

Intersex Movement Gain Ground in Germany and Beyond

By J. Bryan Lowder



The fight for more than male and female includes intersex people.

Photo by THOMAS SAMSON/AFP/Getty Images

In a great piece that you may have missed amid the New Year's festivities earlier this week, *The New Yorker's* Emily Greenhouse offered a nuanced and welcome update on the encouraging progress of the intersex rights movement. For those not familiar with the terminology, intersex refers to those individuals born with mixed or otherwise indeterminate sex characteristics (including genitals), who, until recently, were as a matter of course subjected as infants to "corrective" sex-assignment surgeries. While doctors and parents likely conceptualize measure as a way to make their child's life easier, intersex advocates persuasively argue that the

http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/01/03/intersex_rights_movement_makes_progress_toward_stopping_sex_assignment_surgery.html



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medical choosing of sex is also about the comfort of the male/female binary—as Greenhouse puts it, an invasive procedure performed "just so nurses can tick 'male' or 'female' on [a child's] birth certificate."

As Greenhouse's reporting reveals, those little check marks can cause a great deal of pain, especially when the imposed sex does not suit the patient later in life. It's this kind of pain that Germany tried to address in November when it became the first European country to offer a third gender designation aside from male or female. Greenhouse explains the implications of "X":

The legal acknowledgment of a third category should mean that fewer doctors urge parents to have sex-assignment surgery performed on their newborns. Fewer children should suffer the plight described by one person quoted in a report that helped lead to the new law, a German born with ambiguous genitalia in 1965, who spoke of being a "patchwork created by doctors, bruised and scarred."

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Though the situation of intersex people is in many ways distinct from the gay or even transgender rights movements, Greenhouse also notes how progress in the various areas, though uneven, are ultimately connected.

While broader cultural developments have begun to clear space for the expression of formerly unorthodox sexualities and gender identities, those who would have once been called hermaphrodites remain even more marginal than transgender persons. But the order in which old taboos dissolve varies without much logic: the movement for gay rights and same-sex marriage has helped the admittedly slower recognition of transgender issues, while intersex rights have sometimes been granted in statutes, like the one in New Jersey, that enhance transgender rights.

For more on all of this, including more stories from intersex adults, take a few minutes to read [Greenhouse's excellent piece](#).

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