



*Model Hanne Gaby Odiele
on what it means to be
intersex, her decision to go
public – and her new mission
of advocacy and support*

Model M/F

BY LYNN YAEGER

1 When Hanne Gaby Odiele was two weeks old, she developed an infection. Her parents took her to the hospital near their native
5 Kortrijk, Belgium; the doctors did some blood work – and then they informed Franke and Annie Termote that their little boy was going to be just fine. Boy? They were 1. The
10 blood tests showed that their child had a condition known as androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) – while she was genetically male, with one X and one Y chromosome, she was
15 resistant to male hormones, or androgens. Hanne was born with

internal testes, and without a uterus or ovaries.

The Termotes' family doctor
20 had never seen anything like this. The couple was sent to a specialist, who told them what they would hear over and over again as their daughter grew up – their child was
25 intersex; she would need corrective surgeries; and it was important to keep it all a dark secret, even from Hanne herself.

The last taboo

30 Odiele is now 28 years old, a model who has walked runways

from Chanel to Prada and starred in campaigns for clients including Mulberry and Balenciaga. In a
35 world where trans and gay rights have made incredible progress, intersex is perhaps the last taboo. Odiele's decision to go public, to fully 2 the details of the body
40 she was born with, and to become a spokesperson for the intersex community, is an act of enormous courage. Though she admits being inspired by trans models who have
45 walked major catwalks, Odiele is exploring unknown territory – it is impossible to find even one well-known person in any field who is openly intersex.

50 Intersex is actually an umbrella term referring to more than 30 different conditions in which a person is born with a variation in sex anatomy. For decades, most
55 doctors recommended surgery for intersex babies. Ilene Wong, a urologist who has 3 intersex adults, says that as of the last several years 'the whole landscape
60 is finally changing as people are becoming more aware of the consequences. Some things don't





need to be fixed! There are times when there is medical necessity, but almost all of the surgeries are purely cosmetic – and can leave people scarred, unable to have sex, and possibly experiencing early menopause.'

Kimberly Zieselman, the executive director of InterACT, an organisation with which Odiele is working closely that fights for the rights of intersex youth, shares an astonishing statistic: 'Nearly 2 per cent of babies are born intersex – about the same as naturally born redheads.' How many of them have lived their lives in shame and 4?

Many of Odiele's school holidays were spent in doctors' offices, with medical students often viewing her without her permission. Her parents were told that if she didn't have her testes removed when she was ten or eleven, she would get cancer (a response to our society's fear of intersex bodies; these children are no more likely to develop cancer than anyone else). Instead of explaining to their daughter what the surgery actually was for, they had to tell her

that she had a bladder problem.

'They told us what Hanne had was extremely rare,' her father, Franke, explains. 'We thought we could never share this with friends or family.' In those days before the Internet, if you were in a little town in Belgium, you had no access to the kind of information now at our literal fingertips. 'We felt 5,' her mother, Annie, says.

Not the only one

If Odiele's parents didn't tell the whole story to their child, it was because they didn't know the 6 either. In fact, it was Hanne herself who finally cracked the case. She was seventeen, feeling like 'a sad mess – the hormones they gave me were messing up my body. I knew something was wrong'.

A few months before she was discovered by a modelling agent at a rock festival in her hometown, she was reading a Dutch teen magazine when she came across a story about a girl who couldn't have babies, and who had had many surgeries. This is me! Odiele remembers thinking. 'I contacted the magazine, got in touch with that intersex girl, and then found a self-help group in Holland. It was the most amazing thing. You think there is no one like you – and then you get to talk to other intersex people!' Her parents now advise other parents of intersex children to be 7 and transparent.

'Doctors think they have to "normalise" the baby,' says Odiele, who is passionate about stopping what she calls 'crazy surgeries that can never be undone when you are much too young'. The United Nations agrees with her – in March 2016 they criticised non-consensual genital surgeries on intersex children, suggesting that they be classified as torture.

Coming out

In the beginning, Odiele told very few people. Alexander Wang, who cast her in his very first presentation, recalls that she told him about herself on the way to a party about five years ago. 'She doesn't let these things scare her

or change her thinking or 8,' he says.

She also has no problem answering questions that might seem deeply personal in another setting. 'It takes a lot to make Hanne feel ashamed,' her husband of six months, the model-DJ John Swiatek, says. When she first told Swiatek about herself, seven or eight years ago, he answered 'Oh, that's 9 – I'm adopted.'

Odiele, showing her well-known openness, says without being asked, 'Our sex life is very normal – hetero – normal.'

Still, she doesn't hide what makes her different. 'I will never know how it is to have a period, have a baby. But I also don't stand up peeing! I don't have a penis! I am intersex, but I am much more female.' If she is nervous about her coming out, she is also almost delighted with excitement. 'It was important for me to make this statement now, based on where I am in my life. I want to help to the shame that intersex persons face. I want to be there for people who are struggling, to tell them it's OK – it's one part of you, but it's not who you are.'

'Being a model is like a big compliment,' she adds, 'but it can be so one-sided. I knew I wanted to use it at some point as a platform to tell people: you can be accepted however you happen to be! The "norm" is not what you think it is.' <<

