

# Sex Change For The Better

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*Are we treated differently at work just because we're women? Women say yes, men say no. PINK gets the truth from those who've seen it both ways*

DONNA ROSE fingers the silver heart pendant at her throat and throws a coquettish smile at the waiter, who nearly blushes and looks at his shoes as he takes her order. "Just a cup of the bean soup," she says. "Girl's gotta watch her figure."

As he scurries off to the kitchen, Donna laughs. "That's how it works for blondes," she jokes, amused by the power of her own feminine wiles.

Flirtation can get her a cup of soup on the quick, but it's not what got Donna into the upper echelons of the information technology world. The 48-year-old executive from Arizona is a valued consultant for big companies. She's driven, analytical and accomplished, a standout in the conference rooms and mahogany-paneled offices of corporate America.

But she's a standout for another reason — not because of what she does but because of what she's seen and what she *knows* that make her an authority on gender disparities like no other. Ever since 2000, when she completed her physical and emotional transition from man to woman, from David, to Donna, she's witnessed firsthand the differences in how men and women are treated in the workplace. And they're even more shocking than you might expect. Testimonials and statistics tell of the problem. The wage gap for women didn't narrow in 2006 (hovering around 77 cents to the dollar), which means equal pay could "take another 50 years," says Heidi Hartmann, Ph.D., president and economist at the Institute for Women's Policy Research. And a new study from Catalyst suggests that persistent gender stereotypes place women in "double-bind" dilemmas that hinder their advancement at work.

But for decades there have always been excuses. Naysayers shake their heads at the stats and suggest the issue is more subtle, that it's the particular people and personalities — not their genders — that are the cause of disparities. *It was the woman's lesser qualifications and experience, they might argue, that cost her the job, the promotion, the raise. She doesn't get the same level of esteem, they may say, because she hasn't been in the trenches long enough.* And sadly, the lame explanations always raise just enough reasonable doubt that nothing much has changed.

But Donna Rose knows better. She'll tell you that a client's handshake is softer for Donna than it was for David, that the tone of talk is sometimes more condescending, that the security guy calls her "sweetheart" instead of just nodding respectfully when she walks through the door.

"It's deep-seated societal tradition," says Andrea James, a trans-gender woman and co-founder of Deep Stealth Productions, the consulting company that helped actress Felicity Huffman prepare for her acclaimed film role in *Transamerica*. "I don't think it's much more complicated than the fact that our society has really been set up for centuries to favor males."

Donna and Andrea aren't alone. To get some of the first irrefutable proof of unequal treatment, PINK sought out other trans-gender women in high places: powerful lawyers, high-tech execs, authors and public speakers. Because they've brought to identical work situations the same career and life experience, the same emotional baggage, in the outer persona of both man and woman, they alone can put the lame excuses to rest. Transgenders "can settle the debate," says Rachael St. Claire, a Colorado psychologist who specializes in transgender issues.

Experts estimate there are as many as 40,000 postoperative transsexual women living in the United States, with many thousands more in the process of transition. For some, the journey is eased somewhat if a new job accompanies the gender change, allowing the individual to assimilate completely at work as a woman once the transition is complete. Such was the case for Donna. The same, too, for Jillian Todd Weiss, Ph.D., a law professor and former litigator.

Here we offer their stories, just two of many, from both sides of the gender divide.

## INSIDE THE DOUBLE STANDARD

### *The Donna Rose Story*

With her wispy blonde hair, her eyes lined and shadowed in pinks and blues, her delicate earrings and her cream-colored kitten heels, Donna Rose now looks, acts and *is* entirely female. No longer is her transformation obvious; in fact, she's only identified as transsexual when she chooses to be. When Donna was David, a jock who could bench-press 300 pounds, commanding the attention of co-workers was easy. Now, with her narrow shoulders and smooth cheekbones — yet with the exact same resume — Donna sometimes feels invisible.

"I've met with consultants who obviously feel more comfortable talking to the men in the room," Donna says. "My questions and suggestions are met with very little response, and answers are directed to my peers, who are men, rather than to me. These things happen all the time."

Donna also notices a difference outside the conference room, as when she's in an elevator or standing in line at the airport. "There was a man standing just off to my right and slightly behind me," she says of a recent elevator encounter. "I realized that he was uncomfortably close — so close, in fact, that if I didn't know better I would have thought we were a couple. He seemed totally oblivious to the fact that he had crossed my own personal space boundary and caused alarms to go off in my head."

This never happened to David, she says. But was David ever guilty of invading a woman's space? Donna isn't sure; it's something David never even *thought* about. What she is sure of, though, is that men favor male characteristics in the workplace, such as being tough and assertive. "They don't really appreciate some of the more maternal qualities and emotions," she says.

Case in point: When Donna managed a huge project at Dell, it was a male colleague who saw himself as the one in charge. When Donna left town for any length of time, he would try to edge his way in and make decisions he wasn't authorized to make. Handling the problem delicately didn't work. To fix the situation, Donna had to tap into David. "Eventually it got to a point where I scheduled a meeting with our vice president to tell him there was only room for one project manager," she says. "I told him it had to be him or me. I won."

