

# What Happened to the T in LGBT?

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In this workshop I would like to briefly talk about my own experiences of self-identifying as a “trans guy” and share transgender inclusive organizing experiences from Turkish LGBT movement.

The popular analogy often provided while describing the transgender phenomena is “a man imprisoned in a woman’s body” or “a woman imprisoned in a man’s body”. I find this line of analogy quite unfortunate because I think it creates some sort of superficial dichotomy between our “bodies” and “selves” that causes many trans folks to get alienated from their own bodies. For me, it wasn’t until I realized that I was actually trapped in a heteronormative society which does not accommodate “gender diversity” that I felt no longer trapped in my own body. Today I don’t see myself as “a man living in a woman’s body”, I rather see myself as a trans person living in a trans body.

When describing the transgender phenomenon or talking about trans issues, the “body”, by which I mean a “problematicized body” comes up a lot. For example, by definition transgender people are seen as people who have major conflicts with their bodies. However, I would like to suggest that it is not the trans folk, but the heteronormative hegemony that has major conflicts with trans bodies<sup>1</sup>. After all, it is the hegemony that dictates us what a man and a woman should look like, and propagates the norms of binary gender system. By binary gender system, I mean a system of only two acknowledged genders, in which you can either be a “man” or a “woman”, there is no room for other shades of gender; and trans and intersexed folks are always pushed to choose either or. At this point I’d like to make it clear that by no means I am suggesting that a trans person cannot or should not identify simply as a “man” or a “woman”, all I am saying is that the spectrum of gender identification among transgender people is certainly inclusive but also larger than those two options, which in my opinion makes the world a bigger and gayer place ☺

I am a transgender person and I have a certain way of perceiving myself and my body; of course another transgender person may have a vastly different one. My perception factors in the clothes I choose, the way I carry myself, and the personal boundaries that I put around my body. If you think about it, this kind of holds true for everyone. I am sure many of you, trans or non-trans, favor certain clothes, accessories, posture, etc over others because it puts a particular emphasis on your body. And that doesn’t even have to be the same over the years. To a certain extent gender is intertwined with self expression and it can too be dynamic, and there is no harm in that. Since “gender” is so

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<sup>1</sup> Heteronormative hegemony deliberately turns our bodies against us, and uses the body as a proof to discredit our self-identified gender in the most antagonizing ways. For example, I don’t know a single transgender person who does not get overwhelming stares at various body-parts once their existence or non-existence is caught.

essentialized and is forced to be confined within rigid boundaries, it is hard for us to let ourselves move freely in that zone. Feminist women were the first to study gender and they pointed out that “essentialized” gender roles legitimized patriarchal oppression of women. In extrapolation, transgender struggle points out that “essentialized” gender categories<sup>2</sup> not only legitimize the oppression of transgender community but also feed into the construction and reproduction of “essentialized” gender roles and dynamics.

For a long time, I struggled about being trans. I didn't even feel comfortable with the term because A. it was very stigmatized, and B. I felt like it implicated some sort of fakeness or incompleteness. At that point, I thought a person could be either a man or a woman, and ‘trans’ meant a mere approximation or some sort of transformational journey to one of those “natural” gender destinations. So it was hard for me to associate with it because I didn't feel like I was on the move, I felt rather at home and I didn't feel any less of a man or boy than any of my non-trans counterparts. My only problem was that some people around me didn't seem to understand my way of existence and I didn't have the language or the confidence to explain it in detail.

When you fixate “man” and “woman” as the only two possible gender categories, transness often gets rendered as a limbo and the trans folk as struggling to escape his or her ill destiny. Obviously there are many ways to come in terms with one's gender and sexuality. In my experience, feminism and critical theory helped me understand certain mechanisms of oppression and helped me realize that the world could be constructed in different ways. I started feeling good in my skin because all of a sudden I stopped thinking that I was a mistake of god, or a freak of nature, or a man waiting to be freed from some prison, instead I realized that I was just who I was and I felt like my transness gave me inspiration and courage to resist against “numbing and hegemonic sameness of the universal way of life”<sup>3</sup>. And that is the story that got me into queer politics and how I decided to join the Turkish queer movement.

My organization Lambdistanbul is an LGBT solidarity organization in Istanbul, we are a grassroots, anti-hierarchical, volunteer-based organization. Lambda works in commissions, there are about ten active commissions but that number changes based on needs and member priorities. Some example commissions that I can think of right now include the commission for law, media relations, international relations, social activities and events, trans initiative, the pride commission, queer women's group, Lambda performance group (LPG), art collective, commission that coordinates the constitution campaign and the

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<sup>2</sup> . Anne Fausto-Sterling's article called “The Five Sexes” can be an interesting gateway to see biology as a political discourse as it talks about how patriarchal mechanisms (in this case medicine) construct biological sex, something seemingly so tangible.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, *It's all in the Family: Biological Kinship Categories in the Twentieth-Century United States*,

campaign against court case, women's group, and a very new initiative, the trans boys' initiative that we started about two months ago.

