

# *Working Model with Transgender People*

*Experience from an Islamic Secular  
Country between East and West*

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# Most of the studies with transgender people have been conducted in western cultured countries

It is one of the current issues whether the data collected from the Western societies can be universally acceptable.

In this presentation,

1. Information about the general attitude towards transgender people in Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country, will be given.
2. The model that is used to work with transgender people who live in Turkey and seek help to go under a sex reassignment surgery will be presented.

The decision to be transgender is based on the self-perception of the person about his/her own identity

- There are physical, medical, social and legal dimensions to sex transition.
- The decision to use hormones and have an irreversible surgery is made by the doctors according to medical laws.

- As a clinician, I will discuss especially the medical and psychological dimensions of this process. According to HBI GDA principles we assess and provide treatment and give certificate of approval for SRS to TG people.
- During the process of making this decision, it is essential to pay attention to distinguish people who have unrealistic expectations about the surgery and gay people who demand the surgery because of social pressure.

# TG people would like to let go of their sex of birth & change into the opposite sex

- **Transition** is not simple. Especially sex transition can never be an ordinary activity under any circumstances.
- Our experience has showed us that TG people need different levels of support to deal with the difficulties of the changing process.
- Besides, in a society where family bonds are very strong and heterosexual people constitute the majority, while trying to adopt their identity, transgender people also struggle to make their families accept this situation which is hard

- The families first need to resolve their negative feelings such as disappointment, guilt and anger, in order to accept their changing children.
- Most of the TG people who applied to our clinic were FTM, single, between 20-30 years old, still living with their families, having regular jobs such as doctors, teachers, factory workers, secretary..
- Very few of the married or divorced ones asked for SRS.

- TG people who consult us for surgery are encouraged to participate open groups that get together monthly.
- In these groups the main topics include family relationships, medical problems, partner relationships, work problems, financial issues, religious concerns, the TG image reflected in the media and homophobia.
- These groups that also serve as self-help groups, the process of self-acceptance and opening up is accelerated.

# In Turkey, family bonds are very strong and essential

- In our clinic, information and consultation oriented meetings for the families of transgender people are held twice a year.
- These sessions do not only create a relaxed and non-threatening environment for the families, but they also make the process of accepting their TG relative easier and they become less resistant to the idea of SRS.
- Furthermore, these groups provide the support that families need as they witness their relative's gender transition process.

- We believe that, the group experience is very helpful in the process of self-acceptance and to learn problem-solving, as it enables transgender people who hide their true identities in their daily lives all the time to get together with other people who go through the same things as they do.
- As I have a limited time, I would like to discuss the following subjects, which I have learned from the Turkish TG people.

# east and west are similar or different

- **Transphobia-Discrimination-**
- **Why most of the applicants are FTM?**
- **Financial problems**
- **Family Matters**
- **Identity Cards**
- **Media presentation**
- **Religion**
- **Legal problems**
- **Education**

# Transphobia-Discrimination

- In Iran, a neighboring muslim country to Turkey, being gay is a crime punished with death penalty. Still, we know that in Iran there are places where TG operations are conducted.
- Also in Turkey, there are gay people who go under the surgery, even if in lesser amounts.
- These demands may have various reasons

# Homophobia & SRS

- Homophobia sometimes happens to be a reason for SRS. In Turkey, homophobia is much stronger than transphobia. Moreover, surgeons who conduct surgery without the medical report usually demand unjust prices and be insufficient.
- This group of people who go under the surgery consists of sex workers and people from low SES.

## ***Why most of the applicants are FTM?***

- In Turkey, MTF people are well known. They have certain places where they can meet. They can exchange information about hormones and surgical interventions.
- There is not a similar environment for FTM people. Also, there is a lack of capable surgeons who can conduct such a complicated surgery. This group is anxious about the results of their more complicated surgery.

- Their need of support is different. They still keep in touch with us even after they get their medical report and go under the surgery.
- There are authors who suggest that demand for FTM surgery is very little due to its difficulty and high expense as well as little knowledge about its presence.

# Financial problems

- Today in Turkey, public hospitals do not serve TG people.
- TG surgeries are classified as aesthetic surgery,
- They are not under insurance coverage
- TG people have to pay for it themselves.

# Family Matters

they may come with their families

- These people aren't adolescents; they are about 25-30 years old.
- The Turkish family structure attaches enormous social value to children, in particular to male children.
- The family 'owns' the sexuality of its unmarried daughters and controls the sexual desires of its sons. Indeed, the family has a well developed gender hierarchy with codes of behavior for its male and female members.
- Male children are expected to provide protection and material support to their parents.

- On discovering that their child is TG, parents experience an 'injury' to their honor and social status in society.
- The relatives of these people, who disturb social norms and are disapproved by society, are generally ignorant about the subject and unable to provide support.