For anyone in her field, she says, getting status reports or necessary information from people can sometimes be a challenge. But as Donna, she finds it happens much more often. "I'm constantly having to visit people's desks or turn to management to get what I need," she says. It's so frustrating, in fact, that she often wells up with emotion. As David, that emotion erupted as anger. But after Donna began hormone therapy during her transition, she instead found it difficult to fight back tears.

"Estrogen hit me like a sledgehammer," she says. "One of my earliest fears [as a woman] was to cry at work. I realized that it could happen anywhere, and I didn't want it to happen there. It did, once, and I actually got reprimanded for it. It's perceived as weakness, and that's a double standard."

Even though she alone knew just how much of a double standard it was – that the tears were meaningless, a hormonal manifestation of the very same emotion that resulted in a man's rages – she took comfort in having the support of other women at work when the tears threatened to fall. The genders are in very distinct camps, she says. The men compete with and often provoke each other. The women, on the other hand, are more likely to band together as a team.

It's a level of camaraderie Donna feels she missed out on as a man at work. "There's a level of shared understanding [among women] of what it takes to get there," she says. "What it has done is provide a deeper personal connection with coworkers than I ever had before. It's helped add a new context to my career that's more interpersonal, more relationship-based, than before. It makes going to work more enjoyable, and it makes me better at what I do simply because I enjoy it more."

## JUSTICE ISN'T BLIND

### *The Jillian Todd Weiss Story*

Before her doctorate from Northeastern and her current position as professor of law and society at Ramapo College of New Jersey, and before transitioning to a woman in 1998, Jillian Todd Weiss practiced law for 10 years as a man. For men in the courtroom, the treatment could be "harsh and punishing," Jillian remembers. "If they tell you that certain information has to be given, and it's late and you ask for an extension without good reason, they'll throw out the case." There were "serious consequences," she says of her experiences as a man. "I had my share of judges yelling at me."

But after the transition from Todd to Jillian, it was a different story. She recalls how she was hired to help a legal team by appearing in court on their behalf and asking for an extension. The team was already two months late and had received five previous extensions. As she stood before the judge – in a smart business skirt-suit and pumps, her hair done – she asked for two more weeks and braced for the response.

Instead of the explosion she had received before as a man, Jillian – possessing Todd's exact legal background and competence – got ... nothing. And then: "My dear," the judge said sweetly, "we have rules in this courthouse. They have to be followed. I'll give you a week."

Jillian was stunned. "My teeth almost hit the floor. This guy was absolutely nice to me," she says. "Completely patronizing, practically calling me 'honey,' not really talking to me as much as checking me out. What a different experience. I was completely unprepared for that."

The treatment behind closed doors at the law firm was much the same. Todd had been known for his hard work and writing ability and had published several articles in scholarly law journals. "I would usually get a few comments from the senior partner like, 'Make this point clearer,' or 'Change this title,'" Jillian recalls. "Comments were always respectful." As a woman, however, she received very different remarks for the same writing. "Comments like 'No!' and 'This makes no sense' were now the norm. The changes that were requested were all stylistic changes – nothing of substance – so I was surprised that my superiors were getting so bent out of shape." Jillian was similarly unprepared for the differences she would experience when negotiating salary. For Todd, the process was very straightforward: the interviewer would lay out all the benefits, make an offer, then ask if all was acceptable. Todd would usually ask for more money.

"This was, of course, pure puffery, but the issue was treated very seriously," Jillian recalls. And later, as a woman? "The person with whom I was negotiating would make a take-it-or-leave-it recitation of the salary, and I would have to drag the benefits out of them," she says. "I never received a higher offer, and the implication was that I was lucky to be picked and ought to be *gracious*, not demanding."

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Having seen all they've seen, Donna and Jillian know that achieving true equality – and the kind of respect that David and Todd commanded automatically – will take more time. There's not necessarily a conspiracy to hold women back, Jillian says, but there are certainly "unstated expectations" for each gender among men. "When women fulfill different roles," she says, "they can get a lot of push-back."

As it stands now for men and women in the workplace, "Everything is different – more than anyone would imagine," Donna says. And through her experiences and those of others like her, we know it's true beyond a reasonable doubt.

WORK SITUATION	AS A MAN	AS A WOMAN
in meetings	David, the strong athlete, could work the room.	Donna's suggestions "are met with very little respon
Unfulfilled duties	Todd received "harsh and punishing" treatment.	Jillian gets more leeway.
Personal space	David rarely thought about the concept at all.	Donna finds her space invaded often.
Evaluation of assignments	For Todd, comments were "always respectful."	For jillian, comments like "No!" and "This makes no sense" became the norm.
Emotions at work	David's frustration took the form of anger.	Donna's frustration takes the form of tears.
Salary negotiations	Todd's were straightforward, with mutual understanding and higher pay.	Jillian's were "take it or leave it." "The implication was that I was lucky."
Camaraderie with colleagues	David competed with and provoked the other men.	Donna enjoys support and a "shared understanding among women at work.

