There is perhaps no better place to begin a discussion about being a trans woman than with the quote that has become practically synonymous with that experience in the public's mind: that we feel like "women trapped inside men's bodies." This saying has become so popular and widespread that it's safe to say these days that it's far more often parodied by cissexuals than used by transsexuals to describe their own experiences. In fact, the regularity with which cissexuals use this saying to mock trans women has always struck me as rather odd, since it was so clearly coined not to encapsulate all of the intricacies and nuances of the trans female experience, but rather as a way of dumbing down our experiences into a sound bite that cissexuals might be better able to comprehend.

Unfortunately, the popularity of the "woman trapped inside a man's body" cliché has become a lightning rod for cissexuals who are disturbed by transsexuality. Some cissexual women, for instance, have accused trans women of being arrogant or presumptuous in claiming that we "feel like women" when, prior to our transitions, we had only ever experienced living in the world as
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...men. Often such criticism is followed with catty remarks such as “How just like a man to say such a thing”—the implication being that our attempts to claim the identity of “woman” are merely (and rather ironically) a by-product of male entitlement.

Speaking for myself, I can honestly say that I never “felt like a woman” before my transition. Even as a preteen struggling with the inexplicable and persistent desire to be female, I understood how problematic that popular cliché was. After all, how can anyone know what it’s like to “feel like a woman” or “feel like a man” when we can never really know how anybody else feels on the inside? Most people whose physical and subconscious sexes coincide generally fall rather seamlessly into womanhood or manhood; as a result, they take for granted the identity of woman or man. My gender identity always felt more like a puzzle that I had to put together myself, one in which many of the pieces were missing, where I had no clue as to what the final picture was supposed to be. And the twenty years between my conscious recognition that I wanted to be female and my eventual decision to transition was a time when I painstakingly ruled out the possibilities that my female inclinations were merely a manifestation of my sexuality or a desire to express femininity. And after many years of exploring and experimenting with femininity, masculinity, and androgyny, with crossdressing and role-playing, and with heterosexuality and bisexuality, I realized that for me, being trans had little to do with sexual desire or social gender; it was primarily about the physical experience of being in my own body.

People often assume that transsexuals have some kind of idealized and unrealistic image of what it’s like to be the other sex, and that transitioning is our attempt to achieve that fantasy. Nothing could be further from the truth for me. When I decided to transition, I had no idea what it would actually be like to live as a woman, nor did I have any preconceived notions about what type of woman I might actually become. Hell, at the time, I didn’t even dare call myself a woman. That word, like the word “man,” seemed to have way too much baggage associated with it. At the time, I preferred the word “girl,” which seemed more playful and open to interpretation. Or I might say that I identified as female, since the word is more commonly associated with one’s anatomy than with any specific gender roles or regulations. But I completely avoided the word “woman” because it seemed to be too weighed down with other people’s expectations—expectations that I wasn’t sure I was interested in, or capable of, meeting.

My initial avoidance of the label “woman” was fostered even further by my decision to transition in “boy mode,” a strategy that many trans women feel is the safest and most effective. Essentially, this meant that I underwent electrolysis and hormone replacement therapy while continuing to live my life as a “man”: wearing the same jeans, sneakers, T-shirts, flannel shirts, and sweat-jackets I always wore and acting pretty much the same as I always had. The idea is that you simply go about your life until you reach the point where most people begin to assume that you are female despite your (tom)boyish gender presentation; some trans women refer to this as the point when they lose the ability to “pass” as a man.

At the start of my transition, I had the same assumptions that most people have about gender: I believed that there were obvious, concrete differences between women and men. Thus, I figured that I would have to spend a good deal of time during my transition being “in between” genders—too physically ambiguous for people
to classify as either female or male. But that didn’t really happen. To my surprise, people almost always made the call one way or another, even though their conclusion as to my gender often differed from person to person. For instance, it was common for me to go into a store and have an employee say, “Can I help you, sir?” Then a few minutes later, as I was leaving, a different employee might say, “Have a good day, ma’am.”

After about a month or two of never knowing whether any given person was gendering me as female or male, I experienced a dramatic change. It felt like the world suddenly shifted around me. Almost overnight, I sensed that everything was very different. At first, I suspected that this feeling was coming from within me, perhaps a psychological or emotional change related to my being on female hormones. But then I realized that it wasn’t me, but rather the rest of the world, that was acting differently. In public, strangers began standing much closer to me. Women seemed to let their guard down around me. Men, for no apparent reason, would smile at me. Everybody spoke to me differently, interacted with me in different ways. I realized that I had passed through some sort of threshold and suddenly everybody saw me as female.

