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Becoming a woman

**Becoming a woman is more than just having breasts. It's also about having the right attitude, a transexual tells LEONG SIOK HUI.**

At 26, she obtained her master's degree from the UK, published her first book two years later, held a couple of management jobs then went on to set up her now thriving public relations consultancy.

Tall, slim and self-assured, this 31-year-old Singaporean gal loves windsurfing, salsa and exotic dances, and enjoys an active social life. On occasion, she fights for causes that are close to her heart – like when the authorities threatened to close down the local windsurfing club.

But life hasn't always been peachy for Lo who was once a man.

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Picture by LANCE LEE

### From Leonard to Leona

Back in 1991, Leona was Leonard, 15 years old and the vice chairman of the English Language drama society in an all-boys school. With his falsetto voice and fair complexion, Leonard readily took on the female roles in school plays.

Every stage appearance was an exhilarating experience.

"I lived for the wolf-whistles and catcalls. At the end of every performance, I would take in the audience's appreciative looks before sashaying offstage with the poise of Gong Li," recalls Lo.

After the shows, he would drift trance-like back to class only to discover the words "Leonard is a bloody faggot" splashed across his desk.

"Even Cinderella had her moment of reckoning," she says.

It was in Primary Six that Lo realised he was born in the

wrong body.

From then on, Lo led a tormented life until he suffered a nervous breakdown while doing National Service.

(In Singapore, all able-bodied, 18-21 year old male citizens are required to serve in the military for two years.)

Lo, then 19, popped 40 Panadol but survived the suicide attempt.

“My parents went ballistic (when I told them I wanted to be a woman). They hired an exorcist and monks. I was made to drink ashes and pray at the temple,” recalls Lo.

“It took them about two years to accept me for who I am. But deep down, they’re still grappling with the changes and they’re also very apologetic for who I am.

“But it’s their love that has taken me so far,” adds Lo.

During his first year at the University of York in UK, Lo used his tuition money for his sexual reassignment surgery (SRS).

“My parents were upset when they found out, but they forgave me later.”

### **The journey**

But life post-SRS isn’t a bed of roses for most transsexuals.

Under Singaporean law, post-operative transsexuals are allowed to register their new sex status on their identity cards and are free to marry people of the opposite sex. (The first sex change operation was performed in Singapore in 1971.) But there is no legislation to prevent discrimination at the workplace – transsexuals can be wrongfully dismissed or not hired on the grounds of sexuality.

However, there are employers who hire based on merit and who look beyond gender, Lo adds.

“I may have lost a few jobs because some people judged me before they saw my work,” says Lo.

“But someone once told me that because of who I am, I will always bring a creative edge to my work. So I choose to focus on this positive aspect.”

The relatively higher cost of surgery and lack of options in Singapore drive many transsexuals to Thailand for their SRS. But some transsexuals suffer complications later due to a lack of follow-up treatment and information on the effects of lifelong estrogen therapy.

Lo has had her share of medical complications. Last year, she was diagnosed with a benign pituitary tumour, which she discovered was due to a time-release oestrogen implant in her body.

And, after a corrective post-sexual reassignment surgery last November, she developed urinary tract infection that required the attention of a specialist.

“For every disease, Singapore’s Ministry of Health has clinical guidelines for general practitioners and specialists – except for post-operative transsexuals,” explains Lo.

“I would recommend that the government set up clinical guidelines for the management of transsexuals.”

### **My sisters, their stories**



In 2003, Lo and photographer Lance Lee released a coffee-table book highlighting the lives of transsexuals in Singapore and Thailand.

“I was idealistic and wanted to tell the story of transsexuals and the discrimination they face every day,” says Lo, who braved herself to face the repercussions of coming

out.

“I thought I could change people’s perceptions and help transsexuals integrate better into society.”

When the book hit the shelves, the press had a field day writing about the subject and interviewing Lo. This brought on a blanket ban on media reports on transsexuals until just recently, Lo says.

But in the course of researching her subjects, Lo got an insider’s look into the world of prostitution and entertainment.

“Apart from the ladies in Thailand, most in Singapore also willingly embrace prostitution because of the easy money. It is hard for them to break out of the lifestyle once they get into it,” says Lo, who became disillusioned.

“Writing the book was a cathartic experience for me. I said what I had to say so I could move on.”

### **The rocks in her life**

Lo’s family and friends are her pillars of strength. During the transitioning period after SRS, she also had Sister Juanita O Carum, a Carmelite nun, to lean on.

“I was quite lost, and my then boyfriend told me in my face, ‘You’re not a real woman’,” recalls Lo. Sister Juanita counselled her and gave her a lot of affirmation.

“But what’s most important is to make peace with ourselves and accept ourselves first. Once you’ve arrived at that point, you will find love, friendship and many other wonderful things.”

Still, relationships are not an easy thing for Lo and most transsexuals.

“I would love to go out with a local guy, but they’re terrified of me, of what their friends and family will say,” says Lo who has just ended a one-year relationship with a guy who was posted to Switzerland last year.

“But I can’t accept a man who cannot accept who I am. Even if it means I’ll have to remain single all my life.”

### **Message to her sisters**

Being a woman is not just about finding a husband, having children, etc, adds Lo.

“It’s more about how you can give back to society, because a woman – in my definition – is a kind, giving, patient and loving person. Develop a passion, share your passion with others, and live and enjoy your womanhood.”

Lo believes she has come to terms with being a woman.

“I no longer fixate on the fact that I’m a transexual, but I focus on developing myself as a woman of substance,” says Lo.

“I would like to get married and be a mother, but I believe love will seek you when you’re ready, you don’t have to look for it.”

In the meantime, she wants to promote windsurfing, salsa and exotic dance as activities that can help women restore their confidence.

“Windsurfing has done wonders for my self-confidence and exotic dance has helped define my femininity,” says Lo, who plans to take up a windsurfing instructor’s course and teach women and young children.

“I’m just excited about life these days, because there’s just so much to do, so much to achieve.” W

## Transgender terms

Transsexual refers to males who want to be females and females who want to be males.

The term also describes a person whose gender identity is fundamentally and irreversibly incompatible with his/her biological sex and whose ultimate goal is sex reassignment surgery.

Unlike transexuals, transvestites accept their biological sex, but enjoy cross-dressing. Experts say cross-dressing is usually practised for general sexual stimulation or sexual gratification.

The Malaysian term for male transexuals is Mak Nyah and refers to those who have undergone sex reassignment surgery (as well as those who have not).

The term was coined in 1987 when the Mak Nyahs tried to set up a society for the community but was denied by the Registrar of Societies. The term differentiates them from *pondan* or *bapok*, referring to men who are effeminate and includes homosexuals.

In Singapore, male to female transexuals commonly refer to one another as sisters.

*Sources: Teh Yik Koon, The Mak Nyahs – Malaysian Male to Female Transexuals, Eastern Universities Press, 2002 and Leona Lo, My Sisters, Their Stories . . ., Viscoms Editions Pte Ltd, 2003.*



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