LIVING PATTERNS, NARRATIVE STYLES

I am the lost child of a century not yet born
I was born, with a body named woman
Why can I not love the body of another woman?

Within minutes of our first conversation, Mahnaz, an attractive woman in her early thirties, burst into reciting her poetry. This was a long ode of desire, desire to be left alone, to love as she desired:

I do not want that ordinary spring that others desire
Let me be, let me be
I want to hear love in a fresh blade of grass

No leaf will last on a tree
No flower will last at the bottom of a wall
And no wall can tell you what is in the yard

I do not desire modesty
I do not want grace
I shall not knock on any door, nor on any walls

... 
I do not want that ordinary spring that others desire
Let me be, let me be
I want to cling onto love

...
The poem was movingly performed, but I was taken aback because of the place and time of its recitation. We were sitting in the busy lobby of an up-scale Tehran hotel (where Mahnaz was staying) a day after I had met her in the offices of the Mirdamad Clinic—where I would first meet many of the trans persons who would accept my requests for interviews. She had come there from Sabzivar, a northeastern provincial city, with a friend and with cash in hand to fix the date of her srs. In 2007, more than a year after when I last saw her, she was still weighing her options, no longer certain that she wanted to go through with srs. She was looking into immigrating to Europe with her husband. This time, in her living room in Sabzivar, she recited the entire poem again. This was a poem that spoke her.

As I got to know Mahnaz more closely, in every encounter and in between our meetings, I was silently obsessed with the desire to name her lesbian. She, on the other hand, seemed to be utterly uninterested in naming herself anything. What she wanted, above all, was to be able to love women; if that could not be done in her born-female body, she would consider changing that body. Why not?1

The initial shape of my research questions had been informed by the emergence, in recent decades, of the field of gender and sexuality studies, in which critical analytical distinctions had formed around anatomical body significations, gender identifications, and sexual desires. This configuration had translated into the opening lines of my conversations with trans, gay, and lesbian people, reflecting an urge to distinguish, to make a distinction that mattered. My urge to name Mahnaz a lesbian and my way of presenting my research aims were plotted along these lines of differentiation. During the first few months of field work, I presented a variation of the same conversation opener, reproduced here from one transcript: “Well, one of the main goals of my research is to understand how a person comes to a self-understanding as trans and not as some other category, for instance, homosexual. How does a person reach identification, self-cognition, as a transsexual? What are some of the key memories, moments that you now remember as pivotal to this cognition?”

I am not suggesting that my opening line simply determined anyone’s answer. I received incredibly varied responses. Indeed, many challenged the premise that the delineations in my question had anything to do with their process of self-cognition. As Emad, a postoperative FtM in his early thirties, put it, “The impact of these categorical distinctions is for others [other than trans persons], who are unfamiliar, and who mix up or collapse these phenomena. We, too, socialize and mix together because of the difficulties and limitations we face. The reason our families think trans kids are deviant is because in Iran
these two groups are collapsed onto, mixed up with, each other. For us, things are clear. When an outsider comes to places we hang out, like the Food Court [pronounced as in English, it referred to one particular food court] on Tuesday nights, they can’t tell the difference.”

More problematically, my initial queries were reenacting the legal and dominant psychological understandings and categorizations that had emerged in Iran—and that my project was meant to critique. In turn, these questions tended to solicit narratives along those very lines. They tended to foreclose the possibility, at least initially, that such distinctions may not have been the dominant frame of self-cognition for my interviewees. Were not the initial “textbook” narratives that I tended to receive in early interviews elicited in part by my very frame?

Mahnaz’s life story, as narrated by her, her husband, and several of her friends, was no more or less complex than the life stories I heard from many others. In all these narratives, there were patterns of similarities, especially in the stories told at the first encounter, because these often had the echo of what had been recited to doctors, friends, sometimes parents—people who had to be convinced of the veracity of one’s desire. These were narratives to make one’s sense of being-in-the-world intelligible to one’s disbelieving audience and at the same time recalling one’s sense of cognition to oneself. I was received as one more skeptic interrogator.

As Jay Prosser has noted in his work that bears the subtitle *The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, “. . . the genre of autobiography is conformist and unilinear. In that its work is to organize the life into a narrative form, autobiography is fundamentally conformist. . . . In autobiography the desultoriness of experience acquires chronology, succession, progression—even causation; existence, an author. . . . transsexual autobiography is no exception to this rule of autobiographical composition.”

While it is the case that, in the sense pointed out by Prosser, this is a general rule of autobiographical composition, there is an important distinction to be made: Creating order and meaning out of memory fragments of a life lived out of sync with norms and normative expectations—a life pressured incessantly by “what are you?” and “why can’t you be like others?”—produces a distinct narrative dynamic. Like other forms of narrative, “the end”—as both the now of recitation and the goal of recitation—is known. The journey from “as far as I remember” to this end has to end here and now. Having been marked as incoherent because of being sex/gender non-normative, the recounting of a past life, no matter how stylized, offers the possibility of coherent meaning-making through repeated recitations. Whereas the larger society and culture
does not permit one’s self-knowledge to be taken for granted, as granted to “the normals,” “self-knowledge as a transsexual requires such narrativization.”

Trans- and homosexuals in Iran share a self-constituting mode: both are received skeptically by others. Self-cognition, along with its more public recitation—that is, its narrative and bodily presentations—is what makes a transsexual/homosexual re-identified by others. As Prosser observes in a different context, “As much as transsexuality, inversion takes autobiography as its primary symptom.”

Moreover, even in what at times seem to be formulaic accounts—and much more in subsequent conversations—finer details of lives would emerge: one father’s leather belt, another’s understanding calm, one mother’s vengeful scheming to stop one’s surgery, a sister’s protective cover, other siblings’ uncaring concerns (worrying more about their own reputation among neighbors and peers), an enlightened judge, a punitive psychologist. These differences in small details I will attempt to sketch through the retelling of lives of several trans persons, as well as self-identified gays and lesbians, to map out a cartography of daily living patterns, as stories that make habitable lives possible.

Mahnaz was born into a comfortable, middle-class family. Her parents were both professionals; she described her family as belonging to a “freer cultural” world, comparing it with her husband Taymur’s family, which she described as “religious.” One of the constant points of bickering and discontent with Taymur’s family concerned the way she dressed and the way she did not observe proper etiquettes of male-female socializing. Taymur was two years her senior, an engineer with a very successful career. “She always wore very tight pants, and would come and sit with me, in the men’s section, in family gatherings; she talked to my parents in a tone and language that was disrespectful,” Taymur confirmed the disjunction in practices and expectations. He talked in the past tense. Mahnaz no longer visits his parents. He goes alone.

Although defining herself and her family as “not religious,” Mahnaz practiced her own “spirituality.” Her spirituality was narrated as centered on her conversations with God: “I incessantly ask God to tell me what I am. I ask God, ‘How is it that I have the best spouse in the world, but have no feelings for him? Why do I fall in love with women if I am a woman?’” She regularly visits a woman she considers her spiritual guide, has great faith in this woman’s powers of foresight, and always consults her when faced with difficult decisions. Indeed, she chose Taymur over a much richer and more culturally compatible, though also considerably older, suitor because of this woman’s
advice. She narrated this story several times; it was a decision she had come
to almost regret. This other suitor lived in a European country and she could
have been there, not confined to the walls that she felt constricted her in a
small provincial town where everyone knew each other—when she went to a
court to file an initial application as an srs candidate, the judge was a relative
of her husband’s and would not look at her file—and where Taymur was for-
ever concerned about his reputation and what people might be saying about
his young beautiful wife who spent her days socializing with young lads out
on the streets.

“I am like that woman who went to the Prophet,” Mahnaz told me in one
of our early conversations. “She was married, had two kids, and went to the
Prophet one day, crying and asking for help. She begged him to listen to the
pain of her life, a pain that she could not tell other people, the pain that burned
inside her. She told him that she had no feelings for her husband; that any time
he came to and slept with her, it was torturous for her because she had no feel-
ing of being a woman. This is exactly how I feel. Her story is exactly my story.”
Mahnaz stopped and was moving on to another topic, but I had never heard of
a prophetic narrative like this. I asked her, “How did the Prophet respond?”
Mahnaz continued the story:

He told her to go into the river nearby, immerse herself deep in water and
come out. She followed his order and emerged as a complete man. The
Prophet told him that s/he was no longer a woman, but a man, and could
become one of the Prophet’s companions and fight alongside him. After a
week the husband came to the Prophet with his two kids, asking him for
help in finding his missing wife. The Prophet told him that his wife would
not come back and he should marry another woman. In our time, we no
longer have a prophet to whom we can tell our pains and who can perform
miracles to solve our problems. On the other hand, Hazrat ‘Ali [the Shi’ite
first Imam] has told us to move forward with time and today science proves
it; when science can solve a problem, suppose your illness is cancer, some
people tell us God has created you and it is sinful to interfere with God’s
work, but God has also created cancer in your body, he has also put the
doctor to treat your cancer; God has created some people with no arm, but
has also created prosthetic arms to give you hand motion; that is just like
me. Science tells me that my brain is male; it gives me masculine orders.

Mahnaz’s narrative resonated with many others, among trans persons and
their families and friends, who came to terms with transsexuality as an act of
God. It also recalls the earlier discourse on inter-/transsexuality in the 1940s
and 1950s (see chapter 2), in which marvels of science began to displace wonders of creation. One day I asked Zaynab, one of Mahnaz’s closest friends, a woman in her late forties who seemed to be religious in a more traditional sense, how she understood Mahnaz’s situation. She was at first reluctant to answer, saying, “You’d laugh at me if I told you.” But Mahnaz reassured her that it was okay to be straightforward with me. Zaynab explained that in her eyes Mahnaz was a sign of God’s creative power: “I was totally amazed by God’s ability to create so many differently beautiful creatures.” For her, Mahnaz was truly a man, someone with a male soul who happened to have a female body. She then asked me if I had seen the television program about a creature that sang like a rooster but also laid eggs. These were all signs of God’s power of creation. At this point, Mahnaz got really excited; she jumped up from the couch and asked if that were possible in humans as well? Uneasily, I offered a brief account of hermaphrodites, and mentioned the possibility of ambiguity at birth and “sex change” at puberty. Mahnaz wanted to know if she were one such case. Who could diagnose that? Has she ever observed any changing bodily signs? I asked. Has her gynecologist ever indicated something of that kind? The answer was no, but still she kept saying perhaps she was a case that hadn’t become evident—yet. What mattered to her, it seemed, was that she did not want to be a woman; she wanted to be anything but a woman, including an intersex person.

Like almost all trans and other nonheteronormative identified persons I interviewed, Mahnaz’s story began with tales of a “gender-discordant” childhood. These sounded like the familiar tales of liking cross-gender games, cross-gender dressing up, and so on. The important difference seemed to be that in Iran, parents and family members generally seemed to be relatively gender-flexible with young children and did not consider these childhood differences to be symptoms of future trouble; at times they even seemed to encourage daughters with “boyish” behavior and sons with “girlish” habits—something that many child psychiatrists are working hard to change.

These stories of her childhood were of course retrospective remembrances that had acquired a past significance as the foretelling of a future trans identification. Similar incidents in the childhoods of adults who did not grow up trans-identified were recounted differently: A successful female professional, in a field dominated by men, for instance, would recount her early “boyish” childhood as a foretelling of later professional achievements. Given the pervasive male societal prerogatives, recounting cross-gender childhood memories by adults who had become mainstream masculine men was less frequent.

Some transes, in later years, use their recollections of their earlier years to
persuade not only psychologists but also their own parents to support their trans cognition. Houri recalled that she had always thought of herself as a girl and everyone in the family had gone along with it. As she grew up and noticed other girls’ bodies changing shape, she asked her mother one day why she was not like them. Her mother laughed it off, she recalled, “‘Things will work out when you grow up a bit more,’ she said.” The critical moment for her came with the growth of facial hair:

I almost mutilated my face trying to shave it off as hard as I could. And then it all grew back even thicker. I didn’t know what to do. I went to my mother and asked for her advice. That is when I was shocked to hear, “But it is natural for a boy to grow facial hair.” I said, “But girls don’t grow beards and mustaches.” She said, “You took the joke seriously? You are a boy.” I was devastated. That was the moment I told myself, no, I don’t want to become a boy; I want to stay a girl. I didn’t know anything about homosexual, transsexual, whatever. All that mattered to me was that I had been a girl all along and I was determined to remain one.

This was by no means an exceptional narrative. Delara, a nineteen-year-old FtM, had just begun her/his transition when we met in the Mirdamad Clinic. S/he was from a relatively poor family—“kumitah imdadi,” as s/he put it, which means that they qualified for aid from the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation. When I interviewed her/his back in her/his hometown, Urumiyah, a northwestern provincial capital, s/he talked about her/his family as a religious family (khvanivadah-am mazhabiah), some of whom had accepted her/his decision to change from female to male, while others had not. “I think what helped some of my sisters and their husbands to accept me was that there is religious ground for it. Also, I have eight sisters and no brother. So this way they will now have a brother! I am sure it would have been impossible for them to accept it were it the other way around.” Initially, they had lived in a nearby village; her/his father was a shepherd, and even though they had migrated to the city, he continued to keep his herd in a place just outside the city limits and spent a lot of time there. Delara’s mother took care of an elderly woman who needed someone to spend the night at her place. Delara never finished high school and had been working in various jobs to help pay for the house they built in town. First s/he cleaned houses but didn’t like it and now made a much better living buying old appliances, such as refrigerators, taking them apart, extracting all the copper wires and selling them. She explained that, “Since childhood, I didn’t accept that I was a girl. I knew I was a boy and acted like a boy, . . . had a lot of conflict in high school. I would tell the girl whom I loved that I
was a man, and that would get me into trouble, . . . these break ups made me very sad and depressed. Then a year ago, last October, I saw that program that Mr. Amini had made for satellite television, that made me feel much better. I got the phone number from the program and followed it.”

