

The importance of Intersex Awareness Day

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Intersex flag

Today is Intersex Awareness Day, an occasion that is important to inform the public about the issues facing intersex people.

Intersex is a term applied to human beings whose biological sex cannot be classified as clearly male or female. An intersex person may have the biological attributes of both sexes or lack some of the biological attributes considered necessary to be defined as one or the other sex.

Intersex is always congenital and can originate from genetic, chromosomal or hormonal variations. It may be a combination of all three elements. Environmental influences such as endocrine disruptors can also play a role in some intersex differences. Intersex people represent a significant percentage of the global population, from 1.7% ([Anne Fausto-Sterling](#), sexologist, 2000) to 4% (various authors). It is often the case that the I of the LGBTI community gets ignored, miscategorised and misunderstood.

Worse still, intersex people are often denied even the basic right to self-definition, information, and knowledge and often may be forced to undergo medical and psychological procedures that damage and traumatise them for life.

It's also important to note that intersex can be diagnosed at any time from birth to adulthood, and it has been known for people to live their whole lives without even knowing, or being told of their intersex status.

Another very important issue is the prejudice, misconception and their disastrous consequences on intersex people. As Morgan Carpenter from the Organisation Intersex International (OII) [eloquently explains](#): "We face a range of health and human rights issues — and deep-seated stigma — caught between two contrasting visions of who and how we should be."

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“On the one hand, this includes medical interventions in infancy and childhood that are explicitly intended to make intersex bodies conform to social norms for a specific sex or gender. On the other hand, people with intersex variations increasingly face misgendering, through social expectations to identify as a third gender or sex, to challenge or transgress gender norms.

“Neither approach lets us truly make our own choices.”

Intersex infants, children and even adults endure non-consensual surgical and hormonal interventions to fit into a more socially acceptable embodiment of being male or female. This may be at the behest of their parents, and/or clinical pressure toward the parents. This continues despite increasing evidence that shows such an approach often damages the person physically and psychologically for life.

Furthermore These interventions may sterilise an individual, often leaves deep scarring, and a loss of sensate experience. Adults, including women athletes, have also been subjects of such treatment; one such Indian athlete, Dutee Chand, has been [deselected recently](#) from the Commonwealth Games, and was unaware of herself possibly [being intersex](#) and was shockingly told, outed by the press who also informed her of disqualification.

In most countries being intersex is not seen as a natural attribute, rather than an “aberration” which justifies the procedures discussed above. In short, the I of LGBTI isn’t recognised as a human right at all, unlike sexuality and gender identity.

There is some movement from a number of international and national bodies recognising intersex issues as human rights and the above practices as human rights abuses, but this has been still very limited in the UK.

Most commonly, even amongst members of the LGBTI community, intersex people are incorrectly assumed to identify as transgender sometimes rejected as gay or lesbian, labeled as hermaphrodites, or dismissed as abnormal, or as examples of gender gone wrong. None of these are accurate, and all are deeply pejorative attitudes held about intersex people. Encountering these opinions can be deeply traumatising for intersex people, and can add to their feelings of isolation.

These are some of the many reasons why Intersex Awareness Day is such an important event, as means of grass-roots action to end shame, secrecy and social prejudice.

It is also important platform for intersex people to call for an end to surgeries, medical and psychological pathologising of intersex people, trying to coerce them to become “normal”.



It also a chance to demand the same status and respect for human rights accorded to all others to be equally accorded to intersex people, including the right for information that is often denied.

Most of all it is about accepting intersex people as who they are, not as who others think they should be.

From an LGBTI perspective the community should be standing united demanding social justice for intersex people and an end to misgendering.

Intersex people have as many gender identities as non-affected people; most being quite content to identify as men and women. Nevertheless it is an important part of intersex advocacy to counter the insistence by some to misgender intersex people.

Some intersex people do not like being gendered at all.

This is why it is important to have Intersex Awareness Day; intersex people should be embraced as who they are rather than treating them as they are some descriptive illustration of a non-binary gender identity.

Rather, intersex people should be understood in their own definitions, as Carpenter puts it: "a form of bodily diversity."

Between 26 October and 8 November, intersex organisations try to bring attention to the challenges intersex individuals face, culminating in the **Intersex Day of Remembrance** on the birthday of Herculine Barbin, also sometimes known as **Intersex Solidarity Day**. This year the Equality Network and Scottish Transgender Alliance will host a gathering of intersex people from across the UK for the Trans & Intersex Conference of the Isles right in the middle of the Intersex Awareness Fortnight.

In Scotland, Intersex Awareness Day has been highlighted in [the Scotsman](#), where Nathan Gale, of The Scottish Transgender Alliance called for legislation and public attitudes to be changed to improve rights for transgender and intersex people.

Gale wrote that: "Current legislation does not count intersex people – those who are born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male – in existing discrimination laws, meaning they can face exclusion in the workplace without any legal recourse.

"In 2014, equality under the law should be a minimum standard for all citizens but for trans and intersex people we still haven't achieved it. We also have much further to go to ensure that people no longer experience prejudice and discrimination in their day-to-day lives.

"We cannot truly say that Scotland stands for equality while trans and intersex people are still unable to access basic services that meet their needs, or walk down the street without fear of getting abused."

James Morton, Scottish Transgender Alliance Manager, told KaleidoScot: "At our Conference next week we will be launching the Equal Recognition campaign for trans and intersex rights. Just as trans and intersex people have helped fight for LGB equality, we now need LGB people to join with us to support this campaign. Together as an LGBTI movement, we can win protection for intersex children from non-consensual genital surgeries and we can change the law to ensure all trans and intersex people are legally recognised and respected, whether they identify as men, as women or as non-binary people."

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "The Scottish Government is fully committed to equality for transgender and intersex people and added the 'I' to LGBTI earlier this year as a visible symbol of that. We are working closely with partners such as the Scottish Transgender Alliance (STA) to further develop our understanding of intersex issues and learn from international best practice. The next phase of our 'Scotland believes in equality' campaign will include a focus on LGBTI equality."