

INTERSEX

their allies from the activist group Transsexual Menace to bolster their numbers and support them in their attempt to get the doctors to rethink their unnecessary interventions.

According to ISNA co-founder and professor of sociology Morgan Holmes, they were "asked" to wear Transsexual Menace shirts. "The message the medical establishment received was that there was a group of trans people ready to take them to account," says Holmes. "They missed that there were intersex people there to advocate for children's issues." Furthermore, when the docs took in the T-shirts reading "I'm a transsexual," nobody wanted to speak to them because of trans-phobia. The bungled opportunity led Holmes away from activism for years.

an issue that is widely misunderstood in both the gay and straight worlds. The most common misperception conflates trans and intersex. As transgender individuals have gained visibility, people have become less aware of the specificity of the intersex experience, Mbessakwini says. Being transgender is a feeling of a disconnect with one's assigned gender at birth. Some gender discourse fingers biology for this disconnect and mistakenly construes intersex as the cause. Even some trans folks claim an intersex condition as the reason for their minority gender status. In the film *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon Tina, a transgender female-to-male, tries to avoid being blamed for sexual "deviance" by alleging, "I'm a hermaphrodite—I can't choose."

that people choose to be trans, but they're certainly not having their bodies surgically changed shortly after birth to try to eliminate that trans-ness," Driver says. Intersex activists decry the decisions by their parents and the medical specialists to take away their right to consent to sex-assignment surgery. These surgeries, typically referred to as "genital mutilation," are considered harmful physically, emotionally, and sexually.

Many with intersex don't struggle with gender identity; their problems revolve around shame, secrecy, isolation, and sexual trauma at the hands of the medical establishment. Intersex activists emphasize these issues because they inform the specific needs of intersex people, needs often separate from those of the LGBT community. The thrust of the intersex movement is to end unnecessary genital surgery in infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Bodies Like Ours states that up to five times a day a child in the U.S. has "cosmetic" genital surgery.

But activists like Mbessakwini have more radical ambitions. She's interested in more than just eliminating harmful medical procedures: She wants to change society's gender constructs so as to acknowledge the intersex experience—in law and culture, on driver's licenses, passports, marriage certificates, and bathrooms signs. "All of it is constructed on ignoring the real truth that intersex has always existed," she says.

Whether adding I to LGBT is a humble first step or merely a politically correct gesture, the LGBT movement seems to have the back of their intersex brethren. At the Gender Identity Project at New York City's Lesbian and Gay Center, Program Director Carrie Davis received a call recently from a lesbian couple desperately seeking information on their intersex newborn. Davis set into motion a chain of peer support, putting them in touch with an adult intersex activist, parents of intersex children, and supportive doctors—possibly averting reassignment surgery.

"It was a defining moment. This is why we do this work; not because we believe in theory...but because we believe in lived bodies," Davis says. "This child isn't going to grow up without having given consent for what could have amounted to mutilation."

For activists like Driver, that's good news. Of course, all this progress hasn't changed her dating prospects overnight. But she knows she's part of the front line, the first wave, of an intersex future. ●

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Homophobic or trans-phobic backlash is cause for concern for some with intersex. As Holmes puts it, people are fearful that parents will think, *Why fix something and align yourself with the very people you've been trying to avoid having your kid become?*

Many intersex people believe adding an I to LGBT is like adding a D for diabetes. "Adding the 'I' implies that it's a behavior and it's not; [or] it implies that it's a gender identity and it's generally not," explains Driver, who says many of her peers identify as male or female according to the gender roles they were assigned at birth. In her view, intersex is a biological condition not unlike diabetes or asthma.

Others, such as Eli se Mbessakwini, an Australian filmmaker, take umbrage with the idea of intersex as a medical condition akin to an affliction. She's one of a few intersex advocates who claim the label as an identity rather than a condition. "The most striking thing for me is the pathologizing of people's bodies," Mbessakwini says. "So taking that term or label and using it as a gender identity or sex identity is taking a step away from being medicalized."

Mbessakwini believes that adding an I—empty gesture or not—will raise awareness of

Some people with intersex histories believe that their determined gender at birth was wrong and are moved to correct it by transitioning to the opposite sex. A few of these people identify as trans; most do not. Conversely, a minority of trans discover they're intersex but don't take it on as an identity. Neither intersex nor transgender are umbrella terms or subsets of one another.

Driver and Mbessakwini both identify as "queer," as do many others who are intersex, even without "same-sex" partners. They've been made to feel that they inhabit an extraordinary body, and therefore align themselves with other sexual minorities. Other intersex individuals don't feel that way at all. They think of themselves as sexually straight and don't have an experience of being outside the gender-binary paradigm.

Despite a shared history of homophobia and trans-phobia, there are defining differences that intersex activists vociferously work to preserve. One crucial divergence is the lack of self-determination. Intersex advocates see transgender individuals as having more control over their bodies—the sticky difference being the ability to decide for oneself as an LGBT adult versus being robbed of that choice as an intersex infant. "I'm not sure