

Maya Posch, 28, is intersex. Until 2005 she thought she was a man, then came out as a hermaphrodite and defines herself since that time as an intersexed woman. Her body has mostly feminine characteristics, although with male reproductive organs, so that she still gets classified as male. During examinations last year it was determined that she also possesses female reproductive organs. Maya works in the Netherlands, her country of birth, as a software programmer. More information can be found at Maya's website: www.mayaposch.com

Are you sick?

Physically not, although I have suffered some traumas due to the treatment I received in this country, including a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Yet further I see myself as normal. There is nothing wrong with me.

How did your country treat you?

The problem is that intersex isn't recognized in the Netherlands as a healthy condition, preferring to call it a disorder of sex development. It is seen as a birth defect, which has to be corrected. The focus also lies on surgery and therapy, to change an intersexed person into a 'normal' man or woman. I got pushed towards surgery as well, without my intersex condition being diagnosed; the correct procedure according to Dutch regulations.

Not for you, though?

I just wanted to know what my body really looks like, how it is put together. Yet at every consultation which I visited I got asked: you just want to become a woman, don't you? I got offered only the choice between staying male or through surgery becoming a normal woman.

When did this happen?

In early 2005. Before that time I always thought, I am a man - until I looked at myself and I noticed that I do not at all have the body of a man. As a result I did some research and I noticed that not even in my youth did I choose to be a boy or a girl. Normally children do so around age 6. Thus I went to a hospital, to have myself examined, to become informed and then to choose what I wanted.

Did you even question that you might be different from what society expected from you?

I did have my doubts, but I always thought that it was my giftedness which makes me different. My mother and my family also questioned this, but they didn't tell me until afterwards. I mean, I have never put on women's clothes - whereby I do remember that I grew closer to a female role and didn't mind it at all when someone mistook me for a girl.

What makes you intersexed?

After an examination in Germany last year it was determined that I have a vagina as well as a penis. Thus I have both female and male reproductive organs, even though neither is fully developed. This confirmed two earlier MRI examinations at two clinics in Germany. In the Netherlands this is still being contested.

Did you see yourself as a transsexual prior to the surgery in Germany?

No, I did so only during the first few days after I found out that I preferred a female role over a

male one. Back then I didn't even know intersex existed. After that I soon started to define myself as intersex and a hermaphrodite.

What exactly was found during the surgery?

Part of this surgery was the removal and biopsy of what turned out to be undeveloped testicles. Further a hidden vagina was sought for and found.

How do people respond when you tell them about yourself?

Surprised, mostly. They do not expect it, since I look like an attractive yet further unremarkable woman. Yet after that the response is usually positive. Only a few times was the response different, mostly with extreme Christian people. One physician refused to treat me.

Where do you find support?

Mostly from acquaintances, friends and others. There is no support network for intersex people. And my family can't handle it either. I have no contact with my father any more, and my mother is burned out after seven years of battle and worry.

What about other intersex people?

I have a few contacts, mostly via articles on me which got published. Basically are most of the intersex people whom I came across so traumatised that they do not want to talk about it any more. It is a harsh experience for all of us.

What kind of support do you hope for?

First of all I would like to be taken seriously and treated as a human being. They have damaged me psychologically, because they wanted to turn me into a 'normal' woman through sex-reassignment surgery. I do not want such a thing. Intersex should be recognized and no longer be seen as 'wrong'. Right now I want to live somewhere else where I can be safe, outside the Netherlands, and receive the medical help there which I require to rebuild my life. I have had very little chance to live my life these past seven years which it took to battle these hospitals.

Where do you want to live? And which medical help do you still require?

At the moment I'm applying at Google Germany for a job. I'd like to go there first. And then perhaps to the USA or Canada or maybe somewhere in Asia. Medically I still require a detail examination of the not fully developed vagina, to figure out whether something can still be done with it. That's the last part of my body with which I still want to do something. Beyond that I still need therapy for my traumas.

How important is it for you to appear as a woman?

I call myself an intersex or a hermaphrodite woman, so it is definitely important. To be intersex is as much part of me as being a woman. I do not want to have things cut out of my body to make people think that I'm not intersex. I am not ashamed for my body, the way it is now.

It probably was not always like that...

It definitely took a few years before I had determined for myself what would make me happy. For

21 years I had been made to behave like a boy, I didn't have any intersexed humans as examples. That's one of the reasons why I have contacted the media and am telling my story. I want to be that example, which other intersex people and their parents can follow. In the end I have decided that the only person who can know what makes me happy is me. What my environment thinks is irrelevant.

What is so wrong about appointing a gender to a child in case of doubt? Doesn't one save them the uncertainty as an adult?

No, the contrary is true. I know many victims of genital surgery. It is the worst thing for an intersexed child, to take away this decision before it is old enough to decide for itself. Many of so-called transsexuals are in truth the result of wrongful surgeries. It is one of the dirty secrets of the medical world.

How do you wish that you had been treated?

I simply want to be treated as what I am: a human. There is nothing wrong with me, I'm neither sick nor handicapped. Yet it is suggested to me that I am. Thereby comes that diversity is normal and should be the rule, not the exception.

Which positive things did you gain from your intersex condition?

I have learned a lot and have become a stronger person. I have learned that gender a spectrum is, not two extremes. I have also learned how to explain things to other people, and that education and information can rapidly change a situation, not only for intersexed, but also for others who are 'different'. In the end it are ignorance and dogma which form the greatest threats to humankind.

(Interview by Malte Göbel)

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