

How Transgender People Experience the Media

Conclusions from research November 2009-February 2010

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Introduction

Using questionnaires, Trans Media Watch asked self-identified transgender people based in the UK, how they felt about representations of trans people in the media. This survey was conducted between the 1st of November 2009 and the 28th of February 2010.

This survey used a mixed methods approach, concentrating on quantitative data but incorporating a qualitative aspect by permitting respondents to go into detail about their experiences in regard to some questions. We felt that it would be useful to know not just how many people had been affected in particular ways by the media, but what the nature of their experiences was.

Of the 256 people who completed the survey, 6 explicitly identified themselves not as transgender people but as people with close family members who are transgender. We decided to include their responses in the qualitative parts of the survey because this helps to give a more rounded picture of how media representations impact on transgender people's lives.

Sample and Demographics

Out of the total sample of 256, 215 respondents specified their gender identities. 59.5% (128) identified as female, 25.6% (55) as male, and 14.9% (32) as other (*e.g.* androgyne people). Of the 201 who identified themselves in more depth, 14.9% (30) identified as FTM / trans men; 12.4% (25) as men with a trans background; 33.8% (58) as MTF / trans women; and 27.4% (55) as women with a trans background. 14.9% (30) identified as cross dressers or transvestites, with two noting specifically that they cross dress full time but have no plans to transition. 2% (4) were intersex; and 17.9% (36) identified as androgyne / genderqueer / polygender people, with the remaining 8.5% (17) describing themselves as having other types of gender identity. Four stressed their dislike of labels and one identified as genderqueer FTM.

Many transgender people simply identify as male or female, though this may not accord with the sex they were assigned at birth. In the course of this report, respondents are referred to in accordance with their self-identified gender. The term 'trans man' refers to a person who was assigned a female gender at birth but identifies as male. The reverse applies for 'trans woman'. Androgyne, genderqueer and polygender identities are different ways in which individuals place themselves between or beyond binary genders. Intersex people are people born with bodies which are not normatively male or female. Most intersex people do not identify as transgender but they are often identified that way by other people and, as such, may be victims of transphobic prejudice.

These figures may represent a higher proportion of trans men to trans women than is estimated to occur in the general population, but it is worth noting that many people working in this field believe trans men are usually under-represented in research.

Sample Structure

Single identity definition selected	Count
Man with a trans background	8
Woman with a trans background	38
FTM / trans man	10
MTF / trans woman	50
Cross-dressing / transvestite person	15
Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	13
Other type of gender variant person	13
Intersex person	3

Complex identity definition selected	Count
Man with a trans background & FTM / trans man	8
Woman with a trans background & MTF / trans woman	16
Man with a trans background & Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	1
Man with a trans background & Cross-dressing / transvestite person	2
Man with a trans background & Other type of gender variant person	1
Woman with a trans background & Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	1
FTM / trans man & Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	6
FTM / trans man & Cross-dressing / transvestite person	1
FTM / trans man & Other type of gender variant person	1
FTM / trans man & Intersex person	1
MTF / trans woman & Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	2
MTF / trans woman & Cross-dressing / transvestite person	3
MTF / trans woman & Intersex person	1
Cross-dressing / transvestite person & Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	6
Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person & Other type of gender variant person	3
Man with a trans background & FTM / trans man & Androgyne /genderqueer / polygender person	3
Man with a trans background & Cross-dressing / transvestite person & Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	1
Woman with a trans background & Man with a trans background & Cross-dressing / transvestite person	1
MTF / trans woman & Cross-dressing / transvestite person & Androgyne / genderqueer / polygender person	1
Non transgender (ie partner/SO etc)	6
Total	215

214 respondents identified the age group they belonged to, with some giving more specific information elsewhere in the survey. The youngest was thirteen and the oldest two were in the 76 to 80 age group, with ages in between represented fairly evenly, tailing off after 55.

