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Eunuchs Abroad

Medieval, traditional, post-colonial and third-world societies treat overtly transgendered/transsexual (TG/TS) women in much the same way that they have always treated women and other deprived classes at the bottom of the social order. Even when such cultures were not politically or militarily colonised by western countries, the desire to imbibe western values often resulted in the repression or elimination of gender minorities.

In some countries, traditional gender minorities are remembered through word-of-mouth tradition, while in others they barely survived, perhaps 'underground' or in geographically remote areas. This is in stark contrast to history, where many non-western cultures have long recognised and accommodated eunuchs and transgendered people in a wide variety of ways.

However, in general, western society has proven to be much more accepting of eunuchs and transgendered people after the Middle Ages.

We can visualise the large variations in TG/TS life by making a base level comparison of the following acceptance parameters:

- (i) social responses to the conditions,

- (ii) the ease of access to transition services or Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS) and medical treatment,
- (iii) legal status before/after transition,
- (iv) degree of recognition as men or women after transition,
- (v) access to employment before, during and after transition,
- (vi) who pays for these services and treatments and
- (vii) variations in the freedom to 'start a new life'.

Based on the above, we come across a wide range of acceptance and fair treatment meted out to TG/TS people in various countries.

United States of America (USA)

By most measures, USA now is the country with the best opportunity in the world for TG/TS people. Here they are treated on par with normal gendered people. At present, transition expenses are rarely covered by health insurance and must be paid out-of-pocket by transitioners themselves. However, the wide range of good employment opportunities in USA provides transitioners with the means to support themselves and pay for expensive procedures before, during and after transition. Many companies even support 'on the job' TG/TS transitions.

Most states in USA now enable post-operative women to apply for and obtain revised birth certificates and other ID (identification documents) after TG/TS transition and have full legal rights as women, including the opportunity to marry men. All these things work to

the great advantage of transitioners. USA has also made rapid progress in formal civil rights for TG/TS people and they are protected by anti-discrimination legislation.



Amanda Simpson - believed to be the first transgender woman to be appointed to a senior government role. She is senior technical advisor at the Commerce Department in the Bureau of Industry of Security, USA

USA also has a long social tradition dating back to their frontier days of 'starting over again, somewhere else with someone else'. Family bonds may get severed and such people build 'extended families' among their friends at work and in their recreational activities. Unlike India, not feeling the constraints of a traditional society and being able to build lives far beyond their birth families and communities, people do not fear pulling up roots, moving and starting over.

American society, for the most part, is a friendly 'live and let live' one and transitioners are relatively free

from harassment. No other country provides such wonderful opportunities for TG/TS in the workplace and life in general and many post-operative TG/TS women can go on to have fine careers and lives.

Latin America

The ancient Mayan civilisation may have recognised a third gender. This can be noted in their androgynous Maize deity, masculine Moon goddess, iconography and inscriptions, where rulers embody or impersonate these deities. The Olmec, Aztec and Maya people understood 'more than two kinds of bodies and more than two kinds of gender'. It is suggested that the third gender could also include two-spirit individuals with specially assigned roles such as healers or diviners. Anthropologists generally agree that gender was a fluid potential, not a fixed category, before the Spaniards came to Mesoamerica.

Childhood training and ritual shaped but did not set adult gender, which could encompass a third gender and alternative sexualities as well as 'male' and 'female'. At the height of the Classic period, Mayan rulers presented themselves as embodying the entire range of gender possibilities, from male through female, by wearing blended costumes and playing male as well as female roles in state ceremonies. Many figures of Mesoamerican art are depicted with male genitalia and female breasts, while other figures in which chests and waists are exposed but no sexual characteristics (primary or secondary) are marked may represent a third sex, ambiguous gender or androgyny.

The advent of modern society after Spanish colonisation and influence brought attitudes that were more in conformity with those of Southern European countries or Roman Catholic Europe. Though not as liberal as western Europe, they are currently far more accepting than most countries in the rest of the world.

Thailand

Thailand may be the only country in Asia where eunuchs and TG/TS people are rarely discriminated against by normal gendered people. There, they are often perceived as helping the nation's economy which is mainly dependent on tourism, especially sex tourism. The sex trade in Thailand is widely known around the world as having large numbers of very beautiful 'she-males' and transwomen. Also, Thailand has a long tradition of 'lady-boys' or '*kathoey*' as bar girls and entertainers.

Many TG/TS girls there manage transition at a young age, eventually undergoing GRS, which is easily and inexpensively available. Although Thai society is tolerant of these 'lady-boys', they are unfortunately not considered women after their transition and cannot get updated IDs or working papers as women. Thus, a very large number of *kathoey* remain marginalised in jobs as bar-girls and prostitutes, even after becoming women.

Many post-operative girls in Thailand also try to find work or husbands in other countries, in order to escape from a life that is limited to sex work and entertainment. Some emigrate to countries such as

Germany, where they make wonderful wives and are fully accepted as women.

China

In Chinese history, the tension between eunuchs in the service of the emperor and virtuous Confucian officials is a familiar theme. Reality was not always that clear cut and there were instances of very capable eunuchs, who were valuable advisors to their emperor. In many cases, eunuchs were considered more reliable than the scholarly officials. Resistance to them from 'virtuous' officials often stemmed from jealousy on the part of the officials. Eunuchs represented the personal will of the Emperor, while the officials represented the alternative political will of the bureaucracy.