Mohammad, a postoperative FtM, in his late twenties at the time of interview and a successful information technology engineer working in a government office, put it in these terms:

Ever since I remember, I fought against accepting I was a girl, didn’t want to wear girls’ clothes, play girlie games. When I was young my older brother (sixteen years my senior) and his wife had problems with me but my father (my mother died when I was six) didn’t notice anything. Generally in these early years, families pay no attention [to cross-gender behavior], they think at puberty, once sexual needs kick in, things will work out. But this is a big mistake. They keep silent, hoping that day will come. They say nothing to the kid, because they are scared that talking about it will further deepen the problem.

In recent years, a growing number of child psychologists and social workers have begun to write in alarming language about these childhood cross-gender tendencies and their presumed causal contribution to gender/sexual non-normativity. The psychologists’ narrative also informs much of the press coverage of this topic. But, at least for the moment, parents generally seem to treat these childhood playful interests as cute, as passing, rather than as worrisome.

The alarming moment for parents kicks in with adolescence and the emergence of sexual desire. Here a gender difference emerges. Girls interested in “boyish” activities and sports are sometimes warned that their femininity (often taking the form of a dubious concern with the possible rupture of the hymen) may become compromised. Parents begin to warn against very close relations with other girls that may leave one open to the charge of being someone’s baruni, damaging one’s reputation. In general, however, parents tend to consider girls’ homosocial/sexual relationships to be quite benign and something that eventually will be “cured through marriage.” A male adolescent interested in activities considered “girlie” (such as dance, gymnastics) is warned that he could become kuni—an anally penetrated male body—if he did not wise up. Parental fear of the possibility of their son becoming kuni brings much earlier and much harsher measures to bear on the adolescent; these are the years of becoming subject to severe parental supervision, restrictions, and sometimes harsh punishments. Even after Houri had left home and moved to
Tehran, she continued to be hounded by her mother. When her parents found out that she was transitioning, they sent her a friendly invitation to come home to Damavand for a visit; when she arrived they locked her up in their house to make sure she didn’t return to Tehran. She managed to escape when she was left alone with her sister; her mother eventually caught up with her back in Tehran and filed a complaint with the police, charging her with moral corruption and engaging in sex work. Houri spent a whole week in detention before she could get the judge to check her file with the lmoi and clear her name. When Tahmineh ran away from home in Abadah, her father found out where she was staying in Tehran and filed a charge of “kidnapping” against her because she was still underage and in his custody.

Arezu, an MtF in her late forties from Urumiyah, had a particularly horrific adolescence, but this was by no means completely out of the range experienced by MtFs, especially for the generation whose teenage years coincided with the 1980s. I met Arezu through Kamran, an FtM I had met at the Mirdamad Clinic. Kamran was also from Urumiyah. On my home town visit with Kamran, I had casually wondered how different the earlier generation’s path of transition had been; Kamran volunteered to introduce me to Arezu, if she would agree to meet with me. Two days later, Arezu showed up at my hotel with her husband. He had accompanied her only to be sure she was safe with me, worried that this might be some journalistic stint with cameras and intrusive questioning. Soon he left us alone.

Arezu lived the life of a successful caterer, wonderful mother, and caring wife. Although based in a provincial town, her wedding planning and catering services had by now become nationally known. “I get clients from all over the country now,” she said proudly. She had been married for sixteen years, had a twelve-year-old son (through adoption), and—like almost all postoperative transes I had come to know—except for her husband, a few close kin, and a couple of other transes, no one knew anything of her previous life. “I changed my domain of social circulation completely,” she explained. Her narrative began with early childhood. “When I was about three years old, I fell in love with belly dancing. I still love it.” Our common passion for belly dancing went a long way toward getting the conversation rolling. “There was this Egyptian dancer, Samia Jamal. They used to show her shows on television in the 1960s and 1970s. I would tie a few colorful pieces of cloth around myself and imitate her. Everyone in the family loved my performances; they laughed, clapped, and cheered me on. My father was in the army and every year on the birthday of the crown prince, there would be festivities in the Officers’ Club. All the kids would line up to get gifts. I always lined up in the girls line to get a
girl’s toy. By the time I was ten, I had learned a lot of cooking and that is what I wanted to do professionally.”

Growing up in what she described as a “strict and religious family,” her first conflictive memories began in middle school, when she became friends “with another boy like myself”:

He said he had a boyfriend, we spent a lot of time together, and I learned from him how to telephone other boys and flirt with them in a girlie voice. When someone would suggest meeting me, I’d never call them back. I was too scared. But unfortunately, my friend was more willing, and one day he brought a friend of his boyfriend who wanted to have sex with me. I let it happen, but was devastated. I went home and took a whole bottle of sedatives, hoping to die. My older brother noticed and started talking with me, trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I told him I was just tired of life. Since then we have become very close. He is still my close friend and supporter. . . . In those years, I had already read articles in the magazines, or in books about men who lived as women, there was this secretary to a king, of France, or maybe England, only after his death people found out he was a man.11 I started reading psychology books, wanted to learn more about woman-presenting males and masculine-presenting females. In these same years, my friend suggested that we should start injecting estrogen.

“You could just do that?” I asked.

Yes, you could buy it from pharmacies and inject yourself. So we both started doing it. Both of us quickly developed womanly bodies, just as you see me right now. I used to pluck every single hair from my face. But changing sex—that was like a dream, a complete fantasy that one read about, not real. My desire to become a woman was aroused when one day in the basement I found a pile of old magazines that had articles about men who had become women. I realized this could be possible. . . . I never completed my high school education. In the first year, I was the center of other boys’ attention, but even though I enjoyed it, it tormented me since I knew all they wanted was sex. I fell in love with my biology teacher and with him I experienced the pleasure of being touched, being embraced, and loved. I dropped out of high school after the first few months. These were years of feeling tormented; I enjoyed the pleasures of being desired by other young men but also felt this was inappropriate and would always feel deep regret afterward. By the time I was eighteen, I had a few friends of my own kind [hamjinsan-i khaud—in this context meaning of the same genus, males who wanted to
be women], my breasts were quite large, and I always had my hair long and very clean-shaven face. My mother had started noticing my breasts and was becoming concerned and nosy. So I decided to openly tell my family. This was also during the early post-revolutionary years. I was picked up by the kumitahs several times on the charge of not veiling properly [badhijabi], and then when they would realize I was a male, they would take me home and tell my family not to let me go on the street this way. My family, except for the brother who supported me, started treating me really harshly, my father and one of my brothers (I have four brothers) would beat me up, pull my hair and cut it with scissors, cut my nails; . . . from one of my brother’s friends I learned that Dr. Mehrabi treats people like me and went to him in Tehran with one of my brothers. He was very good about it. He explained the situation, and told my brother “You have to realize you have a sister not a brother in her/him.” My brother seemed to be accepting and promised to convince my father. We went back to Urumiyah. But my father was unmoving. He locked me indoors, hoping I would break down. I insisted that I wanted to be myself. After locking me up didn’t work, he committed me to a juvenile correction center for a two-month stay. It was there that I was targeted by the librarian who repeatedly raped me. I used to cry at night, thinking my father sent me here so I wouldn’t become a kuni, and here I was letting myself be anally penetrated to survive. Oddly that thought would give me a sense of perverse revenge pleasure. After my time was over and I came back home, one day a friend of one of my brother came to our house to see him. We met as I opened the door. He told my brother, “I met your sister and want to marry her.” My brother explained my situation to him. He said it didn’t matter, he would take me to Europe, pay for my sex change and we’d get married. He gave an engagement ring for me to my brother and sent his family to ask for my hand. My father blew his top; he kicked them out of the house, then bound my hands and threw me into a room, and with my older brother started beating me up. They said either change your thinking or die. I said I’d die. They gave me a packet of something and I took it. Within the hour I started vomiting violently, they took me to the bathroom and left me there, I was throwing up blood violently; by this time my mother was beside herself and intervened; but they didn’t want to take me to a hospital and get into trouble. They started trying to wash my stomach, fed me milk, slapped me to keep me awake. Once my condition improved a bit, they threw me into a room and locked me in. After a week, I started thinking this wouldn’t do; I have to get out of here. So I began to behave more calmly and said I would listen to them. For a month or so I played this
role. Then I ran away with a bit of savings I had. I went to a nearby town, and with the help of another woman-presenting friend, I found lodging with an old woman who needed help with housework. This was a good arrangement for me. I don’t know how, but my father and brother managed to find out where I was, and they came and took me away. Back to the same treatment. They started taking me to psychologists. My father took me to the Legal Medicine Organization of Urmium, where the doctor told him, “Why can’t you understand, she is a girl, even if you kill her you can’t turn her into a boy.” But nothing would move him. I had another suitor who wanted to marry me. I was close friends with his sister and went to their house a lot. I used to leave our house and after a few blocks put on a chador. My father rejected him too. I ran away from home two more times, each time starting anew, and each time my father would find me. Twice more I attempted suicide. Once my father sent some kumitah thugs to arrest me; they took me and flogged me really hard. Another time I was picked up on the streets near a tomb I had gone to visit for ziyarat [visiting a saint’s tomb for prayer] to feel peace. Each time, I got twenty-five lashes. That is when I decided I was going to cut my genitals myself even if that meant bleeding to death. I got some numbing medicine from a pharmacy and locked myself in the bathroom, but after a while the pain came back and I passed out, bleeding on the floor. My younger brother noticed, my mother helped and they took me to a hospital. When I gained consciousness, the first thing I touched were my genitals; I was devastated, they had stitched them right back, after all that. . . . This was my life. . . . Then they started saying either you leave this house and we never want to see you, or you agree to marry a woman and settle down. I left home when I was twenty-one and began life from zero again. . . . Sometimes I tell Kamran and a few other kids I know, you guys don’t know what the hard times were like. You whine and complain if someone in Bihzisti talks rough with you. You haven’t tasted the lash.\textsuperscript{12}

There is another domain in which the legal legibility of transsexuality has improved lives: vis-à-vis parents and for parents vis-à-vis family and neighbors. When Arezu would tell her brothers and father “I am a woman,” they would hear her statement to mean “I am kuni, I am a same-sex-player.” In the same way, Arezu’s own vocabulary for the articulation of her desire and need used cross-sex/gender statements and practices. As she said, “In those days none of these categories, transsexual, homosexual, gid, etc. were known to me. I would say, ‘I am a woman, you can’t force me to become a man,’ and my father would take out his belt and say ‘I will make a man out of you.’” The wide circulation

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of the discourse of transsexuality and the insistent official distinction between transsexuality and homosexuality—as it comes through such statements as “parents must realize if their child is transsexual, s/he is not deviant”—has enabled trans adolescents to say to their parents “I am not homosexual, I am transsexual.” As Pahlavani, a therapist who worked closely with families at the TPi, put it,

Some families would be happier if I told them their child had terminal cancer than gid; their immediate reaction is that their child is homosexual and that is such a shameful thing [nang]; the transsexuals themselves often talk about the intense fear they experienced when they thought they were homosexual and there was no way they could tell their families. It comes as a relief to them when they realize they are transexual. . . . Most of them are unfamiliar with the existing religious opinions sanctioning srs . . . we need a lot of social education. It is what we achieved with addiction and with infertility. It took a lot of social education to make these issues understood as medical issues that need treatment; still a lot of families keep these issues a “family secret.” This is the same thing. Like addiction and infertility, people have to learn to accept it as something that must be addressed [zarurat].

The religious-legal-medical discourse sanctions trans identification and discourages/prohibits same-sex desires and practices. It denies one set of auto-narratives the possibility of public cognition even as it opens up the space for the other—even if it is in the form of a sociomedical problem along the lines of addiction and infertility. It also has enabled parents to save face among family members and neighbors by presenting their “problem child” as a clinically diagnosed case, not a moral deviant. Mohseninia, a TPi social worker, similarly emphasized both the “ignorance of parents about religio-legal status of transsexuality,” and the importance of family support to trans persons:

These kids [in bachchah-ha] really want to have their families’ affirmation [ta’yid], but instead they face denial [inkar]. Some just leave and say we don’t want this family, how long can we wait to get their consent. It takes a long time for families to come around, especially with boys [MtFs]; it is easier with girls [FtMs], it is a cultural issue here, . . . it is really hard for families, they ask “How can we tell our neighbors that for twenty-five years we had a son, now we have a daughter?” . . . We use examples of tss who have very successful lives after surgery. But they also hear stories of sex workers . . . so we tell them that is precisely why their support is critical. People who turn to sex work have lost their homes.13
At first blush, this seems to simply regenerate the completely abject position of homosexuals—and it does that, no doubt. But it also has allowed some, gays in particular, to have a more semi-open life by going under the mantle of trans (and allowing their parents to save face under that category).

