

Spouse Reactions to Transsexuality

Zoë Kirk-Robinson

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intersex and genderqueer information and support network.
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Survey commissioned for T-Vox.org by Zoë Kirk-Robinson and made open to all.

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Introduction

Coming out as transsexual to loved ones is a harrowing experience for many. It's often the case that the person coming out will not be entirely certain of how their loved ones will react to the news but, at the same time, there is an overwhelming need to inform them of the situation because living in secret has become unbearable.

Many people will have known there was something their partner was hiding from them for a long time. They probably did not know it was transsexuality however; which can lead to a great deal of problems.

The purpose of this report is to gain some insight into how the partners and spouses of transsexual people have reacted to the news that their partner is transsexual. This is necessary because although the British government is currently intent on allowing spouses to effectively block applications for gender recognition while they are still married to their transsexual partner, there is no independent data to support or refute the need for this "spousal veto".

The Current Situation

Under current legislation, a transsexual person wishing to transition (the process of moving from living as one gender to living as another) is not required to inform anyone of their intention to do so (although informing employers prior to turning up in a new gender is recommended).

In order to obtain a Gender Recognition Certificate (which allows birth certificates to be reissued in the transsexual person's acquired sex), a person must be at least 18 years old and have a letter from a psychiatrist confirming a diagnosis of "gender dysphoria". They must have lived as their acquired gender for at least two years and must present a statutory declaration to the Gender Recognition Panel stating their intent to live in their acquired gender for the rest of their life.

Receiving a psychiatric diagnosis can be a long and drawn-out process. Most transsexual people will see a psychiatrist on a regular basis both before and for the duration of their Real Life Test (RLT). The RLT is a 1-2 year period of living in the acquired gender full-time. Some psychiatrists will demand that some or all of the RLT be completed before they will prescribe their transsexual patients hormones, while others prefer to begin hormone therapy before the RLT begins.

A pre-RLT hormone regime makes the RLT easier (both physically and mentally) because of the obvious benefits of the physical changes hormones induce. Although there is no recognised benefit to the RLT, it is a requirement that anyone wishing to undergo gender reassignment surgery must complete it.

There is no requirement for the transsexual person to have taken hormones or undergone gender reassignment surgery in order to receive a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC).

If the transsexual person is married, they are required by law to divorce before they can be issued a full GRC. If they have not yet divorced, they may be issued an "interim GRC" and can re-apply for a full GRC on presenting the Gender Recognition Panel with a copy of their decree nisi.

An interim GRC does not entitle a transsexual person to a new birth certificate showing their acquired sex. Only a full GRC provides this entitlement.

The requirement for divorce is a result of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 coming into effect almost a decade before equal marriage rights for gay people. Under the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, there is no requirement for a transsexual person to divorce before receiving a full GRC.

Instead, their spouse must agree to the conversion of their heterosexual marriage into a homosexual marriage. This is what's known as the "spousal veto" since without the agreement of the spouse, the transsexual person is only entitled to an interim GRC. A holder of an interim GRC must then divorce before a full GRC can be issued, just as before.

The Spousal Veto

The spousal veto is a measure contained in the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill to allow heterosexual people to prevent their heterosexual marriage becoming a gay marriage. The veto allows the spouse of a transsexual person who is applying for a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) to prevent a full GRC (and thus a new birth certificate) being issued to their spouse for the duration of the marriage.

According to reports from GIRES, and confirmed by Liberal Democrat councillor Sarah Brown, the spousal veto came about as a result of roleplaying sessions conducted by members of the civil service. As Paula Dooley, a trustee of GIRES, stated in a letter to MPs:

“...this requirement has been introduced by civil servants/junior ministers ‘role playing’ and working out how they would feel if they were in a similar position. This beggars belief. How on earth could anybody role play what it is like to be inside a family unit when one party changes gender role! It seems to be a completely inappropriate way to determine government policy.”

Role-playing a situation without taking all the facts into account is never a productive method of determining the best policy. A far better situation would have been reached by discussing the problem, if indeed there is a problem, with people actually facing the situation under consideration. Gathering facts and discussing solutions with representatives of the affected group would have prevented this veto ever being added to the Bill; because the civil service would have seen it was unnecessary.

