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# Transgender Identity and Media in Historical Perspective

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Transgender Identity and Media in Historical Perspective

Melanie Bilbrey

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## **Introduction**

“Given the swift political advances of the transgender movement, paired with its new pop-culture visibility, you'd be forgiven for believing that to be gender-nonconforming today is to be accepted, celebrated, even trendy.”<sup>1</sup> As the Rolling Stone points out, the trans community is making large advances in the public sphere. Trans men and women are becoming more visible on television shows like *Orange is the New Black*, in the fashion industry, such as the well-known models Lea T. and Carmen Carrera, and even in social media with Facebook's new gender options. Unfortunately, these portrayals do not necessarily mirror daily life for the majority of trans men and women. The transgender community remains vulnerable and underrepresented, with trans men and women being murdered, committing suicide, or becoming victims to violence within the prison system every day. While the transgender community has been making progressive strides in the media recently, these dominant narratives misrepresent what it truly means to be a transgendered person in the United States today. This, in turn, shields the mainstream from the harsh realities of every day life for these individuals and allows violence, discrimination, and transphobia to continue.

## **Background of Transexuality**

The term “transgender” can be used to refer to people who “cross over the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.”<sup>2</sup> The reasons people may feel strongly about wanting to move away from their birth-assigned gender vary, as does each individual's preferred method of crossing that barrier. Throughout history, there has not always been a name for this type of transition. There has been an abundance of terms tossed around before the term transgender was coined in the 1980s, some more accepting than others.

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<sup>1</sup> Sabrina Rubin Erdely, “The Transgender Crucible,” *Rolling Stone*, July 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 1.

Originally, trans people were grouped together with homosexuals and labeled inverts, or they were said to have gender inversion. Gender inversion was defined as a man being sexually attracted to other men, which made him act similar to a woman, and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> While the idea of gender inversion was based on the assumption that if a person was attracted to someone of the same sex, they began acting like the opposite sex, it also blurred the lines between homosexuality and transsexuality.

However, the world continued to search for a term to correctly define these people who crossed the gender binaries. Some terms that became popular include eonism, which later came to be used to describe a genuine transvestite rather than a crossdresser; antipathic sexual instinct, which was the disliking of what one should normally find sexual based on one's gender; eviration, a change of character in which a male's feelings become those of a woman; and defemination, which is a change of character in which a female's feelings become those of a man.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in 1910, German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term "transvestite," which is the only term still used today.

At the time, the term "transvestite" was used in the same way "transgender" is used today, to convey the sense of a wide range of gender-variant identities and behaviors.<sup>5</sup> During the late twentieth century, however, the term became less favored. Now, it generally refers to people who wear gender-atypical clothing, but do not take hormones or receive surgery to modify their body. The term "transsexuality" refers to those who do choose to partake in surgery or hormones to permanently alter their gender. The term was first used in the title of a 1949 article by D.O. Caldwell, but it was popularized by Dr. Harry Benjamin 1950s.<sup>6</sup> The term was created to draw a

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 18.

distinction between those who wanted to physically alter their bodies and those who wanted to simply change the way they dress.

Dr. Harry Benjamin explains the difference between transvestism and transsexuality as having to do with one's opinions of their own sex organs. "In transvestism, the sex organs are sources of pleasure; in transsexualism they are sources of disgust," he explains.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin continues on to say that transvestites are primarily homosexuals who enjoy the sex organs of their own sex, whereas transsexuals are uncomfortable with their birth-assigned gender and have a strong desire to psychically and permanently change it.

The term "transgender" is the most recent and the most widespread. It is a general term that refers to any and all variations from gender norms and expectations.<sup>8</sup> It becomes difficult to pinpoint one exact definition of transgender when the constantly differing gender norms are taken into account. Under the umbrella term of transgender, there is a multitude of specific gender identification terms a person can choose. To name a few, there are AFAB/AMAB, or Assigned Female/Male at Birth; Demigirl/Demiguy, meaning someone who identifies with being a woman or a man, but not completely; Intergender, which can be used by those who feel their gender identity is in between a man and women, is both a man and women, or is outside the binary of man and woman; and Neutrois, or the feeling that one does not have a gender or gender identity.<sup>9</sup> All of these terms and more can be grouped under the term "transgender," as well as the term "trans\*." Trans\* is similar in meaning to transgender, but it has been recently adopted as a way to show the inclusivity of the term.

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<sup>7</sup> Harry Benjamin, "Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-Somatic and Somato-Psychic Syndromes," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 46.

<sup>8</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> "Trans 101\*: Primer and Vocabulary," *Ohio University*, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.ohio.edu/lgbt/resources/trans101.cfm>.

All of these terms were created due to an increasing need to describe those who stepped outside of the typical gender binary. These people challenged the dominant opinion that there were only two genders: man and woman. As the transgender community grew in popularity, so did the awareness that gender is fluid. Out of this revelation, a few theses formed in an attempt to explain the fact that there is more than one gender. During his study of homosexuality, George Henry concluded, “it is scientifically inaccurate to classify persons as fully male or female.”<sup>10</sup> Written in the early eighteenth century, this began the discussion of bisexuality.

Christine Jorgensen, one of the first openly transgendered individuals in the United States after her public transformation in the 1950s, found Henry’s idea compelling and used a variation of his research to answer the popular question, “Are you a woman?” Her standard response included Jorgensen pointing out that the interviewer is assuming that every person is either a man or a woman, when in fact each person is both in varying degrees.<sup>11</sup> A *New York Daily News* reporter interviewed various medical experts to determine how accurate Jorgensen’s response was. After his research had concluded, he agreed with Jorgensen and Henry. “All humans remain somewhat bisexual,” the reporter began. “The male has some vestigial female sex organs, the female some vestigial male organs. Both men and woman produce both male and female sex hormones.”<sup>12</sup> This, he decided, could explain Jorgensen’s desire to transform into a woman.

