



Lola feels accepted as agender and now has a partner



'WE'RE TOO PREOCCUPIED WITH GENDER AS A WHOLE'

to know that the safe middle space between the binary genders was a legitimate place to be. It was weird learning I wasn't the odd one out and instead my feelings were valid, just under-represented."

Things started to change for Alana after arriving in the UK and then going to Brighton University last year. "I was able to find people to connect to - nobody seemed confused when I told them I considered myself gender fluid. Even so, I still only really make that known to people my own age, because I find they're much more accepting. I tend to conceal it more from older generations because they don't understand as well. I'm still not 100 per cent open with my family about my gender. I'm nervous about that conversation."

"But at least now I can wake up and feel comfortable leaning more towards one end of the spectrum or the other, just like you'd suddenly develop a craving for what you want for dinner. As much as I shift towards being a boy or being a girl, and dress differently according to how I feel, I also like hanging out in that grey space in the middle where I am both genders, or neither. It's liberating."

Gender fluidity is also receiving growing visibility thanks to the likes of fashion house Gucci, which recently launched a new line of gender-neutral clothing. Plus androgynous models, such as Rain Dove and Andreja Pejic, who is transgender, challenge stereotypes on the catwalk. Even so, it can still be difficult for many non-binary individuals to be treated normally.

"I wouldn't necessarily say my gender identity is a struggle - I don't feel like any sort of victim," says Lola Olson, a digital content manager from London who identifies as agender. "But it is hard when people tell me I don't know myself."

"I feel like we're too preoccupied with gender as a whole. My identity is made up of so many different things - from my family background to what I do for a living - not just the gender I was born into."

From birth, Lola - who, like Alana, prefers to be referred to as "they" - had a congenital disorder called septo-optic dysplasia, which means the body doesn't produce oestrogen or testosterone. "As a child I looked very androgynous and was bullied a lot," says the 28 year old, who was raised as a girl and is bisexual. "Other kids would ask me whether I was a boy or a girl, which made me feel almost inhuman. Once, I discovered my name and the words 'weird' and 'bitch' carved into the school toilet wall. As a result, I retreated into myself. Sadly, I never felt able to talk to my parents about being bullied, which made it much harder to embrace my differences."

At the age of 12, Lola was given oestrogen therapy to induce puberty. "I didn't feel like a girl at that point - I didn't feel like anything really - but I wanted to be normal. I hoped at least looking feminine might help me fit in." It didn't. But seven years later, at 19, Lola stumbled upon the term "genderqueer" when a transgender family member passed on several books about transitioning and experiencing gender in different ways.

"As soon as I read them, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief," says Lola. "Reading more about the issue gradually led me down the path of identifying as agender. Now, I roll my eyes when people talk about trans kids 'going through a phase.' The idea that a child would actively seek out something that would possibly make them outcast by their peers is preposterous."

Lola adds: "I had to go through a lot of self-doubt, questioning and introspection to get to where I am today. I also had to come to terms with the fact that not everyone would understand me or even try to, but I'm so glad I found the strength to do it."

While only time can tell what's next for gender fluidity, clearly a seismic shift in attitudes is occurring. Last year, an Instagram post of Milley Cyrus wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "Gender Is Over" received over 550,000 likes, while Dr Jay Stewart, co-founder of diversity group Gendered Intelligence, declared in a recent speech that we're on the cusp of a "gender revolution" and the ways in which we categorise traditional genders will soon be obsolete.

Lola feels lucky to be accepted as non-binary. "I don't tell everyone I meet first off that I'm agender, but those who do know respect me and call me by the right pronouns. I have a partner now, too, and he loves me for who I am. For a while before we met, I felt like I couldn't date because I wasn't truly myself. But he reassures me that he loves me and wants me to be happy - and that's most important."

Alana agrees that having the right support has made all the difference. "My new college friends are amazing, and a huge number call themselves gender fluid, too. They say I look handsome on my 'boy' days. They also sympathise when I'm feeling out of sorts."

"Realising there are millions of people out there who are finally proud to not fit in is beyond inspiring." **✂**



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