

Trans-positioned

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She's the kind of butch any femme would want: kind and thoughtful, mature and funny, politically aware and playful, handsome and great in bed. You've been soaring on cloud nine since the two of you got together. There's just one little problem that threatens to bring the whole wonderful lovership to a crashing halt.

She says that despite her female body, she's actually a man. And she -- or should it be "he"? -- intends to live as one.

Dyed-in-the-wool, activist, out, proud lesbian feminist that I am, I've always understood that the social myths that lesbians just want to be men or actually want male lovers but can't catch any are exactly that: myths. Confronted by my new lesbian love's assertion that she was a female-to-male transsexual, I was therefore more than a little confounded. No lesbian I'd ever heard of had gone down this road before, and, I finally decided, I was not going to be first. Tearfully, I gave my new love an ultimatum: she could either have me or live as a man, but not both.

For nine mostly-silent years I thought Marcelle and I were the world's only lesbian feminist couple hiding one partner's transsexual feelings. When I finally decided I could no longer in good conscience block Marcelle's transition from female to male, one of the tasks I most dreaded was having to tell everyone who knew us as lesbians the truth: this particular lesbian was, in fact, a man, and her -- his -- lesbian lover was going to stay with him.

I expected rejection. I expected incredulity. I expected anger. I expected curiosity. What I did not expect was what I found. Out of the first 30 or so coupled lesbian friends we talked to, three admitted that one of the partners felt she was also a female-to-male transsexual (FTM). A fourth lesbian friend said she had struggled with the question for many years before deciding to keep her female body and role. During the whole nine years Marcelle and I had grappled in isolation with that invisible elephant in the living room, other lesbians we knew and socialized with were cohabitating with the same beast!

Like the early feminists shocked into politicization as a result of sharing their personal lives in consciousness-raising groups, my discovery of the hidden undercurrent of transsexual feelings in the lesbian community radicalized me. In part to atone for the pain I'd caused Marcelle with my ultimatum, in part to continue Marcelle's and my long-lived advocacy for our society's "queers," and in part to ensure no other lesbian has to cope as I did with a potentially transsexual partner in ignorance and isolation, I've since made it a point to publicly discuss FTMs in the lesbian community.

Luckily, other partners -- lesbian, bisexual, and straight, male as well as female -- have been active, too. In the three short years since Marcelle and I came out publicly about his transsexuality, lots has happened: Five national conferences devoted to female-to-male transsexuals which attracted some partners have taken place; an e-mail list for partners of FTMs has flourished; Minnie Bruce Pratt's book *S/he* about her transgendered lover Leslie Feinberg was published; a 10-page list of resources for "significant others" (SOs) of FTMs was compiled; families that include an FTM and his lesbian lover were included in nationally-distributed photographic displays and magazine articles; and countless partners have met each other at FTM-oriented groups...to name but a few of the developments.

But the mushrooming of support and information networks for the lovers of FTMs has not meant the road has been made smooth. The struggles are still myriad, and many relationships do not survive "transition" (the period during which a person changes from living as a woman to living as a man). Yet having other partners to talk to means having someone with whom one can ask questions, compare notes, and vent. It's also allowed us to start identifying patterns among partners' struggles. These patterns seem to hold regardless of the partner's gender and sexual orientation identity. Nevertheless, lesbian-identified partners' identity issues differ some from heterosexual women's identity issues, to take but one example. This article therefore focuses particularly on the ways lesbian-identified SOs approach the dilemmas.

YOU THINK YOU'RE A WHAT?

