

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Cross-dressers are also “T”s

Posted: 4 April 2011, 11:30AM

Cross-dressers are like bisexuals. They are allegedly in the majority of their minority communities (transgender and non-heterosexual, respectively) but no one knows who they are.

When average people use the acronym LGBT, they have little, if any, knowledge of cross-dressing beyond Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, and RuPaul. But one of these cross-dressers is a make-believe person, and the other is an entertainer. What about real people who cross-dress as part of their everyday lives? Who are they? Why don't we know them? What do they need?

We point with pride, deservedly so, at the successes of transsexual women and men who serve in corporate executive positions, and in the Obama administration, but can we name one successful cross-dressing heterosexual or homosexual man in either of those places? And yet, cross-dressing heterosexual and homosexual men greatly outnumber transsexual men and women in both sites, and in the general population.

Many people generally assume that gay men make up the bulk of cross-dressers, which is probably true in the area of entertainment, but not in everyday life. Heterosexual women who cross-dress are usually referred to as "stylish." Many lesbians who cross-dress are often referred to as "butch." These gay women also face workplace discrimination, but their numbers are fewer, and they get much less amused attention than their heterosexual male colleagues in female attire.

There's a very nice, married, heterosexual father I know who I'm tempted to call a professional cross-dresser. I say "tempted" because I've always hated my moniker of being a professional homosexual. But, she, like me, makes her living educating others through presentations and writings about her unique life experiences.

Vanessa Sheridan is a handsome woman, unlike some of the cross-dressing men who come to Provincetown, Massachusetts each year in the fall for the Fantasia Fair. I don't know Vanessa's male name. I don't need to. What's significant about her in my life is that she is one of the few cross-dressing people I know, and I know and love lots of transsexual people.

It frustrates Vanessa, and some other cross-dressers, that too few people consider the unique needs of cross-dressing men when they talk about the "T." All the attention of national gay groups to the "T," it sometimes seems, has gone to ensuring that the medical costs of transitioning transsexuals are covered by their employers. This is a most worthy goal, but how about also focusing, she asks, on the need for some straight men to be able to occasionally come to work expressing the feminine side of their persona?

If we talk about the rights of transgender people to serve in the Armed Forces, our minds go to "Klinger," the character in the television program *M*A*S*H* who cross-dressed so that he could be discharged. But what do real-life transgender soldiers want us to imagine when we think of them?

Who are our role models for cross-dressing? I don't mean the likes of Dame Edna, Big Momma, or Mrs. Doubtfire. I mean people like Vanessa Sheridan who work openly in corporations or government.

Many people in the gay and corporate communities don't know this, but transsexual persons, especially those not in leadership positions, are not always great advocates for cross-dressing persons, and vice versa, despite them huddling together under the Transgender umbrella. But, when a company adds "gender identity" to its non-discrimination policy, it's promising its cross-dressing employees, as much as its transsexual employees, that it will create for them a work environment in which they feel safe, valued, and included. People often cross-dress because of their fluid gender identity, and are thus covered by the words "gender identity."

This means that cross-dressing employees, including all those who exhibit any transgender behavior, have not only the right to use the bathroom that matches their gender expression at the time, (seemingly the most pressing issue of the day) but also, and more importantly, to protection from hostile colleagues and clients.

In order for corporate policies to be fully understood, and for behaviors to change, we all would benefit from having more cross-dressing people put a face on the issue for us. Cross-dressing heterosexual men, and cross-dressing homosexual men and women, need to tell us who they are, and specifically what they need in the workplace to feel safe and valued. If they don't put faces on the issue, their needs will regrettably be unmet.