

The Evils of Transgender Stereotyping.

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Three days ago, I had lunch with a transgender sister of mine. As we played around with our French fries, she told me of her disdain for the habit of some gay men dressing up as women during gay parties and assuming they and her (a transsexual woman) are the same i.e. she is not against gay men cross dressing but they should never assume putting on dresses and make up make them transgender women). I asked her if she has ever perceived herself as a gay man to which she admitted that during her nascent stages of her gender transition (male to female) her friends used to tell her she was gay or she was acting in a gay manner. She was then introduced to homosexual men and labeled a “bottom” - a bottom is said to be the “woman” in a male homosexual relationships and gets penetrated by men. A top (the man in the relationship) is the one who penetrates. Among lesbians the one who takes the “star” role is known as the “butch” (and takes a masculine and shaggy look) and the lady who gets done by the butch is known as the femme. I don’t judge these terms or the people who use but I have a problem when these are used to sexually exploit transgender men and women.

Before ventilating this subject further, I need to define certain terms:

Transgender/Transsexual – a term used to describe someone who has persistent discomfort or distress with their biological sex and undergo a series of medical procedures to change their sex to best fit their psychological sex/gender identity.

Male to female transgender – a person who changes from male sex to female sex.

Female to male transgender – an individual who changes from female to male sex.

Transgender men are not females who act in a masculine manner and neither are they women who take the active role in a lesbian relationship. Transgender women are not men who act in a feminine manner and neither are they men who take the passive role in gay men relationships. In a nutshell, transgender or transsexual is not a characteristic relating to sexual preference/sexual orientation or sexual practices i.e. sexual attraction. For example, a transgender man (Female to Male transgender) may be attracted to men or women or no one of these two genders. Similarly, a transgender woman (Male to Female) may be attracted to men or women or no one in these genders.

Anyway, this transgender sister of mine tells me she had earlier in the day gone for a HIV test and she turned negative. She regards herself lucky

considering the sexual exploitation she had gone through because she was regarded as a “bottom”. I admitted to her that I had gone through the same sexual exploitation back in university when I started my transition. She confided in me that being young and not wanting to hurt the feelings of others she had to do whatever she was told. If her girl friends in college told her she was a cute feminine gay boy/bottom she had to do what bottoms did. When everyone referred to her as a gay boy she went ahead and joined the gay community. All along, she knew her problem was “being born in the wrong body”. It is not that she wanted to date men or wanted to join the gay community – these were imposed on her because people misconstrued her gender problems with the desire to be used by men. At this juncture, I quietly paid my bill and told her that I needed to leave. An avalanche of horrible memories provoked nausea in me and I needed to leave the discussion at that. We parted ways and I thanked her profusely for sharing her testimony. I went home and showered thoroughly. I just had to clean my body. I lay on the bed in darkness and forgave myself for the sexual exploitation I had gone through.

I finally felt my mind clearing and at peace with myself. I found myself looking for answers of why sexual exploitation happens among transgender women. I called a few transgender sisters of mine and they shared their thoughts. It is with their blessings that I have penned this article.

Stereotyping of transgender people is the generalization of certain characteristics about transgender people. Some common stereotyping of transgender people include:

- Transgender women are gay men who act in a feminine manner
- Transgender men are butch lesbians
- Transgender people are impersonators
- Transgender women are male sex workers
- Transsexual people are cross dressers or transvestites

These stereotypes normalize deviancy, unstable lifestyles, risky sexual practices, illiteracy and irresponsibility in the transgender community. Transgender is no longer about gender identity, gender changes and gender expression. Being a “true transgender” is now all about being penetrated in the behind by men and exhibiting exaggerated feminine mannerisms in public e.g. broken wrist syndrome and swinging non-existent hips. It is now about being a failure, a school drop out and a drunkard in some filthy bars whose patrons are either on their way to prison or City Mortuary, thanks to the long arm of the law. Transgender is “now” about having funny hair styles to provoke members of the public or to gain attention – people staring at you in public. Being a “true transgender” person is now all about lacking principles, following the crowd and being used by HIV/AIDS research institutes as guinea pigs. It is about moral bankruptcy and been turned into statistics. It is about misery and suffering.

