

Taboo – National Geographic Series

Episode: Sexuality

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Example 1: Gender Identity: “Sworn Virgins” in Albania

Described as a traditional farming patriarchal society, in the last 20 years [since the fall of the USSR] women have gained many rights in the modern cities with independence. However, in the countryside where life didn’t change noticeably between political regimes, the old traditions and rituals remain. One of those is the “sworn virgin.” This is not a woman who has a so-called “sex change” operation but a switch of gender identity that is an accepted practice within the society.

Why change your gender? One reason is that there are not enough males in the family to carry out the needed masculine gender roles. Another reason is for women who needed/ wanted to be more independent than the prescribed feminine gender roles in a patrilineal society would allow. In this traditional society, women had no rights and are ruled under a strict patrilineal law.

Pashka: Early difficulties in her life forced her to have to work at demeaning and low-paying jobs as a woman. By making the decision @ 35 years of age to become a “sworn virgin,” Pashka could and did take jobs that allowed her to care for her father’s mother and brother. Although she is not particularly happy about the life-long commitment and advised any woman to think it through very thoroughly, she stuck with her decision. Is Pashka a “lesbian”? Not in the ways that we think of that term and role in the West. She is a literal, if not an actual, man.

Lula: In another village, we find Lula. She is the 9th of 11 children with only one brother. She states that she became a “sworn virgin” because she felt more like a boy. This is a story that many in the West can understand. At 15, she took a motor mechanic course and took on being a “sworn virgin” early. She had to move completely from one gender to another. In every way, to her community, she is seen as a man. She like being a “sworn virgin” because she is freer than the women. In these communities/societies, gender roles are strictly segregated. Because the “sworn virgin” is a literal man, she has higher prestige than any woman in her community.

Note: The people of the large cities that the Taboo camera crew interviewed had never imagined that “sworn virgins” actually exist. I find that it is interesting that it is considered a myth to city dwellers. I also find it interesting that the “sworn virgins” apparently don’t take a masculine name but retain their birth name.

Example 2: Sex Identity: Transsexual in California

Here we see another form of switching. However, this time, the person in question is literally

going from male to female or changing his sexual identity to her sexual identity. Transsexual people are more rare in any given population than homosexuals. Homosexuals are statistically about 10% of any given population or 10 in every 100 people. Transsexuals are statistically only 1 in every 1000 people. That is only .001% of a given population. [According to the film.]

Dawn: born Don, was punished as an 8-year-old by *his* parents for playing with dolls. Getting hundreds of dollars of tonka trucks did not change his needs, but did send him deep in the “closet.” He joined the military, married, had 2 children. After struggling with *himself* for many years and taking out his unhappiness on his wife, he finally decided to become *she*. When we meet Dawn, *she* is going to Phuket, Thailand for sexual reassignment surgery. There the operation is a fraction of the cost does not require the years and years of psycho-therapy as it is here in the U.S. Dawn gets a complete reassignment, meaning, *his* male genitalia are removed and converted to *her* female genitalia complete with a vaginal canal built from a small section of sanitized bowel. This is no small surgery and is very complicated and hazardous. It is not a lightly made decision.

Example 3: 3rd Sex/Gender: Hijras in Delhi, India

While most Westerners can't or don't understand how this could be, the hijras of India represent yet another way of representing being a gendered person, neither man nor woman. This idea is not unique to the hijras, either. There are the berdache in the Plains tribes of American Indians as well as the mahu of Polynesia. Each of these represents the idea of a 3rd gender for those individuals – usually men – who are not comfortable in either male or female roles. For the hijras, this is specifically men. There are three types of males identified in the movie: a hermaphrodite, a homosexual, and an impotent man. Any of these will undergo castration upon making the decision of becoming a hijra. They are then called “eunuchs” which just means a castrated male.

Mona: Mona and her eunuch family, and all hijras, are accomplished performers. They dance and entertain at weddings and births. They are considered to have spiritual powers and the blessing of a hijra is sought out for fertility of the newlyweds and then again when a baby is born. While they are sought out, they are likewise reviled by many Indians who are afraid of the supernatural powers of a hijra. The hijra can also curse people. There is a certain ambivalence toward these people in modern Indian society and hijras are the targets of beatings and other forms of violence. Mona counsels men who are confused about their sex/gender identity. She is also building a sanctuary for other hijras, especially ones like herself, growing old without family support in a rapidly changing society.

For more on the hijras and 3rd gender, refer to your textbook in Chapter 9: Gender.