The weirdest part about this experience was that I was pretty much the exact same person that I had been prior to that. I was acting and dressing the same. And over the four months I’d been on hormones, I had barely changed physically. I still had some stubble growing out of my face (although not nearly as much as before). My breasts were sore and tingling and definitely beginning to grow, but they were hardly noticeable. The only visible changes were the softening of my complexion and a little extra facial fat around my cheeks, and yet I completely lost my ability to “pass” as a man quite suddenly. Granted, my transition went a lot quicker than it does for many trans women, since I started out as a small, long-haired boy who was occasionally “ma’am”ed even before taking hormones. Nevertheless, the speed and extent of my transition, and the fact that it occurred without my having to change my behavior or mannerisms, challenged everything I used to believe to be true about gender.

My initial reaction to this experience was to even further embrace my “genderqueerness”—my sense of otherness. The taken-for-granted assumption that female and male were fixed and reliable states suddenly appeared to me to be the product of a mass hallucination, held together only by the fact that so few people actually had the firsthand experience of transitioning—of seeing how such small differences in one’s physical gender can result in such a large difference in the way one is perceived and treated by others. Suddenly, I no longer felt like I was journeying from one gender to the other. I felt more like I was floating in a little dinghy that had been recently released from the dock I had been anchored to my whole life; and now I was being tossed about on an ocean of other people’s perceptions of me. And while I was definitely searching for a place where I could feel at home in my own body, I was no longer quite sure what that place might look like or what I might call it when I finally arrived.

From conversations I’ve had with a number of transsexual friends who transitioned before me, I would say that my attitude at the time—my questioning of (and refusal to identify within) the male/female binary—was a fairly common response to being in the throes of physical and social transition. Transitioning is such an upending, mind-blowing experience that it seems to me to be
almost a necessity for one to let go of one's preconceived notions of maleness and femaleness in order to traverse those states of being. Being perceived as female while having an entirely male history and a mostly male body (as I did at the time) made me feel not like an imposter (as some might imagine), but more like an alien. I was just being myself, but other people were relating and reacting to me in ways that were foreign to me. I felt less like a woman or a man than I did a stranger in a strange land.

As with many of my transsexual friends, I found that this sense of otherness steadily subsided with time. And over the course of a year or two, I eventually did come to identify as a woman. Part of this evolution in my self-perception was driven by how different I felt in my body after physically transitioning. This is one of the most difficult aspects of transitioning to describe, as there are so few words in our language to articulate "body feelings" of any sort. I'm sure that this lack in language is related to our cultural tendency to dismiss or discount the way that our bodies feel to us. Indeed, many of us tend to think of ourselves as brains or souls crammed inside of a shell—a shell that is our body. We delude ourselves into believing that the shell itself is not important, not connected to our consciousness, that it's merely a vessel that contains us, or a vehicle that we move about with our minds. But the truth is, our bodies are inseparable from our minds. This becomes evident whenever hunger, thirst, or physical pain grows to the point where we can think of nothing else, or when mental grief or stress manifests itself in physical aches and exhaustion. All of us who have experienced the physical difference between feeling healthy and feeling ill, or perhaps most profoundly, between pre- and post-puberty, have a deep understanding (whether we acknowledge it or not) that our body feelings make a vital and substantial contribution to our senses of self.

You could say that my decision to transition was primarily driven by my choosing to trust my body feelings—in this case, my subconscious sex—over my conscious understanding of gender. So perhaps it's no surprise that the most immediate change in my body feelings that I experienced upon starting hormone therapy was an easing of my gender dissonance—the chronic gender sadness that I had carried around with me for as long as I could remember. I am not sure whether this was a direct effect of having female hormones in my system or a more psychological effect of knowing that my body was finally moving in the right direction. Either way, the relief I felt was beyond measure; for the first time in my life, I slowly began to feel comfortable being in my own skin.