Asked how she felt upon learning that her female lover believes herself¹ to be transgendered, one woman answered: "Numb, unsure, afraid, happy for my partner, scared, threatened, wanting to help my partner, needing help for myself, depressed, restless, anxious, [and] happy that my partner is finally able to express their true feelings." Although most partners probably wouldn't be able to articulate quite this extensive a range of feelings upon being told of their lover's transsexuality, it does seem that contradictory feelings are common: "My first thought was that I would have to leave. That thought made me very sad after all we have built up over the years. I hate to see that go down the drain. In fact, I felt angry that I had to walk away. Why should I? No one has ever loved me the way my partner does. How could I settle for less? Why should I?" Another woman said, "I really don't think I can or want to stay. Some of the time. At other times the alternative seems much worse...I feel like I would be letting go of a really important relationship for a 'little' thing like gender, or a pronoun." A third acknowledged her doubts but concluded, "I really want to see my lover more at peace with himself on a daily basis. He just seems so tortured now."

With time, these initial gut-level, emotional reactions start getting refined and begin to take shape as questions about identity. Although these questions are all interrelated, they can be roughly grouped into three categories: What does this (transsexuality) make *hir*? What does it make *me*? And, what does it make *us*?

SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN ABOUT WHO YOU ARE?

FTMs often say that they've always been male; they're just making some physical and/or social adjustments so that other people recognize that fact. That's not how a lot of lesbian partners see the process. Although many always saw and often much appreciated their lover's butchness, they say what they prize is masculinity wrapped in a woman's body; masculinity as displayed by a man often feels totally different. One woman commented about a photograph in Loren Cameron's seminal FTM book, *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (Cleis Press, 1996), showing Loren with his butch lover: "The picture of Kayt and Loren arm-wrestling struck me because the line where their hands met is the line of my desire. Kayt is totally my type. Transgendered, male-identified in a woman's body." Another responded to a discussion about the sexiness of butches: "I know what you mean about the attractiveness of that look in a woman that says, 'Don't fuck with me,' but the same look in a guy feels

¹ Although FTMs are properly referred to by masculine pronouns, pronouns present a problem for those who are speaking of people who are still in the early stages of exploring whether or not they are FTM and those who have chosen to occupy a middle, blended gender ground. Although several genderless pronoun systems exist, none has been adapted universally. For this article, I've arbitrarily chosen to use "zhe" and "hir" whenever a person seems not to identify with either set of gendered pronouns and when I'm talking about both males and females.

threatening and dangerous because society has ingrained that in us through years of oppression and violence towards women. Thinking of my lover as a 'man' reminds me of the mean men in my past." Some know why this memory of past mean men is an extremely scary proposition: "I am also a survivor of sexual abuse, mostly at the hands of men, and I am afraid of how my partner's transitioning might trigger me." Others can't articulate the source of their fear, but know that it's there: "I just get nervous thinking about being in bed with a man."

Lesbian-identified partners also worry that a transitioning spouse may turn into Bubba, or expect her to become June Cleaver. "I love him dearly, but if he starts wondering aloud if I shouldn't iron his underpants, then we are gonna have problems." On a more serious note, another woman said, "I've had to deal with the idea that as my SO becomes a man, his power increases. To me, men are closer than women to power, power-grabbing behavior, yelling, and physical violence." Although these women feel they know their partners' values and goals, they worry that hormones will change him ("the cold voice of fear is still whispering in the back of my head: 'He's only saying that because he's not on testosterone yet! Wait til the hormones kick in and he loses his mind!'",) or that experiencing male privilege will make the FTM forget or abandon the feminist principles by which he formerly lived.

SO WHAT DOES THIS MAKE ME?

Lesbian-identified partners also worry about how their own identity might change. It's easy to define yourself as a lesbian when everyone can see that your partner is a woman. When your partner is a man, however, even a strongly-held sexual orientation identity of "lesbian" may seem less defensible. One woman said, "I'm very dyke identified. The possibility that he might transition and 'become male' scares me because I feel like my identity hangs in the balance." A self-described femme echoed that feeling. "I'm really wary of giving up my identity for someone else. That seems like such a stereotypical femme thing to do -- 'it's o.k., honey, your identity is more important than mine.'" On the other hand, insisting on a lesbian identity when one has an FTM lover may feel like an undermining of *his* right to self-define: "I can't in good conscience call myself a lesbian *and* validate his gender identity when he isn't identifying as a woman," one woman explained.