By the 1940s, doctors had created the term “psychological sex” to refer to the sense of being a man or being a woman.<sup>13</sup> This new term was necessary to distinguish it from biological sex, which refers to chromosomes, genes, genitals, hormones, and other physical markers.<sup>14</sup> The issue of one’s psychological sex became relevant as surgery to change one’s sex became more

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<sup>10</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

popular. Most research on psychological sex focused on people with visibly intersexed conditions, which can be defined as a person who is born with a sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definition of male or female. While many in the medical professions agreed that it was necessary to “correct” ambiguous genitalia, many disagreed on how to choose the sex of the individual. Despite a 1952 summary stating, “adult patients are usually better adjusted and happier if the genitalia are reconstructed in keeping with their psychological sex, disregarding completely the genetic sex,” the debate continued.<sup>15</sup>

The ability and the demand to psychically transform parts of the body have been around since anesthesia has been available and surgeries were no longer a death sentence.<sup>16</sup> However, as the desire for sex change surgeries became more popular among those not considered intersexed, many doctors agreed with the psychoanalysts who were loudly proclaiming transsexuals to be mentally ill.<sup>17</sup> This caused most doctors to disassociate themselves from all possible surgeries. Most did not want their practices to be involved with such a controversial topic. Those few medical professionals who did decide to perform gender reassignment surgeries were rewarded with damaged reputations and negative publicity.

By the 1980s, the idea of transsexuals being mentally ill was still very much around, however the relationship between their illness and their ability to receive surgery had changed drastically. The fourth addition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) defines Gender Identity Disorder (GID), or the unhappiness one feels with their assigned birth sex, as a mental disorder. Because GID was now an official mental illness, those wanting to undergo gender reassignment surgery were able to do so under the pretense of needing necessary medical treatment. However, despite the fact that it

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 122.

should have been easier for those individuals to receive treatment, it was often still just as difficult.

Although GID was now a part of the DSM, it was difficult for individuals to become labeled with GID. First, a person would need several months of psychotherapy to prove they suffered from GID. If the therapist felt the individual was truly unhappy with his or her assigned gender, then that person would be recommended to an endocrinologist for hormone therapy. After receiving hormones, the individual must live as a member of the desired sex for at least one year. After that year, a psychiatrist would evaluate that person's need for a change of gender, and possibly recommend surgery.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, that recommendation did not always guarantee surgery. Despite gender reassignment surgery now being considered medical treatment for GID, insurance companies still considered them "experimental," "cosmetic," and "elective."<sup>19</sup> Therefore insurance did not cover any part of the surgery and many were left without means to pay for what was considered medical treatment.

Just before the introduction of GID into the DSM in 1980 made surgeries more difficult to come by legally, the rise of university-based sex programs in the 1960s and 1970s allowed for surgeries to gain popularity in the United States. While some transgender research had previously been conducted at the University of California, Johns Hopkins University was the first in the United States to open a medical program that combined scientific research into the biology and psychology of gender with the "expert evaluation of transgender individuals for hormone treatment and genital surgery."<sup>20</sup> The doctors at Johns Hopkins performed their first

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<sup>18</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 112.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 93.



complete genital surgery on Avon Wilson, an African American male to female (MTF) patient in 1966.<sup>21</sup>

Although sex reassignment surgery became popular in the later twentieth century, it had been around since the mid-1800s. However, it wasn't until the 1940s that it started to become less taboo and more of a popular subject for those hoping to receive the surgery in the United States. The appeal to psychically alter one's body resonates with the mid-twentieth century trend of Americans routinely searching for ways to remake themselves in pursuit of self-fulfillment.<sup>22</sup> Despite becoming more acceptable in theory, it was still uncommon in practice. In order to receive surgery, MTFs had to convince doctors it was necessary by conveying conventional femininity and Female to Males (FTMs), masculinity. They also had to prove to doctors there was a sense of urgency. One MTF explains, "In order to get surgery, you have to tell the doctor that if you don't get it you will commit suicide."<sup>23</sup>

While transsexuals wanting surgery commonly had to display every thought and action regarding becoming the opposite sex that they have ever had, they had to keep their sex life hidden. Although transsexuals knew that heterosexuality would be "normal" post-surgery, it was too dangerous to mention any sexual interests pre-surgery.<sup>24</sup> If transsexuals wanting surgery mentioned a desire for sex after surgery, they were generally written off as homosexuals who did not qualify for surgery or too interested in sex. There was a thin line between proving one was worthy or unworthy of surgery, and many transsexuals at the time worked hard to structure their life histories so that they fit the mold of those able to receive it.

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<sup>21</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 219.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

Because it was so difficult to be accepted for sex reassignment surgeries, many transsexuals, especially MTFs, would begin the operation themselves so that the rest of the surgery was deemed a medical emergency. In a study published in 1965, 18 out of 100 MTFs had attempted to remove their own testicles or penises.<sup>25</sup> Annette Dolan, a MTF who did not have the funds to travel abroad for surgery, decided to perform her own surgery. She read medical books and bought surgical equipment. She successfully removed her testicles and took them to her doctor within an hour. Once all legal obstacles were removed, she was able to find a surgeon to complete the operation and even construct a vagina.<sup>26</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, historian and author, explains, “As in cases of botched self-induced abortions, doctors sometimes felt more comfortable cleaning up afterward than providing medical care from the start.”<sup>27</sup>

However, those who weren’t denied the opportunity for surgery still faced issues such as excruciating pain during and after operations, unhappiness with results, and the fees of the surgery. While the costs of the surgery varied by operations and doctors, by the 1950s it generally cost each patient a few thousand dollars. This led to patients bargaining with doctors, traveling out of the country, performing self-surgery, talking of suicide, and taking up prostitution to raise money.<sup>28</sup>

Many also felt unwelcome at the hospitals and clinics while receiving treatment. Numerous transmen and women told stories of being treated as second-class citizens by doctors and staff. During the operations, it was no different. Many complained of excessive force and pain, which some saw as a necessary evil. Others, however, questioned the motives of their doctors. Along with the continued pain, infections, grafts that failed to take, and scar tissue were

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 162.

extremely common. It was not unusual for “vaginas to close, new penises to wither, or urethras to constrict.”<sup>29</sup> FTMs and MTFs were constantly returning to their doctors to receive additional surgery to correct issues with the original surgery. This led to extreme frustration and disappointment.

