

*In the early 1990s, I was an earnest but idealistic activist working in the transpolitical movement. I was struck by how our young movement lacked any sense of politics beyond what seemed to be a male-centric, "my rights have been violated" approach. A feminist 15 years prior to my transition, it bothered me that we lacked a perspective in which to contextualize the many hardships we faced as we came out into the open for the first time to advocate for our civil rights. As a staff writer for *TransSisters: the Journal of Transsexual Feminism* (in which this essay first appeared) I had the opportunity to write a critique of the movement, and to articulate a possible politics for it. In the light of history, my attempts and those of others to instill feminism into the political struggle for trans people must now be regarded as a failure.*

Transsexual Feminism and Transgender Politicization

by Jessica Xavier (written 1995)

As a feminist, transgendered political activist, I have become greatly concerned over the past year about the lack of involvement by transgendered people in the political process. There are simply too few of us working actively to accomplish our political goals, some of which have time limitations. For example, nine states now have anti-discrimination laws that include sexual orientation but only one of those (Minnesota) also includes gender identity. Each time another state, at the prompting of its gay and lesbian lobby, adds protection based solely on sexual orientation, it is already too late for the transgendered citizens of that state. It is unlikely we will ever have the resources to go it alone, so we must quickly form transgendered organizations to lobby the gay and lesbian groups in the remaining states. Each new anti-discrimination law passed without protection based on gender identity is a window of opportunity slammed shut for at least a generation. Unless a major break occurs in that state's case law, its transgendered citizens will face another fifty years of harsh discrimination. (For the purposes of this essay, "transgendered" includes all people with non-traditional gender identities or expressions, including transsexual persons).

So lately I have been focused on identifying the reasons for the lack of involvement, and on developing possible strategies to empower more of us to get involved in shaping our political destiny. Of paramount and continuing concern are our shame and fear issues, which can only be resolved over time. But there are other reasons that limit involvement. It is only recently that have we begun to come out in numbers sufficient to call ourselves a "community", and simply relating to one another as transgendered human beings has been problematic, due to our fundamental natures. David Harrison, as quoted by Kate Bornstein in *Gender Outlaw*, observed that the gay and lesbian communities are centered on individual relationships with each other, giving them an outwardly-looking focus. Transgendered people are inwardly focused on our self-identities, producing a different group dynamic, one which has not helped to build a sense of cohesiveness within our new community. We transgendered are indeed very individualistic persons, with strong opinions and an inherent distrust of any authority and all rules, two key components of politics. Thus many transgendered people shy away from politics simply because they do not trust their activist leaders (myself included). Furthermore, due to their fear of exposure, transgendered victims of discrimination and hate crimes are concerned about how their cases will be reported. They do not want their personal tragedies to become fodder for an overly zealous activist who may make matters worse.

But I suspect even more transgendered people have problems with who we activists are. Perhaps it's just a matter of our personal style, or being out, or perhaps even the way we take pride in being transgendered. Or maybe it's our gender expression itself. To be activist, transgendered and out requires more than a healthy ego to overcome our shame and fear issues. It requires what many might stereotype as "male energy". While men and women, transsexual and non, can possess masculine-identified energy and use it as a positive force, being perceived as having too much male energy becomes too difficult for many of us, especially the feminists. It smacks of patriarchal mindsets and male egos that are anathema to feminism. I suspect that this is driving more than a few transgendered people away from our political movement as it becomes identified by the leaders who exhibit it.

I began working in the queer movement a year after I transitioned, a full year before surgery. At first, it was fun, and I became energized by the pride exhibited in the positive actions of my gay brothers and lesbian sisters. With a few exceptions, we transgendered are clueless about teaching pride within our own community. But as I became more and more drawn into political activism, embroiled in one inclusion struggle after another, I found the going getting tougher, my energy flagging. It simply was not in my nature to fight with my less-than-enlightened gay brothers and lesbian sisters who were/are my activist role models. I also realized the ultimate irony, of surviving the intensive process of transitioning from male to female and finally being able to live my new life, where I am now perceived by many to be an aggressive, assertive, rhymes-with-rich activist for transgendered and queer causes.

