

# forum

Editor's Note: See also March 17, 1974, magazine section of *The New York Times* "James and Jan" by David Holden for an account of the life of James Morris, well-known reporter/writer, who is now a transsexual, Jan Morris.

## Transsexophobia: Old Arguments Against New People

by Margo Schuller

It is a curious quirk of human nature that people often spend 50% of the time fighting against their own oppression, and the other 50% passively ignoring or even actively justifying the equally painful oppression of other human beings.

There are certainly many examples of this human weakness in American history alone, from the pilgrims who fled from England to seek religious freedom and then hanged Quakers for seeking the same freedom, to the members of certain feminist groups who in recent years have cruelly used and abused their Lesbian sisters.

We might hope that by 1974 this game of pyramidal oppression would be discarded as old hat, at least within the more enlightened circles of opinion. However, it appears that this pastime of supporting liberation for some but not for others is still going strong right here in our own progressive community of Boston. The latest victims are transsexuals — people who for various medical and psychological reasons feel themselves to be members of the gender "opposite" to their genital sex. Transsexuals are struggling now for the right to bring their bodies and social identities into harmony with their inner feelings. In challenging the patriarchal assumption that sex and gender are the simple and unchangeable results of genital anatomy at birth, transsexuals are up against the same sexist oppression which has also kept down women and gay people.

Furthermore, these areas of oppression overlap. In addition to being transsexual, for example, I am also now under the same conditions in most ways as any person living as female in this society: further, since I view myself as bisexual, or nonexclusively Lesbian, I must also deal with the same oppression that other gay people must confront.

In an ideal world, we might hope that advocates of feminist and gay liberation would recognize transsexual people as fellow victims of sexist prejudice, and also as allies in the quest for human liberation. But anyone who knows how straight liberals have treated gays (at least before it became "in" to be friendly), and how straight and even gay males have treated women (inside as well as outside various liberation movements), will not be overly surprised to discover that transsexuals are the latest candidates for the same treatment.

While transsexualism may be a new issue to many people, the arguments for supporting or ignoring transsexual oppression are exactly the same arguments which have been used to support or ignore female and gay oppression. It is as if some gay people have remembered all the cliches which they themselves have rebutted when these cliches were directed against women or gay people, and then turned them against transsexual people.

To make this point more graphic, I would like to make a simple table with two columns. On the left-hand side, I will list all the anti-gay cliches which require no attribution because they have been heard at least a dozen times each by any gay person or supporter. On

the right-hand side, I will catalogue the typical "liberal" observations on transsexuals as accurately as I can, from personal experiences.

### ANTI-GAY CLICHE

1. "Homosexuality is just too hot an issue for me."
2. "We cannot permit gay dances — they confuse kids who might still go straight."
3. "The homosexuals I know don't seem very happy."
4. "Gay sexuality isn't truly fulfilling because it doesn't bring children."
5. "People are gay because they can't make it in normal heterosexual relationships."
6. "Maybe in order to change more important things we may have to forget minor problems like those of homosexuals."
7. "I can't support homosexuals! What would my friends think? What would happen to my reputation?"
8. "Maybe when it's 'in' to be gay I'll speak out."

### ANTI-TRANSEXUAL CLICHES

1. "I feel that gender identity is maybe too hot an area for me."
2. "There are some crazy kids here who might get the idea that they should change their sex."
3. "I have met many transsexuals, and none of them seem really happy people."
4. "I am uncomfortable about transsexualism because it conflicts with what I consider the proper reproductive aspect of life."
5. "I'm afraid that many people change sex because they haven't succeeded in their natural sexes."
6. "I have limited time — maybe I have to concentrate on helping 90% of the gay community at the expense of the other 10%."
7. "If I became a known supporter of transsexuals, that would definitely lower my respectability in the straight community."
8. "Maybe in five years I will find myself supporting transsexual liberation."

ence or gender identity as a result of meetings and dances — AND IF THEY DO, THAT IS ALSO THEIR RIGHT. In fact, the process of social and physical change of sex is adequately prolonged and painful to discourage the merely curious. Years are usually required for a complete change.

(3) Gay people and transsexuals are "unhappy" because of the self-ignorance, self-hatred and closetry which a pathologically oppressive society forces upon them. As socially aware minority group members we should all realize that the cure for both gay people and transsexuals is self-knowledge, self-approval, and the total celebration known as "coming out."

(4) The primary purpose of sexuality is not reproduction but the expression of affection between one person and herself/himself, or between two or more people. In a similar way, conflicts between genital anatomy and self-identity must be settled in favor of inner peace and comfort with one's body as a channel of love, regardless of the consequences for reproductive capacity. Isn't it fascinating that many gays, after proudly praising Bill Baird and endorsing the validity of nonreproductive gay sexuality, should suddenly worry about the fertility of transsexuals? Surely the population growth rate must indicate that the straight scene can keep going even without the help of transsexuals, who may be at most .01% of the population.

(5) Both gayness and transsexualism are positive identities, not just negations of "normality" as defined by straight and nontranssexual people. It can be argued with equal validity that straight people are just failures in gay relationships, and that nontranssexuals have failed at transsexual identities. Of course, the argument is unfair in either direction, but seems to go in one direction rather than the other in the real world.

(6) It's time to realize, in the words of Eugene Victor Debbs, that "while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." The struggle against sexism must be on a universal and deep enough level to include *all* the victims of male and heterosexual chauvinism. No one can morally be the subject of "benign neglect" — no woman, no gay person, and no transsexual.

(7) Social causes only become "in" after many people have courageously acted and "come out" in order to make them popular. As the saying goes: "If not now, when?"

### CONCLUSION

No one is suggesting that anyone has a responsibility to devote all of her/his time to fighting transsexual oppression. However, I do mean to say that as a transsexual, a woman, and a Lesbian, I feel that everyone has a responsibility to cooperate with the transsexual cause to the extent of not denying space for meetings and not disavowing transsexual rights. Enlightened people must not be afraid to associate themselves with both male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals, and to support transsexual liberation as one part of human liberation. Transsexuals must join with others for the freedom and happiness of all.

Maybe it would be helpful to reply to these repressive cliches, as they affect both gay people and transsexuals.

(1) While people in reasonably comfortable positions find issues of oppression "too hot to handle," it is the oppressed people who get burned;

(2) People do not generally change sexual prefer-