

## Fighting a private battle of the sexes / TV personality Ai Haruna talks about her struggle with gender identity disorder

Masanori Tonegawa / Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

The following is the first installment of a two-part story of how Japanese transsexual TV personality Ai Haruna, 39, suffered from and overcame gender identity disorder.

Ai Haruna sometimes shows her "manly" side on TV variety programs by speaking in a loud, hoarse voice, drawing laughter from the audience.

"I might have taken the long way in coming to terms with my more manly side, which--as much as I hate to admit it--is my attractive feature," Haruna said.

Born anatomically male, Haruna wanted clothes and toys for girls as a child. When playing house, she always played the role of the mother. "I believed that I would naturally be able to become a woman when I grew up," she said.

But upon entering primary school, things quickly changed. Students were separated by sex for physical examinations. She wanted to wear bloomers for female students in gym class, but had to wear shorts for male students. "I despaired and wondered whether I would gradually become different from the other friendly female students. I felt my identity was threatened," she said.

"Why can't I become a woman?" Haruna thought this to herself all day long and was unable to concentrate on studying.

During reading time, Haruna always chose the Hans Christian Andersen tale "The Little Mermaid" because she could identify with the main character, who could not become a perfect woman unless she gave up something important. During that time, Haruna covered her face with the book to hide a flood of tears.

Before attending kindergarten, Haruna had dreams of becoming an idol singer, aching to be like pop music duo Pink Lady. Beginning in primary school, Haruna frequently appeared on amateur impersonation TV programs.

"As I hid my feminine side at school, I felt liberated [on the programs]," she said. Without confiding in anyone, she graduated from primary school and advanced to middle school.

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## A place to belong

Since childhood, Haruna had worried about the incompatibility between her mental and physical genders. When entering middle school, she wore a male school uniform with a stand-up collar and tried to act manly. "I had a tough time not being true to myself, but I had decided to present a fictitious self at school," she said.

On the impersonation TV programs, Haruna appeared in women's costumes even after becoming a middle school student. As a result, she was bullied at school. She even thought of suicide.

When she was a second-year middle school student, Haruna had a life-changing event. A customer at her mother's restaurant took her to a club where "newhalves" (transsexuals and male transvestites) entertained customers. It was the first time she learned there were many people just like her.

Haruna asked the club manager for a job and started the next day, living a double life as a male middle school student by day, and a newhalf at night.

As she had found a place where she could be her true self, Haruna had no problems acting like a man both at home and at school.

"I used to hold a grudge against my parents for not making me a baby girl. But when I was considering suicide, pleasant memories of my family dissuaded me from doing so. So I'm really grateful to my family," she said.

Just three months after entering high school, Haruna dropped out. She confessed to her parents that she was suffering from gender identity disorder and was determined to live as a newhalf.

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## Changing gender

While working at a club, Haruna sang and danced on stage to entertain customers, becoming a show business professional.

One day, a TV crew came to the club to cover Haruna. "I felt like I was closer to my dream. I wanted to become cute so I could look like a young woman in every way, and that way, more TV stations would come to run stories about me," she said.

Haruna then underwent a sex-change operation. "I couldn't tell my parents about the operation. But right before the surgery, I called my mother to hear her voice. Then I went into the operation room shedding tears," she said.

Once she became a woman in body, Haruna felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. The happiest thing was that she could now wear clothes and swimsuits for women, as well as enter female bathhouses.

Nevertheless, those around her sometimes do not acknowledge Haruna as a woman. At the time, she was in a steady relationship with a man, but his family pressed her to break up with him on the grounds that Haruna is a newhalf.

"I understood that after I had the operation, I wouldn't be able to have a period or become pregnant. It was a tough operation, but I noticed that only one of my many worries was resolved," she said.

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