Some lesbians don't find the prospect of losing their lesbian credentials all that daunting. "Where I'm from, it's been hard to find a part of the lesbian community that fit my fat Latina hi femme meat eating kinky sex self. Therefore, I don't have much to lose." Another who has had bad experiences with judgmental lesbian peers said, "I can't stomach those womyny-womyny lesbian types who are so quick to judge. I think bisexual people are the most welcoming component of the GLBT community to transpeople: they 'get it' (on trans issues, on inclusion, on my identity being flexible) more than the monosexual folks do."

SO WHAT WOULD THAT MAKE US?

Nevertheless, potential loss of the lesbian community is a big deal to many of the partners of individuals contemplating transition. "Many in our respective lesbian communities may feel that once-lesbian identified transfolk and those of us lesbeens who love them are 'defectors,'" suggested one woman. Another partner who was further along in the process confirmed this happens. "The 'wimmin's' community suddenly assumes that since we 'appear' hetero, we will just fit right in with all those other hetero couples who have done absolutely no gender analysis, etc., etc." Yet, she says of herself and her partner, "the truth is, we want to be in the dyke community. That is where we both feel we belong." FTM partners also may feel keenly the loss of the lesbian

community. One woman reported how "painful" it was for her to attend an FTM conference and "hear guys post-transition talking about loss of community, looking for a less 'straight' identity, missing lesbian space even if that hadn't been quite right for them before. It made me wonder where and how we will find community."

Some women admit they helped create the community norms they now feel exclude them. "The problem is that I like to go to lezzie clubs and lezzie events. We like to do these things together. I would still go with friends to do the lezzie things I want to do if it came to that, but I want to do things like go dancing with my lover and not have to go to a straight club. The other piece to this is that I am part of the problem! When I was out dancing Friday night, there were a few couples I perceived as 'straight' and also some boys there. Who knows what paths their lives have taken, but I found myself being irritated by their presence." Another accepted her exclusion on the same basis: "Part of the difficulty in being with an FTM, at least for me, is that it changes my identity from lesbian to a FTM's SO. So if the event is for lesbians only, I don't go. I don't think any less of the lesbian community because of that. I worked for many years to create a space for lesbians to feel safe and free to express themselves."

Lesbian-identified partners also worry a lot about what they'll look like to outsiders if their partner becomes male. As one woman put it: "Everyone will see me as straight. Damn." Femmes who have long struggled with misperceptions of heterosexuality seem to be especially fearful of what transition will bring. One said, "I guess that being perceived as a heterosexual couple is really going to be a blow for me because *perceptually* I will fall into the 'heterosexual stereotype' in other people's eyes, which is what I fought to get away from in the first place. What I'm trying to say is I'm going to look like a 'wife' and no one will know any better. I guess my insides would be screaming, 'I am not what you see!'" Another could foresee a less threatening but still irritating future: "So, okay, the whole world may perceive me as a straight woman married to (or at least living with) a straight man. This perception will carry with it a trainload of gender stereotypes and expectations, which will no doubt piss me off royally on some days and just make me laugh up my sleeve on others."

COPING WITH TRANSITION

Resolving these identity and community worries and dilemmas takes time, a luxury many partners are shocked to find they don't have. Like coming out as gay, coming to terms with being transsexual is often a long process that goes on internally for months, years, or even decades before the person finally starts telling others. Once a person reaches the stage of coming out publicly, zhe's often ready or even anxious to begin acting on the newly-embraced identity. That means that many lesbian-identified partners of newly-proclaimed FTMs find their partners racing toward transition with almost break-neck speed. Even when things go a little more slowly, each step the transsexual partner takes *toward* his true identity represents a step *away* from the lesbian partner's preferred identity. "While he's celebrating," one woman summarized, "you may be crying and grieving over a loss."

