

# IRANIAN TRANS-SUBJECTIVITIES. TRANS BODY AS A 'TERRITORY' BETWEEN PATHOLOGY AND RESISTANCE

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## Abstract

The history of “transidentity” in Iran and its legalization after the 1979 Islamic Revolution often seems perplexing to outside observers. Institutional discourses applied in gender transition project have produced, on the one hand, a psycho-medical discourse regarding the trans individual body, and on the other hand, trans individuals attempt to get recognition from the state and citizens alike within the legal and medical discourse. Trans people frequently express their bodily alienation as “being trapped in the wrong body”. We will try to redefine “transidentity” as a “passage” and “transition” in a non-pathological paradigm inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of multiplicity of identities. This paper argues for the presence of “agency” among Iranian trans individuals undergoing the process of transition. Trans people “invent” a new definition of gender. Bodies in this transition are the center of trans resistance as a process of subjectivation.

**Keywords:** Trans, subjectivation, identity, resistance, Iran.

## I. Trans identity as “becoming”

Analyzing trans<sup>1</sup> bodies beyond resistance and the discourse of pathology is a

recent approach in research on the construction of “trans identity” through an institutional program and based on the individual will to change the sexed body. Psychiatric labeling and the medico-legal protocol of sex change are a legitimating reply to trans individual suffering. Here, the suffering refers to the feelings of an Iranian trans individual who believes that his/her soul is “trapped in the wrong body”.<sup>2</sup> Throughout

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation Trans, Trans\* or transgender is an umbrella term covering people whose gender identity is different from the gender assigned to them at birth. Trans people are those who may desire sexual reassignment surgery and medical assistance to transition. While some transsexual individuals prefer to use the term to describe themselves, many prefer the designation “transgender” or “trans” and reject the term “transsexual”. On transgender terminology see: Williams, C, *Transgender, TSQ*, (2014) 1 (1-2), pp. 232-234.

<sup>2</sup> Based on our interviews between 2015-2018 with 30

our research we have mentioned that no monolithic trans narrative exists, despite the effort of the institutional Iranian discourse to promote one narrative of being trans.

In 1966, Harry Benjamin, pioneer in sexological research and well known for rejecting reparative therapy, defended the health needs of the trans community in accordance with this logic that “if the mind cannot be changed, the body must be changed to alleviate the suffering of the patient.”<sup>3</sup> In DSM-V (The American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), the seeking of medical and surgical help is a symptom of “gender dysphoria”. While SRS (sexual reassignment surgery) can function as a vehicle of trans agency, it can also remind us of how body and sexuality are a political matter in countries where mandatory sterilization is a requirement for legal gender recognition. The gender transition paradigm in some societies is only recognized by carrying out genital surgery, while in other societies, according to the

WPATH, (World Professional Association for Transgender Health), gender dysphoria treatment has become more individualized and based on personal needs.<sup>4</sup>

Each country has its own way of accepting, ignoring or repressing the gender transition. In other words, embodying gender is a process of “becoming” between a trans self-construction and the politico-legal construction of trans identities in each society. The wrong body narrative then depends on the conversion of body and self-gender identity and the discursive production of gender binary norms in each society. The history of gender transition in Iran begins in the 1940s, with the earliest discussions on transsexualism. A series of popular psychology notions on this subject from American literature were largely translated into Persian. By the late 1960s, Afsaneh Najmabadi stated: “notions of ‘gender disorder’ and hormonal or genetic ‘sex and gender determination’ began to enter Iranian medical discourse”.<sup>5</sup> The earliest non-intersex sex change surgery reported in the press dates back to February 1973.<sup>6</sup> The important role of religious discourse on gender transition in Iran is related to the famous *fatwā*<sup>7</sup> of Ayatollah Khomeini, which sanctioned sex change,

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Iranian trans people in Iran and 10 interviews with Iranian trans asylum seekers in Turkey, “Being trapped in a wrong body”, is a common affirmation that most of them use in order to express their transidentity. The expression “wrong body” is a model for analyzing “transsexuality” developed in the context of sexology, psychiatry and medicine. See Meyerowitz, J., *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 14-50. In the psychological approach, “transsexuality” is viewed as an issue of the mind and treatable by sex reassignment surgery. In both approaches, the gender identity of the individual is determined as a man or a woman “trapped in the wrong body”. See Rubin, H., *Self-Made Men: Identity and embodiment among transsexual men*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003, pp. 150-151.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, H., *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. New York: Julian Press, 1966, p. 91.

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<sup>4</sup> Standards of care for the health of transsexual, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people, WPATH, 7th Version, 2012, [online], available at : [www.wpath.org](http://www.wpath.org)

<sup>5</sup> A. Najmabadi, *Transing and transpassing across sex-gender walls in Iran*, “Women’s studies quarterly”, 36 (3-4), 2008, pp. 23-42, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> A *fatwā* is an Islamic legal pronouncement, a scholarly opinion or a religious ruling issued by an expert in religious law.