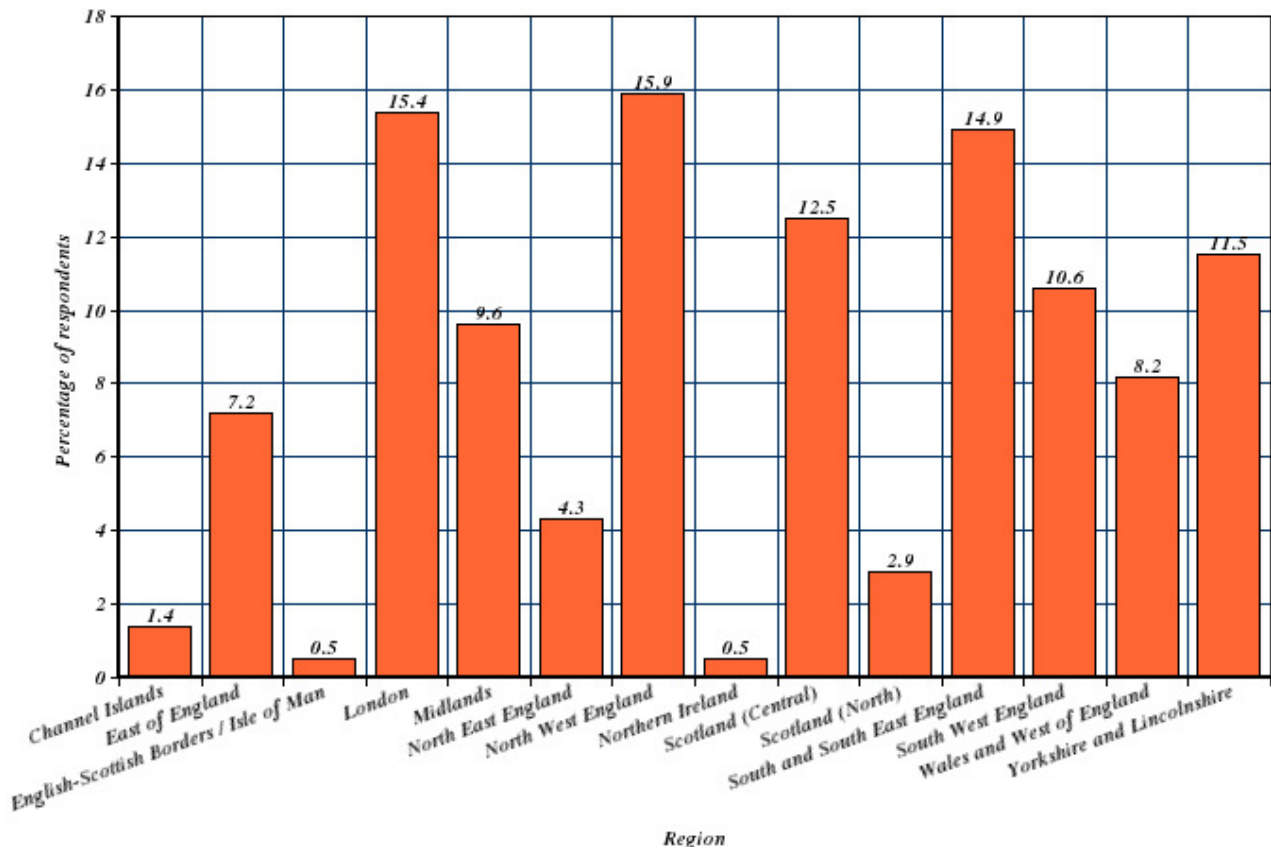
Age Group	Count
Under 16	1
16-20	26
21-25	25
26-30	18
31-35	22
36-40	18
41-45	24
46-50	25
51-55	26
56-60	13
61-65	9
66-70	5
71-75	0
76-80	2

Media Usage

In order to find out more about the access our respondents had to the media, we asked them about the television channels they received, the newspapers they read, and their use of the internet. Internet-only media were not discussed by any of the respondents but we feel this data is still relevant because it affects the way in which many people receive news, *e.g.* when links to particular items are passed around among groups of friends.

103 respondents reported that they had access to only the basic terrestrial television channels. 117 had Freeview, 47 had Sky Digital, 27 had Virgin Media and 11 had Freesat; the others did not comment on this. There was a fairly even distribution of people across television regions, with the highest number (33) in the North West England region. Only one person was in each of the Northern Ireland and English-Scottish Borders / Isle of Man regions.