The media is a key cog in stereotyping transgender people. For example:

1. Hypersexualization and other Stereotyping of Transsexuals in Movies

Hypersexualization is extreme intensification of sexual themes among members of a particular community. Hypersexualization of transgender people is predominant in movies with transgender women depicted as sex workers, promiscuous people and men in dresses who will deceive men into sleeping with them. Additionally, transgender characters are always depicted as drug addicts and peddlers. There are a number of movies I have watched that turn transgender people into complete disasters - deserving a shelf in World Disaster Movies Section in your local movie library.

Trans America

I watched Trans America two years ago and couldn't help but set a new world record for projectile vomiting. Bree Osbourne is a transsexual woman whose therapist canceled her sex change surgery until Bree faced her son who was in remand for drug dealing (she had him before transitioning). She was unaware she had a son who goes by the name Toby. Bree flew from Los Angeles to New York and bailed Toby out. She lied to Toby that she was a Christian Missionary with the aim of returning him to his grandfather. This is the point at which things go south:

1. The issue of child molestation surfaces i.e. Toby's grandfather used to molest Toby – means that *Bree is an irresponsible parent, never there to raise her child and allowing her pedophile father in law to take advantage of her son*
2. Bree and Toby finds themselves in a house where a group of transsexuals, talking in exaggerated feminine manner and tone about vaginas and boyfriends – *Transsexual women are sexually starved men in dresses who get vaginas to chase after men for sexual gratification*
3. After this, Bree exposes her genitals to her son – *Transgender women are perverts*
4. Bree loses her money to a skunk but her son Toby sleeps with a man for cash to foot their road trip. He lies to Bree that she sold some drugs he had on him. Bree is okay with the explanation – *Like father like son – moral bankruptcy*
5. Bree is seduced by her son and nearly sleeps with him – *children are not safe while alone with their transgender parents*
6. Toby ends up being a gay actor in pornographic film – *a “bottom” sired a gay porn actor*
7. The movie ends with Bree in a bath tub masturbating with her new genitalia – *transsexual women get vaginas because they are obsessed with sex and we perceive women as sex toys.*

There are a few positive bits in Trans America but just like its actors and the director it takes mediocrity to a whole new level.

CSI Las Vegas: The Accused is Entitled - Season 3 Episode 2

A movie star kills two sex workers (sex workers replaced the term prostitutes) after they trick him into having sex with them (at the same time) and realizing that one of the ladies had a penis. He killed them and had the body of the transgender sex worker dumped in a desert.

Lesson learnt kill these “men who pretend to be women” if they trick you into sleeping with them and dump their bodies where no one will find them.

The Silence of the Lambs

A transsexual patient is refused sex change surgery. Goes ahead to kill women in his basement. She then remembers she is a tailor and makes body suits from the skin of the women he has killed. This horrendous movie won awards in: Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Actor, Best Director and Best Writing.

It is crystal clear that defaming and ridiculing transsexuals is a sure way of winning some award.

The Crying Game

Dil (a transgender girl played by Jaye Davidson who is a gay man) tied a man to a bed and threatened to kill him if he did not confess his love for her. Additionally, he made him promise he would never leave her. She later untied him saying that even if he was lying she loved to hear those words.

The Crying Game was nominated for six Academy Awards and won one (Best Original Screenplay). Jaye Davidson was nominated for Best Supporting Actor.

My salient point is not that transgender people are made to take the roles of murderers, sex workers, drug peddlers and parents of gay porn actors. But, that non-transgender people are made to take roles that depict transgender people as psychotic murderers, drug dealers, sex workers and as very promiscuous creatures. Consequently, they go ahead to win awards for taking the ridiculing of trans people to new heights. There is no balance in depiction of transgender people. I have not watched or heard of a movie where a fictional president was transgender or a doctor was transgender. There are no movie roles where the character is an attorney who also happened to be transgender.

