



## Transgender Activism

by Susan Stryker

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Since the late nineteenth century, people whom we would now call transgendered have advocated legal and social reforms that would ameliorate the kinds of oppression and discrimination they have suffered as a result of their difference from the way most people understand their own gender.

### Early Activism

Much of the early history of this struggle is intertwined with the history of the homosexual emancipation movement in Europe, a situation caused by nineteenth-century conceptions of homosexuality that conflated gender variance and same-sex erotic attraction. The identity category "Urning," for example--defined as "a feminine soul enclosed in a male body" by pioneering homosexual emancipationist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who proposed changes in the Prussian legal code to decriminalize homosexual activity between males--is an ancestor of both modern gay and transgender identities.

Likewise, the politically active sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld's understanding of homosexuals as "sexual intermediaries" who fall somewhere on a spectrum between pure heterosexual masculinity and pure heterosexual femininity also undergirds early transgender political sensibilities.

Hirschfeld, who in 1897 founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, the first political organization in the world that aimed to better the treatment of sexual minorities, was a pioneering advocate of transgender rights. He employed transgender people on the staff of his Institute for Sexology in Berlin, which played a pivotal role in promoting endocrinologic and surgical services for transgender people trying to change the gendered appearance of their bodies. The first modern "sex-change" surgeries were carried out in collaboration with Hirschfeld and his medical staff in the early 1930s. Hirschfeld also worked with Berlin's police department to curtail the arrest of cross-dressed individuals on suspicion of prostitution, until the rise of Nazism forced him to flee Germany.

In the United States, what little information scholars have been able to recover about the political sensibilities of transgender people in the early twentieth century indicates an acute awareness of their vulnerability to arrest, discrimination against them in housing and employment opportunities, and their difficulties in creating "bureaucratically coherent" legal identities due to a change of gender status. They generally experienced a sense of social isolation, and often expressed a desire to create a wider network of associations with other transgender people.

### Mid Twentieth-Century Advocacy

Transgender advocacy efforts did not begin to gain momentum, however, until the 1950s, in the wake of the unprecedented publicity given to Christine Jorgensen, whose 1952 "sex-change" operation made her an international celebrity and brought transgender issues to widespread attention.

A central yet virtually unknown figure in the history of transgender community formation was Louise

Lawrence, a male-to-female transgender person who began living fulltime as a woman in San Francisco in the 1940s. Lawrence developed a widespread correspondence network with transgender people throughout Europe and the United States by the 1950s, and worked closely with Alfred Kinsey to bring the needs of transgender people to the attention of social scientists and sex reformers.

Lawrence was also a mentor to Virginia Prince, who, later in the 1950s and early 1960s, founded the first peer support and advocacy groups for male cross-dressers in the United States.

In 1952, using Lawrence's correspondence network as its initial subscription list, Prince and a handful of other transgender people in Southern California launched *Transvestia: The Journal of the American Society for Equality in Dress*. Though it lasted only two issues, this publication marks the beginning of the transgender rights movement in the United States.

In 1960, Prince launched another publication, also called *Transvestia*, that became a long-lasting and influential venue for disseminating information about transgender concerns. In 1962, she founded the Hose and Heels Club, which soon changed its name to Phi Pi Epsilon, a name designed to evoke Greek-letter sororities and to play on the initials FPE, the acronym for Prince's philosophy of "Full Personality Expression." Prince believed that the binary gender system harmed both men and women by alienating them from their full human potential, and she considered cross-dressing to be one means of redressing this perceived social ill.

Support organizations for male cross-dressers proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s, but most traced their roots to various schisms and offshoots of Prince's pioneering organizations of the early 1960s.

### **Militancy in 1960s San Francisco**

Militant transsexual politics first erupted in San Francisco in 1966, when transgender street prostitutes in that city's impoverished Tenderloin neighborhood rioted against police harassment at a popular all-night restaurant, Compton's Cafeteria.

In the wake of that riot, San Francisco activists worked with Harry Benjamin (the nation's leading medical expert on transsexuality), the Erickson Educational Foundation (established by a wealthy female-to-male transsexual, Reed Erickson, who funded the development of a new model of medical service provision for transsexuals in the 1960s and 1970s), activist ministers at the progressive Glide Memorial Methodist Church, and a variety of city bureaucrats to establish a remarkable network of services and support for transsexuals, including city-funded health clinics that provided hormones and federally-funded work training programs that helped prostitutes learn job skills to get off the streets.