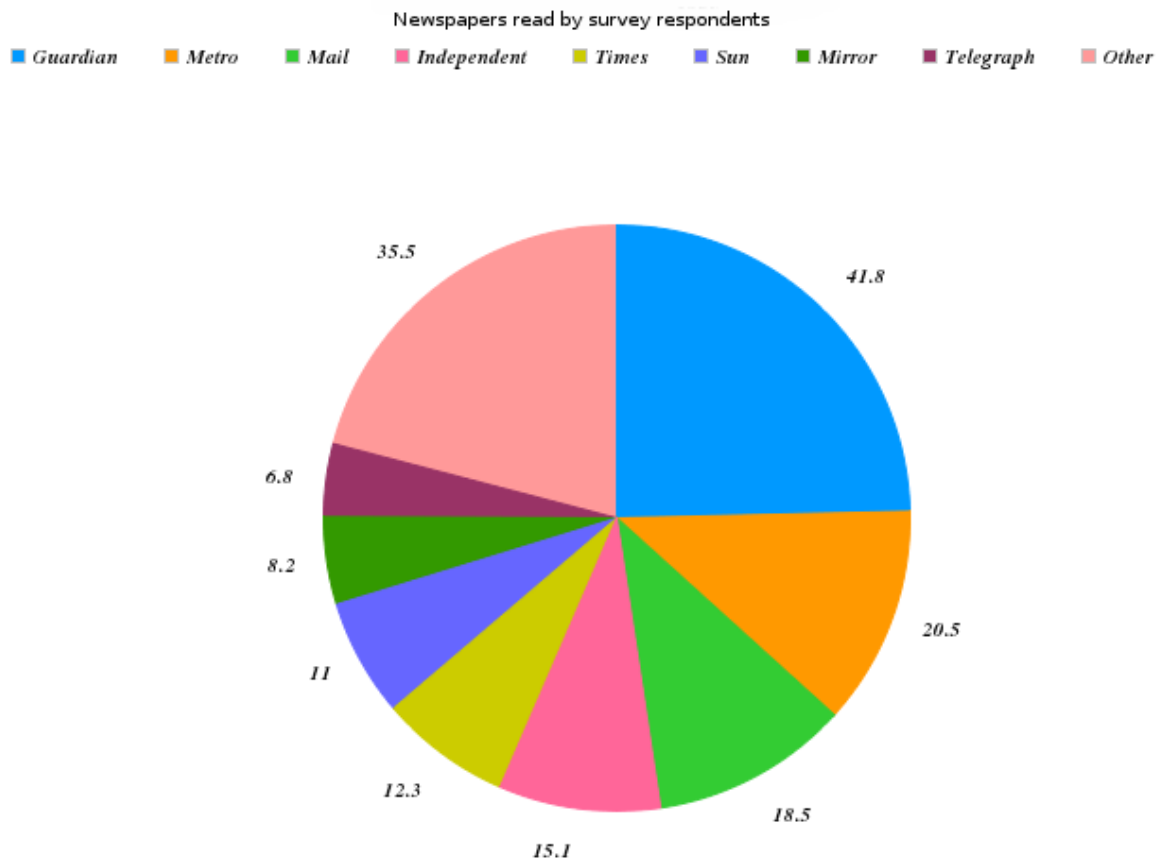
Distribution of participants by independent television region.



Based on general population demographics, we would have expected a slightly higher concentration of respondents in the London region. This would also have fitted in with the extensive evidence from other studies suggesting that members of sexual and gender minorities tend to migrate to busy urban areas. The reason for this unexpected result may be that trans communities are better organised in the north west of England and that consequently our survey was disproportionately well advertised in that region.

144 respondents told us which newspapers they read at least once a week, with The Guardian by far the most popular choice (41.7%). The Independent was the next most popular broadsheet (15.3%) and The Mail the most popular tabloid (18.8%). 30 said they never read newspapers, with several stating that this is because they expect them to be discriminatory, uninformed or transphobic. One person who did report reading newspapers went on to say that they "stopped reading newspaper articles [about transgender people] in papers and turn the page if I see one."

This presents a stark contrast with patterns of newspaper consumption across the population at large, with ABC statistics consistently showing the circulation figures for The Sun, The Mail and The Mirror to be over three times that of The Guardian. We suspect that this variation occurs because transgender people are less likely to feel welcome within the communities that tabloid newspapers purport to represent, a notion which is supported by the results of this study. If transgender people are actively avoiding those publications that they consider to be most transphobic, it is possible that the actual quantity of transphobic content in the media is considerably higher than this study suggests.



