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Russia's Transgender Community Struggles for Acceptance (Video)

By Elizaveta Vereykina

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Vika, 48, works as a truck driver at a Moscow construction site.

There is no Russian equivalent of Caitlyn Jenner, whose transition from former Olympic athlete Bruce has been documented in both the mainstream and tabloid American press all summer. Transgender Russians often keep a low profile, worried how they will be treated by friends, colleagues and family members.

See the Photo Gallery: A Day in the Life of a Transgender Muscovite

Although the LGBT community in Russia faces significant legal and social challenges, there are laws in place that allow Russians to change their gender on official documents and undergo gender reconstructive surgery.

There are no official statistics on the number of transgender people in Russia, but experts put the number at around 15,000 across the country — about 0.1 percent of the population.

One of them is Vika, 48, who works as a truck driver at a Moscow construction site and declined to give her last name. She came to the capital from her native Novosibirsk, where her wife and 10-year-old son live.

Vika didn't intend to be a truck driver. She worked for eight years in a beauty salon before it closed, and subsequently spent a long time looking for work. In her most desperate days, she even resorted to selling her body, an experience she describes as so shameful and terrifying that she cried the entire night before she did it.

She eventually found a job as a driving instructor.

"Once my boss called me and asked: 'Are you gay?'" Vika told The Moscow Times. "I said, 'No, I am not.' Then he tried to convince me to take off my earrings. But I didn't. I was giving driving lessons wearing earrings."

Her current boss is more supportive.

"Those who see me for the first time at the steering wheel are surprised how a lady can operate such a huge truck," Vika said. "Once a couple of colleagues wanted to beat me up for being a transgender person. After my boss found out about it, he fired them immediately."

Anastasia Gerasimova, 48, tried to take on the most masculine jobs she could think of as a young person, with the hope that doing that type of work would make her feel more like the gender she was born as.

"I wanted to be a woman since my early childhood, but I thought serving in the army and having a masculine profession would help me to remain a man," said Gerasimova, who worked on the railroad after her military service. "I wanted to fit the public opinion that your genitals define who you are. I got married and had two kids, but nothing changed."

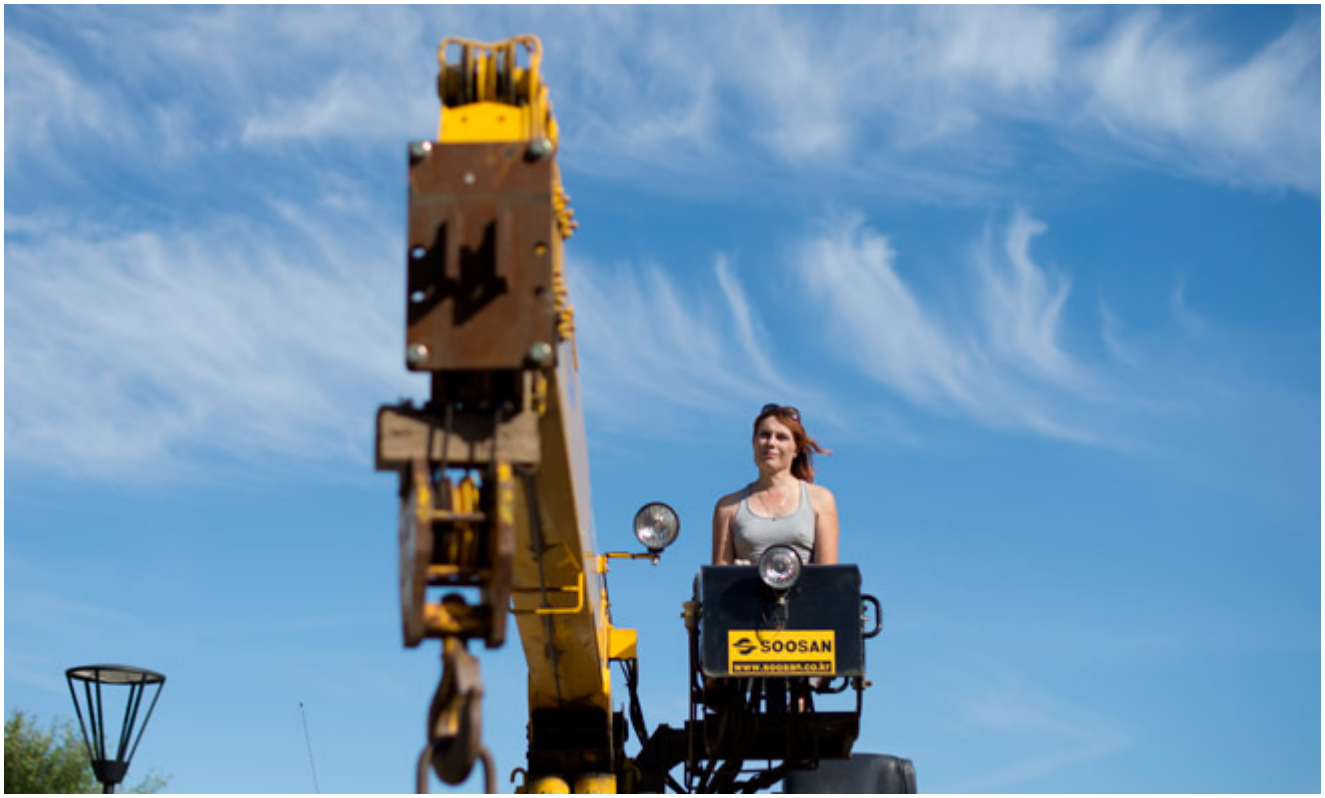
Eventually, Gerasimova joined a transgender support group and began living as a woman. She now works as a laser epilation specialist.