Unfortunately, those in the medical field were not the only ones who were treating the trans community as second-class citizens. Many groups who seem like obvious allies to the transgender cause were against them. The 1950s brought the second wave of feminism as a new transgender adversary. While not all feminists shared the same point of view, many felt that transsexuals were “politically regressive dupes of the patriarchal gender system, who, at best, deserved to have their consciousnesses raised.”<sup>30</sup> Most feminists were critical of many trans practices, such as surgery, hormones, and cross-dressing because they saw it as “personal solutions” to the communal problem of gender-based oppression. Many believed these were ways for females to pass as males and move more safely in a world that was hostile to women. As for MTFs, the common belief was that they should remain effeminate men and be proud of it, rather than strive to become “normal women.”<sup>31</sup>

The 1970s brought an assortment of anti-trans incidents at feminist events. There was a fistfight at the first Gay Pride parade in 1972. Beth Elliott, a MTF lesbian singer and activist was ousted from the Daughters of Bilitis in 1972 on the grounds of “not really being a woman.” In 1973, Elliott was kicked out of the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference, after an old college friend accused her of sexual harassment, a charge Elliott vehemently denied. As a final blow, in

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>30</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 2.

1979, Janice G. Raymond published *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* in which she compares transsexuality to Nazism.<sup>32</sup>

Another unsuspecting opponent of the trans community was the gay community. Many felt threatened by transgender men and women. Homosexuals did not want to transform into the opposite sex, but with this new alternative lifestyle the trans community began to present, some felt that was what they would have to do.<sup>33</sup> Many also did not want to be associated with the trans community, and yet the public continued to lump the two together, causing frustration. The frustration was similar for the trans community as well. There was a general belief that all transsexuals were homosexuals as well. That is untrue, as the sexual preference of the transsexuals of that time varied, as it continues to do today. Some transmen and women, such as Christine Jorgensen, even saw homosexuality as immoral.

With even those who seemed to have similar interests fighting against them, it is no surprise the trans community faced a lot of violence as they became more visible in the United States. Leslie Feinberg, author and activist, explains, “the many people who don’t fit these narrow social constraints run a gamut of harassment and violence.”<sup>34</sup> Susan Stryker describes the violence directed at trans people in a different manner. “Because most people have a great difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person’s gender,” she explains, “the gender changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness. This gut-level fear can manifest itself as hatred, outrage, panic, or disgust, which may then translate into physical or emotional violence directed at the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 101-107.

<sup>33</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 179.

<sup>34</sup> Leslie Feinberg, “Transgender Liberation,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 205.

person who is perceived as not-quite-human.”<sup>35</sup> Visually perceiving someone as transgender is one of the main triggers of antitransgender discrimination and violence.

Some of the main perpetrators tend to be the police. Often, transgender women would be arrested for prostitution when they were simply walking down the street with friends. Stryker explains that they might be, “driven around in squad cars for hours, forced to perform oral sex, strip-searched, or, after arriving at the jail, humiliated in front of other prisoners.”<sup>36</sup> While in jail, transgender women would often have their heads forcibly shaved or placed in solitary confinement if they resisted. More often than not, since they were legally men, they were placed in men’s jail, where they were vulnerable to rape, sexual assault, and murder. Even those committed to protecting the most at-risk, failed them.

Despite everything the trans population has had going against them, they continued to create their own thriving community. Virginia Prince began the first political transgender publication in the United States in 1952. It was called *Transvestia: The Journal of the American Society for Equality in Dress*. While it only lasted two issues, its legacy lived on. She shortened the title to *Transvestia* and transformed the publication into a magazine in 1960.<sup>37</sup> Prince also created the first transgender organization in the United States, the Hose and Heels Club. Trans men and women also played a large role in the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which led to a breakthrough in gay rights. After feeling excluded from the gay rights organizations that were created in the wake of Stonewall, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, two veterans of the riots, established the first of many transgender organizations, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). STAR’s goal was to help kids on the street find food, clothing, and a

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<sup>35</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 46-53.

place to live.<sup>38</sup> STAR also inspired many other transgender groups such as Transvestites and Transsexuals (TAT), Transsexuals Anonymous, and the Queen's Liberation Front (QLF), many of which have lasting legacies.

### **Background of Transgendered People in the Media**

The number one news story of 1953 was not the execution of atomic spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg or the armistice of the Korean War, it was the story of Christine Jorgensen: "Ex-GI Turned Blonde Bombshell."<sup>39</sup> Jorgensen was born George Jorgensen in 1926. After returning from the army, which she had been drafted into during the war, Jorgensen used the GI Bill to study photography. It was then that a twenty-two year old George learned about the hormonal and surgical sex change surgery that was available in Europe. In 1950, George left the United States for Denmark and returned in 1953 as Christine Jorgensen. She arrived at Idlewild Airport to a sea of journalists and fans, waiting to catch a glimpse of the elegant, attractive woman who had once been a man.

Jorgensen was a media sensation. She signed a deal with *American Weekly* to tell the story of her life in Sunday newspaper segments and eventually performed in her own show about her life in Los Angeles and created a nightclub act in Pennsylvania. In her act, Jorgensen sang, danced, and told jokes until becoming serious and telling her stage partner, Myles Bell, why she chose to receive the surgery she was now famous for. While she admitted she had no real talent when it came to singing or dancing, she took her show on the road and made it to Broadway. She frequently gave interviews and public lectures for the majority of her life. She even wrote an autobiography, which was made into a film in 1970.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 66.

So why was Jorgensen, a MTF Transgender, so popular in the 1950s, a time of conservatism and gender roles? While part of the fascination certainly comes from Jorgensen's obvious femininity, conventional beauty, and dignified persona, Stryker looks to the media and the viewers who adored Jorgensen for answers. She believes the captivation has to do with "the mid-twentieth-century awe for scientific technology."<sup>40</sup> Now technology could not only split an atom, but also transform a man into a woman. The fact that this happened to someone from the United States simply made it all the more enthralling.

After World War II, a war in which Jorgensen fought for America, the United States became a global leader with other countries looking to us for guidance. It is also important to note that Jorgensen was once a soldier, the ideal depiction of masculinity. Many began to believe that if a strong, macho soldier could willingly transform his body into that of a woman, what would ordinary men be willing to do? Also during the war, many gender stereotypes were broken with women having to perform labor jobs generally done by the men who were busy fighting for the country. When the men returned home, the United States was faced with the issue of fitting women back into their feminine gender roles in the home and men in their masculine gender roles at work. However, now that a woman had experienced life outside of domesticity, the question of what made a man a man and a woman a woman was very much up for debate.