During the third reading of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill (“the Bill”) in the House of Commons, Helen Grant, MP, Under-secretary for Women and Equalities, told the House that it would not be possible to support an amendment that removed the veto. However, we must respectfully submit that this is simply not the case.

There are no legal grounds for providing one person a veto over the exercise of another person's rights; even if those two people are married. Furthermore, an application for a GRC requires the applicant to have lived in their acquired gender for at least two years.

If a spouse has a problem with their partner's transition, two years is more than enough time for them to have made this clear and even to have gone through divorce proceedings if that is necessary. The Bill even provides for a marriage to be annulled on the basis that one of the spouses is transsexual and the other did not know this at the time of marriage, so it is not as if anyone can legitimately claim to have been “trapped” or “conned” into a gay marriage.

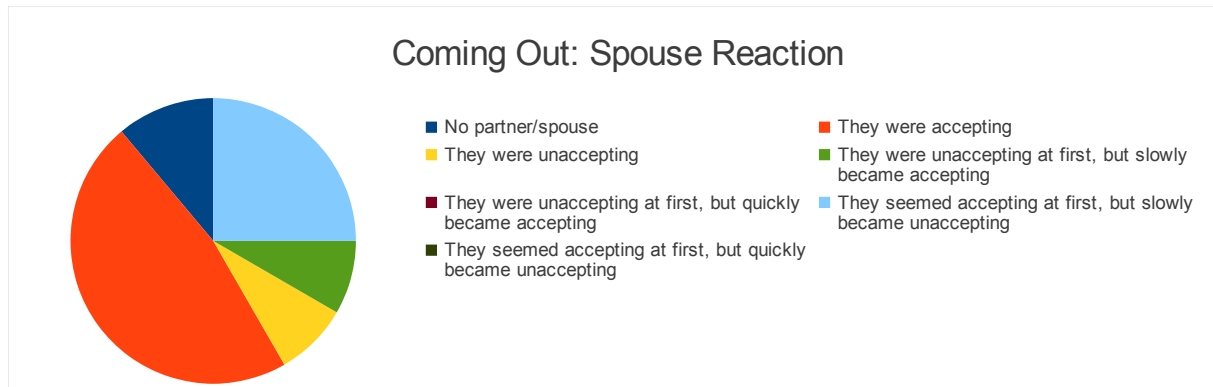
Furthermore, the Bill is designed to further equal rights for homosexuals by providing an equal footing for marriage. If gay marriages and straight marriages are supposed to be equal now, what exactly is this veto protecting the cisgendered (“non-transgendered”) spouse from? Why do straight people need an opt-out that prevents them entering a gay marriage they did not sign up for?

There is no evidence to support the need for a spousal veto. There is, however, now evidence that the spousal veto is likely to be misused by those who do not want their transsexual spouse to transition.

The Survey

The Trans Spousal Reaction Survey was conducted online to gauge the various responses of the partners and spouses of transgendered people. It has provided shocking evidence of the extent to which transgendered people in relationships problems from their own loved ones.

95.24% of respondents to the survey were transgendered, with 2.38% unsure of their gender identity and 2.38% cisgendered respondents. 92.31% of the transgendered respondents who have a spouse or partner have informed them of their transgenderism.



Of those who have informed their partners, only 41.46% had spouses who were accepting of the situation from the time of being informed. Of those who were not initially accepting of the situation, 7.32% slowly became accepting. The end result being that, given time, 48.78% of transsexuals who come out to their partner or spouse can expect a positive reaction in the long term.

21.95% of respondents' relationships ended after they came out. 7.32% stated their relationship ended when they came out, while 14.63% stated their relationship ended after they came out.

For transgendered people in relationships, the picture is not a pretty one. Less than one person in two will find their partner is accepting of their transsexuality, while one in five will find their partner leaves after they come out.

"I told my ex-wife (civil partnership) that I was trans on our first date - she said that she was fine. Over time she became less and less 'fine' with with, and it was one of the factors that led to the dissolution of our civil partnership."