Visible legibility has its paradoxical costs as well. As far as some families are concerned, so long as a son has not transitioned, “the problem” can be kept confined to the four walls of their house—or, as we have heard, locked in the four walls of a room. If an MtF is not already expelled from home, once s/he moves “into the habit,” once s/he is post-transition, “the problem” becomes public—the neighborhood and the larger family will all “know” that this family has/had a “deviant son.” “The problem” becomes a publicly visible scandal, no longer a containable family secret. MtFs tend to aspire to break out of the identification of their desires and practices with homosexuals. Yet, even after transition that affiliation continues to weigh on them in the eyes of many parents and the larger community of their sociality. Paradoxically, post-transition MtFs may be perceived as even more threatening and viscerally repugnant to many normalized persons since, in their eyes, they have taken on a legitimized publicly circulating face of being kuni. Homosexuals—because they tend to live under the social radar—are in a category that people could choose to not see and therefore would not have to face among their kin and neighbors (and perhaps themselves). MtFs seem to refuse invisibility. The legality and public visibility of transsexuality thus paradoxically make MtFs at times a greater threat to the normative sexual/gender order of things than homosexuals, who tend to live often unobtrusive lives. Except for occasional run ins with the morality squads, other government institutions do not concern themselves with this subgroup. As one Ministry of Health official put it, “They don’t ask us for anything; we don’t have to get involved with them.” A trans activist confirmed the same: “They are invisible in society, they fade into the general population, unless they want to make themselves noticed [matrah kunand]. But transes, that is a different story. Everyone says transes harm society and society harms them. Sometimes, we get picked up for badhijabi [mal-veiling]; this is especially terrible for those who don’t yet have their certification. They are taken to Vuzara station and get roughed up. By the time you prove you are in the process of getting your certification, you have spent several days in detention.”

Like Mahnaz, Arezu talked about dreams and spiritual experiences; hers foretold of reaching her desired end. The night before the cleric told her she was a woman (see note 12), and could—indeed should—use the chador and magna’ah at all times, she had a dream.
I was in the middle of a vast desert, I saw a large mausoleum, someone’s grave; it was cubical in shape, covered with a glass container. Inside it, there was a hood, a full suit of armor, and several other battle-related objects; there was a man there, a respectable person. I told him, “I am lost, where am I?” He said, “This is Karbala.” I asked “What are these objects?” He said, “They belong to the martyred Imams.” Then I noticed a woman’s ‘abayah there. I asked “What is that?” He said “This belongs to Hazrat Zahra.” I said “What a nice ‘abayah.” He said “This is for you to take. Do you want to wear it? It is yours, take it.” I startled out of sleep. But then the next day I actually went officially into a woman’s habit.

The reach of “spirituality” for self-defined “not-religious” trans persons extended, beyond dreams of transition, to old age, death, and life beyond. When I asked Yunes, an in-transition FtM, if s/he had considered the option of living as a man but without srs, s/he said, “You know, the one thing that makes me sure I do want to do surgery, even if not immediately, is old age. When I imagine myself as elderly, I really want to be an old man not an old woman. When I die, I want something about a man to be written on my grave, not about someone who lived as a man.” Imagining death had come up in several other conversations. Because the srs operations were not of high quality, many corrective surgeries had to be performed to complete the process. Both MtFs and FtMs had explained the reason they were putting themselves through these multiple surgeries in terms of “when my body is being washed for burial, I want the washer (wo)man to see a completely (fe)male body.”

The workings of religious and spiritual concepts are, of course, more complex. Zaynab’s strong religious beliefs, which allowed her to see Mahnaz as a sign of God’s creative powers, had its reproachful side as well. On two occasions, she was, openly and in front of Mahnaz and Taymur, disapproving. Zaynab sharply criticized Mahnaz for “looking at me with lustful eyes. She looks at me as a man would. I am a married woman. That isn’t right. Only my husband has the right to look at me like that.” For Zaynab, Mahnaz was simply a man. In another conversation, she quietly murmured to me, “I don’t think it is right that Mahnaz continues to live with Taymur. That constitutes sodomy; that is forbidden.” In her narrative, lavat/liwat (sodomy) did not index anal intercourse—whether between a husband and his wife or between two men. For Zaynab, any sexual intimacy between a man and a person of manly identification, even though Mahnaz at the time had a fully female body, constituted forbidden sex between two men. In her eyes, it was not Mahnaz’s body that

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mattered. While religious scholars such as Hujjat al-Islam Kariminia may consider sex/jins of the physical body to be the final arbiter in defining a person’s sex/gender as far as rules of fiqh are concerned, that primacy does not generalize into some universal Muslim belief and practice. Zaynab’s spiritualized Muslim-ness takes the sex/jins of the soul as determining the sex/gender of Mahnaz.

Moreover, Zaynab’s discomfort points to the dominance of the modernist narrative of marriage as a contract between “opposite sexes.” With the transformation of marriage—from a passage into adulthood and a contract that created a conjugal home for licit sex and procreation into a romantic venture between a man and a woman, initially as complementary and later as opposite sexes—marriage acquired a heterosexual/gender dynamic that has now taken over larger cultural domains. The opposite positing of sexes within marriage has worked to produce men and women more generally as opposites of each other in multiple domains, such as temperament, feelings, emotional needs, and sexual drives—recall that even how one squeezes one’s toothpaste tube has become genderized!

The binarizing dynamic works beyond the heterosexual marriage and its patterning of man/woman as opposite sexes. It works as well to sharply heterogender/heterosexual patterns of non-normative relations; the masculine-presenting female and the woman-presenting male are necessarily viewed as practicing what is considered sexually masculine and feminine.

This pervasive binarizing work of the modern conceptualization of marriage, moreover, works through and contributes to a regeneration of cultural parameters within which gender, sex, and sexuality need not become distinct categories in defining living practices or patterns of (self-)cognition. The circulation of a single word, jins (and its variations, such as hamjins-khvah, tarajinsiyyat, etc.), keeps anatomical body significations, gender identifications, and sexual desires tightly together. This tight conjunction has both enabled the reform of practices concerning the changing of body to align its gender/sexuality with its sex and has set the parameters within which these changes are imagined and enacted. It has contributed to the structure of self-cognition and narrative presentation among trans persons. The persistent pattern of a tight transition from a cross-gender-identified childhood to an adolescence marked by sexual desire for one’s own genus/jins speaks to the indistinction among gender/sex/sexuality.

Mohammad’s narrative on these critical years was echoed by numerous other trans persons, both FtM and MtF:
When I entered middle school, this dualism [feeling I was a boy when everyone else thought I was a girl] became much stronger for me because I started having sexual desire. I felt there was something problematic about my sexual desire. At that age, we don't know ourselves. I felt I was attracted to girls . . . but I too [like my father and older siblings] thought things would work themselves out. But these conflicts intensified. From second grade in middle school I had girlfriends . . . my relationship with my girlfriends was different from that of two ordinary girls [dau dukhtar-i ‘addi]. In those years, because girls are restricted in their relations with boys, when there is a girl with my kind of tendency, other girls become attracted to her. For this reason, we can establish such relations very easily. At that time, I had heard that such relations are called same-sex-playing, but I believed that I was not a same-sex-player because I felt I did not accept myself as a girl, I am not a girl so I couldn’t have same-sex-playing desires.

To others, however, in these difficult years Mohammad had to continue to self-present as a girl: “Sometimes I would ask older people if it were possible for two girls to get married. They would always say, ‘No, that is impossible, don’t even talk about it.’”

I asked: “When you say you had desire for other girls but did not consider yourself a same-sex-player, how did you reach that distinction? Was it because you thought same-sex-playing was a bad thing?”

No, no, not at all. Even what I was I thought was a bad thing. I was fearful; sometimes I would have nightmares about it. I was scared that if I told people I was not a girl, I would be arrested, put in jail, and killed. What was in my thinking was this: When they talk about same-sex-playing that means the desire of two people of the same sex for each other, but I didn't consider myself a girl at all, so I would tell myself I was a boy, everything about me is like a boy, so my feelings and desires were also like a boy’s; that is why I would not accept being considered a same-sex-player. So my problem [for myself] was what am I then? High school years were the worst; these issues created a lot of headaches for me! I was in an all-female social space, all day every day, surrounded by girls; just imagine sending a boy into a gathering of girls! Imagine what he would suffer, right when from a sexual point of view his body reacts, when his sexual hormones are active . . . I started romantic relationships that after a while would lead to such places. Because I accepted myself as a boy, the other side had no problem with me. Contrary to the people on the other side [meaning MtFs] who suffer greatly in
their high school years, we have great fun in high school! Girls never leave us alone. Sometimes, I was even approached by young married women. We had to watch out for school authorities though; if they heard anything, or sensed anything, they would report to our parents and we’d get in trouble.

Indeed, the narration of high school years by MtFs depicts anything but fun. Some are tormented by the fear of possibly being a “passive male homosexual.” Shahrzad, an MtF in her early thirties, had heard the word gay when in high school:

So I thought I was gay, and though at first I didn’t know exactly what it meant, I thought it meant a man with feminine feelings. When I heard more explanations, and that we are also called same-sex-player or same-sex-desirer [hamjins-gara], I hated these words. I became familiar with these concepts through the news or conversations with people like myself. For instance, I heard that Elton John was gay, that is, he is a man who has sex with men. This thought really tortured me. The other word that really tormented me was ivakhvahar. In our neighborhood, there was this guy known as ‘Ali Khaushgilah [Ali the beautiful]. He was killed, perhaps by his father, or someone else, I don’t know. When I was around nineteen, I heard about transsexuals, but there was no clear concept about it.

While some trans narratives were structured around “I always knew I was . . . ,” many other narratives, whether those of MtFs or of FtMs, were focused around years of struggle for self-cognition, defined sharply by the delineating line between trans- and homosexuality. As already discussed in several chapters, this is a differentiating line generated by dominant legal, religious, and psychobiosexual discourses. The grid of cognition is premised on sorting into two either/or categories—MtF or gay, FtM or lesbian—and is especially punitive over the MtF/gay distinction on the fiqhi, legal, and state levels. It informs the media coverage as well. Over and over again, well-meaning commentators, including interviews with officials of Bihzisti published in the dailies, center on how the public, but especially the families, must learn and recognize this critical difference—that transsexuality is not a moral deviation and trans persons must not be treated as “bad people.” This is also why so many trans persons, at least in publicized domains, say, ever insistently, “we are not same-sex-players.” It has become a grid of self-cognition through dis-identification.

Often the disavowal of homosexuality out of transsexuality verges on homophobia.17 When the Thursday meetings at the offices of Psychology and Society were shut down in November 2006, it set off a new round of discussions on
In a Bihzisti meeting (January 7, 2007) Sina, who had acted as the coordinator and was seen as a leader of the Thursday meetings, was criticized by several trans persons for his responsibility: He had advocated for and welcomed the presence of gay men and lesbian women to these meetings. The presence of gay men was held as responsible for the neighbors’ complaints that caused the loss of the meeting space. Sina’s explanation—that many MtFs were a lot more visibly provocative than gay men, who were virtually indistinguishable from “ordinary” men—was not persuasive.

Mulk-ara was said not to socialize with Houri because she was rooming with Zia, a self-identified gay man. On other occasions, her disavowal was articulated in more utilitarian language: “They introduce themselves as trans and even go and get certification in order to get military exemption and do other things, they ruin our position and have multiplied our problems.” Sina, however, disagreed with this argument: “To the contrary, because they are not recognized and have to worry about threats, homosexuals [bachchah-ha-yi humausikchual] behave a lot more cautiously than transes [bachchah-ha-yi tirans].”

“We are women not same-sex-players,” MtFs emphasized over and over again, at least in public pronouncements. Taraneh put it in these words (in the Yad-i yaran TV documentary): “A same-sex-player, even if he is maf’ul [passive], he’d never use makeup. People should know this: if a guy goes out in cross-appearance [zahir-i mubaddal], if he wears makeup, they should not view him through the same-sex-player lens; this guy loves to be a woman, her/his thinking is feminine, and thinking is what human character is about.” This narration of a not-same-sex-player feminine male retains the continuity between MtF transsexuality and woman-presenting males of the 1970s; yet it is distinct in that it seeks to exclude any notion of homosexuality from its domain. Taraneh continued:

This person is really a woman. It is nature’s fault that s/he was born male and has to become female. The easiest criterion I can offer you for recognizing which male is a same-sex-player and which transsexual is to look at the person’s appearance. A same-sex-player male goes for same-sex-playing with a full male appearance. But the male who uses makeup, puts on lipstick, this person is not a man. S/he is a woman. S/he has male chromosomes, so was born male, but from the point of view of subjectivity [zih-niyat], behavior, temperament, s/he is perfectly a woman. . . . We are not same-sex-players; I personally detest same-sex-playing, even though many of my best friends are same-sex-players—this is because we understand each other.
Taraneh’s emphasis on appearance is noteworthy: the difference is visible on a person’s surface; one does not need to excavate it from any depth. Ironically, Kia was sitting on the same panel—he was a young man whom everyone, including Taraneh, would insist was not trans but gay, and yet aspects of his appearance Dr. Usku’i noted as feminine: his shoulder-length hair, his manicured fingernails, a touch of mascara.

While some trans persons, and others for that matter, have come to treat homosexuality as a linked, similarly pathologized, and to-be-tolerated “condition,” for many, the recognition of transsexuality as a “disorder” has contributed to the further categorization of homosexuality as a “willed deviation.” Mohsen, a postoperative young man with Klinefelter syndrome, put it this way: “I think same-sex desire is a moral deviation, but the desire for changing one’s sex is related to one’s brain, to what one thinks. People who desire sex change, even if they have sex with a woman before [sex-change] operation, never exhibit their genitals, they cannot accept having sex as a womanly body with another woman. It is not at all same-sex-playing. . . . But those who are same-sex-players are happy with their bodies.” As the diagnostic discourse about transsexuality has gained near hegemony, the desire for sex change as something beyond the person’s willpower is underscored: “It is not a frivolous desire, it is not a whim,” one therapist emphasized in a television documentary. The implicit, and at times explicit, foil here is that same-sex desire is a frivolous desire. It is this insistent distinction and pushing of homosexuality to “willed deviation” or “frivolous desire” that has, in recent years, opened up a conversation among gays and lesbians about whether perhaps they too need to embrace the dominant narrative of transsexuality as a “born”—“not acquired”—condition for themselves.