Likewise, Jorgensen's story told the tale of "individual striving, success, and upward mobility."<sup>41</sup> Unlike the Soviet Union's totalitarian, conformist society during this Cold War era, Jorgensen was living proof of the United States' individualism. She refused to conform to masculinity and in doing so represented the growing idea of American liberalism, which was in direct contrast to Communism's ideas of collectivism.

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<sup>40</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 67.

Although Jorgensen and her surgery were new to the scene, talk about such surgeries had been around for a while. As early as 1937, men and women began publically inquiring about how to transform into the opposite in sex. In a letter to *Your Body* magazine, “Miss R. & R.” from New York wrote, “I have had the feeling, ever since I can remember, that my sex is gradually changing.”<sup>42</sup> She went on to explain she found an unusual lump on her body, which she assumed was a masculine organ forming and declared “an intense desire” to become a man. She asked the editor if this were possible. Many others followed suit, asking magazines and newspapers to aid in their desired sex changes.

While it may seem odd that men and women turned to popular magazines for support and advice about sex changes rather than doctors, it made sense at the time. The sex change made its popular debut in the media rather than within the medical field. While European scientists had been attempting sex transformation surgeries on animals as early as 1910, most Americans knew of these sex change operations through the media. Stories of “sex reversals” began appearing in newspapers and magazines in the early 1930s. These stories opened Americans to the possibility that sex was not as permanent as they once believed. They allowed men and women who desired a sex change, but were not born intersexed, to finally feel as if they were not alone.<sup>43</sup>

After sex change surgeries became slightly less taboo and Jorgensen made waves as the first famous transgendered American, the media became enthralled with the stories of the transgender community. However, rather than assisting these individuals in their quest for acceptance in society, the media were only looking for sensational stories. This often led to skewed representations that became popular. After Lili Elbe’s story, *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex* was translated into English and published in the United

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 14.



States in 1933, the media focused on the physical aspects of her story rather than the psychological. Not only did the book describe Elbe as a typical transvestite, a term that at the time meant a cross dresser who wanted to permanently change their sex, but it also depicted Elbe as a hermaphrodite.

The newly translated book on Elbe's life described her as being born with "stunted and withered ovaries" in addition to testicles.<sup>44</sup> Although only twenty medically confirmed hermaphrodites had been found at that point, none of whom had two ovaries and two testes in the scrotum as was claimed in Elbe's case, the media latched on to this physical reasoning behind her transformation. Newspapers and magazines downplayed her transvestitism and focused instead on her alleged hermaphroditism, using it as a way to justify the surgery. This condition was a way to distinguish Elbe from the other "purely mental" cases, the ones with a "disorder of the mind ... due, perhaps, to unhappy experiences in childhood," reported the December 1933 edition of *Sexology Magazine*.

Aside from attempts to rationalize sex change surgeries, the media rarely distinguished between transvestisim, homosexuality, intersex, and crossgender indetification. It often used the terminologies interchangeably and declared all of them in need of a cure. The media also published many obviously embellished stories meant to scare the transgender community or offer sensible reasons behind the urge to change sex. Many popular stories revolved around women and men gradually turning into the opposite sex of their bodies' own accord.

A 1939 article titled, "SEX REPEAL!," tells the unlikely story of Ruth Parrin, a beautiful, healthy woman who underwent a "mysterious personality change" and found herself attracted to the same sex. Shortly after, Parrin sprouted a beard, her breasts shrank, her shoulders broadened, and her hips narrowed. She reported thinking and feeling "like a man." Eventually, a doctor

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 30.

located a tumor near her ovaries. Once it was removed she reverted back to her normal, feminine self.<sup>45</sup> Parrin's story told the commonly recognized tale of ovarian tumors masculinizing women. The article then went on to suggest that many cross dressers, homosexuals, and surgically changed women could become "normal" again if they were checked for ovarian tumors.

Checking for ovarian tumors was far from the only advice magazines offered people who searched for answers regarding a change of sex. The magazine *Sexology*, for example, often discouraged operations by warning that surgeries created completely sexless creatures. Often, magazines would advise confused readers to see endocrinologists with the goal of becoming more masculine or feminine or to see psychologists in the hopes of better presenting ones gender. One particular writer who asked for information on female-to-male sex changes received the following response, "There is no operation whereby a *normal female* can be changed to a normal male, or a normal male into normal female. The operations you have read of were performed on 'hermaphrodites.'"<sup>46</sup> While simultaneously publishing frequent stories about men becoming women and vice versa, magazines, *Sexology* in particular, continued to assert that these operations were only performed on intersexed men and women.

The media sensationalized these surgeries after they happened, yet deterred confused men and women from seeking surgeries themselves. This left many readers feeling confused and alone without knowing where to turn. Doctors in the United States were generally unaware of the sex change surgeries happening in Europe and most refused to perform or recommend the surgery for anyone who was not obviously intersexed. The only hope many had left was the reoccurring stories of successful operations in newspapers and magazines.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 37.

In the 1950s when television began to compete with traditional forms of media, the once popular stories of sex changes did not follow the trend. The topic was considered too risqué for family-oriented entertainment.<sup>47</sup> However, during the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the self-censorship of television stations halted. Many transsexuals, especially MTFs, began to become more sexual. They rejected the traditional style of Christina Jorgensen, who remained respectable by keeping her sex life private. While transsexuals of the time agree that Jorgensen had to be “supermiddle-class conservative...to convince the majority of people that she was alright,” they did not want to follow that same path. MTFs became more sexual and outrageous and this behavior attracted the media. Books, magazines, and tabloid articles were written on these women, many containing nude or almost nude photographs. By the 1970s, many of these stories contained graphic accounts of sex acts MTFs were able to do after surgery.

In 1968, *Myra Breckinridge*, the bestselling novel by Gore Vidal, was published. Myra Breckinridge was a power-hungry transsexual out to destroy men.<sup>48</sup> The main theme in the book was Myra’s sexuality, which she used as she took revenge on the men who humiliated her before her surgery. The climax of her story comes with a thirty-page scene in which Myra uses a dildo to rape a masculine man. The book was an instant hit. In 1970 *Myra Breckinridge* was made into a film. The same year, Christine Jorgensen’s autobiography was also made into a film. While Jorgensen’s film flopped, *Myra Breckinridge* was a success, proving that a simple sex change no longer warranted an interesting story.

