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GENDER POLITICS

THE QUEST TO BE ONE

Am I a he? Am I a she? **Oliver Roberts** speaks to three South Africans about the torment of achieving identity when you are both male and female

SALLY Gross has been many things in her life, including a revered political activist, a philosophy lecturer and a Catholic priest. She also spent time in the Israeli army.

Gross was born a man and still is; but she's also a woman. At least, she decided to become a woman in the early '90s. She went into hiding in the south of England to adapt to wearing dresses and makeup and turning right instead of left when visiting a public bathroom.

She didn't have any surgery to change her sex, though — it wasn't necessary. Gross doesn't really have a gender. She is both. She is what's commonly known as a "hermaphrodite", though the preferred term is "intersexed".

This condition — atypical sexual differentiation — occurs in about one in 50 people. These figures make it feasible that between 45 000 and 90 000 South Africans are intersexed. According to **www.intersex.org.za**, we have one of the highest occurrences of intersexed people in the world.

Gross could then add to her extraordinary list of experiences "has been man and woman", but the truth is that Gross — who now works as the research and policy advisor for the Regional Land Claims Commission — has never felt she was either. Her life's struggle has been to achieve humanness or, more correctly, a sense of someoneness. What we take for granted — our sex — is our basic identity and, though Gross most certainly exists, she could also be seen as a flicker of shadow in the murky back streets and alleys of convention; she's an entity unknown, a trick of light that passes us by and makes us look twice.

"I've had a hell of life and, certainly, only a portion of it is about me being intersexed," Gross tells me. "You're looking for a label."

I'm sitting in Gross's home in Observatory, Cape Town. When I walk into it on this chilly Thursday evening, I immediately suspect it is the abode of a somewhat solitary intellect. Chairs are sunken from prolonged use, boxes full of papers chunk up the rooms and there are stacks of books everywhere. In Gross's study is a computer where an online contest of the ancient Chinese board game "Go" is in progress, and two cats are scurrying about the place, tickling the wooden floors with their claws and leaping suddenly from open boxes.

I have just asked Gross, who is dressed in a black skirt and pale blue top, to tell me her story. Three hours later, having moved from her study into the lounge, Gross is reclined on her brown La-Z-Boy, shoes off, toes curled, eyes drooping with sleep, still talking about her life.

SOLITARY CAT: Sally Gross was born to Jewish parents and later became a Catholic priest

"I was born in Cape Town in 1953 to Jewish parents," she tells me, earlier in the evening. "I don't know that much about what actually happened when I was born, but it's blindingly clear in retrospect that it caused somewhat of a fuss; there were questions immediately. It was evidently decided to assign me as male. This involved an attempt at circumcision on my eighth day, which proved to be problematic. I know this because it left a lot of scar tissue. There was clearly a degree of ambiguity."

'Years later, my father complained that the stupid ritual circumciser should have known I was female'

Gross's circumcision took place before an assembled horde of relatives and parents' friends.

"The difficulty and fumbling would have been seen by lots of people, and a hell of a mess was made of it. A few days later, a second attempt was made and a little bit more was hacked off to tidy up aesthetically. Years later, my father complained to me bitterly in an e-mail, saying that the stupid ritual circumciser should have known I was female."

Gross has a kind of phallus, but almost all of its 'length' is inside her. She has a scrotum too, and two gonads that are not always descended. She is able to grow light facial hair. On her head is a crop of ash blonde hair, and she wears earrings and light lipstick. She also wears gold-rimmed, feminine glasses. Physically, she could easily pass as a woman which, in part, she is.

It is only Gross's voice that might make you notice and follow the shadow down the alleyway. It is deep and deliberate, a bit like the way a voice sounds on television when it's slowed down to protect the speaker's identity. Except in Gross's case, her tone does not conceal her, it exposes him.

Gross was raised as a boy named Selwyn (nicknamed Sally) and, while his childhood was a reasonably happy one, Gross describes it as "a lonely business". He was gentle and isolated and, though unable to comprehend his condition, Gross remembers feeling obviously different.