"I am happy I can wear high heels to work. My soul soars. I have a guitar in my office and perform Russian rock songs by [legendary Soviet bard Vladimir] Vysotsky and [rock group] Mashina Vremeny," she said.

Nevertheless, she continues to do the "man's work" around the house.

"My relatives believe all the TV nonsense and try to give me all the hardest, 'man's' work at home. I always have to carry the heaviest items, must earn more, fix the electrical and plumbing problems at home. But I love my family and will never leave them. My son is 21 years old now and my daughter is 12. We live together. I feel I am responsible for bringing them up."

Gerasimova and Vika both introduce themselves as women, but their passports bear their birth names and gender.



Pascal Dumont / MT

Vika didn't intend to be a truck driver. She worked for eight years in a beauty salon before it closed, and spent a long time looking for work.

"At first glance, some think I am a woman, treat me politely and are friendly. But when they look into my passport, I see how the expressions on their faces change," Vika said.

To officially change legal identification documents, including the internal passports that are the primary identification document for all Russians over the age of 14, transgender people must go through several steps, including being diagnosed by a state psychiatric commission with "transsexualism."

Tatyana Glushkova, a lawyer with the Transgender Legal Defense Project, which offers free legal help to transgender people, says that hurdles remain even after those requirements are met.

"According to the law, one must submit a certificate of gender change. However, there is no approved form for such a certificate," Glushkova said. She says that state registry offices often use the lack of a proper form as an excuse to refuse to amend birth certificates.

Glushkova also noted that while there is no law stating that gender reassignment surgery is necessary to change a person's gender on official documents, courts often refuse to do so without the surgery, creating another — expensive — hurdle for transgender Russians.

Gender reassignment surgery runs from 35,000 rubles ($500) for the removal of testicles for male-to-female transition to up to 1.2 million rubles ($20,000) for the construction of a penis for female-to-male transition.

Despite the cost, Igor Gulyayev, a plastic surgeon at the K+31 Clinic in Moscow, said that his clinic does more female-to-male transition surgeries.

"Most of the operations we do are female-to-male transition, while in Europe, for example, the majority are from male to female. Probably it's because psychologically in Russia it's easier to live as a male," he said.

Vika is saving up for surgery to make her look more feminine.

"Almost everyone around me recognizes the man in me, but I want people on the street to exclaim: 'Look! What a beautiful woman!" she said, noting that she has saved 300,000 rubles ($4,723) to have facial reconstructive surgery to make her features look more feminine and has scheduled the operation for later this month.

Anna Slutskaya, a plastic surgeon at the Clinic of Reconstructive Surgery of Andrology and Sexopathology, has been performing facial feminization surgeries for five years.

"The first stage of such an operation lasts six hours and may include hairline correction, forehead and chin contour adjustment, upper lip lift and Adam's apple reduction," Slutskaya said.

Andrei Demedetsky, 32, had gender reconstructive surgery at 19 and has lived as a man for nearly half his life.

"I wanted to be a boy since I was in school. I was lucky my parents accepted me and even sponsored my operation," Demedetsky said. "I live in the same neighborhood where I went to school. My former classmates don't recognize me on the street."

Demedetsky and his wife founded Transgender.ru in 2004 to provide information about transgender people and offer advice and support to the transgender community. He also works in a shop that sells special supplies to the transgender community.

"You can buy stuff like corsets, Hessian boots, wigs. We also sell special devices to enable women to pee in the men's room," he said. "There are women's shoes in sizes up to 46, push-up pants and bras. We sell special T-shirts to flatten down breasts."