After *The Christine Jorgensen Story* and *Myra Breckinridge* premiered on the big screens, transsexuals in Hollywood became much more acceptable. In 1975 Al Pacino starred in *Dog Day*

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 203.

*Afternoon* as a bank robber who stole as a way to pay for his lover's transition.<sup>49</sup> It won an Academy Award for best original screenplay. *What Sex Am I?*, which was produced in 1984, provided a sympathetic view of transsexuality. Multiple biographies and autobiographies were turned into movies, including *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). Instantly a success, *Boys Don't Cry* tells the true story of Brandon Teena, a FTM teenager who was raped and murdered for hiding his birth gender. Television also opened up to transgender stories, with trans storylines appearing in the CBS drama *The Medical Center* and interviews with trans figures finally making it into the evening news.<sup>50</sup> While the transgender community has since broken into all genres of popular media, their stories still remain far from the norm.

### **Transgender Accomplishments in the Media**

The transgender community has been making progress when it comes to how they are portrayed in the media. While trans men and women were once only included to sensationalize and sell a story or news piece, they are now being celebrated. There are mainstream trans actors, models, and singers as well as television shows and movies recognizing the trans community for who they are rather than their ability to sell a story. Within the past ten years, the trans community has become much more visible in a positive way. Laverne Cox has become the first transgender actor ever nominated for an Emmy; in 2014 Amazon debuted its popular show *Transparent*, which is about a family dealing with their father's transition; and the popular social media site Facebook added 52 new gender options.

Arguably the most famous trans woman at the moment is Laverne Cox, the actress, reality show star, and activist. Cox, an African American MTF from Mobile, Alabama, got her start in Hollywood on VH1's reality show "I Want to Work for Diddy." She was the first trans

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 278.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 278.

woman of color to appear on an American reality show. She was also the first trans woman of color to produce and star in her own reality show, also on VH1, “TRANSform Me.” She has appeared in various other shows such as “Law and Order,” “Bored to Death,” and a few independent films.<sup>51</sup> However, it was Cox’s role as Sophia Burset in the hit Netflix series “Orange is the New Black” that really brought her fame.

In 2013, “Orange is the New Black” premiered as a Netflix original series with Cox playing the groundbreaking role of Burset, an incarcerated transgender woman. This role made Cox the first trans woman of color to have a leading role on a mainstream scripted television show. The role led to Cox’s Emmy nomination for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy. While she did not win, she was the first trans woman of color to be nominated for a primetime Emmy award. Sophia Burset was also named the 4<sup>th</sup> most influential fictional character of 2013 by Time Magazine.<sup>52</sup> In addition to her Emmy nomination, Cox has also received a GLAAD Award for Outstanding Reality Program, the Best Supporting Actress Award at the Massachusetts Independent Film Festival, she was named one of Out Magazine’s “Out 100,” one of the country’s top fifty trans icons by the Huffington Post, and her writing has appeared on the Huffington Post and the Advocate.<sup>53</sup> She has also shared her story and her transgender activism all over the country and she was the first openly transgender person to grace the cover of *Time* Magazine.

Cox and her fame are important to the transgender community because it is rare that they are able to see their stories on mainstream television, let alone played by an actual trans person. Most trans roles are given to cisgender, or a person whose gender identity matches their birth sex, actors. Likewise, Cox uses her fame to advance the public conversation about transgender issues.

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<sup>51</sup> “Biography,” *LaverneCox.com*, last modified 2014, <http://www.lavernecox.com/bio-2/>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

During an interview with Katie Couric, Cox was asked about her various sex reassignment surgeries. Instead of answering, Cox explained why focusing on the genitalia of transgendered people is misguided and unimportant. Instead, the focus should be shifted to the discrimination the trans community faces on a daily basis.<sup>54</sup> Cox's stardom gives young trans people hope that they will be able to find a welcoming place in mainstream media as well.

Another ground-breaking moment for the trans community was the creation of Amazon's newly popular series *Transparent*. *Transparent* follows the struggle of Mort Pfefferman and his family as he comes out as transgender and transitions into Maura Pfefferman. The series is ground breaking in a multitude of ways. First, it is a popular comedy that humanizes the trans community and the process of transitioning. Because it's mainstream, a diverse audience is able to empathize with Maura while learning about trans issues they otherwise might not have known. However, the production of *Transparent* makes it revolutionary as well.

Jill Soloway, the creator, writer, and director has a transgender parent. *Transparent* is based loosely off her experience of watching and trying to understand her father's transition. Because she had this real experience, Soloway wanted to create a truly inclusive production. She began by hiring Rhys Ernst and Zackary Drucker, two transgender artists, as consultants. Together, they came up with the idea of "transformative action."<sup>55</sup> A play on "affirmative action," the trio wanted to ensure trans actors and actresses were chosen for trans characters. While Soloway had written the script with actor Jeffrey Tambor in mind to play Maura because he reminded her of her transgendered father, he remains the only cisgendered actor playing a trans

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<sup>54</sup> Katy Steinmetz, "Laverne Cox Talks to TIME About the Transgender Movement," *TIME*, last modified May 29, 2014, <http://time.com/132769/transgender-orange-is-the-new-black-laverne-cox-interview/>.

<sup>55</sup> Jen Richards, "How Amazon's 'Transparent' is Changing the Game for Trans People," *The Daily Dot*, last modified September 26, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/amazon-studios-transparent-transformative-action/>.

part. Season one ended with speaking parts for 15 trans people, and not all of those characters being trans.

Their idea of transformative action did not end on screen, but instead continued into production. Soloway wanted to hire trans people in every department. Including Ernst and Drucker, there were ten trans people on the production team.<sup>56</sup> To create a safe and welcoming environment for all, Ernst and Drucker educated the entire production team on trans issues. Together, the team learned about the various identities that fell under the umbrella of trans and the importance of pronouns. All members were able to ask questions without judgment and all bathrooms were made to be gender neutral.<sup>57</sup>

*Transparent* not only made the trans dialogue available to a more diverse audience through a comedic television series, but it also created a positive change in the production industry as well. Van Barnes, a production assistant in set design, explains that she “asked almost everyone if they had ever worked with an out trans person before, and few had. But I earned their respect.”<sup>58</sup> By providing education on transgender issues to many seasoned industry workers, *Transparent* is breaking down the barriers that are keeping the trans community out of Hollywood.

