

MWMF: denying womanhood

Dear GCN:

I am happy that the producers of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival have finally responded to the issue of my expulsion from the Festival this summer. Their response is an important piece of the mosaic that depicts the politics and policies of the festival which before this time were hidden. Now that the producers have publicly acknowledged their exclusion policy against transsexuals, I would like to discuss some of the implications of their policy.

The producers state that "...the Michigan Festival is and always has been an event for... womyn-born womyn... We regret that the circumstances at this year's festival may have been a result of a lack of current public information on this policy." The hitherto unpublished policy was a fundamental issue and I believe the festival producers have been negligent for failing to publish their exclusion policy against transsexuals. Transsexual women have a right to know that the Festival is not a safe space for them *before* they plan their vacation and travel 1000 miles. Also, all women who attend the festival have a right to know the politics they are supporting when they attend the Michigan Festival.

They further state, "We think it is understandable that our priority would not be centered around who our event is 'not' for, and we have deliberately refrained from placing our focus in that direction, though we have always been definite about our policy when asked." The exclusion policy can be succinctly stated as, "No transsexuals allowed." There is no excuse for not having a published policy. Given the fact that the Festival has an explicit policy with regard to participation by men and boys, it is unconscionable for them to have an unpublished policy for transsexuals. Furthermore, it is totally unreasonable to expect that each transsexual woman would have to individually contact the producers to find out if she is welcome at Michigan. Such an elitist and paternalistic attitude is totally unrealistic for women who are otherwise accepted members of their lesbian and feminist communities.

Now that the Festival has a public policy, how will they enforce it? What criteria will they use to screen out transsexual women that will not eliminate some women who were born female and include some transsexual women? If transsexual women are to be excluded then it should be done on a fair, uniform basis using objective criteria, and such criteria should be clearly stated. In the absence of such criteria the enforcement of their policy becomes arbitrary and capricious.

When the producers say, "there was a known transsexual man attending the event" they are deluding themselves. They had no objective proof to substantiate their claim that I was a "known transsexual man." They based their decision on the feelings of discomfort expressed by a few women and my refusal to submit to their intrusive questions about my medical history. The producers further delude themselves when they think that by expelling me they have dealt with the transsexual "problem" at Michigan. The truth of the matter is that many transsexual women attend the Festival and most go undetected.

The bottom line is that there is no clear way to distinguish transsexual women from "women-born" women except by medical history. This demonstrates that exclusionary politics are not based on any real difference between transsexual women and women-born women. The impetus for exclusion is just a gut feeling—like racism and homophobia. There is no rational basis for excluding post-operative transsexual women from the Festival.

Finally, the producers state that the festival working community processed the issue and the result was overwhelming support for the exclusion policy. While it may be true that the majority of workers support the policy, it is not so clear that Festi-goers support the policy. Two of my friends talked with almost 300 Festi-goers during the six day event and their virtually unanimous response was that my expulsion was an outrageous act that should have never happened. Furthermore, they did not know that the Festival even had a policy that excluded transsexual women.

The festival policy mirrors the patriarchal belief that "biology is destiny." For example, the producers say, "We respect everyone's right to define themselves as they wish" and then they refer to me as a transsexual man. This response flies in the face of the reality that I self-identify as female, I am post-oper-

ative, and I've lived as a woman for nine years.

The struggle for recognition is difficult because transsexual challenge people's entrenched popular beliefs about sex and gender. It seems that certain segments of the lesbian and feminist community share with the patriarchy a desire to maintain rigid sex-typed gender roles assigned at birth. This common belief is highlighted in some women's view of transsexual women as "men masquerading as women" and in the Roman Catholic Church's view of sex-reassignment surgery as "unjustifiable mutilation."

No doubt transsexual women will continue to be marginalized and ostracized, and in that process we will serve as mirrors in which the oppressive segments of the feminist and lesbian communities can see how they perpetuate some of the very social evils and stereotypes they fight against in the dominant culture.

The reality is that some transsexuals are lesbians, and we will continue to be a part of the lesbian community, even if we are in the closet because we fear being marginalized and excluded by certain members who harbor parochial views about gender diversity. Nevertheless, many women support us because they recognize in us the energy, commitment and values that they hold dear and which brings them together as a community. Those qualities are intrinsic to our being, our soul and our heart, and they cannot be taken away or denied by those who would deny our womanhood.

Nancy Jean Burkholder
Weare, NH

Condoms in prison

Dear GCN:

I'm a prisoner here at Norfolk State Prison. I am writing in hope of drumming up support to get the Department of Corrections to make condoms available to the prisoners of Massachusetts.

Our only form of protection as it now stands besides abstinence is to ask our partner if he has had the HIV test. And as we all know, many can fall through that window period, so they are indeed infected but show a negative result. We are forced to play Russian Roulette with our lives and our partners everytime we engage in sex. This is cruel and unusual punishment.

I have family who are taxpayers. They all told me if they had a choice between paying .59 cents for a condom versus the thousands of dollars it costs to incarcerate a person with AIDS the answer was of course the cost of the condom.

I cannot do this alone. I need help concerning the Dept. of Public Safety that oversees the Dept. of Corrections to make condoms available to those prisoners who want them. As far as the Dept. of Corrections stance on this issue, I'll use the quote from the now ex-Commissioner Fair who said since homosexuality is against the rules of the Institution then it doesn't happen in his institution. Please give me a fucking break! Homosexuality is alive and not so well in the prisons of Massachusetts.

Please do what you can. We are people before we became prisoners. We count too! I know if I was out on the streets I'd be using a condom every time I had sex. No doubts about it. I don't want to die of AIDS. None of my brothers in prison want to die of AIDS.

Maybe if we could start a letter writing campaign to the Governor, Lt. Governor, Dept. of Public Safety, Dept. of Corrections, maybe something would come of it. I sure hope something positive happens. Before we all end up positive! Thank you for your time and hope to be effective.

Best regards.

A worried inmate,
Ronald Guest
PO Box 43
Norfolk Mass, 02056

Lesbian sexual behavior and AIDS

[GCN received a copy of this letter that was sent to *Off Our Backs* in response to the "Does lesbian sex transmit AIDS? GET REAL!" article printed in November.]

Dear OOB:

I am extremely concerned about the article about lesbians and safe sex in the November 1991 issue. Although it is a good idea to avoid excessive alarm, to dismiss the need for safe sex among lesbians is irresponsible. The reason Beth Elliott can come up with only HIV-infected lesbians is because the Centers for Disease Control, which calculates such figures might consider you a lesbian only if you have no other risk factor.