- While an increasing number of parents are acknowledging their child's gender struggle, most TGs keep their gender issues secret until they cannot hold them back any longer.
- In our study family members reported that they first noticed signals of gender identity differences mostly in puberty.
- But neglect it. So, they mostly tried to conceal the situation from their immediate environment and did not inform even their closest relatives.

# Socioeconomic Status

- It is hard to make generalizations since we work with a limited population, but still families from low SES show less reaction since they see the situation as a medical condition that cannot be changed.
- Middle class families tend to be more resistant towards the situation of their children.
- It was observed that mothers trying to accept their children's sexual identity and who were developed depressive disorders, who attempted to commit suicide and who actually committed suicide were from the middle class.

# Identity Cards

- In Turkey one's documented identity matters a great deal.
- Everybody needs to show their identity cards when asked. Identity cards are designed in different colors for females and males.
- So, by presenting an identity card to an official, biological gender status is also indicated. One can run into such difficulties during his/her daily life such as in night clubs or during traveling for banking processes.

- Kandiyoti (1998) in her article “Pink Card Blues” wrote that “In Turkey one’s documented identity matters a great deal. A lot of black humor revolves around tales of mistaken / misconducted identity.
- However, the acquisition of a pink identity card which is, for the most part, a routine and uneventful matter, provides the legal affirmation of their new identity as women” (Kandiyoti1998)

# Media presentation

- Another problem families face is the representation of transgender issues in the media.
- In 1970's Turkey learned about TG through a TV show. A well-known plastic surgeon conducted operations on people who were being psychologically tested by a well-known psychiatrist. These surgeries were only conducted to MTF people.

# mistake

- A HS person who regretted having gone under the surgery had threatened the doctors by killing them for having operated on him.
- The surgeon and the person who had been operated were brought together on a live program on TV, and it was exhibited what a serious mistake had been done.

After this incident, the well-known surgeon was excluded by his prestigious colleagues for almost 15 years

- The same surgeon showed up in another TV show in 2000's and declared that there is no such thing as TG, that they are mentally ill and what he did in the past was a mistake.
- After this statement, number of his nonTG clients and his credit in the university both has increased.

- In media TG people are generally depicted as prostitutes or low class entertainers. Indeed because TG –TV individuals are such a cultural anomaly their behavior is always depicted in a bawdy and over sexualized manner. In particular the focus of the media is generally on men who have become women and thus their effeminate behavior is treated with scorn and mockery.
- “Dönme” is a special slang term describing a male to female transsexual who has not had a SRS yet. It is also used as a cussword.

# Religion

- In fact in Islam, like in other monotheistic religions, all kinds of sexuality other than heterosexuality are considered shameful and sinful.
- The religious TG people, practice religion according to the gender they would like to change into.
- Gay people who have strong religious beliefs and feel guilty for their different identity are told by religious authorities that if they live a monogamous life after the surgery, then it is not a sin.

- An FTM person who was very religious and also had a very religious family, dressed like a man and lived like a man to the extent his family let him.
- But because of his faith, (s)he put on a head scarf as well. After coming to the support group for 4 months, (s)he was able to take the head scarf off only in the group

# Legal problems

- The new TCC (2002) came to force. It regulates the pre-conditions for the surgery and the procedure for getting a court authorization to be operated, as well as the procedure for entering the sex change into the birth register after the operation (Atamer 2005).
- The court will give its permission when the person must be infertile. The condition of infertility taking place in the law has a political meaning and makes thing harder.
- PAT and TMA have applied to the Ministry for this condition to be changed.

# Education:

- Medical doctors have very little information related to gender dysphoria.
- I teach medical students and doctors from related discipline to work and to care with a respectful manner towards TGs.

# Group psychotherapy doing groups for 18 years

- **Group work is important in working with TG people in Turkey and in places with a similar cultural structure.**
- **The reason for my belief is that two groups of TG people are visible in Turkey. Both groups are in Istanbul and consist only of MTF people.**
- **One of these groups consists of people from low SES and who work in the sex sector. The other one includes different minority groups & the political activists.**
- **Both of the groups are marginal & tend to get in trouble with the police**

- **The help seeking TG people who come to the clinic have not met other TG people.**
- **If they are aware of the visible TG groups mentioned above, they do not identify with them and avoid being regarded as similar to them. They find them dangerous.**
- **These people who are mostly FTM would like to ignore their biological sex completely & start a dissociated life**

- **This attitude which is a sign of denial of their past is a product of their transphobia.**
- **They can break their isolation and socialize by meeting other TG people in the group to whom they feel close to and by expressing themselves in the group therapy.**
- **Consequently, the groups provide a special milieu that can function as a self-help group as well and help them accept their own identities easier.**

# conclusion

- I met F. Pfefflin in 1980 and he introduced me to H. Benjamin Principles. Since 1980, I have based my work on these principles. This guide helps me a lot through my decision making process as well as through defending my final reports to my colleagues.