Despite his defense of gays’ (and lesbians’) presence at their meetings, Sina’s self-cognition narrative also was differentiated along a tight gender/sex binary: “I am not lesbian, I get offended if someone calls me that,” Sina said. “It is fine to be a lesbian, it is just not me. Before I went abroad to study, a couple of doctors told me, ‘go there and live as a lesbian.’ I guess I could have. But that is not me. If I am in a relation with a girl, I want her to treat me as a man, I want her to feel she has a man in her life.”

Yet the boundaries are not as clear as it would seem. In more private settings, many would agree that, before the operation, their desires and practices are not distinguishable from those of people with same-sex desires. As Sina put it, “I guess my relation with my girlfriends, before my transition, was similar to lesbian relations.” This was a particularly vexing issue when it came to MtFs who had used hormones for many years, had a womanly body shape,
and had perhaps removed their testes as a result of atrophy and its complications, but had not pursued the removal of the penis and vaginal construction. Were their sex lives homosexual or heterosexual? The uncertainty made both clearly postoperative MtFs (such as Mulkara) and clearly gay-identified men very uncomfortable.

Zia attributed the whole problem to the tight gender binary in the society at large.

You see, part of the problem is that in our society there is a big emphasis on who is a man and who is a woman. That is why sexual minorities have become limited to the two categories gay and trans. If other positions would become known and accepted, like lady-boy, gay queen, she-boy, drag queen [all these words were pronounced as in English], I bet you fewer people would go for surgery. Many are just like me; they like to dress up as women. But they don’t know how to manage life like I do. They are incompetent, so they complain. Others, like Mulk-Ara, say so-and-so was once married and has children, so he couldn’t be a trans; he couldn’t be gay. But this is stupid. People used to be married off at an early age; their parents chose their spouse and married them off.

Note that Zia, like several other gay men who have become more connected with the virtual spaces and discourses of sexuality, have begun using the notion of “sexual minority.” This is a recent emergence. One university student spoke of it disapprovingly: “it is an intellectual gesture, they don’t want to opt for an identity and say what is the difference, gay, trans, whatever, we are all sexual minorities.”

The sex/gender/sexuality indistinction, along with its tight binarization, have made it difficult to conceive of postoperative sexuality as anything but heterosexual. When in a conversation with Sina, Zia, and Houri I sounded a dissident note by suggesting that not all postoperative transsexuals are straight, and gave the example of American MtFs I knew who were in relationships with women, everyone looked perplexed. Zia eventually broke the silence and said, “I don’t understand. A man does srs to become a woman so that she can pair up with a man, s/he doesn’t do the operation to become a lesbian.” Sina added, “So what was the point [of transitioning]?” and Zia added, “Probably she was one of those transes who rushed into transition and later regretted it.”

An often-recited marker of distinction was how one felt about one’s born-body. Mehran spoke in very strong terms about disliking his former female body: “I never took a shower with my clothes off.” Sina explained that over the previous few years he had developed several close relationships initi-
ated through the Internet, but despite much emotional pain, in each case he couldn’t bring himself to meet the woman in his preoperative body. Several others, both MtFs and FtMs, indicated that they could not allow their lovers to see their bodies before their transition: “When I am with my lover, s/he wants to see someone of the opposite sex next to him/her.” This was a common refrain. For those born female, this often shaded into hating to be in manteaurusari (long loose tunic and headscarf)—the iconic sign of public womanhood. Before transition, many wore this outfit only in high school or if they needed to go to a government office. If a female-bodied person didn’t seem to have any trouble being in manteau-rusari, this was read as a sign that she was lesbian not FtM. “Women, straight or lesbian,” played with the shape and color of their manteau-rusari, Sina told me. “For [pre-transition] FtMs, we don’t want to waste money on it and just wear drab black ones, if we have to.”

Yet the issue was not as fixed as some insisted. Cyrus—most often self-identified as gay, though at least twice he had considered transitioning—talked about his discomfort with his male body in his late teens. But he learned, he said, to come to terms with his body by going to classes and learning ballet and other dances, as well as engaging in what he named as “Buddhist meditation practices.”

Delara, the nineteen-year-old preoperative FtM from Urumiyah, was not very strongly inclined to undergo bodily change; she knew she could live as a trans-dressed male once she had her certification. But, she said, “This is not Tehran. First, I am worried about getting a lot of street harassment; but most importantly, that would not be an option acceptable to my family, or to people around us more generally. They will all then think I am really a same-sex-player.” If you are a certified trans and stay at that stage, not only are you thought to be abusing the legal system but you are also assumed to be “really” a same-sex-player—a conceptual weight as important for the person as for her/his family, friends, and neighbors. This issue came up repeatedly in the hearings of the commission at the TPI. When Zahra, a twenty-five-year-old FtM from Lahijan, was asked by one of the psychologists on the commission, “If you could live in a man’s clothes, would that not be enough? If you could live like a man from all points of view, would you be willing not to go for sex change?” Zahra’s response indicated the challenges of sustaining a space for nonoperative trans living: “I have lived in Lahijan for the past twenty years; my father is a well-known figure; my family will not accept it; I will have problems with my partner; our society will not accept it; I myself cannot accept it.”

The issue of family acceptance is a critical parameter in self-cognition and
transition decisions. Family severance is a very serious social issue; much of one’s life is defined and made possible (or impossible) through one’s location within an intricate network of extended family members, family friends, and acquaintances. Thus, severance from family often means not only emotional hardship and homelessness for prospective trans persons, but also a loss of education and job opportunities. Most significantly, in many trans narratives, it is the pain of the emotional break that remains central. Many successful MtFs have gone the extra mile to reconcile even with the most hostile families. Arezu now speaks warmly and lovingly about how her family totally embraced her after all those years of punishments and final expulsion: “I am the apple of their eye now.” After transition, Houri immediately used the occasion of a family wedding to reconnect with her mother. Before that moment had arrived, she was plainly distressed and in tears every time something related to her family came up in our conversations. At times, estranged families take the first step, especially if they hear that their child is in a difficult situation. When Hamideh, an MtF sex worker, was busted on a drug raid, she called her mother to plead for bail money. Her mother obliged and that broke the ice of many years of abandonment. She is now occasionally visited by her mother, brother, and sister, although she is forbidden to visit them.

Huma, a preoperative MtF, described her family as religious (mu’min); her father, a bazaar goldsmith, had known a trans person, someone who had worked as a man all his/her life and only after death people realized s/he was female. This made it easier for him to finally accept that his own son was not masculine. Huma lived at home and would leave home as a man and change and put on makeup outside, sometimes at the home of a trans friend if they were going to a party, sometimes in quiet street corners. She was not taking hormones because, being at home as a young man, she had to preserve family respectability (abiru); she had only had laser treatment for her face.

For some trans persons, the struggle to locate oneself within terms of acceptability was framed within what they had grown up to associate with religious appropriateness. Suhayla, an FtM in his early twenties, was finishing law school at the time of his hearing in the TPI commission. He talked about his family as “religious and traditional” (mazhabi and sunnati) and considered himself similarly religious. “I have struggled with deep feelings of sin, was not sure if sex change was religiously acceptable [shar’i], so I spent quite some time studying the fatwas.” Like Zaynab, Suhayla indicated that he believed “in the primacy of soul [asliyat-i ruh] and have finally concluded that with a woman’s body I cannot fulfill the objectives of my creation.” Suhayla was married a year
ago under family pressure and had “exercised tamkin [in this context, sexual submission] to my husband because of my religious beliefs, but it became more and more stressful.” He finally decided to explain his situation to his husband, who “is very enlightened and supportive. I have come for my operation with his full emotional and financial support.” More recently, he had developed an intense relationship with a girl from Isfahan and spent extended periods of time there—two weeks at a time—to be with his girlfriend. “Once I accepted myself as a trans I started having sex with my girlfriend without feeling sinful.” He was very happy with this relationship, he said, and referred to her as “my spouse” (hamsaram).

For observant Muslims, a deep sense of “incommensurability” between remaining faithful and living non-shar’i lives seems to contribute to naming oneself trans and at times also to making a decision to transform bodily signs of sex/gender (jins). The former is closer to what Boellstorff has called “habitation of incommensurability,” the latter to its resolution.21

Despite whether it is articulated within a paradigm of sinfulness, for many trans persons it was critical to ask that question: “For us trans people, the first thing we have to deal with is: ‘Am I a homosexual [hamjins-gara]?” Kamran emphasized.

Because we don’t know; we all go through that stage. In Urumiyah Bihzisti, there was this woman, a social worker, who kept preaching at me. I told her, “Look, if I wanted to live against the Shari’a [khilaf-i shar’], our society has so many different layers that not only you who is sitting in the Emergency Committee, but even your more senior people many times over could not find out. I do not want to live as homosexual.” Iran has thousands of lesbian groups, but Iran doesn’t want to face up to it. They have parties. Of course they can live a good life. But that is not what I want.

For some, the certainty of to which category they belong remains painfully elusive and the struggle lasts for decades. Mehran, an FtM who was thirty-nine years old, is a highly successful and well-known photographer whose work has been exhibited in international forums. For many years, he had been considering transition; part of his hesitancy stemmed from a concern over how that would affect his career. When I interviewed him, he had done a lot of asking around but had not yet taken any steps; a gynecologist had offered to do her/his breast removal and hysterectomy free, simply because she was very fond of his art work; he felt he needed to explain why it had taken him so many years to finally come to the conclusion that he was trans. While his “difference from others” was a key thread throughout the narrative, it seems that several key
moments moved him toward a final self-cognition as *trans*—since our interviews he has completed transition and is now known under his male name.

Born into a large family with eight sisters and four brothers, all older than him/her, in the small city of Abhar in northwestern Iran, Mehran recounted a childhood of tomboyish, *shaytun* (devilishly naughty), *quldur* (tough) behavior. S/he was once bastinadoed and once beaten up (by the assistant principal, *nazim*) in school over disobedient “rabble rousing” behavior—encouraging students not to agree to do unreasonable favors either for more senior students or for teachers. S/he narrated these incidents with proud laughter. From her/his early years, s/he remembered a teacher whose daughter was a *trans*. I asked how s/he knew. “S/he always came to school in trousers not skirts.” They quickly connected and became best friends. “S/he was even more exaggerated than I was. Even to parties s/he came in trouser suits and with a necktie.” I asked if this friend had since undergone srs. S/he didn’t know; s/he had lost contact with her/him since moving to Tehran. “So how do you mean that s/he was *trans*?” I asked again, with my own inner urge to name his/her friend (and perhaps Mehran as well) “butch.”

Because s/he was just like me. S/he was completely manly; s/he did everything that men do. I am sure had s/he known about *transsexuality*, s/he would have changed sex. Like me, s/he was ignorant of this option. S/he used to openly bring his/her girlfriends to parties. I never did that. For one thing I was very strict with my girlfriends, I didn’t want them to be flirted with by other men or *transes* like myself. I didn’t want my girlfriend to be out late at night. My girlfriends asked my permission for everything, even if they wanted to go to a family party.

This latter sentiment was echoed by several other FtMs I got to know; it usually was talked about as a sign of their manly zealfulness, an honorable trait. Often it was narrated closely linked with stories of *javanmardi*—a term often translated into English as “chivalry,” with similarly associated attributes of generosity, courage, right-mindedness—the gender/sexual honorable temperament constituting one attribute of *javanmardi*.22

During our long conversations, Mehran several times emphasized that he never had any problem sexually speaking; he had had girlfriends ever since his middle school years. During high school, Mehran had had a very observant girlfriend and he also began to observe Muslim daily practices more regularly. That relationship lasted many years, until Mehran was pressured into marriage when s/he was twenty-four years old. The marriage lasted one night; the next day s/he moved back home. It took Mehran another year and a half to get
his/her divorce. His girlfriend broke off their relationship over his agreeing to get married. “Forty days later, as if she was done mourning for me, she got married and now has grown-up kids.”

Despite a string of girlfriends, Mehran said, something continued to make him unhappy. S/he completed her/his high school education by taking extension school courses (having been expelled from high school over political activism in the early 1980s) and then moved to Tehran to pursue his/her artistic interests. For the next three years, s/he went back to Abhar once a month to be with her/his girlfriend and visit family members. In Tehran, while finishing a special degree in photography, s/he began to see therapists to figure out what was up with her/himself. Soon s/he developed a very close relation with Dr. Mehrabi. Early on, he had recommended srs; this was back in the early 1990s. Why did he not pursue it?, I queried.

