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# life

Your stories, lives, loves and struggles



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VICTOR HENRI/CEC



Gender non-binary may be a term that many people don't understand, but only through discovering this — and rejecting the pronoun "she" — did Lola Phoenix find happiness

AS TOLD TO DAREN PRITCHARD  
PHOTOGRAPHY VICTOR HENSEL-COE

# there's no hidden agender

**i** magine you've been sleeping on a terrible mattress your whole life. If you've only slept on this terrible mattress, you probably don't realise it's terrible. You know your back hurts and you toss and turn at night, but you probably think there's something wrong with you, not your mattress. And then for a short period of time you get to try an amazing mattress. It makes going back to the old one pretty much impossible.

I can't speak for all non-binary people, but this analogy is how I feel. Once I had the courage to call myself agender, to ask friends to refer to me with the right pronoun, to admit I wanted and needed to address my dysphoria, not only did I feel better than I ever had in my life but there was also no way I could go back.

Sometimes you don't realise how

only one of many people who identify this way. Discovering that there was a term that explained all of the feelings I had grown up with was fantastic.

If you've ever had that "a-ha" moment, when you've finally realised you aren't alone in how you think of yourself, you'll know how this feels.

The first thing I ever heard about trans people was a transphobic joke

told in grade school. You learn very early that in this society being trans is a joke, embarrassing or shameful.

Naturally, you don't want to be something that's scorned. So, first, you have to unpack your internalised transphobia. I don't know if there was a singular moment where I realised I was non-binary. I think a lot of other non-binary or trans people would agree that it takes a lot to recognise what you are because you have to re-evaluate everything you have learned.

I didn't really "come out" to anybody at first. I was a volunteer for Gendered Intelligence at the time and it was the first place I felt comfortable asking for different pronouns. Even in a meeting with just me, the co-founder Jay Stewart, and my best friend, I felt awkward saying, "My pronouns are they, but she is OK, too." Slowly I got used to saying that "they" was my

pronoun, not my preferred pronoun, just my pronoun. And "she" was no longer OK.

**MOST OF MY FRIENDS** are trans or queer, so they just smiled and agreed to use the correct pronoun.

Not everyone in my family has been so accepting though. When I was fundraising for surgery, I asked some of my family members to help. One aunt replied that she was "tired of abnormal" (probably as much a reference to the fact that my mother was a lesbian) and insisted my birth certificate said I was female, so I was female. I told her my identity wasn't up for debate and that if she couldn't accept who I was, there wasn't any point in having a relationship.

She accused me of demanding money for my surgery fundraiser and holding our relationship as a hostage.

As for the general public, if they are aware of non-binary people, they are positive and ask me what pronoun I use. If they're not aware, reactions to my non-binary identity differ from person to person. Sometimes people who are well meaning ask things such as whether I have tried to just accept my body. Sometimes people ask if there was any trauma in my life that "caused" it.

Some people refuse to call you by the right pronoun or name unless you've had surgery or medical intervention and believe that is a nice approach.

People who are not so nice will make a grammatical argument against

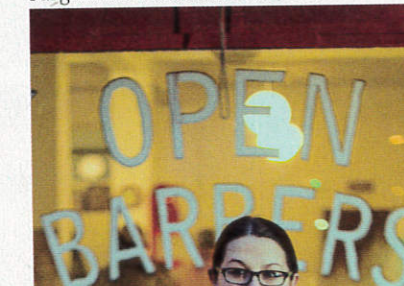
"they" being my pronoun or claim it's just too difficult for them. Sometimes they accuse me of just wanting to be oppressed or making up an identity to be "special". The truth is I have a disorder so rare, most hormone specialists don't even know what it is. I don't need to make up anything.

**I FIND THOUGH** that most people who don't know what non-binary is just nod and go along with it. Internally, I wonder what they must be thinking because sometimes people who smile and nod still call me "she", "miss", "lady" and "ma'am" — even after I've explained what it means.

Generally, I don't mind — which is not to say that I enjoy being mis-gendered. I just accept the fact that there isn't really anything I can do to make people aware, as soon as they see me, of the fact that I'm non-binary.

Even if I was to change my name to something "neutral" or look androgynous, people are not likely to assume I'm non-binary or use a neutral pronoun. I would rather accept the shortcomings of this culture and work with it than let it get me down.

Perhaps the most irritating assumption others make about non-binary people is that none of us want surgical or hormonal interventions



**"SOME PEOPLE ACCUSE ME OF MAKING UP AN IDENTITY TO BE 'SPECIAL', EVEN THOUGH I HAVE A DISORDER SO RARE, MOST HORMONE SPECIALISTS DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT IT IS"**

because we don't experience gender dysphoria. Most non-binary people I've met feel dysphoria in some way and many want surgical or hormonal options, they just don't feel they will be taken seriously by gender identity clinics (GICs).

I was discharged from a GIC for not "socially consolidating" my gender role and I've had to fundraise to get my surgery privately.

I asked how I "socially consolidate" my gender role as an agender person in a society that doesn't even allow me to do that in many official ways?

I have yet to get an answer from anyone.

**DUE TO THE SPARSE MEDIA**

**COVERAGE** non-binary people receive, people assume we all are read as women and dress in a masculine way. While most of the time I do wear just jeans and a t-shirt (which was described as me "presenting as female" in my GIC discharge letter), I do love wearing elegant, gothic, lolita dresses and femme things now and then.

Sometimes I grow my hair out or have it cut short at places such as Open Barbers in London who have a gender-neutral pricing scheme and approach. Long hair may be seen in this society as "feminine" in some aspects, but long or short hair doesn't dictate how people refer to you.

I'm happy and proud to be a non-binary person who wears frilly dresses and doesn't cut their hair. Blue used to be a girl's colour. Ashley was once a "male" name. High heels were originally designed for men.

If we stopped assuming how someone should act based on social roles we assign to different types of genitals, it would do everyone a world of good, not just me.

I want people to find new and interesting ways of understanding themselves. I'd rather everyone be a special snowflake than just cold, damaging and boring hail. **E**

Lola's fundraising is at [helploa.co.uk](http://helploa.co.uk)



**NON-BINARY SCALE:** Lola aged 12. The first time they heard about anyone being trans was through cruel jokes at school