Court eunuchs in China reached the height of their political power during the Ming dynasty. Emperor Wanli employed over 200 eunuchs in the imperial court and had about 5,000 of them in official positions throughout the country. While the emperor was preoccupied with his beautiful concubines, powerful eunuchs embezzled huge fortunes. In the 1620s, a eunuch named Wei Zhongxian ruled China for all intents and purposes.

The demand for eunuchs was so high that the Forbidden City contained a special eunuch clinic, where candidates had their genitals removed while sitting on a special chair with a hole in it. Those who did not survive were carried away with their penises and testicles in a pouch for reunification in the afterlife.

China has recently begun quietly permitting transitions. Very few transitions are done there compared to the size of the population but such women are also permitted to marry men after their transition.

Japan

Japan is an intensely conformist society that strongly rejects those 'outside the norm'. This was reflected in their attitude until the advent of American influence. Subsequently, the attitude of the ruling class, as well as the general public towards eunuchs is changing. In this scenario, a few TG/TS women have undergone transitional surgery.

Transsexuals from Japan usually go to Thailand for their surgeries (due to the cost advantage) and take a chance on somehow being able to survive back home afterwards. Some highly successful, beautiful, post-operative girls are now influencing public opinion for the better in traditional Japanese society.

Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia

TG/TS women in these Muslim countries find themselves in situations similar to those in the countries of Catholic dominated Latin America. Many girls undertake TG/TS transitions. Although some may manage to obtain female hormones and feminise their bodies, few ever manage to complete a transition. However, those who do transition become identity-less and unemployable and are marginalised into living in urban slums. There they usually resort to sex work, street entertaining or begging to survive.

Pakistan & Bangladesh

Many eunuchs are found in the Muslim countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh, where the eunuch custom was inherited from undivided India long ago. The



United in 'sisterhood' - eunuchs from Pakistan

situation of eunuchs in these countries is somewhat similar to or worse than in India, with most eunuchs relegated to a marginalised existence as dancers, beggars and street prostitutes.

Saudi Arabia

It is said that in the Muslim world *mataf*, the circular inner area around the *Kaaba* was in the care of fifty black eunuchs, who also doubled as the mosque police. They were either Africans or of African origin and called *agha* or colloquially, *tawashi*. Their chief ranked directly below the *shaybi*. They wore distinctive clothes and were diligent in instantly removing any litter. If women became involved in any incident in the mosque or had

to be ejected, the *agha* could deal with them without impropriety and hence the rationale for their usefulness.

However, in modern times, the bleakest scenario for TG/TS people exists in the strict Islamic world, where any variation of sexual orientation or gender is treated with the utmost ostracism and cruelty. In these countries, gay men and lesbian women are routinely executed, simply for being gay or lesbian. As one can imagine, there is no hope whatsoever for TG/TS people in such countries. It is inconceivable that one could transition in such a repressive environment without risk to life and limb.

Iran

There are exceptions to the marginalisation and persecution of TG/TS people in the Islamic world. The most notable is Iran, which provides social and medical help for gender transitioners and state recognition of their new social gender. This practice has quietly expanded there in recent years, building on a favourable ruling years ago by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. However, same sex relationships are repressed in Iran and many young gay people have been executed there.

The Internet, Media and Migration

Every country has always put a different spin on how it treats TG/TS people and transitioners can often find special advantages in medical services, jobs or citizenship in countries other than their own. Every aspect of transition and post-transition life is affected by one's nationality and culture.

Different countries have divergent customs, social traditions, cultural taboos, legal rules and bureaucratic regulations regarding TG/TS conditions and transitions. One's nationality thus has a large effect on how difficult it is to complete a TG/TS transition, as also the degree to which a transitioner is accepted by society and can obtain opportunities for a fulfilling life after transition. Hence, transgenders from all over the world have often looked beyond their own country's borders when trying to escape the gender traps they find themselves in.

Fortunately, the internet is helping these people become more aware of the situation in countries other than their own. These contacts are helping many transgenders living where it is difficult or impossible to transition, to figure out ways to somehow escape the trap that they are in. Many transitioners study detailed country-to-country differences when seeking medical treatment, finding employment, seeking love partners and planning their long-term futures.

Many TG/TS women evaluate surgeons from all over the world before deciding on where to go for critical procedures such as GRS. Due to differences in the cost of quality medical care, especially the cost of surgery, many people in expensive countries such as USA and Japan prefer to go to countries such as Thailand for treatment.

Many TG/TS people attempt to emigrate from less tolerant countries to more supportive ones - such as from Latin America to Europe or USA. In USA, UK and

all other developed countries, a person cannot be denied an opportunity to work on grounds of gender. Laws protecting their rights are implemented and discrimination cannot take place. Transitioners get respectable jobs based on merit and they enjoy life like the mainstream.

The possibility of being able to undergo gender-changing transformation is now widely known about in India and exerts an incredibly powerful and mystical calling to all young transgenders. Recently, some eunuchs have begun interacting with western TG/TS women and are learning about western methods of gender transition. More eunuchs are likely to seek hormone therapy and even full gender changes in the future, if they can find ways to afford such treatment. This feminises them and makes them look more like women and enables them to be better accepted in society.

Discrimination on account of gender is not legal in India, yet it is predominant. One hopes that the improvements now being made in advanced countries e.g. USA, UK etc will provide a model for rapid improvement in countries like India as well.