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The Pregnant Man: An Oxymoron?

The Unique Issues Faced by Pregnant F.T.M.s

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Abstract

The desire to found a family is a gender neutral one. Pregnancy does not fall into this category - in our culture it is considered to be an exclusively female activity.

This study focuses on female-to-male transsexuals (F.T.M.) who chose to bear a child, while being conscious of their transsexual male identity, and who therefore transitioned shortly afterwards.

Problems this group has to face include: finding a supportive environment, defining the individual perception of masculine identity and handling the organisational aspects of transitioning.

These consist in dealing with therapists and or medical caregivers who are required to write or approve the necessary referrals for name change, hormones or surgeries. Additionally meeting the standards legally required for a name/gender change can be complicated as those frequently request permanent sterilisation or a non-marital status.

Several F.T.M.s who transitioned either during or after pregnancy (maximum three years afterwards) have been interviewed, particularly in respect to the response of their social environment. The request of permanent sterility for F.T.M.s who wish to change their gender legally is discussed from a feminist and human rights perspective and from the male self-perception of the F.T.M.s involved in the study.

Introduction

The biological characteristic which separates females from males has been defined as the ability to produce eggs in an ovary and so mothers have been the stereotype for femaleness in our culture (Clover, 1986).

Potency, the ability to sire own biological offspring is however a prominent characteristic of a man in many, especially traditional societies. Female to male transsexuals (F.T.M.) are caught in a catch-22 situation: if they become pregnant society might perceive them as female, if they opt against a pregnancy they won't become fathers of own biological offspring - both may lead to psychological suffering.

Feminists have often regarded F.T.M. transsexuals with suspicion as going over to the enemy (Feinberg, 1996: 100; Queen 1994) and threatening the concept that gender is a social patriarchal construct (Butler, 1991). In claiming the right to have their own biological children and still being determined to live in all purposes as a man, the pregnant F.T.M. could be seen as a special threat to feminism. The essence of his decision would, however, be to claim the right of self-responsibility over his own body, a goal which has been a traditional feminist one, especially regarding the difficult moral question of abortion.

As there is also a strong link between feminism and lesbianism, trans-activists who struggle to provide a better legal recognition of transsexual families could become worthwhile allies as for those who try to improve the legal situation for gay and lesbian couples.

The International Bill of Gender Rights (I.G.B.R.) which was accepted as a resolution at the International Conference of Transgender Law and Policy can be regarded as a political manifest of the transgender liberation movement.

It states:

The right to conceive, bear, or adopt children, the right to nurture and have custody of children and to exercise parental capacity ... Therefore individuals shall not be denied the right to conceive, bear, or adopt children, nor to nurture and have custody of children, nor to exercise parental capacity with respect to children, natural or adopted, on the basis of their own, their partner's, or their children's chromosomal sex,

Western's society's view that pregnancy is an activity reserved exclusively for women is also mirrored in the jurisdiction of several countries including Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and some North American States. (McMullen and Whittle, 1994) For example the German legislation "Transsexuellen Gesetz" (T.S.G.) provides a "minor" solution the "name change" and a "major" solution "a change of sex/gender designation".

Parenting options and the right to marry are restricted by this law as long as the F.T.M., desires a gender appropriate male name. After birth of a child or a marriage, the name change is automatically revoked.

The possibility of a pregnant F.T.M. is covered, however, as the name change stays valid, when the child is born within 302 days after the name change has become legal i.e. has been legally conceived prior the name change. The option of transitioning and having biological children of his own is therefore strongly restricted once the F.T.M. has started to live in the male role. Further the law requires strong evidence of male gender-identity to grant the continuance of the male name in a second move.

Additionally the law requires "a permanent inability to reproduce" in order to grant a transsexual citizen a legal gender change. (T.S.G. (1980), Second Section, SS 8, 1 (iii)).