- Survey respondent

"We currently live together but not for much longer. I am under daily threat of being kicked out & losing my children."

- Survey respondent

28.57% of transgendered respondents have children with their current partner or spouse. However, only 46% of those with children are able to see them. 7.69% of transsexual people with children are flat out refused access to their children. 15.38% of transsexual people with children are refused visitation despite the courts granting them visitation rights.

Withholding access to children is a common tactic of vindictive people wanting to hurt their former partners. This is the group that is most likely to attempt to use a spousal veto as a weapon against their transsexual partner, and the percentage of people affected is disturbingly high.

Divorce is not always a straightforward process for transsexual people, so the only method of circumventing the veto is likely to be hard. 28.57% of transsexual respondents stated that their spouse has made getting a divorce difficult. More than one in four people who will be affected by the spousal veto are being left open to abuse of the veto because their spouse is making the only option for getting away from it difficult. This is an unacceptably high number of people.

“In deference to my spouse's needs, I delayed my transition by 20 years. ultimately that was a poor choice that made a bad situation much worse.”

The most damning statistic of all is the revelation that 43.75% of partners and spouses have actively attempted to prevent their transsexual partner from transitioning. This number is almost equal to the percentage of partners and spouses who are accepting of their partner's transsexuality.

- Survey respondent

Those who try to prevent transsexual people from transitioning cause lasting emotional damage because of the inherent strain caused by transsexuality, as one survey respondent's comment demonstrate all too well.

“Emotional abuse has left me feeling extremely insecure and is making it much harder for me to assert my identity. Threatening to remove our children from me even though I've done nothing to harm them is extremely distressing, particularly since I know these threats will become more intense as I start to medically transition.

“Threatening to kick me out of the house, even though I've paid every instalment of our mortgage for 15 years, has destroyed my sense of security and is extremely distressing to someone with my disability (autism).

“Financial abuse has rendered me unable to afford a solicitor or separate accommodation, leaving me feeling trapped in an abusive 'home' with no safe refuge. Also, I tried to start my transition last year through a private clinic, but he made it impossible for me to do so, leading to a 7-month delay in my treatment. He has done all of this in front of my kids, turning them against me too.

“All of this has left me feeling extremely suicidal, mainly due to the thought of losing my family. I dread to think how much worse the abuse will get over the next few months when I start HRT.

“I am fearful for the future and I don't even know whether I'll have a home or access to my children in a couple of months' time, but I absolutely must transition immediately because I can no longer tolerate pretending to be female.”

The risk of people who actively attempt to prevent transition using a veto that is so open to abuse is too great. The veto will only serve to assist those who try to prevent transition in achieving their goals, and it provides no visible benefit.

Conclusion

More than half of transgendered people in relationships have a partner who is not accepting of transsexuality. 43.75% of people will actively try to stop their transsexual partner transitioning, and 23% will go so far as to deny their transsexual partner access to their own children.

The spousal veto is based on roleplaying by civil servants who do not have transsexual partners, not on evidence provided by couples where one partner is transsexual and the other is not.

The veto provides no benefit to couples in a mixed transgendered-cisgendered relationship and only serves to add another weapon to the arsenal of vindictive spouses who seek to prevent their partners transitioning. With divorce as the only way of getting around the veto and more than one in four partners making divorce difficult, it is clear the veto is an unassailable obstacle that will keep transsexual people from enjoying the same rights as everyone else.

The evidence does not support a need for the veto. It supports the amendments to remove it. There is no legal basis to support the veto, but plenty to support its removal. The veto is bad law; a massive blow against equality; and an affront to the principles of good governance.

Survey Data

Question 1 – Are you a transgendered person?

Yes	40	95.24%
No	1	2.38%
Unsure	1	2.38%

Question 2 – If you have a partner or spouse, have you informed them that you are transgendered?

Yes	36	92.31%
No	3	7.69%

Question 3 – If you informed your partner or spouse, how did they react?