When I came to Lambda, I was the only FTM. There were bi-weekly trans meetings but it was only for Male to Female sex worker friends. MTF community in Turkey is forced to do sex work because they often don't have an alternative. There are no anti-discriminatory laws at work place and employers are very prejudiced against the community so they wouldn't hire them, as a matter of fact, most of them lose their jobs when they decided to come out as trans. Sex work is not illegal in Turkey but is still very problematic, bureaucracy is horrible, regulations are incompetent, and there is no guaranteed social security or even personal safety; so people (especially the MTF sex workers) are pretty much forced to work underground and without papers. There are also a lot of human rights violations coming directly from the police forces, so there is pressing imminent issues that require organized action.

The organized resistance of the trans community, actually we can say the Turkish LGBT community, started in late 80s, early 90s when big gentrification projects took start in Istanbul. The first groups to be kicked out of neighborhoods were of course the trans women because the residents could easily be manipulated and mobilized against the trans community around superficial morality discourses. Back then the transgender community put out fights and riots similar to stone wall and that was pretty much the start of a visible LGBT resistance in Turkey. Some feminist groups sided with the trans community and were outspoken about it in the media which was really helpful because trans women felt empowered and got engaged in politics. A lot of neighborhoods are still gentrified and gentrification is an ongoing process but at least Turkish LGBT groups started to be involved in organized action. There is constant fluctuation in terms of MTF sex workers active involvement in Lambda, but maybe I will leave the details for individual questions after the talk.

Lambda engages with trans women through outreach. We deliver condoms, zines, event invitations, etc to let them know that Lambdaistanbul wants to maintain close relations with the community and will provide full support should they decide to take organized action against human rights violations and police abuse. We have a human rights commission that actually documents these violations through interviews and makes them into annual reports and shares these reports with national and international human rights mechanisms. Again, I can provide more details if you guys want to know more about it after the talk.

Going back to the trans boys' initiative. I was the only Female to Male trans identified person at Lambda for about a year and a half. I immediately got involved in trans women's initiative and supported transgender resistance against the police abuse and HR violations. I also joined Lambda women's group. Lambda women's group is open to everyone who identify as woman or

who has women's experience. There were two trans women in the group when I joined and it went up to about seven women when we were most active. A few months ago two friends came out as trans guys and we formed the trans boys' initiative. Of course we are still involved in the women's group but we wanted to have some stand alone meetings to talk about trans boys' issues. Our first purpose was to have some solidarity and share our experiences; we also wanted to seek answers to the gender based questions in our minds; wanted to address the lack of trans guy visibility; wanted to address misogyny, machismo, transphobia and ignorance within and outside of the LGBT community; and we also wanted to identify problems that we can address through organized action.

Through panels we joined, the word of mouth, and fliers we distributed at Pride, we acquired four more guys and now we are seven. We have a yahoogle groups listserv and are thinking about advertising online (hint hint facebook) to attract more guys. Things take time but you have to be persistent.

In our experience if you want to be trans inclusive, you need to put effort into it. For example, it is very important not to just sit and wait for trans engagement but to actively seek out communities and let them know that they are wanted. Also, it is important to think about trans inclusive and trans-focused events and do them even before there is a strong transgender involvement. The trans focused events at pride attract so many new trans people into Lambda. It is the same with the women's group. We had weekly events and discussions, some of these events would be discussions about patriarchy and how it affects us, ways of resistance, etc. Broad enough topics to attract not only women identified women but also transsexuals and gender queers. Discussions particularly about "gender" can also attract people with diverse gender backgrounds.

Finally I would like to finish with some issues that we focus in trans guys' initiative. The three of us who started the initiative are all involved with feminist groups in Turkey. So we have political organizing experience both from the feminist and LGBT movements in Turkey. Actually, Turkish feminist movement and the LGBT movement have quite close ties and people who are a part of both make this bond even stronger. One issue on which we think about collaborating with feminists is changing the laws that regulate transitioning in Turkey. Currently the state regulated process of transitioning takes a really long time and has really problematic requirements such as the person should not be able to reproduce, or should not be married, etc etc. As I said we are quite a new group but in addition to struggle for trans people's right to safety, right to employment, and healthcare we would like to also advocate for transgender right to self identify.