It's also hard to pay attention to your own personal and relationship issues when your partner is going through a life event as all-consuming as changing from a female gender role to a male gender role. "Transition is the central issue in our relationship," one woman stated. "His struggle with gender is so consuming to both of us that my issues in the world kind of get lost. I spend an enormous amount of time focusing on him and his choices. I really need to think more about what it is that I want and what choices I need to make." Many partners struggle to balance their desire to be a loving partner who understands and meets the transitioning partner's heightened need for support and solace and their own need to grieve and process the losses and doubts they are themselves feeling. Finding and keeping this balance is a frequent topic of discussion among

FTM SOs.

SEX AND DRUGS

Vastly complicating the emotional and practical issues lesbian-identified partners struggle with as their partners embark on transitioning is what's called "The Big T" -- testosterone. Getting a prescription for testosterone is often the first exciting, concrete step a new FTM takes. But starting sex hormones means going through another adolescence as the body and brain adjust to a sudden rush of powerful, body-altering chemicals. Read that: mood changes. One harried partner said, "It's like menopause and puberty all at once sometimes."

Also read that: increased sex drive. For some female partners, this is a highly problematic development: "I think the T has made him a sex crazied uncaring ass. He seems to think only of himself. I feel like a whore at times," one angry lover said. Others are delighted: "I love having sex with him. Sex in transition is fun for me. I love when he gets in bed and says, 'look at my body.' He is happy about the changes. We have more fun in bed because he can really be there in his body in bed with me."

Some couples find transition triggers body image and desirability doubts. The FTM may be concerned about how attractive his lover will find his masculinized body, and the female partner may worry, perhaps unconsciously, that since the FTM has "rejected" his female body, he must not be very attracted to her femaleness, either. Indeed, some FTMs do have problems with their female body parts. A few women, for instance, report that their partners do not allow vaginal penetration: "It repulses him to be touched sexually in a way that reminds him of his feminine body parts," said one. A few FTMs also begin to define certain sex acts as "lesbian" and refuse to participate in them any longer. Interestingly, exactly which acts are so labeled differs from FTM to FTM. One partner reported that several transsexual men she heard speak admitted they don't like to use dildos because they remind them of "what they don't have," while another woman said she'd found that "some FTMs feel using their hands is too lesbian coded, as are certain aspects of oral sex." Yet having a sense of humor and being willing to find new terms for body parts helps, one woman responded. "Cognitive dissonance week (his term for that time of the month when he has to use 'masculine protection'²) is hard. We work around where he is at, and sometimes the right word makes the difference. We work around those words which to him seem so female-coded, especially in the heat of the moment."

Further complicating the sexual picture, female partners may find that certain turn-ons no longer work. One woman went to an FTM conference worried about her sexual attraction to men, and was not reassured. "I was looking at the guys there and it seemed that when guys transitioned, many lost/gave up the tough, hard masculine edge that they had before. I'm not sure I'd find that kind of masculinity appealing or 'acceptable' in a man, but in butches it was something that always carried sexual power for me. There were some guys there I could find sort of hot if pushed, but it doesn't bode too well for me and my partner."

BEING OUT IN PUBLIC

Transition is also problematic outside the house, particularly during the period when an FTM may be viewed as female in one situation, male in another. "There are times when we long for the anonymity of the straight

² Regular testosterone use does stop menses, but it may take several months before this effect occurs. In addition, some FTMs decide to transition without the use of testosterone.

society, like, say, when we look for a bathroom," one partner said. Couples also sometimes argue over who controls the coming-out process, particularly if the FTM wants to look like and be treated as a "normal guy" and his lover highly values a more transgressive persona. "I continually struggle internally with the issue of disclosure," said one woman. Yet she believes "it's my partner's job/right/privilege to choose whom he discloses to." Others find the dilemma more problematic: "I really miss being a dyke. I find it is a lot easier to casually come out as a dyke ('my girlfriend took me to a movie...') than as an FTM SO ('my boyfriend took me to a movie and by the way he used to be a woman...'). I can't figure out how to be 'out' without jeopardizing his right to be out/not out when he wants to, because he passes most of the time now."

