

**In the past couple years, there have been several cases of individuals being murdered because they are transgendered. Sanesha Stewart was murdered last year, Angie Zapata's killer was just convicted of first degree murder and bias-motivated (hate) crime, and the man accused of killing Lateisha Green goes to trial on June 11th. There is a common thread in these murders: the killers have all claimed that they were so surprised to find out that these women are transgendered (meaning that they were born as men), and so upset by their "deception", that they lashed out in fury and killed them. The most appalling part? Their lawyers have all tried to say that their clients' actions are understandable.**

This deplorable tactic is called the "**trans panic defense**" and it rests upon the idea that it is understandable to be so enraged, "lose control" and assault (often kill) someone who you find out is transgendered. It is argued to be an understandable reaction because the transgendered individual is seen as trying to deceive people by adopting the gender of the opposite sex than he or she was born as. And here's the weird thing: why do we feel it's deceptive for a guy to wear light colours, tight-fitted clothing or long hair? Or for a girl to cut her hair short, not wear make-up, and wear jeans and button-up shirts? Why is conforming to the gender characteristics of our born sex so important? Gender is not set in stone – it is something we "do", not something we are. This is made irrelevant by many people's reactions to gender non-conformity. In the past in some cultures, embodying two genders was seen as a gift and revered ([2Spirits](#)). Now, those who don't conform are often harassed, bullied, excluded and generally made to feel terrible.

The concern with gender non-conformity is not restricted to cases involving transgendered individuals. It is usually visible in instances of all gender non-conformity, big and small. If they cannot immediately tell what sex you are, people tend to get a little uncomfortable; how should they act around you? What pronouns should they use when referring to you?! Girls who dress in looser, more masculine clothes get suspicious, sometimes hostile looks in women's bathrooms. Guys wearing make-up get weird looks and whispered comments. I've been walking home late at night and seen groups of guys loudly wondering what gender the girl walking beside me is, and what they should do to find out. I am overjoyed that the "trans panic defense" is being shot down in courts, but it is evident that attitudes need to change on a day-to-day level just as much.

It is sometimes hard to combat ideas and beliefs about gender conformity. We must first challenge our own thoughts about gender. Are we thrown for a loop when we see guys wearing "girly" clothing items? Do girls who have emotional reactions that are traditionally "male" leave us wondering how to react? Why do we have these reactions? Once we've identified how we think, we might have to adjust our behaviour: we have to start seeing gender non-conformity as normal and not letting it phase us. We also need to step in when others are discriminating against someone based on their gender presentation.

All of this can be really hard to do though: gender stereotypes and expectations are deeply engrained into the very roots of our society and it's hard to even see this, let alone shake it. This battle can be a very discouraging, but I've still found hope in the most unlikely places. I used to work in a toy store that offered a gift-wrapping service. When asking customers what colours they wanted the gift wrapped in, the standard line was "is this a gift for a boy or a girl?" - boys got blue and white striped wrap, girls got pink and white. One afternoon, a boy of about thirteen years old asked for gift-wrapping. "Boy or girl?" he was asked. He gave the wrapper a weird look. "Well, it's for a boy," he said, eyeing both the blue and the pink bags, "but I don't think that has anything to do with what colour he would want." I almost cheered out loud.

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