No partner/spouse	4	9.76%
They were accepting	17	41.46%
They were not accepting	3	7.32%
Not accepting at first, slowly became accepting	3	7.32%
Not accepting at first, quickly became accepting	0	0%
Accepting at first, slowly became not accepting	9	21.95%
Accepting at first, quickly became not accepting	0	0%
We split up before I told them	1	2.44%
We split up when I told them	3	7.32%
We split up after I told them	6	14.63%

Question 4 – Do you have children with your partner or spouse?

Yes	13	31.71%
No	28	68.29%

Question 5 – If you have children, does your partner or spouse allow you to visit them?

Yes	6	46.15%
No	1	7.69%
No, despite visiting rights	2	15.38%

Question 6 – If you are separated or planning separation, has your partner or spouse made getting a divorce difficult?

Yes	6	28.57%
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No	15	71.43%
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Question 7 – If you have a partner or spouse, have they tried to prevent you transitioning?

Yes	14	43.75%
No	18	56.25%

Question 8 - If you have had problems with transition due to your spouse's actions, how have they made transition difficult?

In deference to my spouse's needs, I delayed my transition by 20 years. ultimately that was a poor choice that made a bad situation much worse.	Fully supportive; we will stay together and look forward to extending out marriage when the bill becomes law.
This comment is not a direct answer, but my wife of 13 years has been my rock, she has and will forever stand by me; she is have as much pressure as I do yet no surveys or help is ever directed at the ones who stay or or allies. This hurts her as well as myself being a transsexual woman. I e had a pretty good and generally easy transition over the past 3 years but not once has anyone asked her how she feels.	Emotional abuse has left me feeling extremely insecure and is making it much harder for me to assert my identity. Threatening to remove our children from me even though I've done nothing to harm them is extremely distressing, particularly since I know these threats will become more intense as I start to medically transition. Threatening to kick me out of the house, even though I've paid every instalment of our mortgage for 15 years, has destroyed my sense of security and is extremely distressing to someone with my disability (autism). Financial abuse has rendered me unable to afford a solicitor or separate accommodation, leaving me feeling trapped in an abusive 'home' with no safe refuge. Also, I tried to start my transition last year through a private clinic, but he made it impossible for me to do so, leading to a 7-month delay in my treatment. He has done all of this in front of my kids, turning them against me too. All of this has left me feeling extremely suicidal, mainly due to the thought of losing my family. I dread to think how much worse the abuse will get over the next few months when I start HRT. I am fearful for the future and I don't even know whether I'll have a home or access to my children in a couple of months' time, but I absolutely must transition immediately because I can no longer tolerate pretending to be female.
There was a lot of emotional blackmail: "I love you as you are, please don't change"	Guilt, blaming, shaming - e.g. not allowed to pick kid up from school, worried about

<p>etc. Legally changing my name and setting a date for surgery were factors that led to her asking for a divorce.</p>	<p>others reactions</p>
<p>Making child support payments almost bankrupted me. Payment level set assuming my earning potential as a man. Didn't want to let kids down. Had to give up my share of the family home.</p>	<p>Nothing truly egregious, just forbade me from speaking with my parents, at least for 2 years (like that is going to be any different) but it makes it awkward to move on...I will be moving forward by the fall. Also made me initially promise not to tell any of our friends. A rule which did not apply to her.</p>
<p>Tried to get therapist to not write surgery letter claiming I would change my mind.</p>	<p>My partner emotionally blackmailed me and threatened me with 1. outing me 2. breaking up with me should I transition. I stayed with her for 2 years as she became increasingly hostile towards transgender people and my self hate got progressively worse. I only decided to ignore her threats when my choices became 1. suicide 2. transition.</p>
<p>They claimed to be accepting and supportive of my social transition, but made no attempt to be acceptive or supportive, and eventually broke up with me due to my non-willingness to have kids as a cis women would.</p>	<p>Negative attitudes, general bigotry and bullying.</p>
<p>I delayed starting HRT for six months to give her extra time to accept it. She really didn't change much over that time so I went for it anyway. She tries to be accepting, but tells me repeatedly she wishes this wasn't happening and that she isn't sure if she's going to be able to handle it. Her parents have been the only people to outright reject me. They have demonized me and tried to convince her to divorce me.</p>	<p>Refusing to allow me to tell our children.</p>