Female hormones have also produced numerous other body feelings that have greatly reshaped my sense of self. There have been profound changes in the way that I experience sensations and emotions, and in my tastes, urges, and responses to stimuli. And the physical changes to my body, which unfolded over a greater span of time, have also influenced the way I experience the world. Granted, when strangers first began gendering me as female (back when I was still identifying as genderqueer), unclothed I probably looked like a slightly feminized male. But after five years of being on female hormones, there is virtually nothing about my body that looks or feels male (with the obvious exception of my genitals, as I have not had bottom surgery). In those intervening years, my skin has become much softer, my center of gravity has totally shifted, my metabolism has changed, clothing fits my body differently, heavy objects seem to have become much heavier, and room temperature...
seems to have dropped about two or three degrees. The changes in the shape of my body and in my muscle/fat distribution have significantly altered the way I walk, run, dance, hold my body, and move in general. Simply put, my body no longer feels male to me; rather, it feels female.

Of course, body feelings are not the only facet of my being that has contributed to my identity as a woman. As I alluded to earlier, the changes in my social gender—how other people relate to and interact with me—were at least as dramatic as (if not more so than) the physical changes to my body. While being treated as a woman felt foreign to me at first, over time it simply became my everyday life. My identity as a woman grew out of positive experiences, such as feeling comfortable with my own female body. Yet it also arose out of negative ones, such as the regularity with which other people placed unsolicited attention upon my body, whether it was the catcalls and sexual innuendos strangers would sometimes hurl at me or the occasional comments people started to make insinuating that I could stand to lose a little weight (even though I weighed the same as I did before my transition, and nobody saw my weight as a problem back then). My identity as a woman grew out of my frustration over being called a “bitch” any time I stood up for myself, or having others make remarks about my hormone levels any time I became legitimately upset or angry about something. My identity as a woman grew out of my experiences at parties and other social occasions when I would come across a group of men talking and laughing, and witness them suddenly fall silent when I approached. My identity evolved out of a million tiny social exchanges where others made it very clear to me that my status in the world—my class, if you will—was that of a woman and not a man.

Not surprisingly, no aspect of my social transition has been more difficult for me to adjust to than the way I am treated by some (but certainly not all) men. Granted, this was not entirely unexpected. Before my transition, I had often asked my female friends about their experiences living as women in a male-centered world. On an intellectual level, I knew that I would sometimes be dismissed or harassed once I started living as female, but I underestimated just how frustrating and hurtful each one of those instances would be. Words cannot express how condescending and infuriating it feels to have men speak down to me, talk over me, and sometimes even practically put on baby-talk voices when addressing me. Or how intimidating it feels to have strangers make lewd comments about having their way with me as I’m walking alone at night down dark city streets. And while I had numerous run-ins and arguments with strange men back when I was male-bodied, I’d never before experienced the enraged venom in their voices and fury in their faces that I sometimes do now—an extreme wrath that some men seem to reserve specifically for women who they believe threaten their fragile male egos. It became more and more difficult for me to see the point in identifying outside of the male/female binary when I was so regularly being targeted for discrimination and harassment because I was a woman, when I so frequently had to stand up for myself as a woman in order to make sure that other people did not get away with it.

After a couple of years living in the world as female, I eventually came to embrace the identity of “woman.” Thinking of myself as a woman simply began to make sense; it resonated with my lived experiences. Before my transition, I was hesitant about calling myself a woman, mostly because I had no desire to live up to the
societal expectations and ideals that others often project onto that identity. I used to fear that embracing that identity would be tantamount to cramming myself into some predetermined box, restricting my possibilities and potential. But I now realize that no matter how I act or what I do or say, I remain a woman—both in the eyes of the world and, more importantly, in the way that I experience myself. While I used to view the word “woman” as limiting, I now find it both empowering and limitless.

Together, all of the changes I've experienced since my transition—in my body feelings, in my interactions with other people, and in my growing life history as a woman—have led to me becoming a somewhat different person than I was before. Granted, my personality, habits, opinions, sense of humor, etc., are mostly still the same, but my life itself has taken on a different shape. While I can think back to before my transition and imagine how I looked and acted, I find that my memories of how it felt to be in my body—to be physically male—are becoming increasingly vague with time. It's not dissimilar to how I feel when I think back to high school—recalling all of the things that I thought, said, and did, yet feeling almost as if I were reminiscing about another person. I now look back on my years as an adult male, remembering how I acted and interacted with others, but having some difficulty relating to the person I was back then. My life has very much been reshaped by the experiences of being and feeling physically female and having other people react to me as such.