"From a fairly early age, I had a sense that something was awry, but I didn't really know; it seemed to bear on gender. I didn't feel like a girl trapped in a boy's body, but I certainly had a sense that something was different, but I didn't have the foggiest idea."

Gross's parents, and even doctors, decided to almost ignore his ambiguity. Aged 10, Gross was hurt when he slipped down some stairs. A visit to the doctor resulted in a head-to-toe examination, from which the doctor concluded that "everything is okay, there's just one thing, but don't worry about it; just leave it".

"Parents are capable of a great deal of self-deception," says Gross. "I wasn't brought up to be inhibited about my body; I used to strip down on the beach on holiday. As I grew up my assumption was that there was a range of the way bodies are. I assumed some were more well-endowed than others; I just thought I was an extreme of the range."

Still unaware of his gender duality, Gross entered adolescence. Though he did not experience the hormonal turmoil of most his peers, he did begin to wonder about his sexuality; not because he felt attracted to other boys, but because he felt attracted to nothing. Gross is asexual.

"Asexuality is bloody frightening in adolescence. I wondered whether I was gay, or a transvestite, though I had no particular inclination to cross-dress; the thought of it gave me no pleasure." Now Gross laughs at this, holding onto the arms of the chair and throwing her head back. Just then, I see Gross's body briefly enveloped by its lurking masculinity. But it's just a glimmer; seconds later, Gross is a lady again.

'I asked the doctors why they couldn't have waited until I was older to do the operation, so that I could decide'

Earlier that day, I met with Funeka Soldaat, 48, and Patrick Maseko, 29, two intersexuals from Khayelitsha.

In contrast to Gross — whom you feel has a tentative grasp on her condition — Soldaat and, especially, Maseko, feel betrayed by doctors and even their own families.

In June 1982, on the advice of surgeons, a 21-year-old Soldaat — who has a vagina and grew up as a girl, but also has internal gonads — had surgery to remove her "penis", which was probably just a large clitoris.

Before the operation, language barriers made it difficult for Soldaat to comprehend what the operation involved; she was handed a copy of Drum magazine and asked to flip through it and say which she was "interested" in — the men or the women.

"I always looked at the pictures of girls and the doctors said, 'No, no, no — you have to look at this picture,' and then they would point at the male," says Soldaat. "I didn't know what the issue was. When I woke up after the operation they said to me: 'We have made you into a woman.' " She has severe scar tissue where her clitoris used to be.

Though tall and broad, Soldaat is inherently feminine. But, like Gross's voice, it's Soldaat's hands that tilt your perspective. They are strong and masculine, as if transplanted from a man who spent his life working a plough.

"I don't like someone to emphasise the fact that I'm a woman," she says. "I don't want to be boxed. People say 'You are a woman, you must wash clothes,' and I'm like, 'Piss off!' It irritates me. Maybe I still don't know if I'm a woman or a man. But I'm probably comfortable as a woman."

Soldaat, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, is an activist for intersexuals and lesbians, conducting workshops for the Engender organisation and speaking publicly about the surgery performed on intersexuals. Though the medical attitude is far less gung-ho than two decades ago, surgery is still seen as the dominant "solution" for an intersexed person.

There are, however, many doctors in the country who are strongly opposed to what Gross describes as an "indescribable form of abuse", especially when you consider creating a vagina requires several surgeries and repeated dilation of the artificial aperture as it tries to heal.

"It is always better not to have the surgery," Soldaat says. "The tricky thing is that people believe that one must either be male or female. I believe I just had a big clitoris, not a penis, so why did they have to cut it?"

Maseko, though small and delicate-looking, appears completely masculine. He is deeply shy and seems folded into himself, both physically and emotionally. On the rare moment when he speaks, his faint tone is just a struggling echo in the stark halls of the community centre where we're sitting.

Pictures: ARAMINTA DE CLERMONT

NO TIME TO CHOOSE: Funeka Soldaat, left, and Patrick Maseko, right, claim neither of them was consulted sufficiently before they underwent operations to engineer their identity

I ask him whether he's had any surgery. "Ha-ha ... lots," he replies. Maseko was born with an unusually large vagina and a tiny penis. His penis was removed a few weeks after birth.