While *Transparent* is working toward inclusivity in the television industry, Facebook has been working toward inclusivity within social media. With 1.23 billion active monthly users, Facebook is currently the most popular social media site.<sup>59</sup> “A person’s Facebook page truly has become their online identity,” Human Rights Campaign President Chad Griffin explains.

Unfortunately, many trans people were not able to fully express their identity with Facebook’s

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Martha Mendoza, “Facebook Adds New Gender Options,” *Huffington Post*, last modified February 13, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/13/facebook-gender\\_n\\_4782477.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/13/facebook-gender_n_4782477.html).

two gender options: male or female. In February of 2014, Facebook responded to pressure from LGBT activists and added 58 new gender options, ranging from Agender to Pangender to Two-Spirit.<sup>60</sup> If someone does not identify with any of the 58 gender options, Facebook allows users to write in their own preferred gender. Users may add up to ten genders on their profile.

Facebook also allows users to choose their preferred pronoun, either “him,” “her,” or “their.” This clears up any confusion others may have when addressing that person. There is also the option to keep one’s gender private so the user can still express their true identity, but remain private if they do not feel ready to share. Similarly, a change of gender will not be posted on a person’s timeline as a life event like an engagement or a birthday currently is. While this can keep secretive genders quiet, it also prevents advertisements from targeting those who declare themselves transgender.<sup>61</sup> Brielle Harrison, Facebook software engineer, sums up why Facebook decided to make itself more inclusive, “There’s going to be a lot of people for whom this is going to mean nothing, but for the few it does impact, it means the world.”<sup>62</sup>

Facebook’s new gender options are providing inclusivity to all of its users who do not identify strictly as male or female. So often, trans men and women must make the choice between “male” or “female,” whether it is on forms, applications, or surveys. While “other” can sometimes be an option, it groups together so many identities that many do not want to identify that way. These new gender options on Facebook, the most prominent social media site, allow the trans community to express their true identity in a way that they previously could not. As an unintended consequence, Facebook has also forced other social media sites to create new gender options in order to remain competitive. OKCupid, the popular dating site has since added nine

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<sup>60</sup> Russell Goldman, “Here’s a List of 58 Gender Options for Facebook Users,” *ABC News*, last modified February 13, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/02/heres-a-list-of-58-gender-options-for-facebook-users/>.

<sup>61</sup> Mendoza, “Facebook Adds New Gender Options,” *Huffington Post*.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



new sexual orientation options and 19 new gender choices while Google+ now allows users to write in their own gender.<sup>63</sup> Through these new gender options, the trans community is becoming more accepted on social media.

The visibility and accomplishments of Laverne Cox, the fact that a show like *Transparent* exists and has been well received, and the inclusion of the trans community on social media sites shows the media's changing perception of transgender lives. Rather than a sensational story that will sell magazines, the media is beginning to view the trans community as the people they are by telling their stories. Even entertainment magazines have begun to show the trans community in a positive light. In July of 2014, *Cosmopolitan's* website posted an article titled, "My Wife Became My Husband."<sup>64</sup> The article tells the story of a couple and how they dealt with one's transition from a woman to a man. Stories like this humanize the community and allow outsiders to understand what trans people are going through, rather than the previous stories that depict trans people as oddities.

### **Daily Life of Transgendered Individuals**

While the transgender community has been making progress in the media, they remain underrepresented in daily life. The advances in the public sphere have done a lot to raise awareness of the transgender community, but not so much to show the terrifying issues trans people face everyday. Despite becoming more visible, the trans community remains one of the most discriminated groups in the United States. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP), transgender women, people of color, and gay men face the

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<sup>63</sup> Samantha Allen and Nico Lang, "11 Ways 2014 Was the Biggest Year in Transgender History," *Rolling Stone*, last modified December 23, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/11-ways-2014-was-the-biggest-year-in-transgender-history-20141223>.

<sup>64</sup> Anna Breslaw, "My Wife Became My Husband," *Cosmopolitan*, last modified July 9, 2014, [http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/q-and-a/a26983/anderson-minshalls-transgender/?src=spr\\_FBPAGE&spr\\_id=1440\\_107427371](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/q-and-a/a26983/anderson-minshalls-transgender/?src=spr_FBPAGE&spr_id=1440_107427371).

highest risk of homicide. Likewise, transgender people, undocumented people, people of color, and gay men face the most severe violence.<sup>65</sup> In 2013 NCAVP reported that 72% of all hate violence homicide victims were transgender women and 67% were transgender women of color. If an incident was reported to the police, transgender survivors were 3.7 times more likely to encounter police violence and 7 times more likely to experience physical violence when interacting with police.<sup>66</sup>

Harm from others is not the only prevalent fear among trans people. According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, 41% of transgender respondents reported attempting suicide, compared to only 1.6% of the general population, and that number only rose when other factors were considered. 55% of trans people who had lost a job due to anti-trans bias reported attempting suicide, while 51% who were harassed or bullied at school, 61% who were the victim of psychological assault, and 64% who were victims of sexual assault reported attempting suicide.<sup>67</sup> The trans community is one of the leading groups when it comes to suicide.

Trans men and women must also worry about law enforcement. The trans community generally has higher levels of police interaction. This may be due to the fact that they are most likely to be victims of violent crimes, they are more likely to be homeless, they may be forced to work in the underground economy, or because it is common to face harassment and arrest simply for being trans in public. Some trans women report being arrested for solicitation without cause because police profiled them as sex workers.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2013,” *National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs*, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Jamie Grant, Lisa Mottet, and Justin Tanis, “Injustice at Every Turn,” *National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Once incarcerated, the struggle does not end. The Violence in California Correctional Facilities report found that transgender inmates were 13 times more likely to be sexually assaulted in prison. The report shows that 2%-3% of randomly sampled inmates describe at least one occurrence of rape while 41%-50% of transgender inmates report at least one incident.<sup>69</sup> It is not uncommon for correctional staff to participate in the harassment, abuse, or sexual assault of transgender people in prison.<sup>70</sup> It is also common for prisons to deny hormone treatments. 17% of respondents in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey reported being denied hormone treatments.<sup>71</sup> Interruptions in hormone therapy can be physically painful and it can damage a person's health physically and mentally.