People often squabble over what defines a person as a woman or a man—whether it should be based on their chromosomes, assigned sex, genitals, or other factors—but such reductionist views deny our indisputably holistic gendered realities. For all of us, gender is first and foremost an individual experience, an amalgamation of our own unique combinations of gender inclinations, social interactions, body feelings, and lived experiences.

While our experiential gender is often shaped or influenced by our perceived gender (the gender others assume us to be), one does not necessarily follow from the other. For example, I had lived and was treated as a man for many years, yet I always felt rather ambivalent about belonging to that class. Sometimes when my female friends would go off on a tirade about men in general, I would join in with them, not because I hated men or enjoyed making generalizations about people, but as a way of expressing the fact that I did not feel like a man. That identity never made sense to me given my constant struggles with gender dissonance, the persistent body feelings I experienced that informed me that there was something not quite right with my being physically male, and my personal history of consciously exploring and expressing my femaleness and femininity both in my imagination and in public. I gravitated toward genderqueer identities for most of the years that I was male-bodied—at different points, viewing myself as a boy who wanted to be a girl, a crossdresser, and bigendered—because they resonated with the myriad of gendered experiences that I had had up to that point. They captured the fact that, at the time, I really did feel like I was straddling both maleness and femaleness in some way.

Genderqueer identities no longer resonate with my experiential gender in the same way. This is not to say that I now denounce them altogether, as I know firsthand just how rewarding and empowering it can be to see yourself as being outside, in between, or transcending both femaleness and maleness. It's just that at this point in my life, I don't feel genderqueer anymore. Experiencing the world (and
my own body) as female makes the word “woman” feel like a far better fit for me now. Unfortunately, I have met a few genderqueer-identified people who have expressed suspicion or have been dismissive of the idea that someone could “transition” from genderqueer to unapologetically woman or man. Such assertions are clearly the product of gender entitlement, of these individuals projecting their own perspectives and beliefs onto other people’s gendered bodies, identities, and experiences. However, the majority of the transgender people I know understand that our experiential gender is potentially fluid and often changes over time as we accumulate new experiences. I have found that transsexuals in particular are often acutely aware of this fact, having experienced the dramatic changes in our body feelings, anatomies, personal relationships, and histories that typically accompany social and physical transitioning.

Personally, I find that the concept of experiential gender not only helps me make sense of my own transition, but it gives me an appreciation of the inherent limits in my ability to understand or speak on behalf of other people’s genders. While I may have experienced a wider variety of aspects of social and hormonal gender than most people, these experiences are still far outweighed by the vast multitude of gendered feelings and experiences that I have not experienced. Therefore, it would be both ignorant and arrogant for me to project my limited experience onto other people’s gendered lives and bodies.

This is precisely what frustrates me about those cissexuals who are most bothered when trans women say that we feel like women. They assume that we are somehow trying to claim to know how other women feel, when in reality all we are saying is that the identity of woman most resonates with our own experiential gender.

And by insisting that we trans women cannot possibly know what it’s like to “feel like a woman,” they’re the ones being presumptuous, both by arrogantly assuming that other women experience femaleness the way they do and by implying that they know enough about how trans women feel on the inside to claim that we do not legitimately experience ourselves as women. Their claims that they somehow understand “womanhood” better than trans women do by virtue of having been born and socialized female is just as naive and arrogant as my claiming to understand “womanhood” better because, unlike most women, I have had a male experience to compare it to. Any claim that one has superior knowledge about womanhood is fraught with gender entitlement and erases the infinite different ways for people to experience their own femaleness.

There are countless experiences that can shape a woman’s gendered experiences: being socialized as a girl (or not), experiencing menstruation and menopause (or not), becoming pregnant and giving birth (or not), becoming a mother (or not), having a career outside of the home (or not), having a husband (or a wife or neither), and so on. Women’s lives are also greatly shaped by additional factors such as race, age, ability, sexual orientation, economic class, and so on. While each of these individual experiences are shared by many women—and each is rightfully considered a “women’s issue”—it would be foolish for anyone to claim that any one of these was a prerequisite for calling oneself a woman. So long as we refuse to accept that “woman” is a holistic concept, one that includes all people who experience themselves as women, our concept of womanhood will remain a mere reflection of our own personal experiences and biases rather than something based in the truly diverse world that surrounds us.