I was concerned about my mother; I knew my father would accept it, he was a scientist, up to date [pronounced as in English]; but it would have been very difficult for my mother in a small town where everybody knows everybody. Perhaps I was immature myself, and had not reached the depth and fullness of understanding that I have about myself now. One reaches the need for change through a process. I tried everything else. Once my work became successful, in the artists’ milieu here in Tehran, I had a very good male friend. We were really good together, spent a great deal of time together. He was attracted to me and at some point I thought if marriage would work for me, ever, it would be with him. So we got married, it was a disaster; I ruined a good friendship over that experiment. I even tried living with Helga, a German lesbian, who worked here for the UN for a while. We were together for over two years. It was Helga who first told me I was not a lesbian; she said when she had sex with me she felt she was with a man. Living with me, she said, was like living with a man, like a husband and wife, not like two women partners. She broke up the relationship over that. I tried everything before deciding on srs. I kept thinking that somehow without surgery I would be able to become happy. Finally, I came to the realization that I simply do not understand what it means to be a woman. If someone addresses me as khanum [a generic term of address for women], I am offended, as if it is a curse word. Let me tell you an incident. When I first went to become a member of the Association of Photographers, the secretary gave me a form to fill. Unthinkingly, instead of crossing out Mr. in the address box, I crossed out Ms. When the secretary asked me to correct the form, I was astonished. The break up with Helga really shook me up.

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still very good friends, but now I had to finally know what I was; I wasn't a 
lesbian, but what was I?

Mehran's next key critical moment was when he saw the screening of 'Attari's 
Sometimes It Happens. . . . Suddenly everything fell in place for him, he said. 
This is what he was, should have been, wanted to become.

The screening of that documentary, in the summer of 2006, was narrated 
by another interviewee as an event of enormous significance. I met Leila, and 
her partner Minu, through Nadereh. Nadereh I knew from the United States: 
an Iranian-American, self-identified lesbian who had returned to Iran in 2003, 
working with a women's NGO that helped generate employment for women in 
female-headed households. Back in the states she had once told me how easy 
it had been for her to find other lesbian women. Now in Tehran, when I was 
complaining about lesbian invisibility (to me) and explaining that I had had no 
problem finding trans persons and gay men, but lesbian women were few and 
far between, she offered to connect me with a lesbian couple, one of whom was 
considering transitioning. She said, “Maybe your research will help her out. I 
really don’t think she is trans.” By then I had learned that cognition by others 
was a critical component of one’s self-cognition and at times I would be re-
cruited as a “cognizant.”

Leila and Minu's neighborhood was already familiar to me. They lived in 
a rented apartment in a working-class area in an eastern part of Tehran. The 
neighborhood had changed character from a largely migrant residential area, 
and it was slowly being taken over by small workshop industries—carpenters, 
ironsmiths, automobile body shops, and so on. More settled migrants had 
moved on and rents were affordable; it had become an area with a lot of uni-
versity students from outside Tehran sharing apartments or other nonfamily 
living arrangements. Its recent history of migrant housing provided a culture 
of transiency that allowed for almost anonymous living.

Almost. This was not a New York–style anonymity where you may not know 
your nearest neighbor of fifteen years until one day something out of the ordi-
nary happened next door. Tehran's momentous urban explosion, accelerated 
because of the impact of the decade of war and the millions of war-displaced 
migrants, and its gradual spread and swallowing of the neighboring villages 
and small towns into its mega-metropolis shape, had resulted in a good deal 
of reconfiguring of neighborhoods in inner Tehran. No longer were neighbor-
hoods based around families and neighbors who were in the same location 
generation after generation. All this reconfiguration had created a situation 
in which rental arrangements had become widespread, so renters moving and
changing did not constitute suspicious activity. Nonetheless, everyone cared about who was next door. Were they respectable people? If they were young women or men, who and where were their families? Leila and Minu had rented as university students. Leila's family lived outside Tehran; it was perfectly acceptable that the two female university friends would share a rental. Moreover, both their families had visited them and the second-floor neighbors—a young couple with two small children—had met them. By now, that familiarity meant the young married couple kept a protective eye on Leila and Minu, which in their case was not a problem: almost all their visitors were other young university-age women. Homosocial safety could be assumed.

Zia and Houri's apartment was in this same neighborhood, just three blocks from Leila and Minu's address. Two other MtFs I had come to know well were not far away. Zia and Houri were living as “brother and sister” as far as the landlord and the neighbors were concerned. Both their families lived in Damavand. Houri's family did not know her whereabouts in Tehran, since her last run-in with her mother that had resulted in the week-long detention. She still visited her brother and his wife, who lived in Tehran, but no longer gave her address to any family members. Zia's mother occasionally visited Tehran, mostly for medical checkups, and then she stayed with Zia. On those occasions, Houri would move to a friend's house, as she was living as a woman (at that time she had not fully transitioned). Houri's boyfriend had been introduced to neighbors as her fiancé. All was well, except when they invited other MtFs or gay men to their place: Their guests would be given strict instruction about how to dress and appear outwardly so as not to make the neighbors uncomfortable and arouse their suspicions. As Zia once explained his nervousness when an invited friend was late, “this is a khafan [unpleasant, not up to the latest styles and fads] neighborhood.” Neighbors' discomfort and eventual suspicion could become cause for eviction or a visit by the local kumitah if they reported morally suspect activity.

One of the reasons that Leila gave for the easier living possibilities of lesbian couples was that a woman's not using makeup and not visibly displaying a womanly appearance did not raise suspicion among the neighbors. To the contrary; especially in a working-class neighborhood, she was perceived as a decent woman, not out there to flaunt herself to seduce men. “But when two men live together and one of them looks effeminate,” Leila explained, “neighbors keep them under surveillance. It is easy to tell a gay appearance, much easier than a lesbian one.”

Leila and Minu had met four years previously through a common friend at
Shahrud University, where they both attended classes. By the time I met them, they had been together for almost two years. A year earlier they had made a private commitment vow and wore identical rings. They had designed their own marriage contract on the model of legal documents, with all the usual specifics, such as *mahr*. “We don’t show it to anyone,” Leila said, “People would laugh at us!” I asked them if they knew about vows of sisterhood. They did not. Vows of sisterhood, historically a publicly enacted and celebrated ritual between two very special female friends, seem to have become unknown in the bigger cities, such as Tehran, over the past generation. Vows of sisterhood continue to be practiced in at least some provincial capital cities and smaller towns. Kamran’s sister Laleh (married with two children) had a sworn sister, as did their mother. When I first visited them, they introduced a young man who had dropped in as their cousin, adding, “well, almost a cousin; he is the son of our mother’s sworn sister.”

By the time I met Leila and Minu, their parents seemed to have come to a recognition of the special nature of their female friendship; and in the usual practice of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” no longer pressured either to get married. Indeed, a year after I had met them, Minu’s parents decided to help their young daughter and her school buddy by allowing the couple to occupy a small apartment they owned so that they need not negotiate the sky-rocketing Tehran rents. The major tension in their lives—and one of the reasons they had been eager to talk with me—was that among at least two other female couples with whom they were close friends, one of the partners was considering transitioning. Leila in particular felt under a “peer expectation” to look into srs as a life option. Indeed, for a time she had, and still occasionally did at the time I met them.

Leila narrated a childhood of growing up gender non-normative; certainly, she thought her parents wanted her to be a boy and treated her like one, and she believed that is why they didn’t have much trouble with her later life pattern.

All my middle and high school friends were boys; I thought of myself as a boy and went by a male name among them. All those years I hung out with my father; he was a site engineer and during summer vacations I would go with him and see what he did. I used to get a crew cut during the summer months. I wore proper female outerwear only in school, until I moved to Tehran for my university education. Then my father insisted I wear the right outfit always in public to avoid getting into any police hassle.

It was during her years at the university in Tehran that she observed other young women dating boys and was puzzled by her own total disinterest in men.
I really tried; I had several very close male friends but could not imagine touching them, kissing them. I even tried wearing makeup for a while and was pleased to be noticed by men; but this didn’t last long. The novelty wore off and it was a hassle to have to get up earlier every morning to have the time to make myself up. The more difficult part was that I also noticed I did actually fancy kissing girls, and then I actually enjoyed it. You know, there isn’t that much social awareness about transsexuality, lesbianism—I had not even heard these words till a few years ago. My initial thoughts were that I was a same-sex-player; that gave me a sick feeling, it made me feel a lot of guilt, I knew this was a sin. Don’t look at me now! I used to be a relatively decent Muslim; I used to do my daily prayers and my month of fasting. Now I have come to be at peace with sin [ba gunah kinar amadah’am]. For a while I kept fantasizing that I would move to another city and from the get-go live as a man and everyone would know me as a man and that would be my new life. With my first girlfriend, we kept talking about me waking up one morning as male. Well, this didn’t happen, and my girlfriend went and married a man. This was a big blow to me. I decided I would never have another girlfriend. I couldn’t imagine going through another break up. My father died just before I finished my university education. So then I moved back home for a while and became the man of the house. I have three sisters but no brother. I have very close relations with my mother. So one day I tried to explain to her my situation by saying, “I don’t think I can get married.” She promptly said, “I know, I will never pressure you to get married. Get married when you feel like it.”

“What do you think she meant when she said, ‘I know’?” I asked.

I am not sure, but she said, “I know you can’t get married.” This was when I had had my break up and I was putting all my energy into my career. Then I met Minu and suddenly realized I had been on the phone with her every night. In small towns, you know, people become family very quickly. Minu came and visited me once and my mother immediately treated her as family. Maybe she sensed something special was happening between us. By that time, I had decided I needed to move back to Tehran, for my work at least. My mother had always been very supportive of my career. So it all came together. My mother was quite comfortable with my move to Tehran; she actually sold her gold and put up the money I needed as advance [sarqufli, the “key fee”] for a rental place, and was fine with me rooming together with Minu.
Leila had finished school in architecture and then continued in interior design. She now has a very successful design firm, and relocation to Tehran was the right professional move. When they met, Minu was finishing a degree in mathematics and was planning to become a college teacher. Leila continued:

But it isn’t clear if my mother really knew what the nature of our relationship was. I think she kept thinking we were just very good friends. But I thought if she were so comfortable with the whole living arrangement, maybe I could tell her we are in love, we are a couple and that is that. So one day I started talking about it with her . . . she totally lost it, she started saying, “No, I don’t understand what you are talking about. Get her out of this house, the next time I come to Tehran I don’t want to see her here. Her parents live in Tehran, why doesn’t she live with them? Why are her parents so irresponsible and don’t take care of their daughter? You are playing with her life, okay, you never want to get married, but she needs to get married and if people know about her and you, she will lose all her chances of marriage. You are ruining her life.” So, for a while, the situation with my mother got really bad. I have always been so close to her that this was very upsetting to me. Then around the same time I saw Sharareh ‘Attari’s film [Sometimes It Happens . . .]. Now I totally lost it, I saw the film, I saw this hall full of transes, I started thinking maybe I was a trans; I started remembering all my fantasies about waking up male, of moving to another city and living as a man—Wow! It was possible to become a man. For three nights I couldn’t sleep, all day and night, that is what I was thinking about. I was in a complete mental mess. I kept thinking, well, it is true that for the past few years I have been focused on my career and have not thought about these issues, but suddenly I started having a lot of memories from earlier years—how I hated the maqna’ah [the required style of head-covering in schools and offices], how I had been upset when my breasts started to grow, and so on. I kept sending e-mails to a friend of mine who was abroad, explaining my thoughts and asking her what she thought I was. Then I would sit there and wait for her response! I didn’t then have enough of an income to go to a therapist, and didn’t dare to discuss it with my mother or anyone else. My friend would tell me, “No, no, you are lesbian” (I hadn’t heard the word before then) and would send me some site addresses to check and find things out. That would calm me down and get me settled for a while. Then I would suddenly remember, “But how come I didn’t like the doll my father had brought from Dubai and didn’t play with it? And then the next year when he brought me an airplane, I loved it so much that I didn’t open the box, I just wanted to keep it new forever.”
I was totally divided. One day I would think: “What is wrong with you, you have Minu, you are happy together, you have a good career developing, what does it matter if you are a lesbian or a transsexual? If you undergo sex change all you have gained in your career will be for naught. Your mother will probably have a heart attack and die. At the end of the day, you want to live with a woman and you are living with a woman.” Then the next day I’d hear there was another screening of the film, and I couldn’t stop myself from going there again. I’d see all these transsexuals, gays, and lesbians; you’d think that the hall was not located in Iran! You know, there was a period that the atmosphere was saturated with talk of sex change; everyone started thinking they were transsexual. In the party after the film screening, the main character, an MtF [Taraneh Aram], kept telling me she was sure I was a trans. The minute I took my maqna’ah off, she gave me a look and said, “Why are you wearing that? You should go out in male clothes. Let me see your nails. Hmmm. Short and no polish. I thought so. You are transsexual.” I would come out totally conflicted. Well, she must know, I would think. What the hell am I going to do now? What catastrophe. I am a transsexual. What to do? This is also when some of my friends decided to transition and kept encouraging me as well. Everybody was suddenly looking at me as if I was a trans, not a woman. Some of my close friends started taking hormones and developed facial hair and grew mustaches. That would make me think, oh wouldn’t it be nice if I had a nice mustache and a goatee? Then Minu and I could really get married. Right now every Nauruz each of us has to go to her own family. We start every New Year apart. This way we could be together at Nauruz.25

In the meantime, I had that big blow-up with my mother. After a few months, it was Nauruz and I went home for the occasion and to see what I could do to work things out with my mother. It was one thing for her to have somehow understood that I would never marry a man, but quite another thing to understand that I wanted to live with a woman I loved. I told her, “Listen, Mom, you think you are worried for me and my future. I am even more concerned for me and my future. You tell me I am ruining Minu’s life, but I am even more concerned that I am ruining Minu’s life. If you want Minu out of the house, you tell her.” I was thinking, after all, she had helped me financially to get that apartment in the first place and set me up, so she was entitled to put demands on me. She burst into tears, and I burst into tears—we just cried and cried. My older sister, Marjan, was around; she started to talk to me. I thought, “Oh good, she will understand, she is knowledgeable, I will tell her I am lesbian and she can explain it to my mother.” The word came out of my mouth, and my sister went ballis-
She said, “Stop, I would hate you if that were true.” At that point I got really pissed off and said, “You know what, like everyone else when you hear homosexual, when you hear lesbian, you only think sex, you imagine what horrible sex we do. You imagine we stick our fingers in each other’s ass. You can’t think love, two women loving each other. If you can’t understand that, stop mentioning Minu’s name.” That Nauruz break I really acted out my anger. Anyone in the family and especially among my married friends would ask, “Don’t you want to get married?” I’d say, “No, I really am married. You know, my friend Minu and I live together, just like you and [your husband].” Some of my friends thought that was cool; others thought I had gone mad and left me alone. But things were now out. After the Nauruz break, my mother came with me to Tehran. Minu had spent the break with her family. She came back. I was really scared, but contrary to my expectations, my mother treated her nicely. Actually in the evening, she suddenly said, “I am going to visit my sister [who lived in Tehran] and will stay the night there.” I blurted, “But why? You should stay here.” She said, “No, you [the plural shuma, not the singular tau] be comfortable, you need to be left alone. I’ll come back tomorrow.” Minu and I were so taken aback, we couldn’t believe things might actually work out with our families. At the end of her visit, the only thing my mother said was that she had sold her gold to help me with this apartment; if this was going to be a joint living quarter for both of us, Minu must pull her own weight. This was a bit disconcerting, but fortunately around then not only my work started doing well, but Minu also found a good job and we became totally financially independent from our families. That really did marvels. Everybody started to give us the recognition of two adults.