50.7% of the 110 respondents who revealed their internet habits said that they use the internet for over 20 hours per week, with 11 identifying it as their primary source of news. Only 3.8% (8) reported that they use the internet for just 1 to 4 hours, with none saying they don't use it at all (though this could be an artefact of the survey having been conducted online, despite it having been advertised in paper publications).

29 respondents reported that they or a member of their immediate family worked in the media or a closely related industry. One noted having been treated respectfully during a former career at The Guardian and feeling pained when that newspaper published "nasty articles" about trans people. Another said that colleagues in a media workplace had been "very transphobic."

Key Findings

We opened our survey by asking how often respondents saw items about trans people in the media. 5% said they saw them daily; 14% two to three times a week; 18% once a week; 20.5% two to three times a month; 24% once a month and 19% less often than that.

78% felt that the media portrayals they saw were either inaccurate or highly inaccurate, with only 3% considering them accurate; yet despite this, 55% would like to see representations of trans people more often and only 10.5% would like to see them less often.

95% of respondents felt that the media do not care what transgender people think of items like these. "I think it is important to note that it isn't just the media that doesn't care how what they do affects trans people. The Press Complaints Commission and Ofcom don't care either," said one.

Positive Representations

"It's a bit like scoring a goal when you're ten-nil down."

70% of the 249 people who responded to this part of the survey said that, on the whole, they felt representations of transgender people in the media are negative or very negative, with just under 5% considering them positive. This does not mean, however, that the rarer positive examples were not cited by a large number of respondents, who felt that they could be educational and could lead to trans people feeling less isolated.

61.5% of respondents said that they felt happy and good about society upon encountering a positive item about trans people in the media. 37% said it made them feel included and only 6% reported that they didn't care. Several said that it surprised or astonished them.

Several respondents singled out Eddie Izzard as the most positive representative of transgender people to appear in the media on an ongoing basis.

"Just putting Eddie Izzard on TV has helped to make the world a better place! It helps that he's really talented as a comic, and that being TV is not the focus of his act, just incidental to it," said one, who stressed the importance of there being a cross-dressing public figure who is clearly not transsexual or gay and thereby challenges commonly made associations that can obscure real identities.

Izzard was acclaimed by trans people with varied identities, not just by cross dressers, but one cross dresser stressed his importance in showing that there are other cross dressers out there and thereby reducing feelings of isolation for members of that group.

Several respondents stressed the importance of positive media representations in helping them to deal with their own uncertainties and talk to others about being transgender. "Before and whilst I was trying to understand myself and discovering that I was trans I found watching the positive documentaries and films extremely helpful. They helped me to understand what I was thinking, and also made me realise that I wasn't the only person in the world who felt like that."

Some respondents felt that almost any media coverage of transgender issues has an inherently positive aspect because it raises visibility and helps to get people thinking about the relationship between trans people and society at large.

"Positive experiences include the debate that is generated by good fiction and non-fiction media that accurately represents trans people - debate that happens within and outside the trans communities. I think that the media has a great power to foster discussion and understanding," said one respondent, whilst another noted that even negative media representations could be useful in providing a starting point for discussing transgender issues and correcting misunderstandings.

Channel 4 documentaries were consistently praised for the educational value in relation to transgender issues (with the notable exception of *Age 8 and Wanting a Sex Change*, which drew criticism). Two readers cited *The Boy Who Was Born A Girl* as particularly helpful because its focus on the experience of a whole family coping with a child's transsexualism helped their own families to understand what they were going through. Another reported that "The documentary *Make Me A Man* helped people I knew to understand transgender issues better and made me feel more included in society."

Negative Representations

67% of the 232 respondents who answered this part of the survey said that seeing negative items about trans people in the media made them feel angry. 50.5% said that it made them unhappy, 34.5% that it made them feel excluded and 20% that it made them feel frightened. 60% reported that it made them feel bad about society. Only 2% said they were not bothered by it.

The main reason given for these strong feelings was the perceived damage done by the media to the reputation of trans people among the general public.

Also significant was the feeling that trans people were being labelled as social outsiders.