Transsexuals in San Francisco formed C.O.G. (Conversion Our Goal) in 1967, which, after a series of internal schisms, became the National Transsexual Counseling Unit, and later the Transexual Counseling Service, both funded in part by the Erickson Educational Foundation.

### **Transgender Activism and Gay Liberation**

By the later 1960s, some strands of transgender activism were closely linked to gay liberation. Most famously, transgender "street queens" played an instrumental role in sparking the riots at New York's Stonewall Inn in 1969, which are generally regarded as the origin of the contemporary glbtq rights movement.

Sylvia Rivera, a transgender veteran of the Stonewall Riots, was an early member of the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance in New York; along with her sister-in-arms Marsha P. (for "Pay It No Mind") Johnson, Rivera founded STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) in 1970. That same year, New York gay drag activist Lee Brewster and heterosexual transvestite Bunny Eisenhower founded the Queens

Liberation Front, and Brewster began publishing *Queens*, one of the more political transgender publications of the 1970s.

New York transsexual activist Judy Bowen organized two other short-lived groups, TAT (Transsexuals and Transvestites) in 1970, and Transsexuals Anonymous in 1971, but neither had lasting influence. Far more significant was Mario Martino's creation of the Labyrinth Foundation Counseling Service in the late 1960s in New York, the first transgender community-based organization that specifically addressed the needs of female-to-male transsexuals.

On the West Coast, militant transgender activism found its leading figure in the person of Angela Douglas, a contentious yet effective advocate of transgender rights. Douglas had been active in GLF-Los Angeles in 1969 and wrote extensively about sexual liberation issues for Southern California's counter-cultural press. In 1970 she founded TAO (Transsexual/Transvestite Action Organization), which published the *Moonshadow* and *Mirage* newsletters. Douglas moved TAO to Miami in 1972, where it came to include several Puerto Rican and Cuban members, and soon grew into the first truly international transgender community organization.

Another influential West Coast figure was Beth Elliot, one of the first politically active transsexual lesbians, who at one point served as vice-president of the San Francisco chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the lesbian homophile organization, and edited the chapter's newsletter, *Sisters*. Elliot became a flashpoint for the issue of MTF (male-to-female) transsexual inclusion in the women's community when, after a divisive public debate, she was ejected from the West Coast Women's Conference in 1973.

### **The 1970s**

The 1970s were a difficult decade for transgender activism. These years were marked by slow, incremental gains as well as demoralizing setbacks from the first flushes of success in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s in Philadelphia, the Radical Queens Collective forged effective political links with gay liberation and lesbian feminist activism. In Southern California, activists such as Jude Patton and Joanna Clark spearheaded competent social, psychological, and medical support services for transgender people.

Across the country, it was becoming easier for transgender people to change the gender designations on state-issued identification documents and to find professional and affordable health care. In 1975, the city of Minneapolis became the first governmental entity in the United States to pass trans-inclusive civil rights protection legislation.

On the other hand, most gay, lesbian, feminist, and other progressive activists distanced themselves from transgender issues. Largely as a result of the emergence of new political ideologies of gender, transgender people--particularly transsexuals--came to be seen as dangerously reactionary in their cultural politics, as people who had a false consciousness of gender oppression and who sought to mutilate their bodies rather than liberate their minds.

### **Anti-Transsexual Discourses**

Feminist ethicist Janice G. Raymond caused particular harm with her paranoiac *Transsexual Empire*, which was published in 1979 but drew on anti-transsexual discourses that had been developing at the grassroots level for nearly a decade. Almost incredibly, Raymond argued--and many of her readers believed--that transsexuals were the mindless agents of a nefarious patriarchal conspiracy bent on the destruction of women.

Raymond characterized female-to-male transsexuals as traitors to their sex and to the cause of feminism, and male-to-female transsexuals as rapists engaged in an unwanted penetration of women's space. She suggested that transsexuals be "morally mandated out of existence." As a result of such views, transgender activists in the 1970s and 1980s tended to wage their struggles for equality and human rights in isolation

rather than in alliance with other progressive political movements.