WHEN IT ENDS

Many lesbian-identified partners -- even those who expected to be supportive of their lovers' transition -- end up discovering that the whole process is just too much for them to handle. One of the few studies of FTMs' relationships found that approximately half of the intimate relationships FTMs had established with women pre-transition did not survive the change³. Yet these break-ups are not always because the lesbian-identified partner decides she can't cope with having an FTM lover. Indeed, many partners discover they actually have a preference for FTMs. One said, "If my lover and I ever break up (which I hope won't happen), I can see myself attracted to other FTMs. Now that I've been with my lover, my immense desire and appreciation of transsexual men is strong." Another woman whose partner "freaked out" and left her for another woman just days after he had surgery to remove his breasts said, "Ironically, after he left, things became more clear for me. I realized that it was very unlikely that I would have left him because of the transition. I've realized that I am attracted to FTMs both pre- and post- hormones." So many ex-partners of FTMs have decided they prefer FTMs, in fact, that a new online support group has been formed to help such women meet single FTMs.

Of course, one doesn't need to decide one's preference is FTMs to maintain a relationship with one. What one *does* need to do is find at least "good enough" answers to the three identity dilemmas a transitioning partner presents one with: Who does that make him? Who does that make me? And who does that make us? The answers, not surprisingly, differ for each woman and each couple. But again, there are some identifiable patterns.

DISCOVERING WHAT KIND OF MAN HE IS

One of the most helpful breakthroughs I had in coming to terms with Marcelle's desire to transition was the realization that when I imagined Marcelle as a man, I no longer saw Marcelle. What I saw instead was a generic man, and not a very nice one at that. Whatever qualities I knew my long-term lover had no longer existed in this stereotypical man, as though Marcelle's personality and values were suddenly going to cede the premises to the ghost of John Wayne.

Other women reach similar conclusions, particularly as transition progresses and they discover testosterone does not automatically create monsters. Instead of their lover adopting all the negative aspects of masculinity, many are pleased to discover he's becoming a calmer and happier version of the person they already loved. "My lover will not BECOME anything different than what and who she has been and he is. I know there will be

³ Holly Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*, Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 363.

changes, but he will never be a "MAN," he will just be [his name], with a body he loves and struts around in." Others remember or discover that they have some power over what behavior gets manifested around them: "As I am a radical feminist, I have made it very clear what attitudes I will NOT accept from my lover, nor from our son." Still others come to realize that the problem isn't gender (or, more accurately, the masculine gender), it's plain old power and control: "Anyone can have power and control issues," pointed out one woman. "Keeping men out of your life is no guarantee you can escape that."

FINDING YOUR OWN NAME

Some lesbian-identified partners retain their lesbian label despite being partnered with a transsexual man. These women frequently explain their stance by pointing out that if their relationship broke up, they would only date women, or by asserting that the source of a person's identity springs from within, not from hir lover's body.

More often, however, previously lesbian-identified partners adopt a middle ground that more comfortably accommodates a male partner. Bisexual, queer, and femme are the most popular self-identifications, reflecting a desire to be seen as anything but straight. Indeed, making a commitment not to fall into a straight stereotype is often a part of this identity resolution: "It's up to me to make intelligent choices and make sure I don't become Mrs. Cleaver!" one woman explained. Others aren't so worried: "I think being queer is like losing your virginity. Once you have left the straight world, you can't go back." Sometimes FTM partners also help in this effort to find and stay on queer land. "[My partner] adamantly maintains he is not a straight man -- he's in a relationship with a femme, not with a straight woman."