These are issues the transgender community must face every day. While the few success stories seen in the media are wonderful, they do not fully encompass what it means to be a transgendered person in the contemporary United States. Trans people must deal with harassment and bullying, the constant threat of murder, a fear of law enforcement, self-harm, and discrimination within the prison system. These are the stories that do not get told, and yet telling them is vital to telling the trans story. The stories of CeCe McDonald, Leelah Alcorn, and Zahara Green are uncommon within the media but all too common among the trans men and women living in the United States.

Like many trans men and women, CeCe McDonald was walking to the store when she was physically attacked. Her story resonated with so many, that her supporters created a website for her entitled "Support CeCe!" CeCe is an African-American transgender woman who stood up against her attackers in a fight that left one of them, Dean Schmitz, dead. CeCe was the only one

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<sup>69</sup> Valerie Jenness, et al., "Violence in California Correctional Facilities: An Empirical Examination of Sexual Assault," *Center for Evidence-Based Corrections*, April 27, 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Jamie Grant, Lisa Mottet, and Justin Tanis, "Injustice at Every Turn," 2011.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

arrested that night. She was sentenced to 41 months in prison, of which she served 19 months before being released. All of her time was served in a men's prison.

CeCe's story begins as she is walking to buy groceries in June of 2011 around midnight, a time when she felt safe from the constant stares and whispers of strangers on the streets. As she and her friends passed Schooner Tavern, a group of middle-aged white men and women began to verbally harass them. "Look at the boy dressed as a girl tucking his dick in," yelled Schmitz, the leader, while others chorused with, "niggers," and "faggots." As they passed, CeCe told the group that they were just trying to walk to the store and they were people who deserved respect too. As CeCe and her friends continued walking, Schmitz's girlfriend, Molly Flaherty, shouted, "I'll take all of you bitches on," as she smashed a bottle into CeCe's cheek, puncturing her salivatory gland.

A small scuffle broke out between both groups, but it did not take long for them to separate. After they separated, CeCe and her friends fled from the scene, only to be stopped about a half a block later. A friend warned CeCe to "watch her back," and as she turned around, she saw Schmitz running toward her. While she did not know it at the time, he had cocaine and meth in his system, multiple previous convictions for assault, and a large swastika tattooed on his chest. As he ran toward her, CeCe searched her bag for protection and found fabric scissors she used in fashion school. She held them up as a warning to stop, but Schmitz only mocked her attempt at self-defense. He continued running toward her as she held the scissors tightly. After they separated, he staggered back to his group of friends where he died from a stab wound to the heart. CeCe flagged down the police and was arrested.<sup>72</sup>

Unfortunately, CeCe's story is not uncommon. Being "clocked," or being recognized as trans, and then verbally harassed is a routine occurrence. These instances of harassment

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<sup>72</sup> Erdely, "The Transgender Crucible," 2013.

becoming psychical are nothing out of the ordinary, either. CeCe's story resonated with the trans community so well because it could have easily happened to them. Laverne Cox explained, "So many times I've been walking on the street as a trans woman and been harassed, called a man – one time I was kicked. Any of them could have escalated into someone doing me harm. I very easily could be CeCe."<sup>73</sup> The only difference between CeCe and other trans people's stories of harassment is that CeCe was able to survive. "And then how is she treated?" Billy Navarro, founder of the Free CeCe campaign, asks. "She is prosecuted for having the audacity to survive."<sup>74</sup>

Violence from outsiders is not the only credible threat the trans community faces. People like Leelah Alcorn show us just how vulnerable to suicide trans men and women can be. Leelah Alcorn, a 17-year old transgender woman, committed suicide on December 28, 2014. Her story quickly spread and became a trending topic on Twitter within hours, with many of the tweets placing blame on her conservative parents. While Leelah's story went viral, hundreds of trans men and women take their own lives each year.

Leelah Alcorn knew she was a girl since she was four years old, but it was not until she was fourteen that she learned what the term "transgender" meant. Once she finally understood, she told her parents in excitement and they reacted "extremely negatively." In her suicide note, which she posted on the popular social media site Tumblr, Leelah explains that her mom told her, "it was just a phase, that I would never truly be a girl, that God doesn't make mistakes, that I am wrong."<sup>75</sup> Leelah continues to explain that her mom took her a Christian therapist who continually to told her she was wrong and selfish and should look to God for the answer.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ashley Fantz, "An Ohio Transgender Teen's Suicide, A Mother's Anguish," *CNN News*, last modified January 4, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/31/us/ohio-transgender-teen-suicide/>.

At sixteen years old, Leelah talked to her parents about seeing a gender therapist about hormones and gender reassignment surgery. They refused. Leelah's Tumblr posts state they told her it would corrupt her brain, while her mother publically stated she told Leelah they did not have the money.<sup>76</sup> Soon after she publically came out as gay and her parents punished her by taking her out of school, taking away her phone and laptop, and forbidding all social media. Eventually, Leelah felt as if there was no way out. "I'm never going to be happy," she wrote. "Either I live the rest of my life as a lonely man who wishes he were a woman or I live my life as a lonelier woman who hates herself. There's no winning."<sup>77</sup> On December 28 she posted her suicide note on Tumblr and stepped in front of a truck on Interstate 71 around 2:15 a.m.<sup>78</sup>

Despite Leelah's final note and suicide, her parents, Carla and Doug Alcorn, continued to refer to Leelah with male pronouns and they used her legal name, Josh. They also insisted upon using the name Josh, as well as male-specific descriptions such as "son" and "brother," on her tombstone. There is a petition on Change.org to change the name and pronouns on her grave. When describing Leelah's suicide, her mother posted on Facebook that her child, "went home to heaven this morning. He was out for an early morning walk and was hit by a truck."<sup>79</sup> She has also been quoted in interviews as stating, "He was an amazing musician and artist. He was an amazing boy."<sup>80</sup> Even after Leelah took her own life because her parents would not accept that she identified as a girl, the Alcorns continue to refer to her as a boy. That lack of acceptance is what drives so many transgender men and women to suicide. According to the Youth Suicide Prevention Program, "over 50 percent of transgender youths have attempted to commit suicide at

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Leelah Alcorn, *Suicide Note*, Tumblr, accessed May 6, 2015, <https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/lazerprincess>. Originally found on Leelah Alcorn's Tumblr, "Lazer Princess," accessed December 29, 2014, which has been deactivated.