The shop, called Transdostavka, is very discreet.

"When we first opened, our customers insisted we shouldn't have any signs on the door so people around them wouldn't know where they were going," Demedetsky said.

Goods can also be ordered online and delivered.

"Famous clients are afraid of harm to their careers, and ask us to pack deliveries as tightly as possible so no one sees what's inside," Demedetsky said. "We hand the box to a courier somewhere in the city."

No Money, More Problems

Russia's economic downturn has made it harder for transgender people to save the money

needed for hormones and reconstructive surgery.

Gulyayev said that his clinic has seen a drop-off in surgery requests.

"In 2014, we performed about five operations per month. This year, we are doing about three sex-change surgeries per month. I think the decrease is a consequence of the crisis; people don't have much money anymore."

Eva, a transgender pharmacologist who declined to give her last name, offers patients free consultations on hormone therapy, but agrees that money makes everything easier.

"If you have money, you can solve any problem: have an operation, rent an apartment and change your ID documents," she said.



Pascal Dumont / MT

Andrei Demedetsky, 32, had gender reconstructive surgery at 19 and has lived as a man for nearly half his life.

Lack of Awareness

According to transgender people themselves, the biggest problem they face is not a financial one, but rather the lack of understanding about what being transgender means.

"In the opinion of the public, transvestites, transgender people and gays are all the same," Vika said. "That's actually what makes me the most sad."

Gerasimova echoed her complaint.

"I feel sorry for Russia when on state TV channels they basically equate transgender people with pedophiles and call us sodomites. There are transgender people who have never even had sex!" she said.

Russian legislation hasn't made it any easier to educate the public, according to Demedetsky.

"Russian authorities constantly want to outlaw things instead of dealing with them and bringing them into the legal field," he said. "Now, under the law that protects children from gay propaganda, we cannot help teenagers who are struggling with gender identification."

"My heart breaks looking at young people under the legal age of 18 who cannot go to a psychiatrist, psychologist or even call us. ... All I can say is wait, be patient. But that makes the suicide risk very high," he said.

Gerasimova agreed that the laws make it more difficult for Russians to come to accept people like her.

"Russia is a great country, there are a lot of kind and intelligent people. But it's hard for transgender people to be integrated into society fully," she said.

Vika

I started wearing women's clothes in 2010. I lived in a typical Soviet nine-story building in Novosibirsk. I remember one day walking with my family, my wife and son, while my neighbors stared at me, shocked.

I came to Moscow two years ago and temporarily work as a truck driver at a construction site.

All my colleagues address me as a woman, but sometimes they use masculine endings on words. I feel uncomfortable and upset, but try not to show it.

It took me a long time to get this job. When other employers realized I was transgender, they didn't want to hire me.

In a couple of months, my work in Moscow will be over and I have to go back to Novosibirsk. To be honest, I have nobody to go back to. I wish I could move somewhere — to Canada, for example. ... Here in Russia I feel transgender people are mobbed.



Pascal Dumont / MT

Eva, a transgender pharmacologist, offers patients free consultations on hormone therapy.

Anastasia Gerasimova

I used to work as a train driver, which was hard. I was constantly stressed, as I had to fix train cars and tracks.

I was working hard at the railway, and at the same time I was going through hormone therapy. My blood pressure went up and down, and I used to faint right at the depot. Once my breast became visible and people around looked at me with surprise.

I had wanted to be a woman since my early childhood, but I thought serving in the army and having a masculine profession would help me to remain a man.

I stopped struggling with myself after the age of 40, when I joined a transgender support group.

Andrei Demedetsky

My wife and I founded the project Transgender.ru in 2004. We are here to inform people about the medical, scientific and legal aspects of transition. We want to help them beat depression.

In Russia, the attitude toward female-to-male transgender people is slightly better than that toward male to female. This is because sexism and patriarchal rules give men a higher status than women.

Three of my friends committed suicide or were killed because they are transgender. Transition

is just a beginning, as first of all we need love and support from people around us.

Eva

Transgender people are included in the LGBT community, but they are different because transgender status is a temporary thing and transition lasts around three years.

Once you start transition, you face alienation at work or in your family. Around 90 percent of people who come to us do not find support at home.

While a person's appearance changes, the passport remains the same. You face problems boarding a plane, train, picking up a package at the post office, or passing through checkpoints.

Sometimes physical aspects of the body do not allow you to look as feminine as you want, despite all the surgeries and hormone therapy. Some are doomed to be stuck between genders forever.

Contact the author at newsreporter@imedia.ru

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