### **The 1980s and the Emergence of the FTM Community**

In 1980, transgender phenomena were officially classified by the American Psychiatric Association as psychopathology, "gender identity disorder." When the AIDS epidemic became visible in 1981, transgender people--especially transgender people of color involved in street prostitution and injection drug subcultures--were among the hardest hit. One of the few bright spots in transgender activism in the 1980s was the emergence of an organized FTM (female-to-male) transgender community, which took shape nearly two decades later than a comparable degree of organization among male-to-female people.

Lou Sullivan, a gay-identified, HIV-positive San Francisco-based FTM activist, played a leading part in this effort. In 1986, inspired by the leadership of FTM pioneers such as Mario Martino, Steve Dain, Rupert Raj, and Jude Patton, he founded the FTM support group that grew into FTM International, the leading advocacy group for female-to-male individuals, and began publishing *The FTM Newsletter*.

Sullivan was an important community-based historian of transgenderism and also played an instrumental role in persuading medical and psychotherapeutic professionals to provide services to transgender individuals like himself who identified as gay or lesbian in their preferred social genders. In the years since Sullivan's untimely death in 1991, his successor Jamison Green has emerged as the most vocal and influential FTM activist in the United States.

### **The Effects of AIDS Activism**

The AIDS crisis provoked a profound reorientation of sexual identity politics in the later 1980s and early 1990s that ultimately worked to the advantage of transgender activism. AIDS activism required alliances between different social groups affected by the epidemic, such as gay men, hemophiliacs, Haitians, and injection-drug users. An effective response to the epidemic meant addressing systemic social problems such as poverty and racism that transcended narrow sexual identity politics.

In the context of this public health crisis, transgender issues once again began to resonate within broader struggles for justice and equality. Leslie Feinberg's influential pamphlet, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, published in 1992, heralded a new era in transgender politics.

Militant groups such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation crafted a highly visible, playfully ironic, angry style of media-oriented, direct-action politics that proved congenial to a new generation of transgender activists. The first transgender activist group to embrace the new queer politics was Transgender Nation, founded in 1992 as an offshoot of Queer Nation's San Francisco chapter.

### **Transgender Nation**

Transgender Nation noisily dragged transgender issues to the forefront of San Francisco's queer community, and at the local level successfully integrated transgender concerns with the political agendas of lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists to forge a truly inclusive glbtq community. Transgender Nation organized a media-grabbing protest at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association to call attention to the official pathologization of transgender phenomena.

Transgender Nation paved the way for subsequent similar groups such as Transexual Menace and It's Time America that went on to play a larger role in the national political arena.

### **Anti-Transgender Hate Crimes**

Transexual Menace, founded by Riki Wilchins in 1994, the year that Transgender Nation folded, tapped into

and provided an outlet for the outrage many transgender people experienced in the brutal murder of Brandon Teena, a transgender youth, and two of his friends in a farmhouse in rural Nebraska on December 31, 1993. The murders, depicted in Kimberly Peirce's Academy Award-winning feature film *Boys Don't Cry* (2000), called dramatic attention to the serious, on-going problem of anti-transgender violence and hate crimes.

The website *Remembering Our Dead*, compiled by activist Gwen Smith and hosted by the Gender Education Association, honors the memory of the transgender murder victims--roughly one person a month. The Remembering Our Dead project spawned the National Day of Remembrance, an annual event begun in 1999, which is now observed in dozens of cities around the world.

## **GenderPAC**

Riki Wilchins, whom *Time Magazine* selected in 2001 as one of its "100 Civic Innovators for the 21st Century," went on to found GenderPAC (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition), the largest national organization in the United States devoted to ending discrimination against gender diversity. GenderPAC, which has sponsored an annual lobbying day in Washington, D. C., since the late 1990s, is but the most visible of many transgender political groups to emerge over the last decade.

More than 30 cities, and a handful of states, have now passed transgender civil rights legislation. While the transgender movement still faces many significant challenges and obstacles to gaining full equality, the wave of activism that began in the early 1990s has not yet peaked.

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