

00:04

I have a confession to make, right off the bat. I don't know what you were doing at 16, but I'm a really big fan of "Harry Potter" and was waiting way too long to receive my letter inviting me to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry -- I could have gone for sixth form. I was also waiting for an invitation to the Jedi Temple or a tap on the shoulder to invite me to the X-Men. I was that kid.

00:35

When I was 16 years old, I got my wish. I was taken into a doctor's office and told that I am in fact part of a group of people who are still largely invisible and misunderstood. I am intersex. That's my superpower.

00:58

For many of you in this room, it will be the first time you've even heard the word "intersex." Intersex is anatomy. It refers to people who were born with one or more of a variation of sex characteristics. That's your genitals, your hormones, your chromosomes that fall outside of the traditional conceptions of male and female bodies. In other words, the most basic assumption we've made about our species -- what we're taught in schools that sex is binary, just male and female -- is not correct. Like most things in this world, it is much more complicated than that.

01:45

Intersex people who fall outside of this false sex binary have always existed, throughout human history. Like the wizards of "Harry Potter," we are pretty much invisible. Some of us don't even know that we are intersex. Like the X-Men, some of our traits are obvious at birth and others turn up around the time when puberty is supposed to kick in. When we find out we are intersex, some of us believe we are the only ones in the world.

02:25

Me, specifically, I have XY chromosomes, which you may have understood to be typically male. I was also born with gonads instead of ovaries. Standing here on this stage would have been my worst nightmare only five years ago. It would have been impossible.

02:52

I use the metaphor of the superhuman, but really, we are just like you. Intersex people are thought to make up to 1.7 percent of the population. That means more, depending on where you are in the world, but you get the picture. We are in front of you, getting coffee; we are sitting next to you on the train; we are swiping you left and right on dating apps --

03:17

(Laughter)

03:20

So why haven't you heard of us? If we are so common, why don't you see us? How has the world responded to us?

03:34

We often think of disciplines like medicine and the law as supposedly neutral -- immune to bias. The law is "reason free from passion." The doctors' Hippocratic oath states that "warmth, sympathy and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's pill." In truth, these disciplines that touch our lives are impressive, but they are filled with our prejudices. They are not immune, just as we are not immune to the effects of that prejudice, which can be devastating.

04:17

In medicine, intersex babies who are born with ambiguous genitalia are routinely operated on without consent, without medical need, irreversibly, in order to make their healthy anatomy appear more "normal." This is before they've even said their first words, indicated a sexuality or a gender identity.

04:51

Many people are never told the truth about their intersex traits, and those who are are instructed, often, not to tell anyone. Secrecy is enforced and shame is a close shadow. In the law, intersex people fall outside of categorization, and more importantly, protection. This concerns the banal tasks -- if you can imagine the number of forms you've filled out that you had to check "M" of "F" on -- to lacking protection under any law, specifically, the Gender Recognition or Equality Act. And intersex people cannot correct the sex classification they've been given at birth unless

they declare they are transgender. After decades of activism, these life-altering problems are starting to be addressed.

05:55

So why does this matter to those of you who aren't intersex, who don't have variations of sex characteristics? I imagine many people in this audience have, in the privacy of their own bathrooms, wondered ... "Are my labia too long?" "Are my testicles uneven?" "Is my penis too small?" "Is my vagina too wide or too shallow?" Nothing that hurts or gets in the way, just aesthetically: "Are mine 'normal?'" I imagine that many people in this audience have those small concerns but generally go about their lives not thinking about it. These variations in our bodies, like the color of our eyes or the size of our feet, rarely affect our health, materially.

06:50

To put it another way, to give you an idea of the intersex experience, what if when you were an infant, your parents or your doctors looked at your labia, your penis, your testicles, and thought, "They're healthy, feeling, but they're not 'normal,'" even before you knew what you wanted to do with them, or you know, want to put them.

07:21

(Laughter)

07:24

What if they went so far as to assign you a different sex based off these measurements ... And then they lied to you about what they'd done? What if these surgeries sterilized you? What if they resulted in immense pain and scarring? What if you had to take medicine for the rest of your life to replace the healthy organs they took away, and you had to pay for that medicine yourself? And then every time you went to a doctor's office for a cold, you were questioned about your sex life, your gender identity, what your private parts looked like. And then more doctors and medical students were invited to add to these questions, ask you to drop your trousers or submit to an unnecessary medical exam.

08:32

This is a picture of what is happening to the intersex community -- people like me, every day, around the world. Our community is not antimedicine or antisurgery. We are for the right to make decisions about our bodies and our lives. The current approach to intersex people stems

from a now-debunked academic study from a man who, over 50 years ago, believed that you could raise a child in any gender by changing their genitals, never telling them and reinforcing that gender over and over again. It also stems from referring to healthy intersex variations as abnormal or disordered. This makes sense. If you refer to something as a disorder, it suggests there's a fix. It also stems [from] the fear and stigma of being intersex, from homophobia, transphobia, sexism and ultimately, our colonial past.

09:48

I am not here to say that the categories of men and women don't exist. I'm saying, like most things in this world, it is more complicated than that. The world is complex, and we can choose to see that as beautiful, or we can choose to continue to deny the existence of that complexity, push people into artificial, binary boxes, fix what isn't broken and restrict our own field of vision.

10:22

One of the challenges that intersex people face today is making ourselves visible and making ourselves safe at the same time. By that, I mean we are appealing to the humanity of lawmakers to make us safe whilst putting ourselves into the public eye, sharing our stories, trying to build community with people like us ... Even when it isn't safe to do so. For parents of intersex children listening and watching, for those in the audience who may become the guardians of intersex people, I want you to know I love my life, but it has not be free of issue, especially in relation to being intersex. No life is free of issue. All coins have two sides.

11:19

On the one side, I have been humiliated in doctors' offices. I have stood in front of prospective partners and felt afraid and so not good enough. I have watched other women pass me in the street and imagine the ways that they were more woman than me, more human than me. I have questioned whether I have a place in this world.

11:51

On the other, I have been deeply loved for everything that I am, in friendship and romantically. I have learned compassion and empathy for a wider range of society. I have taken the time to love my body and not judge the bodies of others. I have developed a strength and a hope that would have been impossible without this particular life.

12:28

The instinct to protect children is instinctive and it's admirable, but the truth is that love, acceptance and refusing to bathe that child in shame will protect them more than trying to fix something that isn't broken. This is why it is in our interest to protect intersex people and make them visible. For as long as societies reinforce one form of acceptable, of "normal," everyone will face insecurity for being different in any way. Simply trying to erase variation, difference, builds shame.

13:20

Being intersex has not materialized the powers that I wished for as a teenager ... beyond being able to see where this false sex binary harms us all. It is my belief that if intersex people can gain equality, can be seen, can be accepted and can be loved, then we all will.

13:48

Thank you.

13:49

(Applause and cheers)