"Negative experiences can be so very damaging," said one respondent. "What troubles me is how common it is to see almost throwaway references to trans people that are so cruel and damaging no one would consider saying it about anyone else or group ... And what is even scarier is how common place and accepted it is. There are weeks when I will see several examples, especially in sitcoms or discussion programmes or films that will simply reference how freaky, disgusting or hilarious trans people can be. Sitcoms especially seem to have picked this group recently ... and more and more I see cheap bad jokes made at the expense of trans people."

The ridicule of trans people in media items intended to be humorous was a common theme in responses throughout the survey, and a major cause of concern. Respondents clearly associated it with ridicule they received from members of the public, with one arguing directly that the media inspires such behaviour:-

"People think we are child molesting perverts because of media reporting of trans issues or as pantomime dames because [of] how we are portrayed in the media as figures to ridicule, to be pointed out and laughed at regardless of our feelings."

This was associated with a dehumanising effect whereby abusers (and possibly other members of society,) did not consider it necessary to extend the same concern to trans people that they might feel for others. Respondents also blamed some media institutions for providing a platform for the expression of transphobic hatred:-

"The Sun, Mirror, Star and Daily Mail all seem to abuse transgender people in every story, plus those with posting comments to their online web site allow hate comments from subscribers."

Respondents frequently expressed concern about inaccuracy, poor research and inappropriate use of language in both broadcast and print media. They argued that this could make an item damaging even when it seemed to have been approached from a sympathetic angle. Some respondents suggested that reporters and programme-makers did not care how they portrayed trans people, and that they did not seem to have had any training in relation to transgender issues. One noted that she had frequently had discussions with people who argued that media use of particular pronouns (as in Channel 4's *Age 8 and Wanting a Sex Change* film in the *Bodyshock* series) justified their use of those pronouns to describe trans people even when the trans people themselves considered them inaccurate and/or found them offensive. Another mentioned a case in which service providers claimed to understand his situation because they had once seen an inaccurate portrayal of a transgender person on television (even though that person was transitioning in the opposite direction), and thus, having made up their minds, refused to listen to him describing his own situation.

Whilst broadcast comedy was seen as problematic and some concerns were expressed about "ill-informed" documentaries, comparatively few comments were made about other items in the broadcast media. This was surprising given the frequency of broadcast items routinely referred to Trans Media Watch in relation to their poor handling of transgender issues. Most respondents in this survey seemed to consider newspapers to be the biggest source of problematic material.

"Generally, I have found TV programmes about or including transpeople to be much more sensitive to us than newspapers," said one respondent. "As for the written media, the usual suspects (Daily Mail, Sun etc.) are predictably bad and this annoys me but doesn't make me feel too angry unless otherwise decent people start believing what they say and using it against me."¹

The notion that it was naive to expect anything better from tabloid newspapers came up often in responses. Several respondents expressed a sense of hopelessness and frustration, of inability to challenge negative coverage. Some reported that they had complained numerous times without even receiving responses. "I have experience of dealing with Ofcom and the PCC. The arrogance beggars belief. I have been news editor at tzone and deal routinely with media output. It is awful. I keep the PCC busy but they rebuff me every time," said one. Many felt that negative media coverage made transphobia more acceptable in wider society. A number of respondents stressed their feeling that trans people are "the last group" which it is acceptable to discriminate against in this way.

Some respondents who considered themselves strong and self-reliant noted that negative media items made them concerned for others who might be more easily distressed by them.

A small number of respondents suggested that negative coverage can sometimes have the opposite effect from what might be intended or expected, making the public feel more sympathetic to trans people. One argued that it can be helpful to get prejudice out in the open so that it can be challenged. It is notable, though, that for this to be useful on a wider social level there would have to be a framework for public discussion whereby such challenges could be mounted.

¹ It is possible that the perceived differences between newspaper and broadcast representations of trans people may relate to the different style of items generally produced in each context. The routine complaints received by Trans Media Watch suggest that negative items in the broadcast media frequently take the form of brief, uninformed or prejudiced, references, which respondents to this survey may have considered less significant than newspaper items with a clear ongoing focus on trans issues (and which may be less readily recalled in a study of this type). This does not mean that we should dismiss the cumulative contribution of the broadcast media either to the general feelings of exclusion and unhappiness expressed by this survey's respondents, or to the general climate of public hostility that respondents perceive.

