**Third Gender Option on All Birth Certificates**

**[Shannon Devereaux Sanford](https://www.linkedin.com/in/shannon-devereaux-sanford-b1909a9/)**

When asked, the majority of Americans don’t think we need to have a third sex designation box on birth certificates when our children are born. To most people, the binary male/female options we have had for years seem to be working just fine.

Regardless of what you currently think, I can assure you that we do need a third sex option in every state in this country. We fall behind many other countries in this regard and we are long overdue for a change.

Society is a wonderful social institution to which we all instantaneously belong when we are born. We each get assigned a sex, male or female, the minute we enter, and that identity stays with us for the rest of our lives. Yes, your sex can be changed on legal documents (with much complexity) if you decide to change your gender later on, but even then, you still have to pick either the M or F box on every form you fill out from birth to death.

Without identifying as a gender, it is almost impossible to function in society. If your ID doesn’t match what you look like, it will be difficult to get on a plane or even buy a six-pack of beer. We have to pick a gender to live in society. For most of us, that is not difficult. We are cisgender, meaning we comfortably identify with our assigned sex at birth; our gender corresponds with our birth sex.

But what if your child is born with genitalia that is neither male nor female, which box do you check when there isn’t one that fits? Here in the United States, for many years, the infant would be whisked off to surgery to change the genitalia. This medical surgery, often unnecessary and often female, was to make sure the child’s anatomy looked like our allocated M/F sex, thus correctly matching one of the binary box choices. So instead of simply adding a new appropriate box to check on the birth certificate form, we have forced surgery on babies to fit the socially constructed format of the two boxes already there.

Of course, it isn’t that simple because just adding a new box doesn’t change society’s predominantly shared position of favoring only the gender binary. If your child doesn’t fit one of the boxes, what do you say to family and friends? What do you register them as for pre-school and other activities when there are only two choices and neither fits?

According to WebMD, children are born intersex at a rate of 1.3 in every 1,000 births. Some equate that number to about as many as children who are born redheads. But unlike hair color, children who don’t fit the gender binary have been subject to surgery to alter them physically as opposed to altering the birth certificate form — an extreme reaction when looking at it critically.

This pressure to undergo surgery to normalize their genital of those born intersex is archaic and performed on babies who are too young to consent or have any idea with what gender they identify. There are many stories of those who were surgically forced to adopt a gender that didn't fit instead of being allowed to decide for themselves when the time was right. Many continually undergo numerous surgeries to fix what was forced on them and take a lifetime of hormone pills.

Ideally, we should wait until the child is old enough to have a say in their gender identity. We are saddling those born a bit different with a lifetime of emotional and physical struggles because doctors have wanted to help them fit into society by deciding their gender for them before reliable information is determined. It seems obvious to me that instead of changing the child, it is society that needs to change.

The problem is more societal than medical. Yes, some of these children will need medical intervention but it may not be best to choose a sex for them before they hit puberty. Today parents are often faced with the difficult decision about whether to bring up their intersex child as a boy or a girl since we don’t feel there is a place for a third option of “not sure.”

The American Indians didn’t see it this way. When they had an intersex child they thought this was a special gift. They called these children Two-Spirited and raised them with both genders until the child decided which gender fit them best. Sometimes, they stayed gender-neutral and felt most comfortable just being who they were. Some fit perfectly into a male or female when old enough to choose.

How do you raise a child who doesn’t fit the binary? It is difficult in our society now, but it should not be. What is the cruel is mutilating children into a sex they may not be comfortable in just so we don’t have to alter society’s view.

Society will change as it always does, and this will be a problem of the past. Until then we need to be aware of what we are forcing upon these children so we can have a pretend binary world. The fear that goes with more than two sexes is built on ignorance, and once that changes the world will be a safer and more welcoming place for all.