Hypersexualization of Transsexuals in Health Research

The current research or advocacy initiatives on HIV/AIDS represent a well oiled machinery that continue to derail the lives of transgender people by encouraging sexual exploitation of transgender women and their use as

guinea pigs in the search for HIV/AIDS vaccines. Their research papers normally promote irresponsible sexual behavior and use of transgender women as sex toys. Additionally, they call for the removal of Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis from the DSM V and the ICD 11 so as to encourage hopelessness and irresponsible sexual behavior. Millions of dollars are poured by drug companies and some aid agencies into dubious research ventures. The researchers hoodwink stakeholders into thinking that similar drug trials are being done in developed countries in addition to exaggerating on the potency of the HIV vaccines. Disclaimers are never in short supply:

“The sponsors of the study had no role in study design, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, or writing of the report.”

Reading this shallow lie reminds one of the deceit of the corporate world in some developed countries as narrated in John Perkins’ book *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*. I have been reading this book in the last two months and though it tastes like the work of fiction, it isn’t. It’s a sordid tale of how greed can turn men and women into heartless, diabolical ogres.

I recently received a paper on a study on the burden of HIV among transgender women. It is titled: **Worldwide burden of HIV in transgender women: a systematic review and meta-analysis**¹.

Their finding was that transgender women are 49 times more likely to have HIV than adults of reproductive age.

Reasons: social exclusion, lack of job opportunities, risky sexual behavior such as anal sex with multiple partners, lack of engagements with the health sectors etc.

Recommendations:

- Inclusion of transgender women in oral pre-exposure prophylaxis initiatives
- Inclusion of transgender women in rectal microbicide trials

Pre-exposure prophylaxis are drugs taken orally before exposure to HIV infection. Rectal microbicides are chemicals put in the rectum and the applicant goes about having unprotected anal sex with the hope that the microbicides and pre exposure prophylaxis will kill HIV if the sex partners were HIV positive.

¹ Baral et al. Worldwide burden of HIV in transgender women: a systematic review and meta-analysis. The Lancet Infectious Diseases, Volume 13, Issue 3, Pages 214 - 222, March 2013
[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(12\)70315-8/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(12)70315-8/fulltext)

There are numerous research papers containing this filth and sadly I could not access the full papers since I am poor and cannot afford the access fees.

I am not solely blaming research scientists and the media houses for the distorted image of transgender people. There is a concatenation of factors and circumstances leading to negative portrayal of transgender people. One factor has to do with the marginalization of transgender people. Transgender people are encouraged to associate with just gay and lesbian people. Never mind that transgender is not a sexual orientation or has nothing to do with homosexuality. If transgender people try to link with other networks, they are vilified and told they are breaking the LGBTIQ movement (as if that is a bad thing). Yet we know it is not LGBTIQ movement – it is a façade of inclusion and diversity that distorts facts and figures about transgender people with reckless abandon. After the transgender community was excised from heterosexual non-transgender community they (transgender people) found that the lesbian and gay spaces were insensitive to their needs and they were only required to agree with some gay and lesbian people even when agreeing with certain decisions was to their detriment. Now, transgender people can't go back to the heterosexual non-transgender person (where they were dislodged from) because of stigma and misconceptions and on the other side the gay and lesbian spaces are largely hostile and insensitive to their needs. They now become more marginalized and out of choices. Once in a while human rights groups will pick a despondent transgender woman to be a poster child for violation of the rights of gay people in Africa or for Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) websites or publications. In some countries, transgender women used in Miss Gay contests and drag parties. The media then picked these distorted images and labeled us transgender women as “effeminate gay boys” or bottoms. It is that simple.

Stereotyping can take place at family level. The memories of my parents' reaction after they saw me with plaited hair are indelibly printed in my mind. My father was so furious because he could only associate my behavior with male prostitution. My mother associated it with homosexuality. It was so traumatizing for me; and I am sure it was for them. Words cannot adequately express the agony that I was going through. These has made me appreciate the courage trans people possess to undergo a gender transition. There are those in more difficult situations than I was and I love them dearly for their courage and hope in a better life.

But, there is one relative of mine who made a remark that turned heads. He stays in Mombasa and I guess he is familiar with beach boys and gay men hustling around tourists. We were gathered in my grandmother's house on a Saturday evening way back in 2008. He had thought I was my younger sister but after he learnt it was “me” he turned to me and advised me to relocate to Mombasa. Why? “The tourists would fight for you and you would get a lot of money. They might even take you to Europe or America” he said in Swahili.