Effects of the Media

The most common form of verbal abuse clearly associated with television referred to the 'Laydee' characters in *Little Britain* ('Emily Howard' and 'Florence'), with eight people reporting that this had been shouted at them in the street and one having experienced it being shouted at their partner. Others had been called Barbara (in reference to *The League of Gentlemen*), Hayley (in reference to *Coronation Street*) or Nadia (in reference to an actual trans woman who appeared on *Big Brother*). Three received abuse relating to Thomas Beatie (a trans man who became famous for his pregnancies) and associated this with negative or ill-informed representations of Mr Beatie in the media. One reported frequently being asked aggressive questions of a sexual nature which related to items about Mr Beatie.

The verbal abuse reported by respondents was often described as being aggressive, with the implication that some of the respondents felt they might be in physical danger from their abusers. It also frequently involved sexual references, such as demands to see genitals. Several respondents reported that they had endured multiple instances of abuse and in some cases these incidents were connected, with one referring to "a month long hate crime campaign" which she believed may have been connected to negative stories in the media. Media-related verbal abuse was reported as occurring at home, in the street, at work, in supermarkets, and even, in one instance, in a lesbian bar. Both men and women, and often teenagers, were responsible for the abuse.

In total, 21.5% of respondents had experienced verbal abuse that they believed was associated with representations of transgender people in the media on at least one occasion.

19 respondents (8%) reported that they had received physical abuse that they believed was connected to an item or items in the media. One reported being targeted as a result of appearing in local media to raise awareness of trans issues. Others felt that media attitudes in general may have contributed to the social climate that led to them being assaulted (in at least one case, on multiple occasions), even though no media item was specifically referenced at the time of the assaults. Several noted that their attackers (in incidents of both verbal and physical abuse) had used language that is generic to media descriptions of trans people. It may be inferred that this differs significantly from the language they would use to describe themselves. One respondent specifically referred to "comments that imply I might be a sex worker" and linked this to the associations between trans people and sex workers frequently made by the media.

86 respondents felt that media representations of trans people had precipitated negative reactions amongst their families or friends. "An article by Julie Bindel about how damaging gender reassignment surgery was led my family to say that I was mentally ill and ruining my life and needed help," said one respondent, with another saying simply "I lost my family - parents and siblings - because of the way this is portrayed by the media." One explained "My mother's perceptions of trans people derived almost exclusively from what she'd seen portrayed on television - she referenced various programmes in an attempt to paint trans people as pathetic, unconvincing and inherently narcissistic. She rejected all suggestion that transsexual people could ever be in any way 'normal'. She has now refused contact for several years." **In total, 14 respondents reported serious ongoing family problems or complete family breakdown which they linked directly to negative items in the media.**

Other respondents noted that their families express worry about them after seeing media items about trans people. The reasons for this are not made explicit but seem likely to refer either to the representation of trans people as victims or to the expectation of negative public attitudes toward trans people.

Another problem respondents reported facing with family and friends involved counteracting inaccurate media reporting. One explained that his family struggle to understand that he's transsexual, not a transvestite, because "the only thing they see on TV is bad transvestites." Another said that she felt the media focus on 'sex change' is problematic because it led to her friends thinking she wanted to become somebody else when all she wants is to confirm her existing identity.

A number of respondents reported that they had difficulty in being open about their transgender identity to family or friends as a result of the transphobic comments they had heard from them in response to items in the media.

19.5% of respondents reported facing negative reactions at work in relation to items in the media. "Anything trans related in the newspapers/media was made fun of," said one, explaining that he felt unable to challenge negative statements for fear of exposure, and that the comments contributed to an atmosphere in which he felt it would be unsafe to come out. Another said that colleagues laughed at and mocked transgender people and the results of gender reassignment surgery "due to seeing comedy shows and poor quality documentaries on TV". A third reported that a discussion of a negative article in the Guardian newspaper about transsexuals in the workplace led to a number of people in management saying they would reveal her gender history if asked for a reference.

12% of respondents reported negative reactions from service providers which they felt were related to items in the media. One trans woman referenced being called a "female transvestite" by a doctor - "like something from a British sitcom". Others said that they were not surprised by such reactions because service providers, like other people, got most of their information about trans people from the media.

