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Transformation

How Transgender Issues Have Become Part of H.R.C.'s Work

by Shannon Minter, Staff Attorney for the National Centre for Lesbian Rights in San Francisco and former board member of the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy and a member of Female-to-Male International.
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Words are certainly powerful, but the proof is in the action.

When I began working for the National Centre for Lesbian Rights in 1993, transgender and transsexual issues were scarcely a blip on the screen of national lesbian and gay groups. Most lesbian and gay leaders would have been hard-pressed to discuss trans issues in any meaningful way, or even to clearly define the word "transgendered." Although much remains to be done before trans people are fully accepted and included in the gay rights movement, trans activists have done an extraordinary job of propelling transgendered issues into the forefront of lesbian and gay policy discussions and political debates.

While H.R.C. isn't doing everything the trans community has asked, we should give it credit for the trans-inclusive work it has done and continues to do.

The questions we have confronted are important and not yet fully resolved. Should transsexual women be allowed to participate in women-only lesbian events? Should lesbians who transition to become female-to-male (F.T.M.) transsexuals be allowed to remain in lesbian organisations? Should lesbian and gay legal groups represent transgendered and transsexual clients? Should laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation be drafted to include, where possible, gender-identity as well? It is probably safe to say that every national lesbian, gay or bisexual group has been profoundly affected by these debates, or has at least begun to consider how to include trans issues in its organisational work.

As the largest lesbian and gay political organisation in the country, the Human Rights Campaign is an influential participant in these discussions. Given H.R.C.'s visibility and national role, it is not surprising that it has come in for a large share of criticism from trans activists who are frustrated at the pace of change and fearful that trans people will be left to struggle on our own, without the support of the very communities and organisations we have helped to build. These criticisms have ranged from demanding that H.R.C. add the word "transgender" to its mission statement to protesting that "gender-identity" is not included in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

As a transsexual person, I understand on the most visceral level why the trans community feels left out, but there is a great deal of misinformation about H.R.C.'s efforts on behalf of trans issues and its commitment to including transgendered people in its work. In the past three years, H.R.C. has taken a number of steps to educate itself about trans issues, to establish an alliance with trans activists and trans groups, and - most importantly - to work with trans people to develop and implement a long-term strategy for advancing transgender and transsexual rights.

In September 1995, H.R.C. flew a number of transgender community leaders to Washington for a meeting with Executive Director Elizabeth Birch and senior staff. At this meeting, H.R.C. committed to support an amendment to E.N.D.A. that would add protections for the transgender community and to work with the transgender community on hate crimes legislation.

A month later, H.R.C. ran the first of several lobby skills trainings for transgendered activists. H.R.C. also provided the services of Chai Feldblum, an H.R.C. consultant and highly respected Georgetown University law professor, in drafting legislative language on gender identification.

The next year, H.R.C. invited GenderPAC to join the Hate Crimes Coalition, which takes the lead in passing federal hate crimes legislation. Jessica Xavier, a well-known trans activist, made a presentation to H.R.C. staff. That March, Elizabeth Birch submitted testimony on behalf of H.R.C. to the Senate Judiciary Committee on the Hate Crimes Statistics Act stating that the bill should include the transgender community. She also met again in November 1996 with representatives of the transgender community to listen to our concerns about E.N.D.A.

In January 1997, H.R.C. set up and attended, with representatives of GenderPAC, a series of meetings with E.N.D.A. co-sponsors in Congress to begin educating them on transgender issues and to assess the level of support for a transgender-inclusive E.N.D.A. Every office visited indicated that the general educational work needs to be done on transgender issues before such legislation would be

viable.

That April, H.R.C. invited me to a luncheon to discuss discrimination against transgender and transsexual youth. H.R.C. staff attended along with representatives from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the National organisation for Women and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

Among its other transgender-related work last year, H.R.C. attended congressional meetings and a press conference as part of a national transgender lobby day and helped get members of Congress to sign a letter to the Justice Department asking it to provide all assistance possible to the trans community on hate crimes. H.R.C. Senior Policy Advocate Nancy Buermeyer attended the annual International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy in Houston in 1997 to learn more about transgender issues and to hear the thoughts and concerns of participants. H.R.C. has continued to expand its work on behalf of trans people in 1998.

This past March, H.R.C. invited me and Nancy Nangeroni, executive director of the International Foundation for Gender Education, to make a presentation on trans issues to its boards - a session that I believe was well-received. And I continue to meet with H.R.C. staff and other trans leaders to discuss opportunities for us to work together.

H.R.C. was also instrumental in getting gender-identity in the Hate Crimes Prevention Act currently before Congress. And, this past spring H.R.C. co-sponsored a legal round-table on gender and sexual orientation with the National Centre for Lesbian Rights and GenderPAC.

My point is simple: While H.R.C. isn't doing everything the trans community has asked, we should give it credit for the trans-inclusive work it has done and continues to do. It's important to change a group's name and mission statement, and I hope H.R.C. will do that in the future. But those changes are meaningless if they are only cosmetic. Words are certainly powerful, but the proof is in the action.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.