But I also realized my internal struggle parallels that of non-transsexual women, especially those who also must become strong-willed and tough-minded in order to secure their own survival and their children's in a hostile, patriarchal world. I'd love to pretend I'm strong and brave, but I'm really just an average woman, who makes mistakes with the best of them while trying to do her best. Still I struggle, I cry, I scream in rage at the brutality of discrimination and violence leveled at my sisters and brothers by the nons. But while caring a great deal for my community, I confess I do not enjoy having to re-immense myself in male energy in order to fight for it. I sense my *anima* and *animus* very keenly, and four years into transition I am still striving for the happy gender medium between the two forces. I feel that too much male energy threatens the delicate balance of gender power, not only within myself, but with other female-identified transgendered people as well. And I realize the additional irony that as an out activist, I am perceived as having all this male energy, while inside I shrink from it.

Like many separatist women, I too have had some negative past experiences with male energy and male egos. At times, I also find male energy disturbing to be around, and I utterly distrust it in power-over situations. I shudder at the velocity at which the male ego travels, and cannot abide by any male sense of entitlement. Aware of my internal gender balance, and having been harmed both before and after transition by unchecked male egocentrism, I am constantly measuring my own ego as I measure that of others, partly because I fear the ego's potential for causing human damage. Like the gender forces, the ego too must find its own middle ground. In my mind, too much male energy begets male ego, which is the driving force behind patriarchy and male privilege. Such patriarchal thinking should have no place in the transgendered movement.

Transsexual feminism has begun to give many of us new understandings of ourselves as transsexual women and the way we deal with ourselves and each other. It is in direct opposition to traditional patriarchal thinking, that relic from many a male-to-female past, which threatens not only women and feminism, but the transgendered movement as well. When exhibited by male-to-female transgendered people in their relationships with each other or in any TG group, this atavistic urge toward overt male-identified thinking becomes very destructive, damaging our ongoing efforts to build and strengthen our community. This mindset may be characterized by hierarchal organizations with boards of directors using Roberts Rules of Order; an obsession with control as exhibited by an iron-hand, Theory X management style which stifles dissent and seeks rubber-stamp approval of its decisions; an overemphasis on the importance of academic credentials as if they equaled ability, judgment or even common sense; a preference for confrontation, competition, and making intractable demands in lieu of dialogue, cooperation and compromise, respectively; an inability to understand other points of view; an inability to admit mistakes; and a strong resistance to change. The transgendered movement is currently undergoing rapid shifts in its thinking, which has caught most of the older transgender organizations off guard. It used to be that if it didn't happen behind the banquet doors of a transgendered convention, it just didn't happen. How times have changed, and quickly!

We transsexual feminists have been quite fond lately of quoting Audre Lourde's now-famous admonishment that "the tools used to build the Master's house can never be used to dismantle it". I hear her words like a bell, ringing in my head, warning me, warning us. I feel the depth of that message resonating

ever so deeply for the entire transgendered movement. While it is not my intent to bash anyone in particular here, neither can I remain reticent, while more transgendered persons are driven away from the transgendered political movement precisely at the time we are desperate for greater involvement. While there are helpful signs, such as the Transgender Alliance for Community, which may over time resolve the turf battles of the past, the underlying management and organizational styles remain intact. If we are to succeed as a liberation movement, it is absolutely imperative that we empower more transgendered people to join us. We must change more than just our bodies and appearances. We must change our minds and mindsets. We must change our way of thinking and relating to one another. And there is another way.

I believe that transsexual feminism holds the key to the success of the emerging transgender political movement. Transsexual feminists can show others how to lead, not by leading but by following. We can seek out and encourage the unheard voices within our community to speak out by listening to them. We can show others how to respect all voices heard in discussion by including as many of them as possible in a group's decision-making process. And most importantly, we can bring more people into the transgender movement by emphasizing cooperation over competition. Transsexual feminists can do this for other transgendered persons by teaching them a different way of thinking, a different way of organizing their group, and a different way of running their meetings. This is the way of feminist process, and decision-making by the consensus method.

In January, 1993 I went to my first queer political gathering, a meeting of the Host Committee for the March On Washington. The meeting was conducted using something called "modified consensus" and this was my first experience with it. Our meetings were sometimes long, sometimes emotional, but our volunteers always came back to the next meetings. The good feelings of these meetings became contrasted with the anger I felt during the organizing meetings for last year's big queer event, when Stonewall 25's Executive Committee used every Roberts Rule in the book to keep "Transgender" out of its title. I find it absurd that the National Organization for Women uses "Roberta's Rules of Order" - the Master's Tools by another name! But at least when I go to Lesbian Avenger meetings in Baltimore, consensus and feminist process rule. When it is my turn to speak, I can share my thoughts with the other women in a caring, inclusive, open environment. I feel I am being heard, and how good that feels!