"I never felt like a woman. I did man things, I even stood up when I urinated; so when I was 16 I had a penis and testicles created. But the penis doesn't work, it cannot get stiff."

Unlike Soldaat, who is still able to have a sex life, Maseko yearns for intimate companionship, but is physically unable.

"I asked the doctors why they couldn't have waited until I was older to do the operation, so that I could decide; they said there was no time to wait, they had to do it immediately. That's their excuse."

Both Soldaat and Maseko have been for counselling, but no longer go. Maseko now lives on anti-depressants.

"A person becomes proud of themselves when they realise who they are," says Soldaat. "But if you don't really know who you are, what can you be proud of? I am a lesbian and a woman; but I feel sad for Patrick because he's really stuck and there's no way out. He lives on his own in a little shack and his mother won't have anything to do with him."

I ask Maseko if he believes in God. He says he goes to church every day, and I ask if that helps him. He laughs, plays awkwardly with his hands, looks down and says "... no."

It was while Gross was studying English literature at university in the mid-'70s that he sought God — his creator — for solace and understanding.

"Something overwhelmed me. I realised there was a gap in my life, and it was God-shaped," she says. "My own confusions and personal struggles were all taken up and symbolised by the image of Christ crucified. Life, I saw, was in many ways a crucifixion, but resurrection symbolised suffering being redemptive, and showed there is hope beyond suffering."

Gross went to the Roman Catholic Church for instruction, and was baptised in 1976. He kept his conversion a secret from his parents. And though his conversion was based on this redemptive revelation, Gross observes that the church was also the perfect, if not the only, place for an asexual to be free.

"In contrast to the world of traditional Judaism, there is a healthy respect for celibacy in the Catholic church," she says. "There were roles for celibates, and it was valued; and I sure as hell was one of nature's celibates."

After living for a few years in Israel, primarily to escape apartheid police (he had strong ties with the ANC by this stage), Gross made contact with the English Dominicans in 1980 and went to the order in Blackfriars, Oxford, where he was ordained in 1987 and taught philosophy. After several more unsuccessful attempts to decipher his condition — one even via a kind of counselling hotline for transsexuals — Gross saw a gender counsellor.

Following a few sessions and an assessment of Gross's testosterone levels (they were unusual for a 'man'), it was suggested that Gross make the transition to become a woman.

Discussions with the church were, in the end, messy and futile (the superior suggested he be institutionalised), and he cut ties with the cloth. It was a few months later, aged 40, that he went into hiding in the south of England, and learnt how to become a woman. She returned to South Africa in 1999.

"It was quite scary initially because I didn't know how to judge people's reactions," says Gross. "Then I realised it's not my job to engage in an Oscar-winning act, I must just be myself ... and then it was kind of okay."

For all her acceptance, the one thing that remains socially insurmountable to Gross is her asexuality.

"In my ideal world, there would be forms of intimacy and unions that weren't sexual," she says. "Unfortunately, in our society, intimacy and being sexually active are inextricably tied up; and, if you're not sexually active, you can find yourself being very lonely. I would like to share my life with someone, with people. The truth is, I think I need a check box that isn't male or female. In a sane society there would be one, but in our society you've got to choose."

I glance to my right at a shelf stacked with hundreds of classical music CDs. I scan the titles, listed alphabetically, and ask if she's heard Henryk Górecki's *Symphony No 3: Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* — three pieces about motherhood, war, Christ's crucifixion and Mary's agony as she watches her son die on the cross. Before she can answer, I spot it on the shelf, misplaced among Mahler and Mozart.

It's very late and I suggest to Gross, who is almost dozing off, that we call it a night. She sighs and, with a last surge of energy, concludes her story.

"I went through so much pain and difficulty in adapting (to) the female role, that part of me is just being bloody-minded," she says. "It's been hellishly costly in personal terms, so I won't give anyone the satisfaction of presenting me differently; but I see myself as human. I don't perceive myself as gendered, I just want to be considered a person and accepted as this."

● For more information on intersexuality, visit **www.intersex.org.za** and **www.engender.org.za**