<sup>78</sup> Fantz, "An Ohio Transgender Teen's Suicide, A Mother's Anguish," 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

least once before reaching the age of 20.”<sup>81</sup> Leelah’s story is not uncommon and it can be prevented.

While trans youth are more likely to attempt suicide than their peers, trans men and women are also more likely than their cisgender counterparts to be assaulted while in jail or prison. Zahara Green is one transgender woman who is fighting back against the prison system that assisted in the violent assaults she received while in prison because she was transgender. Green is suing the Georgia prison that locked her in a cell with the man who had been raping and abusing her for months.

Green was arrested at 23 years old for shoplifting, a crime that she says felt like her only option for financial support since her transition. She was placed in an all male facility in Georgia and it did not take long for her to become a target. Darryl Ricard, another inmate who was incarcerated for child molestation, rape, and kidnapping, began to repeatedly assault Green. He would demand sexual favors under the threat of murder if she did not comply. After a few months of writing to the prison staff about the unsafe environment and witnessing prison guards turn a blind eye, Green was finally placed into protective custody.

However, when the guards led her to the single cell in protective custody, Ricard was waiting for her in the cell.<sup>82</sup> She was supposed to be led to a private cell, as was he, and yet somehow he was in hers. The guards, who were supposed to check in on her every thirty minutes, did not come back to check on her for twenty-four hours. During those twenty-four hours, Green was violently raped and repeatedly threatened with a razor. It was only after the guards finally

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<sup>81</sup> Paula Mejia, “Suicide of Transgender Teen Sparks Heightened Advocacy for Trans Rights,” *Newsweek*, last modified December 30, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/suicide-leelah-alcorn-transgender-teen-sparks-new-advocacy-trans-rights-295724>.

<sup>82</sup> Beth Sherouse, “A Woman Locked in a Men’s Prison: Zahara Green,” *Human Rights Campaign*, last modified January 5, 2015, <http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/a-woman-locked-in-a-mens-prison-zahara-green>.

came around to check on her and saw Ricard with a razor that they removed him from her cell.<sup>83</sup> However, with so many inconsistencies, one has to wonder how involved the correctional officers were.

Unfortunately, situations like Green's are all too common. The trans community, especially trans women, are at a much higher risk of being incarcerated than their cisgender peers. According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), 50 percent of Black respondents and 34 percent of Latino/a respondents reported being forced to work in underground economies such as drug sales or sex work for income.<sup>84</sup> Employment is often difficult for trans men and women simply because they are transgender, so many resort to crime as a way to survive. In fact, 34% of black transgender people, and about 15% of transgender people of all races, report a household income of less than \$10,000 a year. This is also four times the rate of the general black population (9%) and over eight times the rate of the general US population (4%).<sup>85</sup>

Once in the prison system, trans inmates are more often than not placed in the jail that coincides with the gender on their birth certificate, causing the individual to immediately be singled out. Although the Prison Rape Elimination Act calls for each case to be considered individually, it still more often the case that an inmate will serve time in a correctional facility specifically for their birth gender. Stories like Green's are obvious calls for a change in our prison systems. It should not be common or more likely for a member of any community to be sexually or physically assaulted while in a correctional facility.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> "Injustice at Every Turn: A Look at Black Respondents in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," *National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, accessed April 21, 2015.



Because of the growing visibility of the trans community in the media, it is easy and common to believe the trans community is gaining equality. Many see actresses like Laverne Cox or shows like *Transparent* and assume the trans community is becoming more accepted within the main stream and therefore the anti-trans discrimination is decreasing. In reality, this is a rare occurrence. Cox is an exception when it comes to the lives of trans men and women. In contrast, many trans people live in poverty for the majority of their lives and struggle to find jobs because of their identity. *Transparent*, on the other hand, is a fine representation of a white, middle aged, middle class man transitioning. However, the trans community consists of more than white, middle aged, middle class men and most of their experiences are extremely different and much more dangerous than Maura's. In reality, more members of the trans community can relate to CeCe McDonald and her struggle to survive than they can Cox's fame.

Because of this new visibility in the media, there is a disconnect between the popular view of trans life and reality. The media perpetuates the idea that trans people have similar struggles as cisgender people, they are just different. This belief is false and extremely harmful to the trans community. The everyday struggles trans men and women face have been proven to be more violent, discriminatory, and frequent than those of their cisgender counterparts. With popular media downplaying these struggles, they may never garner the attention necessary to put an end to them.

The way the media portrays the trans community, it also causes many consumers to believe the United States has come far in our struggle for trans rights, but in reality they do not understand what it really means to be a transgendered person living in the United States. If all a person knows about the trans community is that there are many different ways to define one's gender or that gender reassignment surgery is the key identifier in a trans person's life, then they

only know the media's portrayal of trans life, which is misleading. While there are multiple ways to define one's gender, it is important to know the difference between each definition, especially when dealing directly with a trans person. It is also extremely important to understand that surgery is not what makes a person transgender. While these misrepresentations are what the media publicizes, they take away from what needs to be publicized, which is the struggle for safety and equality.

While almost any media exposure is helpful for the transgender community since they are currently so underexposed as it is, what would be truly beneficial to the trans community would be television shows and movies that show their daily struggles. If ordinary consumers became more aware of what transgendered individuals actually go through on a day-to-day basis, they will become more likely to take action against anti-trans laws, practices, and beliefs. Media that portrays the real experiences of trans individuals will lead to a better understanding and a more empathetic view of what it means to be a transgendered person in the United States today. If more people became conscious of the struggles the trans community goes through, then we would see more progress when it comes to ending the high likelihood of violence, the high suicide rates, and the police brutality, discrimination in prisons, and increased likelihood of sexual assault within the prison system among trans individuals.

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