MAKING YOUR OWN COMMUNITY

Of course, identity is closely aligned with community, and finding a comfortable community post-transition is a challenge. Because it's unlikely that a previously lesbian-identified partner who is happy to blend into a heterosexual world will blow her cover by getting involved in an FTM SO support group, we have no idea how many partners find happiness in hetero land. Some, though, relish being the fox in the hen house: "For me, being queer in a straight world is a wonderful thing!"

Some women find an accepting community among bisexuals: "The bisexual community is far more understanding and much more open-minded than the lesbian community." Others are lucky enough to live where an integrated "queer" community exists. Even then, however, some of these women worry about the stability of the welcome mat on which they stand: "I'm just glad I do so much work in the queer community; hopefully no one would dare kick me out entirely." Those blessed with online access can find a vibrant FTM SO community there.

But finding a community that fully embraces *both* the FTM and his female lover is difficult, and that loss of a place where both partners are equally welcome can be a bitter pill to swallow. "I still suffer from these occasional bouts of fear and sadness about him not being a dyke anymore," one woman admitted. Some couples become determined to make the community they want: "As far as finding space for ourselves, we both do a lot of public speaking on the matter, and I am convinced we just have to make space by educating." Another answered, "How do you find space together? You do what other groups (i.e., gay, lesbian, black, hispanic, feminist, etc.) have done: you create it." And progress is being made. The second-largest U.S. "FTM"

organization, American Boyz, actually bills itself as an "FTM and SOFFA (significant others, friends, family and allies) organization." It has been growing exponentially in part because it provides conferences and support groups where partners are as welcome (and as liable to be leaders) as their FTM lovers.⁴

MOVING BEYOND

Becoming an FTM requires negotiating body changes, role changes, and changes in how others view you. The lesbian-identified partners of FTMs endure the same changes. They must live with the altering of a body they may have much loved. They must cope with their lover's mood swings and the other physical and emotional changes testosterone brings. They must adjust to the new ways people react to their partners, and to the assumptions that are made about *them* now that they appear straight. They must learn how to defend their lesbian identity in a way they never imagined, or abandon that identity and find (or create) a new one.

For most FTMs, the exhausting and challenging process of transition nevertheless represents the culmination of a long-held dream or the righting of a very old wrong. Lesbian partners, by contrast, are generally happy with their sense of themselves in the world pre-transition; the adaptations they must make are not ones that, left to their own devices, they would have sought out. Yet these unexpected challenges can bring rich rewards. One woman looked back on her process and wrote:

"I want to affirm both the hardships that can be oh so real *and* the joys that can come from growing through the changes together as my partner and I were ultimately able to do. A year ago I could not have said this. My heart felt torn apart. I could not believe it would be possible to get to the other side of the upheaval in our lives. I could not fathom loving my lover in a male form. Well it's been a long year. In retrospect, a really rich year, full of surprises. I feel so lucky to have a lover who was willing to hang in and honor my feelings even when they were on the other side of the universe from his. I feel incredibly impressed with *myself* both for honoring my process and being able to honor his. So much of the time it did not feel at all like we were doing it together, but now I see that we did and I am in awe. I know that some partners need to leave their relationship in order to take best care of themselves. I am personally glad that I stayed in mine. We have a great love and that's a treasure I want to keep."

Others say that living through a partner's transition from female to male has deepened their cultural and political understandings and commitments in ways they could have never imagined. One said, "I have been a fairly hardcore feminist for years, very 'anti-patriarchy' and all that good stuff, but the more I learn about gay, lesbian, and transgender relationships, the more I realize that negative aspects in our culture's structure of relationships are about power and dominance rather than gender per se. I don't think I can ever think about gender in the same way again. Or love, for that matter." Another woman summed it up beautifully: "I believe that our being out here doing this soul-, mind- and heart-searching work serves to bring another important dimension of diversity to the lesbigaytrans world. After all, isn't questioning and redefining our world what growth and life is all about?"

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⁴ As of August 2002, AmBoyz was in reorganization and rumors were that it was dropping its focus on SOFFAs.