Only this status enables a F.T.M. to marry, as once his name change is legal, marriage (to a man) in contrast would permanently revoke the name change, while a marriage to a woman would be impossible due to his still female gender status (T.S.G. 1980, first section, SS 7). An eventually existing marriage with a male partner has to be divorced prior the gender change.

German Law (B.H.G., 14.12.1994 FamRZ95, 344) defines a marriage as a contract between a man and a woman. A change in the T.S.G. would however imply that also relationships between two men would be recognised as eligible for marriage. The existing policy, however, is in contradiction with the German constitution, which guarantees "protection of the family" by the state (Art. 6, sections 1, 2 and 3) as in the cases of relationships between F.T.M. the state is not recognising an existing family and discriminating against it on the basis of gender.

Gay F.T.M.s are prevented to marry or maintain a marriage to the father of their mutual offspring. This problem may have been overlooked when this law and similar ones were issued, as sparse scientific evidence about such individuals existed.

No study has previously investigated if F.T.M. could willingly become biological parents, while being conscious of their transgender identity.

Until now only few studies have been dealt with F.T.M. who have had children. Green et al. (1978) have conducted a study about nine F.T.M. who had raised their own or the spouse's children, The study concentrated however mainly on the psychological impact a parent's transsexuality might have on the children. Devor (1998: 379, 386) mentions in her extensive case study of forty-five F.T.M., two participants who consider to combine parenthood of a biological child and transitioning, but does not go into any detail except citing that one of those individuals had already a child before and had self-identified as a "pregnant man".

Other participants of that study are briefly described as being F.T.M. and biological parents, who had their children prior transitioning, however their identity as a transgendered parent is not investigated. Most other research has been more ethnologically founded and has mainly dealt with non-western cultures where other categories for a socio-cultural gender change from female-to-male apply.

Certain native American cultures have had the system of a berdache, which enabled in certain cases that a female born person could live in a male or cross-gender role (Spier, 1930). This could also be combined with the option to raise own offspring (Feinberg, 1996: 27).

Contacts to F.T.M. transsexuals were established using e-mail via the Internet or at F.T.M. conferences. Notes were taken during the oral interviews, when questions arose later they were clarified using email correspondence.

Two other F.T.M. were contacted exclusively over the Internet, as they belonged to a F.T.M. mailing list and were willing to engage in a longer e-mail conversation. Several F.T.M. who were not willing to give enough information were excluded. All names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

Nine F.T.M. transsexuals were included in this study.

Six (Al, Ben, Chris, Del, Eric, Matt) met the criteria to have had biological children, while being aware of their male gender identification and transitioning in the time-frame of three years after the birth of the last one.

The beginning of transition is defined as the decision of the F.T.M. to live eventually as a man and his start of either cross living, hormone therapy or transition related counselling.

Another three F.T.M. (Leif, Hal, Ian) who transitioned later (6-8 years after the pregnancy) were included in the survey as a comparison to the first group.

Seven (Al, Ben, Chris, Del, Leif, Hal, Ian) of the F.T.M. became pregnant by having intercourse with a male partner, in five cases the F.T.M.s were married (Al, Ben, Leif, Hal, Ian).

In two cases (Eric, Matt) the pregnancies were scheduled in a pre-planned time-frame and the child was conceived by donor insemination in order to have a biological child before transitioning. In those two cases and in one of the above (Chris) the F.T.M.s

were actually transitioning while being pregnant.

All participants were transitioning at the time the study was conducted.

Summary

As this study shows, in certain cases pregnancy might be a solution for a F.T.M. to fulfil his wish to found a family. While direct transition related anxieties were not present during the pregnancies of F.T.M. who transitioned later, the feelings directly concerning the pregnancy did not differ in their variations if compared to the group who transitioned earlier.

Both a positive and rational relationship towards the body and a supportive environment helped to reduce pregnancy related stress.

Medical and psychological caregivers as well as the state would have to change present restrictions to enable individuals with that wish to do so, in order to increase their life quality.

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