

Cuba's first transsexual gets surgery

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After 40 years of waiting, 61-year-old metalworker Juani Santos finally underwent a sex reassignment surgery as part of the Cuban government's revolutionary program to fund sex-change operations.

According to Reuters, Santos was clinically diagnosed as the first transsexual man on the island in 1972, when he still struggled with a lot of prejudice even from his family and friends.

In 2008, when authorities approved a program to allow free sex changes, Santos was one of the first in line and managed to be among some 30 patients approved for the operation.

He said he identified as a man at a very young age and began using male clothes since childhood.

'I have always felt like a man. During my whole life, I've felt like a man. So, I behaved like one and I also began to dress as a man. My mom wanted to dress me as a woman, but I took my clothes off and rip them. My mom is alive, she is 92 years old thanks to God and she can tell you this because her memory is clear. She used to comb my hair and I didn't let her do it. I wanted to use ponytails and that's the way I was, people have always been against that,' said Santos who lives in the city of Matanzas, some 100 kilometres from the capital Havana.

The first sex-change operation in the Caribbean island took place in 1988, but there was so much opposition to using public funds for the procedure that the health ministry cancelled the initiative soon after.

But in June of 2008, at the insistence of the daughter of the then newly-instated President Raul Castro -- brother of revolutionary leader and former President Fidel Castro -- the program was reinstated.

Santos is now among the few transsexuals who have successfully changed their gender through state-funded surgeries, as the fight for gay rights still continues in the island.

Santos, who had trouble engaging in homosexual relations with women before the operation, said however he had been fond with girls since he was a kid.

'I was born with this feeling, without knowing what gender was or anything. I've always played men's games; I've always been friends with men and nothing else. I used to help girls, women, I've always liked to have their attention without knowing at the time if I liked them or not, because I was only a boy, there were no sexual thoughts,' he said.

Santos does not want to remember the female name his parents gave him and used to make excuses to wear boys' uniform while in his first years in elementary school.

'When the Revolution triumphed, I was 9 years old and it was obligatory to wear uniforms (at school). I used to make up that I had to ride my bicycle (to school) to arrive on time, but they began to complain. In fifth grade I dropped out and stopped going to school,' he said.

For many years his brothers did not accept his conditions and even burned his male clothes once. Santos' older brother Fernando Santos said Cuba's sexist society shaped his opinions at first.

'We realized that it was real and we could not fight against nature. Nature is like this and unfortunately not everyone understands this. We did not understand due to the sexist state we used to have,' he said.

Cuba has already made progress in gay rights, mostly through the work and demands of the director of the National Center for Sex Education (Cenesex), Mariela Castro Espin, a psychologist, sexologist and the daughter of President Raul Castro.

Castro Espin is a gay rights activist in a country with a long history of homosexual oppression including sending gays to labor camps -- a policy that ended in the 1970s.

An advocate for homosexual rights, she has accused the national Communist Party of discriminating against gays and has called on leadership to end the discrimination.

Santos still has to undergo one more surgery, because doctors weren't able to perform the procedure exactly the way he wanted due to his advanced age.

Yet, he already enjoys the benefits of the long-awaited operation and said he hoped to spend the rest of his life with a girlfriend.

'(I want to) look for woman who wants me, to be a couple and live what I still have to live a little happier than what I have been until now,' he said.

Despite Cenesex efforts, Cuba's gay community stills fights against homophobia and struggle to win civil rights such as same-sex union.