The differences between these two methods of conducting meetings are obvious. The feminist way has fewer rules, less rigidity, no hierarchy, equal voices, and more respect for the participants. Feminist process affords a group the space to deal with contentious issues, along with ways to help everyone or nearly everyone arrive on the same page together. Using the consensus method to make group decisions allows every voice with an opinion to be heard and ideally, those group decisions represent a summation of all those voices. Rather than rely on a few strong leaders, we learn to rely on ourselves and each other. Meetings are facilitated by different group members each time. Power is re-interpreted as responsibility, which is shared equally by each member of the group. The leaders get to follow, and the followers get to lead, which adds to the followers' self-confidence and the leaders' listening skills. Over time, leadership itself becomes a common resource, thus improving the chances for the group's longevity.

It's Time, Maryland! runs by consensus. ITM is a state chapter of It's Time, America! (ITA), the national transgender lobbying group formed last year. Disappointed by ITA's failure to seriously consider consensus-based decision making, I was determined to try it with ITA's Maryland chapter. ITM is a diverse group of transgendered and non-transgendered men and women, all of whom have a say at our meetings. Some of us are radical and some are conservative, but we all respect each other's opinions, and try to reach important decisions that take all those opinions into account. We've had as many as twelve people at a single meeting, and none of the meetings have been longer than two hours.

No doubt some of you have already been exposed to consensus and feminist process in non-transsexual feminist groups and found it too laborious. Is it difficult? It can be, if the participants do not fully

understand the way it works. Is it time consuming? Sometimes. Will it work for your transgendered group? To be honest, it may not work for every organization. Different groups are composed of different individuals for diverse purposes with differing agendas. But should problems arise, feminist process includes constant critique and revision of whatever methods it currently uses, in order to make it more inclusive, democratic and productive in the future. Post-meeting evaluations allow for adjustments to the process that will improve meetings. Other determining factors for the successful use of feminist process and consensus are effective facilitation at the meetings, clearly understood rules, and respect for all voices and the persons behind them. If it doesn't work, a transgendered group can return to the familiar Roberts Rules, or whatever it has used in the past.

But judging from our experience with It's Time, Maryland! consensus and feminist process should at least be tried by other transgendered groups. It succeeded in helping thirty people learn to work together in just three months to openly lobby our state legislators for the first time ever in Maryland. As a result, we will have our own bill before the Maryland Assembly next January to facilitate the issuing of new, unadulterated birth certificates without court orders to transsexual women and men born in Maryland. ITM members engaged in numerous public educational events and successfully lobbied straight and other queer groups for their support and endorsement of our inclusion. These and other tactics helped us to convince the statewide gay and lesbian lobby, the Free State Justice Campaign, to include gender identity in their anti-discrimination bill. Initially adamant in its opposition to our inclusion, Free State had been working for four years to pass a sexual-orientation only bill. They have over one thousand members and an annual budget of over \$25,000, with additional funding and support from the Human Rights Campaign Fund. ITM had thirty members, no money and no track record, yet we won this important battle because we learned how to work together very quickly. ITM's use of feminist process and consensus facilitated that cooperation and cohesiveness.

Besides bringing more voices into the transgender political movement, consensus and feminist process can play an important role in the re-socialization of male-to-female transsexuals and transgenderists in transition. Since most of us have spent half our lives socialized as males, it can help us to unlearn male behaviors by teaching a new way of relating to one another in our groups. Many transgendered people already identify themselves as feminists, but lack actual experience with feminist process in their groups. If so many of us profess our belief in feminism, let's pay more than lip service to it by actually practicing it in our groups. And if you think it is too female-identified, I have yet to meet a transsexual man who was not a feminist himself. I have seen gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people use it very effectively during many meetings for the March On Washington in 1993, so I believe it would work for any group.

In fact, I see nothing to lose by instituting this model of organization and governance across all transgendered organizations, even the national ones. If they must keep their boards of directors due to their Articles of Incorporation, fine. But at those meetings, the gloves come *on*. Drop those titles, ditch the hierarchal thinking, lose the Roberts' Rulebook, loosen up that iron fist of control, stop obsessing about credentials, and start thinking about the future. Our future. Bring in your memberships and give them a voice. Let go and let the Goddess reign. Let the followers lead, and the leaders follow, *for a change*. Let's throw away the tools that have been used to oppress us. Let's not get fooled again and exchange one oppressor for another one who looks like us. Let's build a movement, not monuments to ourselves and patriarchal stupidity. A liberation movement based on changing identities must not be afraid of changing its *own* identity to advance the goals that will secure its future.