The LGBTI paradigm of promoting and protecting the human rights of transgender people is largely to blame for the stereotyping of transgender people as effeminate gay men and butch lesbians. Last year, a lesbian group published brochures with the following: “LGBT people are also known as same-sex loving people”. A transgender sister protested, the leaders of that lesbian organization diverted attention from their insults to claiming the transgender woman was rude to them. My frustrations lay in our Sisyphean efforts when it comes to changing the mentalities of some gays and lesbians. Most simply refuse to accept they are wrong and that they are sabotaging our work. I am not insinuating that gays and lesbians deserve to be vilified or stigmatized but my point is that transgender people should not be made to be targets of homophobic attacks. Additionally, this ethnocentrism in sections of the gay community deserves to be condemned in harshest terms possible. Am sick and tired of some people saying that the transgender community is fragmented and not like the gay movement. The gay culture or way of doing things should not be imposed in the transgender community. The issue that binds gays and lesbians together is the fact that they are people who are condemned because of the sexual attraction and acts that takes place among them. My bond with my fellow transgender sisters and brothers emanate from the fact that we are vilified because of gender change. Rarely will you hear of a transgender woman dating another transgender woman or transgender man. Also, I am aware of the deep fissures that exist among gays and lesbians in different social economic status. There are those living comfortably in expensive apartments yet there are those living in squalid conditions.

I want to urge the society to judge us as individuals and by the content of character of that individual. We possess characteristics but we should not be characters. Don't assume transgender woman X as having the intent to deceive men into sleeping with her because that is the theme that comes out of *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo story* movie. One of Kenya's television stations likes to re-play this movie so as to whip up a frenzy against transgender people.

Imagine the furore a Kenyan legislator would cause if he introduced a Bill banning women in Mombasa from owning dogs? Imagine the furore a Canadian Minister would case if he introduced a Bill to have black men from Africa checked for HIV before dating Canadian Caucasian women? Imagine the uproar an Immigration Minister in a European country would cause if he introduced a regulation checking whether gay men seeking asylum got exited either by gay or heterosexual pornographic materials. But, audacious transgender stereotypes get hyped by all and sundry – including by human rights organization.

Transgender stereotyping even affects project activities of transgender organizations. An oxygen rule in a section of the transgender community is that: “if your organization fails to get any funding and things are going haywire in fundraising then you need to change the tune of your proposal.

Add stuffs like: homophobia is ungodly, we will hold gay parties, gay movie nights, condoms and lubricants, we do men, we have the right to be sex workers, we support decriminalization of homosexuality, anal sex is a human right, its okay to abuse cocaine and heroine, gay rights are human rights, born this gay, *Mashoga na katiba*, we want same-sex marriage etc”.

We are lucky not all donors require transsexual organizations to put these ideas in their proposal. But, there is a huge section of donors and human rights activists who don't understand why a transsexual would go to court to have her academic certificates changed to reflect her new names instead of going to court to legalize same sex marriages or decriminalize homosexual acts.

We the transgender community need to be extra careful with the advice we get from our “friends” and some of our so called allies. Friends are not the people we laugh with (in fact they don't laugh with you, they laugh at you) or the people we abuse drugs with. Friends are the people who are there when you need tough love or when going up the steep climbs of life. Friends are not the people who encourage you to engage in reckless sexual behavior or to quit school and engage in nonsense. Friends are not the people who get angry with you because you refused to be used like a sex toy and decided to pursue a meaningful life. Friends are not the people who encourage us transgender women to act as weaklings who cannot do jobs requiring a little bit of physical and mental exertions – taking away opportunities of legitimate sources of livelihoods for a life of chasing after men and women in bars for money. There is nothing wrong in having a normal life, a good job and having a close relationship with your family and neighbors. I know at times we find ourselves in situations that don't provide other choices except the ones that rob us our dignity. At times there is no one to provide the tough love or to support you in your steep climbs and you feel like the sky is falling. But, there is always a solution to every problem and we shall not sit on our hands till we get those solutions.