But this didn’t end my confusion over what I was. I told myself I was a lesbian, but there were moments that I felt if I transitioned, my life, our lives, would get better. For instance, a few weeks ago my sister visited me. Minu was not here. I knew Marjan would use the occasion to reopen the old conversation. She wanted to set me on the right path, she said. After a while I tried a new tack, I told her I was a transsexual. She hadn’t heard anything about that! So I explained to her that it meant my brain was male. She said, “So go and get cured.” I told her, “I would have to go through these various operations, would that make you happy? Will you tell your sister-in-law that you now have a brother and call me by a male name?” She said, “Of course not.” So I told her, “Why should I bother then; just accept me as I am and leave me alone.” Then she thought about it and said, “How long do you think Minu will stay with you? At some point, she will leave you and
“Where are you yourself these days? Still torn?” I asked.

Well, if I want to be honest, I think, well this transsexuality business, it is socially very useful. Of course I’d like to have an ordinary life, I want to be in society with my true identity, I want to be able to introduce Minu as my spouse, I want my life to be a legitimate life. This is my right. When I see I have so much trouble even with my own family, it is very tempting to say I am transsexual, at most I’d have to do some operations, but then I’d have a new shinasnamah [identity booklet] and Minu could become my legal spouse. If I have insurance, she can be covered by it too. We will have all the rights of a husband and wife. On the other hand, I don’t hate my female body, I don’t dislike that I am a woman; actually I enjoy being a strong woman. It makes me feel superior! The only thing is that I don’t enjoy socializing in girlie parties. Actually, after a period when we socialized in some trans and gay groups and some lesbian parties, we found that neither of us liked the atmosphere there either; we now tend to live our own lives. We are friends with a couple of other lesbian couples, but otherwise I don’t understand why I should socialize only with lesbians and transsexuals. We are both so much into our work; we don’t have the kind of time that lets us go to parties every night. To be honest, there are still occasions that I say I am transsexual; I am perhaps 70 percent lesbian and 30 percent trans. Perhaps even that is because in our country men are so much freer. Like I would love to go around the country on a bike tour. But I can’t. I could if I were trans. I don’t want to be trans, but on the occasions when there are a lot of trans people around me, like in the screening of ‘Attari’s film in the House of Artists, it appeals to me. So, now, I try not to hang out with that crowd. It is hard. Some of them are very close friends and work colleagues.

“Have you considered the possibility of going through the supervised therapy, getting the certification so that you could live as a man, in the male habit?” I asked.

“No, I wouldn’t do that. I’d be too scared that I couldn’t stop myself at that stage and would go through with the whole thing. I worry about losing Minu. It took a while for her to come to terms with loving me, being in love with another woman. Now, she says, she is not sure if she could love me as a man! How would her family react to my becoming a man? It is all too risky.”

“So most of your consideration, when you say there are times and places
that you feel transsexual, are socializing occasions?” I asked. “Yes,” Leila responded, “but also my career and finding housing!”

‘Attari’s documentary, Sometimes It Happens . . . was not a singular event. These were years of intense media coverage that many people now recall as critical for their cognitions. Zia, who in the Bihzisti meeting had introduced himself by saying, “Maybe I am gay, maybe I am trans; I am here to find out,” speaking about his own challenging years of trying to figure out what he was, said,

I went to several therapists. The first one was sure I was a trans. The second therapist put me on hormones to increase my male tendencies. Another one was too busy and let an intern take my case. This woman knew nothing; she would ask the most ridiculous questions: “What color do you like?” I’d say blue. She’d put me in boy column. “Do you play soccer?” No, I hate soccer; she’d say, “Well, you like blue but not soccer, you must be gay.” She’d ask me what pets I kept. I’d answer cats and dogs. That totally confused her. Then the main doctor took over the file; all he wanted to know was what kind of sex I liked. “Why do you like to be bott [pronounced as in English]?” Being gay to these guys only means anal intercourse. They almost made me into a neurotic before I realized this whole thing was rather stupid.

Part of the problem, he said, was that his years of indecision coincided with the years in which transsexuality had become a media topic; he kept thinking he had to make a decision. One day, he finally told himself: “You don’t want surgery anyway, so what difference would it make even if you knew whether you were ts or gay?” Perhaps the only benefit of therapy was for me to realize that whatever I am, this is what I am. I need to learn to live well as I am. Once I decided that, I realized that what I really wanted was to be in a long-term relationship with another man.”

Not all families are hostile and punitive. Some find ways of at least tolerating, if not supporting, their children’s living decisions. That is how Minu described her parents:

When I first met Leila, I had a boyfriend—actually a very nice man. I had met him through the Internet and it turned out he was from Shahrud, where I was attending university. Soon we met in Tehran and I introduced him to my family, who really liked him as well. Then I met Leila; at the time, she was still suffering from her break up. It was totally illogical; I fell madly in love with her. Really! All I wanted was to spend all my time with her. I went and told my parents I wanted an independent life. I was transferring from Shah-
rud University to the Open University in Karaj [near Tehran], and wanted to live with my friend Leila. My parents knew Leila. Actually my father had met her in a professional context and liked her a lot. First they said, “Sure, this is your life. We'll help you live independently.” But I think when I said I loved Leila and wanted to live with her, some alarm bells went off. “What do you mean you love Leila? You can love Leila and be friends, but have your own ordinary [ma’muli—the word has a connotation of normality] life. You can be friends with her even when you get married.” They started having second thoughts about me and Leila living together. After a while, my mother started to be softer [narm-tar shud]. She had two female friends, Sa’ideh and Mansureh, who, she said, “are like the two of you. I will take you to meet them and see if they are happy.” They had lived together and were such good friends that when Mansureh had to get married, she made it a condition that her friend would continue to live with her in the same house. They had lived together for many years; Mansureh had two grown-up kids. Recently they had decided to live separately. My mother wanted me to see that they were not happy, and that, after many years, they finally had to separate. So I went there and listened to their story. It turned out the reason that they separated was that Mansureh’s husband had started to harass Sa’ideh, trying to pressure her to have sex with him since she was living in his house. So I told my mother, “Let me have my own experience; I want to have the experience of living with Leila. If it doesn’t work, I can always separate.” So my parents finally said, “Okay, bism-allah, go ahead and try it.” So we started to live together. My parents like Leila a lot, but they keep a polite disapproving eye on my life. At the same time, they indirectly support us. It is strange. For example, they own an apartment and if the tenant moves out, they have promised to let us live there and pay them rent. That would be so much better for us. With Leila’s family as well, I now go with her and visit them in Shahrud. At the beginning, when I broke up with my boyfriend, all my relatives thought I had gone crazy. He was a really nice guy; we were going to get married in five or six months. So all my aunts thought that our break up was terrible; they keep sending new candidates my way. What can I say; they really think I must get married; they are trying to help.

Not all partners are supportive of their partner’s decision not to transition. Given the pressure of the marriage imperative, it is often the other way around. In two other couple friends of Leila and Minu, the “femme” side of the couple voiced their encouragement for their partner to transition so that they could marry. Ozra was very much for Yunes’s transition decision. When I met them...
in the summer of 2007, Yunes was already in male clothes but had not undergone surgery. Like Minu and Leila, they had met in university. At that time, Yunes had had another girlfriend, whose father was the person who introduced Yunes to the concept of transsexuality. An electronics engineer, “but well-read in psychology,” as Yunes put it, when his daughter had introduced Yunes to her parents, he had soon contacted Yunes to explain to her/him that s/he was a trans person and should get a sex change, but that he would be against his daughter marrying him/her anyway. He in fact intervened to break up that relationship. By the time I met Yunes and Ozra, Yunes had already obtained her/his TPI approval, though s/he had not pursued it to the IMOI for the final certification. S/he had one more year of university education and did not want to disrupt her/his life until graduation. S/he had started taking hormones, was happy with the growth of facial hair, and “had gone into the habit,” except for when s/he’d go to classes at the university. Yunes carried the TPI approval letter at all times. “It is very useful, sometimes the traffic police stop me, thinking I am an underage male driver; I have to show them my driver’s license, which is in my female name. Without the TPI letter, they would immediately book me for cross-dressing.”

Ozra seemed to be even more enthusiastic about Yunes’s srs than Yunes was. When I asked what she envisaged would change in their relationship after the operation, she talked about the acceptability of their relationship for her parents. “Otherwise, thinking about the complicated surgery, six hours of total anesthesia, and so on, I would probably stop him/her. Even now, I worry about it. I feel like s/he is losing some of the qualities I love since s/he has gone on hormones. I have to come to terms with certain behaviors that weren’t there before. . . . s/he has become a less sensitive person, a bit more rough, some characteristics that distinguished Yunes from other men are becoming paler by the day. So now I am trying to come to terms with this new person!”

Over and over, in trans narratives, a key moment of seeking answers to the kind of question Mahnaz had addressed to God—tell me what I am—is recited as being linked with a failed relationship, a terrible break up, often losing a lover to marriage. The first time Mohammad went to a therapist, on his own initiative, was when he turned eighteen.

I had a terrible break up when I was fifteen or sixteen. It really affected me, I became harsh, nervous, I started chewing my nails. That is what took me to a doctor, but I started talking about this issue as well. The therapist said that she had other such patients but this wasn’t her field and gave me names of other therapists, and advised me to finish my education first be-
fore I went for surgery. I already knew this surgery could be done in Turkey. When I was around eleven or twelve, there was a Turkish singer whose shows we watched on satellite TV; I heard many grown-ups murmur that this person used to be a man and had become a woman. ... Later I heard from others that this operation was performed in Turkey. So I started telling all my friends that when I was older I was going to Turkey to become a man. In the meantime, I had to pursue my education. At the time, I didn’t know we were legal in Iran. 27

Like Mohammad, Mahnaz talked about her middle and high school years as marked by intense desire for her school friends that would not go away. In high school, she said, she experienced her first serious love, a mutual romantic relationship that lasted for two years, before her lover’s family pressured her to leave Mahnaz and get married. This occasioned a serious breakdown: Mahnaz had to be hospitalized, and it took her three years to get back on her feet, she said. She never finished high school and took a full-time job at a travel agency to keep occupied. That is where she met her husband Taymur. He would come day after day to just see her and soon begged her to accept his love. After several years and consulting with her spiritual guide, she finally relented. Once married, she had been introduced to Vida, one of Taymur’s female cousins, who had lived with his parents since losing her own parents in a car accident when she was a child. “She was like a sister to me,” Taymur said. Soon Vida and Mahnaz became inseparable friends. Over the years, that relationship made the marriage bearable to Mahnaz. “I was so happy with Vida, and if the price of that happiness was to service Taymur [meaning to have sex with him], I could tolerate it.” Her relationship with Vida lasted almost ten years. Then Vida was courted and eventually decided she needed to get married “for real.” Mahnaz, by all accounts, went into a rage and tried everything to break up Vida’s engagement—unsuccessfully. It was only during this period that Taymur, according to his own story, realized that all the intimacies he had witnessed between Vida and Mahnaz had a different meaning than he had assumed: “They spent all their time together; either Vida was staying with us, or Mahnaz would go to her place, especially after Vida got a job in a nearby town and had her own separate place. When we were all sitting together, they always sat on the same couch and one of them had her head on the other’s lap, getting caressed, etc. I never thought anything of it then.” Since Vida’s marriage, Mahnaz no longer accompanied Taymur on visits to his family. Taymur went alone. Vida’s marriage affected Taymur and Mahnaz’s marriage as well. She now found it intolerable to have sex with him.
After failing to stop Vida’s marriage, Mahnaz experienced her second breakdown. “For six months,” Taymur recalled, “she just sat here on the living room sofa and stared aimlessly, sometimes watching satellite television.” Aimless it may have been, but, according to Mahnaz, that was also the moment of her rescue: “I was watching this program, on Omid-e Iran channel, and suddenly there were doctors and others talking about sex-change surgery. Suddenly, I realized this was my solution. I realized I wasn’t alone in the world, there was such an illness and there were doctors I could go to. If only I had known this earlier, I could have changed sex and married Vida myself.” She wrote down the telephone numbers given on the program, noted the name of the clinic, and set off for Tehran.

