



A sign at the entrance of an anonymous building in the centre of Johannesburg warns inquisitive snoops: "You may not have a look."

It's hurtful when people simply want to pry. They're not even interested in having a chat, trying to find out more, or understanding. All they want to do is to see what a man dressed as a woman looks like.

The place is a club for trans-

vestites.

Here they can meet each other and relax wearing the clothes in which they feel most comfortable. And wherever you look there are immaculately made-up faces, long strings of pearls, stiletto heels and wigs.

This is not a scenario restricted to the Rand – the club is part of a countrywide society with branches in all the big centres.

"We prefer to use the word

ABOVE: Louise, Amanda Ho, Angela and Sue (back) and Wendy and Chantal (front) are all men with an urge to wear women's clothes. Here they are seen at their club which is out of bounds to snoops.

RIGHT: Angela looking elegant in black and white.

By MARGARET MORGAN
and LEONORE FICK

Photographs: LAMBERT VAN RIJSEWIJK



South African transvestites spill the secrets of their bizarre lives and an agony of guilt

YOU recently ran a story about British transvestites who get together at clubs where they are free to dress up in women's clothing. There's a similar organisation in South Africa. Members are male by day but in the evenings they don their impeccable make-up, long strings of pearls, high-heeled shoes and wigs ...

Man by day, girl by night

BELOW: Louise in a mini.

BELOW LEFT: A cosy get-together - Amanda Ho, Chantal and Sue.



'transgenderist,' explained Joy, the secretary of the society, a man who has been wearing women's clothes for two and a half years.

"This is a name we invented ourselves. 'Transvestite' has such a threatening ring to it and very negative connotations. We are not only into wearing women's clothing, we desperately want to look, act and be accepted as women."

Joy has succeeded in a very

convincing impersonation of a woman, despite his deep voice.

Last month YOU ran an article on British transvestites who have their clubs where they can dress up in women's clothing, exchange notes on the latest make-up techniques and simply spend time with people who share their feelings and interests.

It was after this article appeared that Joy phoned us with the news that there's a similar

society in South Africa.

"We operate as a support group for everyone who has this uncontrollable urge to dress like the opposite sex," he said. "We help people to overcome their feeling of guilt, we issue a magazine which acts as a mouthpiece for our members and we organise visits to people's homes to lend support."

Joy is convinced that the Phoenix society with its

branches countrywide fulfils a need. "We already have more than 70 members and we're sure there are thousands of people out there who are just dying to 'dress up' as we call it, yet are battling with terrible feelings of guilt."

The society's members are mostly men who want to dress as women. Don't for a minute assume you will be able to spot such a man when he's wearing men's clothing. The chairman of the Phoenix society holds down a senior managerial position in Cape Town by day.

At night he gets dressed in women's clothing and uses the name Marlene.

Marlene is married - to a woman who fully understands and accepts his urges and gives him and his co-transvestites her full support.

"He is no exception," says Joy. "We have some members in high professional and technical positions. Many of them are married with families and their wives do not know that they get 'dressed up'. Others are divorced or have wives who accept them as they are."

WHEN we went along to the Johannesburg branch of the Phoenix society to take some photographs we were met by Sue, elegantly dressed in pumps and a black and pink outfit. "Her" cheeks and chin were covered with a thick layer of powder, "her" voice was throaty.

Sue is his alternative, female name. He is the Johannesburg chairman of the Phoenix society. They meet once a month, usually on a Sunday, when they get dressed to the nines in the latest women's fashions.

It's a social occasion at which they enjoy a glass of wine or two.

Sometimes they invite experts to come and address them on topics that concern their kind. A psychologist will explain the urge to dress like the opposite sex. Personalities in the fashion world and make-up artists have also been invited as guest speakers.

Most of the 30 members of the club in Johannesburg dress up for the occasion at home.

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Prop forward in a dress...

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Others bring their clothes along to get dressed at the club. "These are the ones whose families are unaware of their urges or won't understand it if they dress up in women's clothes at home," said Sue.

Some of the members attend the meetings dressed in ordinary men's clothes. "They enjoy wearing women's clothes in the privacy of their own homes but do not feel comfortable about going out all dressed up."

Homosexual friends are often also guests at the transvestites' gatherings, said Sue. "They are just as confused about us as the next person. We are not gay but we like dressing up like women."

There are different degrees of transgenderists, explained Joy. Some get their satisfaction by dressing up in women's lingerie at night only, others have an irresistible urge to appear dressed up in public.

Joy is pleased with the new position to which he was recently appointed at a computer company. He applied for the job in the guise of a woman.

"I lost my previous job after being with the company for nearly 20 years. I still wore men's clothes but wanted to grow my hair and nails. They could not cope with this and asked me to resign."

Now he can dress up all the time in the clothes he finds most comfortable: soft skirts and blouses in the latest colours, high-heeled shoes – "Fortunately I wear a size seven, I can buy shoes at any department store" – and attractive jewellery. His hair is long and curly and his make-up meticulously applied.

Joy has been married twice and has two children from his previous marriage. They are aged 12 and 13. "My wife could not accept my dressing up when she was around," he explained, "but the children understood."

Although he has been given partial custody of the children his ex-wife refuses to let them

see their father dressed as a woman, with the result that Joy is never able to see them. "They phone me from public call boxes for a chat... I can hear they're going through a rough time at home and that they need me," he said in the worried voice of any parent concerned about his children.

HE is also worried about the number of people who telephone saying that they are unhappy and tense wearing men's clothes and why can't they dress like women. They are afraid they might be homosexual or will have to undergo a sex change.

"We try to explain to people that there is a difference between transvestism and transsexualism," said Joy. "Also that it won't help to try to solve a sexual identity problem with a sexually based solution."

Marlene says they receive calls from the most masculine of men; men who play rugby, are motor racing fanatics, spend long evenings with the "boys" and then arrive at Phoenix totally disillusioned and unhappy – because they want to dress like women.

"We never pressure them," said Joy firmly. "We give them emotional support and understanding and allow them the space to unload their anxiety and guilt. Our aim is for them to accept themselves."

"It's almost incredible how much energy these people invest in trying to suppress their true feelings. They feel they are living in isolation and have to keep a terrible secret."

"At Phoenix we do not pretend we are psychologists or even therapists. We haven't got the experience. But we can show someone who wants to dress like the opposite sex what the options are. We are a self-help society."

And his (or her) own love life? "There's nobody at the moment. But it will have to be a very special woman who will accept me for what I am..."

• *The Phoenix Society's address is P O Box 375, Parow 7500.*