

Intersexuality Basics

“Intersex” is the word that describes those of us who, without voluntary medical interventions, have bodies that doctors can't neatly classify as male or female. This includes people with chromosomal sex other than XX (female) or XY (male) or people who develop primary or secondary sex characteristics that fall outside of the conventional male and female sexes. Doctors somehow get freaked out when a newborn baby is found to be intersexed, and often mutilate and manipulate her or his genitals to conform them to their idea of what a normal baby should look like, even though intersex genitals usually do not threaten the health of the child. Parents are often not given adequate information or support to make an informed decision regarding their care.

Intersex Genital Mutilation

Since the mid-20th century, doctors promoted early surgeries on children with visibly intersexed genitalia on the assumption that otherwise they would grow up confused about their identities. They believed that if they could surgically construct a “normal” genitalia, everything would be fine. There is no medical data to support this bizarre theory.

Since the formation of Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) in 1993, many intersex people 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 experienced intersex genital mutilation (IGM) often experience post-traumatic responses similar to those resulting from child sexual abuse. ISNA and other intersex activists aim to end “secrecy, shame, and unwanted genital surgery.”

Languages to Avoid

“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 others 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 these distinctions are meaningless in the lives of intersex people, these terms imply authenticity and ranking of intersex people and thus dis-empowering.

Intersexuality & Transsexuality

Some transsexual people and their advocates argue that transsexuality is a form of intersexuality that manifests in brain, citing preliminary researches suggesting a possible biological “cause” of transsexuality, or “gender identity disorder.”

However, this argument completely misses what intersex activism is about. It is not about whether or not something is biologically rooted, but about how our bodies are treated by the medical authority as we grow up and live. While some transsexual people are in fact also intersexed, most transsexual people do not experience involuntary medical “treatment” in their childhood to “correct” their physical sex, for example.

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**A Starting Point for Feminist,
Queer & Trans Activists**



**Intersexuality &
Intersex Activism**

INTRODUCTION TO

For More Information...

- Do not ask intersex people about their diagnosis or medical conditions merely out of curiosity.
- Do not let non-intersex people such as doctors and therapists speak on behalf of intersex people. Respect the leadership 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.
- 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 exploit intersex existence for the sake of deconstructing sexism, homophobia and/or transphobia while neglecting issues they are facing.
- Join ISNA and/or make donations.
- Challenge the faulty binary thinking everywhere you go! Two is not enough, and neither is five!

On the Web:

ISNA: <http://www.isna.org/>

CAH Our Voices & Stories: <http://www.cahourstories.net/AISSG:>

<http://www.mehelp.org/www/ais/index.htm>

Survivor Project: <http://www.survivorproject.org/>

Books:

Intersex and the Age of Ethics ed. by Alice Dreger

Lessons from the Intersexed by Suzanne Kessler

Videos (available from ISNA):

Hermaphrodites Speak! by ISNA

Is it a Boy or a Girl? by Discovery Channel

Tips for Ally-Building