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Gender identity and you

Why nondiscrimination policies
should include trans queers

This essay is the second in a series of four by Christa-Margaret Nelson reprinted in Just Out from trans awareness workshops sponsored by Basic Rights Oregon. "Gender Identity and You" was first presented in May and is reprinted now in celebration of the Human Rights Campaign's recent decision to write a new nondiscrimination bill that includes gender identity.

Before I transitioned my social and physical gender more than five years ago, I never identified as queer. I lived a fairly conventional heterosexual lifestyle—I was romantically involved with people of the opposite sex, I was passable in the performance of my assigned gender, and I pretty much pursued the traditional cultural expectations of finding a mate, with the hope of eventually starting my own family.

Yet through all of this I always knew I was trans. Although I wasn't familiar with much concerning the issue and experienced great shame from even thinking about it, I was always secretly

drawn to stories of transsexuals and transvestites, in whatever form I would run across, no matter how taboo or discouraging.

These stories represented a possibility of there being a hopeful chance of someday being who I felt I was. I always considered whether or not I was gay, as this seemed a more logical conclusion to me for someone who desired to change his gender.

Yet I continued to be solely attracted to women through my transition and spent the first few years with my pretransition partner. It wasn't until I fully transitioned and began to experience negative reactions that I began to realize I was queer—and this arose not from my sexuality but from manifesting my inherent gender identity.

To most people, queerness is immediately associated with sexuality. For a long time, before the inclusion of the "T" in GLBT, queerness did seem to revolve around this issue. After trans people were included within the queer agenda, the issue of gender identity began to become more integrated into queerness. Now being queer can include much more than whom one shares a heart and body with. Now being queer could involve a person with whom that isn't even an issue.

Somewhere along the line homosexuality was equated with gender variance—effeminate men were

immediately considered gay, and masculine women were taken as lesbians. While this can be the case, obviously it's not always true, and many of these situations arose from not having other identities to choose from. When there's no "T," a masculine woman finds a home for her gender identity within lesbian culture, a man within the traditional gay stereotype.

But another thing that has always led people to identify queers by sight is gender presentation. To the average stranger, someone present-



Christa-Margaret Nelson

ing gender in a culturally accepted way doesn't need to be interpreted. But because queers are often out with their gender identities as well as their sexuality, they are understood as such. When a gay man presents himself in a way that is not considered appropriate for his gender, he will be outed for his sexuality as well.

This means that discrimination can happen not necessarily because of one's sexuality but, rather, from one's gender identity. If a butch lesbian is experiencing difficulty with the dress code of a workplace, this is not an issue of her sexual orientation but of her gender identity. If a man is assaulted after being identified as gay based on nontraditional gender behaviors, then this is an issue of gender identity, not sexual orientation.

What all of this means to all queers is that while the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity do at times seem not all-too-related, they really have a great deal of convergence. While the queer community can point out the distinctions and differences in our members to the greater world, we're all just "gay" to them.

From this perspective, then, most nondiscrimination legislation—even the most well-intentioned—simply includes sexual ori-

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entation, and this language does not cover all cases of discrimination against queers and perhaps may not even apply to a situation where a gay or lesbian person is being discriminated against because of gender issues.

The inclusion of gender identity into nondiscrimination legislation not only benefits trans people, but all people—queer or otherwise. And the more we recognize and work toward this, the closer we come to fully protecting all queers. **J**

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