or "gender identity disorder." However, this argument completely misses the point that intersexuality is not about whether or not something is biologically rooted, but about how our bodies are treated by medical authorities. While some transsexual people are in fact also intersex, most transsexual people do not experience involuntary medical "treatment" to "correct" their physical sex, for example.

Suggestions for Ally Building

- ✓ Do not let non-intersex people, such as doctors and therapists, speak on behalf of intersex people.
- ✓ Do not automatically include intersex people in "trans" and "queer" categories. Many intersex people do not feel included or represented by the trans and queer movements, for good reasons.
- ✓ Educate yourself. Realize that there are very few "out intersex activists around and they are often overworked. Do your homework before contacting them so that you won't burden them with the responsibility to educate you.
- ✓ Do not ask intersex people about their diagnosis or medical conditions merely out of curiosity.
- ✓ Do not exploit intersex existence for the sake of deconstructing sexism, homophobia, and/or homophobia while neglecting issues they are facing.
- ✓ Pass resolutions in your organizations stating your support for ISNA and other intersex activists' work to end IGM. That way, you would be honoring the leadership of intersex activists.
- ✓ Join ISNA and/or make donations.
- ✓ Challenge the faulty binary thinking everywhere you go! Two is not enough, and neither is five!