Beyond the specifics of individual incidents, many respondents reported that negative media representations of transgender people cause them ongoing problems with their self esteem, leading to self-hatred and potentially self-harm. Several said that they often felt frightened, intimidated and unsafe as a result of seeing negative items in the media.

Media Representations and Stereotyping

As well as showing that transgender people often find the media abusive and humiliating, the results of this survey suggest that it routinely confuses cross dressing, transsexualism and homosexuality, which leads to people feeling misrepresented, and may potentially compound prejudiced attitudes in society.

"The media mostly portray us as gay drag artists, and that is not true at all, most of us dress to blend in to society and 99.9999% of us are not gay!"

There was also concern that trans women are frequently represented as "stubby blokes in dresses". Several of the trans women responding stressed that they personally dress to blend in and do their best not to be noticed. "Trans people are routinely treated as objects of fascination, or punchlines - not real people, and there's such a disconnect between these representations and the many trans people I am close to in real life," said one respondent.

A number of respondents reported a perceived bias in media coverage toward the representation of trans women and male cross dressers, with the comparative invisibility of trans men causing problems of its own. "Transmen don't even make it on the radar (there's only one thing worse than being talked about and that's not being talked about)."

"My older brother is transgender," said one respondent, "and when I try to explain to people why I now call my 'sister' a boy, or why my brother's hand-me-downs are dresses, they reference media they've seen about 'sex changes' and assume that he is MTF because of how the media uses incorrect pronouns when discussing transpeople."

"Generally people seem completely oblivious to the fact that FTM trans people even exist since much trans representation in the media is of MTF individuals," said another, "and consequently my FTM identity is taken less seriously. People make assumptions about me based on the character of Max in *The L Word*, since I have a lot of lesbian friends."

Several respondents argued that the media's use of stereotypes, whether positive or negative, is particularly problematic because it excludes people with more complex gender identities. This compounds a situation in which variant gender identities are poorly understood or are dismissed as belonging to an insignificant minority, where our survey suggests they make up a substantial part of the transgender population. GIRES estimate that there are as many as 500,000 people in the UK who have some form of transgender identity; if we consider our data in light of this, we can estimate a population of around 74,500 gender variant people who are for the most part completely unrepresented in the media.

One respondent noted that, whilst coverage of transsexual people is, in her view, more balanced, the items about cross dressers and transvestite people which she encounters in her position as editor of a news service are "almost completely negative". She believes that this contributes to poor self esteem and difficulty in coming out for many such people. Our data showed a significant correlation between self-identification as a cross-dresser or transvestite person and feelings of low self esteem in relation to negative media items.

Finally, there was concern about the contexts and type of roles in which transgender people appear in the media. This was summed-up as follows:-

"Transgender people do not appear often enough in day-to-day roles, where their being transgender is incidental. We are portrayed in the same stereotyped way as those of minority races were in the 1950s."

Taken in combination with the fact that 55% of respondents say they would like to see more representations of transgender people in the media, this suggests that the problem is not the existence of such representations but their inaccurate, ridiculous or sensationalist nature. A positive way for the media to move forward in respect of this data would be to try and develop more realistic, rounded portrayals of transgender people in contexts that allow them to be seen as ordinary - as fully human.

Conclusions

This study makes it clear that transgender people are deeply dissatisfied with the way they are portrayed by the media. It shows that there is an endemic problem with negative and inaccurate representations, and that this leads to considerable real life suffering on the part of transgender people who encounter these representations. It also strongly suggests that such representations inspire at least some of the verbal and physical abuse that transgender people experience in their day to day lives, and that they can be a significant factor in family breakdown.

It is plain from this study that action needs to be taken to address widespread prejudice against transgender people within the media, and to tackle a perceived lack of accountability. This approach would be in line with other measures recently taken to protect transgender people from discrimination.

Recommendations

Trans Media Watch makes the following recommendations:-

1. Increased liaison between representatives of the media and transgender groups, aimed at improving understanding.
2. Increased liaison between media regulatory bodies and transgender people.
3. The extension of the PCC's code of practice to take account of the effect of prejudicial and/or inaccurate reporting on wider communities, not just the individuals directly involved.
4. A firm commitment from regulators to treat incidents of transphobia with the same seriousness as incidents of homophobia and racism.
5. A commitment from larger media outlets to providing training on transgender issues to their staff.