Marriage as a binarized heterosexualized contract thus not only has worked to define manhood and womanhood as opposite and clearly bordered categories, but it also deeply impacts one’s self-configuration as a trans person. Marriage constitutes a rite of passage to adulthood; it is an expectation that everyone must fulfill to be considered fully grown. Unmarried persons are incomplete, unfinished stories, not in any simple utilitarian sense (for instance, in order to have a child or not to grow old alone). Without a child, a married person has a problem to solve, but without marriage one has failed to achieve adulthood. As Zia once put it, “We live in a society in which one is not counted as a full human being until one gets married. It is thought that human nature demands completion through marriage. Otherwise you are half a human.”

Indeed, marriage is what it takes to stay in family, to secure one’s status within one’s natal family rather than leave it behind. Over and over, marriage decisions were narrated as turning points. Two self-identified gay men I interviewed extensively recalled that several times they had considered transitioning—each time turned out to occur at a moment of breaking up with a lover who had decided to get married. Male-male and female-female couples live under the severe threat of, and compete with, the marriage imperative. At times, “passive” males “overact” their femininity in a desperate attempt to avert the threat of a “real” woman and the loss of their male partner to marriage. The same is true of female-female couples: There are abundant sad narratives of long-term lesbian relationships breaking apart because the “femme” partner finally opted (or finally gave in to familial and social expectation) to marry a “real” man in spite of the heroic butch performance of her lover. This same pressure for marriage informs the dominant culture’s deep investment in the proper performance of masculinity and femininity and contributes to perceptions of gender-coded roles within same-sex partnerships.

This, perhaps even more than the illegality of same-sex practices and the
legality of transsexuality, pushes some people, who might otherwise define themselves as butch lesbians and effeminate gays, toward transitioning. They expect transition to make marriage available to them and, in a few instances, to salvage a threatened same-sex relationship. Nevertheless, relationships involving trans persons continue to remain under the threat of inauthenticity; the postoperative body continues to be received as not really the opposite body, but as body manqué, as good for fun but not for serious partnership. The body that was not good enough before continues to be not good enough after; it is often dismissed as a “plastic replica.” This is particularly so for MtFs for whom infertility—at the end of the day a much more serious accusation for a female—is added to sexual inauthenticity. It is generally more acceptable for couples with infertile males to adopt children or for the wife to undergo artificial insemination. Both these options are available to an FTM husband. For MtFs, a living womb is always a threat. Social pressures at times lead the partners to contemplate leaving a “fake” man or woman for a “real” one—as many postoperative break-up stories reiterate and repeat. Despite the circulation of such sad stories, the larger social pressures for marriage continue to move some people toward transitioning.

Marriage is also sometimes arranged by parents for a daughter who continues to enact non-normative gender/sexual identifications and tendencies. As adolescents, even in their late teens, female-female relationships are thought to be harmless, temporary, and would cease upon marriage. Parents pressure marriage-resistant daughters into marriage, hoping that it will “cure” them.

Emad was forced into an arranged marriage at the age of nineteen and ran away after two days. Kamran married with some misgivings. As he put it, he had always had manly qualities—his father had died when s/he was only a few months old and s/he had grown up acting as “the man of the family”: “I shoveled snow, I did all the home repairs, carried heavy stuff; family members often jokingly called me by a male name, such as Ahmad Aqa. We had no man in the family.” He described his misgivings about marriage not as the result of any “contrary” sexual desire, but instead because he didn’t know if he could put up with a man trying to lord it over him/her. His/her marriage’s almost immediate failure was indeed what made him/her convinced that he was not really a woman. This coincided with hearing about transsexuality and seeing a television program about it:

One day we were watching this satellite program in Persian about sex change. My sister turned to me and said, “This is just like you.” I got up and went online and found any and all information, I read it all from six in the
evening till six in the morning; I found Mirjalali’s clinic. Then I talked with my husband and told him either to divorces me or sign the permission to let me change my sex. But he refused and it dragged to the courts. In the court, he himself said, “Our marriage is like two men being married. We are like two parallel lines that never come together at any point.” But still he wouldn’t divorce me. I had to get into a prolonged court battle before finally a judge divorced me. It was a very messy divorce. Eventually I had to give up all my financial claims, including shares I had in a taxi company we owned jointly.

Kamran’s sister, Laleh, supported Kamran’s narrative: “Everyone in the family knew he was masculine; that’s why everyone accepted his sex change with no trouble. We all knew it. He had a manly mannerism and temperament all his life.”

Mehran was married off reluctantly and separated from his/her first husband after a single night. But several years later, as we have already seen, when s/he was still trying to decide “what I was,” s/he actually initiated her/his second marriage with a man who was a very close friend and colleague: “I ruined a good friendship before we finally gave up.” “Failure in marriage” becomes proof that one is not a woman.

A few MtFs are forced into marriage as a cure. Arezu’s father and brothers gave her “the option” of getting married or getting killed. She chose the latter. But I did not come across similar narratives. Most parents opt for other pressures to “make a man” out of their “errant” son. Most commonly, they press their son to go for his compulsory military service, hoping that army service will provide the masculinizing impetus. In part, the less frequent use of “the marriage cure” for MtFs stems from a fear—should the marriage not consummate, the shame of failure would mark the family. It is a “cure” that may backfire and cause more embarrassment and scandal. Moreover, men’s marriages can be deferred to a much later age than women’s without causing much social gossip. For MtFs, the pressure of marriage takes the form of their desire to marry their lovers and live what is considered a respectable conjugal life.

Dominant notions of manhood and womanhood inform styles of (self-)cognition among trans persons on multiple levels. As Sinnott has noted in a different context, differences “between being male and being female” in the larger society matters a great deal to how sexual/gender non-normative lives shape distinctly for men and women.

For Jalal, a postoperative FtM in his early twenties, signs of manhood included being actively interested in sex and not being able to accept as a seri-
ous girlfriend a girl who was taller than him. Emad, a postoperative FtM in his early thirties, stressed feelings of power, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency as characteristics that spoke to his manhood; by contrast he criticized some trans persons for being whiners. Whining was defined as womanly. He could understand why so many MtFs were whiners, but in FtMs, he found that intolerable. Aren’t you a man? He also emphasized that he had always felt a sense of ownership toward his girlfriends in high school. Keeping a jealous eye on one’s girlfriend was a uniformly approved masculine characteristic, although Emad, like several other trans persons, disapproved of it when it became extreme and took the form of violence or unreasonable demands (such as, it was rumored at the time, between an FtM and an MtF couple).

Sina similarly emphasized his sense of standing on his own two feet from early childhood as a sign of masculinity: “My brother is four years older, but my family always counted on me.” Other memories that were recounted as indicative of early masculinity included lording it over girls: “I always told the girls in our family how to behave properly; I would tell them, don’t sit like this, don’t laugh like that. Other family members all considered me a javanmard.” But he also noted that what was considered chivalry had changed. “Older FtMs act very differently, they think being a man means you have to be really rough, almost a thug. They think FtMs like me are susul [effeminate]; we don’t even carry a jackknife! What kind of men are we? We are more modern, and when we get into disagreements, we try to solve things with conversation and mediation not by getting into a fight.”

Womanliness was marked by very different signs, including enjoying the attentions of men on the street, cooking a meal, keeping a journal, and gossiping. Taraneh criticized some MtFs for not being able to adjust their gender characteristics: Being haughtily proud, and a reluctance to be submissive, Taraneh argued, were characteristics that MtFs ought to unlearn if they wanted to succeed in their relationships.

These concepts informed some of the differences that were narrated insistently as distinctions between MtFs and FtMs. Often referred to as in-tarafi-ha versus ‘un-tarafi-ha—literally, those on this side versus those on the other side—this line of separation has a historic beginning. As argued in the previous chapters, the emergence of MtFs as distinct from other categories of male non-normativity was an intensively post-1979 phenomenon. A similar urgency in marking FtMs as distinct from other categories of female non-normativity was neither present, nor does it mark the distinction as sharply in today’s living practices. But more importantly, the general masculine gender privileges in the society at large marks FtMs’ attitudes toward MtFs. As Sina put it, “People
on our side are generally more successful in life. All continue their higher education because they know ‘the day after tomorrow’ when they take a wife, they will have to manage a family, earn the bread, and be responsible. They must have a good income. People on the other side, they focus on finding a good husband. That is much tougher.”

But perhaps even more importantly, as I have already noted, MtF lives continue to be haunted by the category kuni. Initially this affects one’s self-perception, but more significantly, this haunting continues its work for parents, neighbors, and the more general societal perception. At times families who expel their errant son and cut off all ties with him still move from their neighborhood to make a clean break from the shame of that past. Making a clean break from the past is indeed what most transsexuals, especially MtFs, opt for. FtMs do not escape the issue of family respectability altogether. Kamran lives with his sister Laleh for the moment; Laleh and her husband, despite their own and their families’ complete support of Kamran’s transition, have moved from their house to avoid neighbors’ scrutiny. “What will people say?” continues to weigh heavily on many post-transition decisions. Kamran finds the issue of peer judgment one to be avoided. Even though his boss had been exceptionally supportive, among other things providing him with insurance coverage through the only private company that covers srs and guaranteeing him his job after medical leave, he decided that it would be too stressful for him to go and socialize with the same people but as a member of “the opposite sex,” to go and sit at the men’s table during breaks, to go to men’s part of everything, when before he had gone to women’s sections. The challenge of gender-marked spatial cartographies does not cease with transition.

With new identities, with legal documents, and with or without reconciliation with parents, setting up a life that wipes out all traces of one’s earlier life is the ideal goal. Especially once one gets married, the success of marriage as far as acceptance into the family of a spouse is concerned is seen to depend on ignorance of the past. This is also critical to couples with children. Arezu’s biggest fear and anxiety was that one of her sisters-in-law, who knew her son was adopted, might someday inform him of that fact.

Several older-generation transsexuals I got to know have children, and their paths to parenthood have become known as options for the younger generation. Shahrzad, who transitioned some twenty-three years ago and has been married for the past eighteen years, had succeeded in officially adopting children. Arezu and her husband worked out a more elaborate scheme to take over the custody of an infant from a young woman who had become pregnant out of wedlock. Others have adopted their husband’s children from an earlier mar-
riage. Houri’s best MtF friend, Anahita, had married her husband shortly after his wife had died in a car crash and became mother to his two very young children—one almost two years old, the other only a few months old at the time. Nushin, having found out that her husband had cheated on her and had contracted a temporary marriage, agreed not to seek a divorce only if he would arrange for the woman to act as a “surrogate mother” and that they would adopt the baby. Surrogate motherhood has been used more openly by other couples. Houri’s husband is a divorcé; his first marriage didn’t work out because he is infertile. That is good for Houri, since they can openly go for adoption with no stigma.

Both the cultural abjection of “gay”-ness, always working under the sign of kuni, and the religious-legal sanctions against various same-sex behaviors and practices, which are most heavily weighted against anal intercourse between two males, set up the paradoxical situation in which homosexuals and transsexuals (especially gay men and MtFs) are simultaneously pulled together and set apart. Whether for reasons of cognition—am I gay? Am I MtF? Am I butch? Am I FtM?—or for exigencies of living livable lives (especially acute for MtFs and gay men), people on the spectrum of non-normative genders/sexualities reach for each other’s support. They live in overlapping communities and benefit from extended networks that include them all. It is indeed the exigency of these overlapping networks that at once requires inner lines of demarcation and makes clear delineation a struggle for many.

The narrative of transition from a childhood of cross-identified gender to an adolescence marked by sexual desires for one’s own genus/jins is the critical loop through which a space of habitation for homosexuality has emerged. If some of the persons with same-sex desire are after all not sinning deviants, then in principle all persons with same-sex desire must be considered not-necessarily-sinning deviants. The closed question of the forbidden-ness of same-sex practices has become open to ambiguous possibilities. While this produces pressure on same-sex desirers to consider bodily transition as a possibility for living more livable lives, it simultaneously makes it possible to live in the shadowy zone of undecidability: Is s/he ts? Is s/he homosexual? An unequivocal answer to the question of identification can be deferred.
Chapter 7: Living Patterns, Narrative Styles

1 The question is not as frivolously posed as it may sound at first. In the past three decades, Iran has witnessed a changing cultural (and, of course, biosurgical) scene as far as bodily modifications are concerned. This is, in part, connected with the impact of the Iran-Iraq war and the huge number of war-wounded persons that needed various bodily reparation and prosthetic surgeries. There also has been an enormous increase in cosmetic surgeries, most visibly “nose jobs,” and not only among women. Men from similar class and cultural backgrounds are seen frequently with facial bandages after nose surgery. This situation has contributed to the acceptability of srs by trans persons and some of their families. The increasing spread of nose jobs as well as the use of mascara and eyebrow plucking by straight men could be seen as an instance of “how the lifeworlds of gay men are ‘leaking’ into . . . national culture” (Tom Boellstorff, A Coincidence of Desires [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007], 116). For a critically insightful essay that examines the relationship between the bodily alterations demanded by transsexuals and those demanded under the category of “cosmetic enhancement,” see Dean Spade, “Mutilating Gender,” in The Transgender Studies Reader, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 315–32 (New York: Routledge, 2006). For a historical grounding of the connection between health, beauty, and new conceptualizations of the individual in Iran, see Camron Amin, “Importing ‘Beauty Culture’ into Iran in the 1920s and 1930s: Mass Marketing Individualism in an Age of Anti-Imperialist Sacrifice,” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East 24, no. 1 (2004): 79–95.


3 Prosser, Second Skins, 124.

4 Prosser, Second Skins, 142.


6 I have since checked with several hadith scholars and they have not come across anything similar to this narrative in classical compendiums.

7 Yad-i yaran; see chapters 1 and 6 for a discussion of this program.

8 This developmental failure model, with its focus on parenting practices, is countered by several other circulating narratives, especially among trans persons themselves. Over and over again they pointed to the Iran-Iraq War decade (1980–88) as that which produced enormous stress, which in turn affected pregnant women, say-
ing “Just look around you; most of us are in our twenties. Now, what was going on twenty years ago? The war. Everyone lived super-stressed [English words used] lives. Pregnant women’s stress affects fetal development. We are all children of the Imposed War.”

The pattern of disappearing “anonymously” into the general population, especially important for MtFs, coupled with the general association of MtFs with sex work, has contributed to the perception—never verified factually—that “most MtFs work as prostitutes.” See also Deniz Kandiyoti, “Pink Card Blues: Trouble and Strife at the Crossroads of Gender,” in Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayse Saktanber, 277–93 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).


This possibly refers to Le Chevalier d’Éon, which held a wide fascination in the popular journals of the late 1940s through the 1960s in Iran. See chapter 2.

The harsh experience of the older generation of MtFs is generally recognized by the younger activists. As Sina put it, “The older generation really suffered a great deal before they got where they wanted to get.” Arezu’s narrative had a happier development from here on: “I did all kinds of jobs, long story, but I gained so much experience, bad and good, I was very responsible at my jobs and eventually met some really nice people, including a couple who almost adopted me into their life, they both worked, I helped take care of their two kids. Slowly I set up my own independent life, they helped me rent a small apartment and start my business. It was in my new place that I met my husband. His parents lived on the second floor. Soon we set up home together. I still did not know I could legally change my sex. When we were living together, someone in the building became suspicious and reported us. They arrested us and took us to the kumitah [neighborhood surveillance committee]. We were lucky; the judge was a really nice cleric; when he heard my story, he said, “that is no problem, go to so-and-so [name withheld] and get a religious statement from him that you are a woman, then go to so-and-so [name withheld] and he will help you get a new identity booklet.” I actually got my new booklet even before I had my operation, and with that new identity booklet we got married. The cleric told me, “This is all OK, but remember that you need to still go to the doctors and pursue your sex change.” That was of course my dream, my wish come true, that is why I chose the name Arezu [means wish]; the only thing was to work and save money, so it took a while, I had to do one thing at a time. My husband didn’t want me to put myself through all these operations; he kept saying that we have loved each other and been happy without it; but I needed to do it. He is the most loving supportive husband. I am blessed.”

Houri is one of the MtFs who was regularly called upon to go to the TPI and talk to panicked parents. Getting families involved and making their consent part of the legal transition process has become a double-edged sword. At one level, it has provided an arena to which therapists and social workers can bring hostile families and
help them accept their son’s or daughter’s desire for sex change, thus securing a familial connection for a trans person. On the other hand, in the case of harshly resisting and hostile families, it has added further obstacles to transition. A great deal of Mohseni-nia’s workload had to do with complications arising in cases where families simply refused their permission, even after months of counseling. In one case, a mother had accused the TPI, its doctors, and its case workers of having accepted bribes to issue their recommendation.

14 The heteronormalizing dynamic of romantic marriage has been insightfully discussed by Boellstorff: “But perhaps the most far reaching consequence of the shift to chosen or love marriage is that this form of marriage brings sexual orientation into being as a new kind of problem. Since arranged marriages are often constructed as unions between two entire families, not just two individuals, the failure of an arranged marriage lies primarily on the family’s failure to select a proper spouse. But marriage based on choice and love implies a choosing self whose choice must be a heterosexual one” (A Coincidence of Desires, 52). See also pages 167 and 174.

15 I would like to emphasize that while this may sound very “traditional,” it is actually quite “modern.” For instance, female sexual appetite, in classical Islamic thought, was generally said to overwhelm male appetite and thus needed constraints of various kinds. In modernist thinking, active and strong sexual appetite is seen as masculine. That modernity is not a linear achievement, however, is also reflected in that the concept of the female power of sexuality, perceived as a threat to men and to the social order of things, circulates and is invoked as well. Different concepts are put to work depending on a given context.

16 In a different site, that of feminist discourse, jinsiya has come to serve as the term for distinguishing anatomical body from sociocultural constructs and performances—it is used emphatically as equivalent to English gender. Here sex and sexuality occupy the category jins, and jinsiya is reserved for gender. In other words, in this domain there is an indistinction between sex and sexuality—something productive for feminist attempts to rid the over-signified woman’s body as a site of sex and sexuality by dismissing the significance of both categories to meanings of gender (purifying gender of sex/sexuality) that is open to change through social reform. So far the two domains have remained largely on different plains. There is no indication of feminist moves within the trans community. Nor is there much interest among feminists about transsexuality, except to the extent that along with homosexuals and subject to similar restrictions of rights as those of women—the primary subject of feminist movement. It is within this narrative of rights that the feminist press and feminist journalists occasionally have covered the topic of transsexuality.


18 Tom Boellstorff has similarly noted: “Their feminine souls and bodily presentations mean that while male waria sex is understood abstractly as a form of homosexuality, it is distinguished from sex ‘between two men’” (“Playing back the Nation: Waria, Indonesian Transvestites,” Cultural Anthropology 19, no. 2 [2004]: 168).

19 The notion of sexual minority is also invoked to critique persistent disavowal of and
expressions of animosity toward homosexuals in G1D site discussions. See the Q&A subsection, entry dated May 9, 2008: “This [expression of hatred of homosexuality and homosexuals] made me very sad. In all the world, sexual minorities have fought side by side and supported each other.”

20 The significance of the familial is also reflected in numerous ways in which familial designations are used to define, or present, close relationships—as in vows of sisterhood, in mother’s friends and father’s friends referred to as aunts and uncles, in Houri and Zia living as and considering each other “brother and sister,” and in trans persons acting as next of kin for each other in a variety of contexts.

21 See Boellstorff, A Coincidence of Desires, 139–44 and 156–59. Boellstorff concludes, “In Indonesia there is currently no way to be publicly gay and seen as a pious Muslim, and thus it remains ‘ungrammatical.’ . . . Gay Muslims do not necessarily feel excluded from their religion . . . but they imagine a life course of incommensurability where they are gay in the gay world, marry heterosexually in the normal world, and find religious community solely in that normal world” (156); “what we find is a habitation, not a resolution, of incommensurability” (158).

22 On the ethos of javanmardi in contemporary Iran, see Fariba Adelkhah, Being Modern in Iran, trans. by Jonathan Derrick (London: Hurst, 1999; Paris: Karthala, 1998).

23 For a historical analysis of this ritual in Safavid Iran, see Kathryn Babayan, “‘In Spirit We Ate Each Other’s Sorrow’: Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavi Iran,” in Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire, edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, 239–74 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Anecdotally, I have known several women of my generation whose grandmothers had enacted public rituals of sworn sisterhood and whose mothers had such recognized best female friends, whom the children called “aunts,” but they had not performed the ritual.

24 It is possible that the gradual disappearance of vows of sisterhood in big urban centers is linked with the emergent dominance of romantic choice marriages, which demand to be, and are expected to provide, the central, if not sole, locus of affective attachment. Thus an alternative emotional investment in a sister becomes perceived as a rival and potential threat to the attachment to one’s husband.

25 Nauruz, the Iranian New Year, starting at the spring equinox, is the most significant national holiday in Iran. There is a big emphasis on family unions and familial visits. It is a very festive occasion, and, regardless of when that moment of equinox may actually fall, all family members are supposed to come together to start the new year. It is often said that how one starts the new year foretells how one will live the rest of the year. Thus to start the new year in separation not only makes the start of every year a sad moment of separation for Leila and Minu—each has to be with her own family—but it is also a reminder that they are not the same as a heterosexual couple who would be with one or the other’s family.

26 This kind of arrangement is not unusual. Sometimes it becomes a news story. In 1998, a man applied to a court requesting permission to take a second wife. He was a doctor and his wife was a trained midwife; they had been married for two years and both expressly emphasized that theirs was a happy marriage. The judge was puzzled why then there was a request for a second wife. The husband insisted that
this was his wife’s idea; the wife confirmed the statement. Finally, and very reluctantly, the woman explained that she has had a very close female friend since the first year of college; they are very attached and spend day and night together. When someone recently had asked for her friend’s hand in marriage, she became so ill that her friend broke off the marriage negotiations. She immediately recovered, then realized that since she cannot tolerate losing her friend to marriage, the only solution would be for her husband to marry her friend as a second wife. The judge agreed to issue the permit. For the full report, see the Iran Times, July 17, 1998, 11.

Mohammad had met Sina through the medical information site http://forum.iransalamat.com. They became best buddies and years later, now both postop, they so remain. Forum.iransalamat.com has a section on “Psychology-psychiatry” that includes a subsection on “sexual difficulties and sexual identification (from a psychiatric perspective)” — see http://forum.iransalamat.com/forumdisplay.php?f=617. In this section, recent articles include “Eliminating the ‘mental patient’ code for military exemption of transsexuals in Iran” (January 2010); “Looking at girls’ tendency to act boyish” (December 2009); “Skepticism over Caster Semenya’s gender/sex, the African woman, 800-meter world champion” (December 2009); “Gender Identity Disorder Illness (Transsexualism)” (December 2009); and “Homosexuality” (July 2008).

From Mahnaz’s description, the program was the second part of Yad-i yaran. The self-cognitive significance of this program has been mentioned in several more recent trans-autobiographical narratives. For the case of Mehrana, as narrated on the gid website, see the entry in the Open Forum subsection dated August 13, 2009.

Mark Johnson similarly discusses “marriage and children” as “the primary measure of socially recognized adult status” (Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines [Oxford: Berg, 1997], 133). For a similar but distinct meaning of formation of family to individual lives, see Lisa Rofel, Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): “Family is the metonym for belonging, not simply to the nation-state but to Chinese culture writ large. In China ongoing discursive productions of family are indispensable sites for establishing one’s humanness as well as one’s social subjectivity. For gay men to establish their normality as men, they must marry, not to prove their virility but to produce heirs. Then, too, family still provides men with moral privilege and access to social power, which is not true for women and, I suspect, is the reason it has been easier for lesbians in China to renounce marriage” (100).

I am grateful to Steve Caton for suggesting this line of observation.

This is also a fear expressed by transsexuals and homosexuals when facing pressure to get married by “unknowing” parents: “I am a man on the surface [zahiran], thirty-four years old. I have no desire for the opposite sex and desire my own genus/sex. My family doesn’t know this and insists that I get married. I think I will face problems if I get married, because I am not aroused by girls. What shall I do?” (gid site, q&a subsection, entry dated March 30, 2008).

Megan Sinnott, Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 70.

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As Boellstorff notes, in a different context and with different effects, “The prior existence of recognized male transvestites has had a profound impact upon gay subject positions, and it is a prime reason for some differences between gay and lesbian subject positions in Southeast Asia, since nowhere in Southeast Asia did there exist any female transgendered subject position with anything like the visibility of waria, kathoey, bakla, or other male transvestite subject positions” (A Coincidence of Desires, 196). And further, “because the predominant female transgender and female homosexual subject positions in contemporary Southeast Asia came into being around the same time, they are far more intertwined, conceptually and practically, than are male transvestite and gay subject positions” (202).

Chapter 8: Professing Selves

1 I am borrowing this expression, and much analytical work related to it, from Denise Riley, The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); the quote is from page 9.

2 Nor do I propose to draw on the very rich anthropological literature about non-U.S., nonheteronormative gender/sexual identifications and practices (from which I have learned a great deal and on which I draw at times) to produce comparable transnational patterns. I find comparative analysis beyond my comfort zone.

3 These works include Suad Joseph’s Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), in which she provides a broad review and critical engagement with largely psychodynamic theories of self and articulates, in that context, her concept of “intimate selving.” Joseph has developed this concept further in much of her subsequent body of scholarship. While I have learned a great deal from Joseph’s insightful work, my focus is more on when/if/how selving matters at all. Michael Jackson and Ivan Karp, eds., Personhood and Agency: The Experience of Self and Other in African Cultures (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1990), similarly offers important insights. Further afield both temporally and culturally is Jerrold Seigel’s The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); this is an exhaustive intellectual history that emphasizes a concept of self that has three dimensions: the bodily or material, the relational, and the reflective.

4 Seigel explicitly resists “recent writings about the self by philosophers and humanistically inclined psychologists [who have] favored the notion that the self is a ‘narrative’ entity, rooted in human propensity to remember and project, in our readiness to make sense of things in terms of continuity and change, in our nature as what Alastair MacIntyre calls ‘a story-telling animal’” and warns against jumping on the “narrative bandwagon too quickly” (The Idea of the Self, 653). Given that my pursuit is to understand when/if/how selving matters at all, contra Seigel, I find it productive to work with the concept of a narrativizing self and narratives of self.

5 Two works that I have found particularly helpful are Jan Goldstein, The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Dror Wahrman, The Making of the Modern Self: Identity