



An Open Letter to the Editors of SF Weekly:

The Transgender Law Center (TLC) and the San Francisco LGBT Community Center are deeply disappointed by the SF Weekly's recent sensationalistic story, *Border Crossers*, by Lauren Smiley. While the author may have intended to increase awareness of the challenges that transgender immigrants face, we found the article's language and framing to be offensive and misleading. By choosing to be titillating rather than informative, the article fails to address the realities of violence, discrimination, and joblessness that transgender immigrants face in their home countries and right here in our city.

TLC regularly hears from transgender people throughout the world who are experiencing life-threatening violence and threats in their home countries. This year, we successfully represented a transgender woman who was beaten, raped and tortured by the police in Brazil. Far from being an easy case, our client had to overcome incredible, onerous challenges in her quest to find a safe place to live and work. Against all odds (and after many months of violence), she was able to stay legally in the United States when she was granted withholding of removal under the Convention Against Torture. More recently, we received a spate of inquiries from the Middle East, where transgender people are being imprisoned due to their gender identity. State-sanctioned violence against transgender people is forcing people to flee their homelands for the hope of a better life in the United States. Instead of reporting on the chronic violence that transgender people face in many countries, the SF Weekly chose to use hyper-sexualized images, discuss people's bodies in intimate detail (referring to one transgender woman as an “altar to silicone”), condemn sex workers, and misleadingly suggest that some of the most vulnerable members of society are “milking” the impenetrable U.S. immigration system.

Although the article could have told a story of our immigration laws doing just what they were designed to do – give asylum to people who are not protected by their home governments - it instead told a sensationalized story framed by anti-immigrant advocates. The author relies on the “expert opinion” of Dan Stein from the anti-immigrant Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). FAIR is notoriously biased against immigrants and has the distinction of being listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The article also failed to adequately explain the many economic barriers that limit work options for transgender people in the U.S., resulting in relatively high rates of survival sex in the street economy. TLC's 2006 report, *Good Jobs Now!*, a snapshot of the economic health of San Francisco's transgender communities, showed an unemployment rate of 35% among transgender respondents – compared to 4.7% among the general population at the time. More than 57% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace.

More recently, nearly 700 transgender Californians responded to a statewide survey TLC conducted this summer. The results parallel what we found in 2006 – despite solid education rates, transgender people continue to be isolated from the workforce at alarming rates. About half of the respondents say they have lost a job or been denied advancement at work because of their gender identity. Fewer than half are working full time – even though rates of higher education exceed that of the average Californian. This data reflects what we know to be an epidemic of un- and underemployment, discrimination and stigmatization impacting far too many transgender people (and disproportionately impacting transgender women of color). Economic marginalization demands that community members take creative actions in order to survive; as a result, our 2008 survey found that about 1 in 5 has experienced homelessness and about 1 in 4 has participated in the street economy.

To improve this sad reality, a handful of social service organizations throughout the city struggle to provide counseling, housing and healthcare services to transgender people while their budgets are cut by the City, and San Francisco's Transgender Economic Empowerment Initiative works hard every day to connect our community with good jobs even in the midst of economic crises.

There are many stories to be told about the issues facing transgender immigrants. There is a grave need for California to invest in workforce development for transgender people. There is a grave need for our federal government to continue granting asylum to survivors of unthinkable torture. There is a grave need for public education about transgender lives. We urge the SF Weekly to tell these complex stories through more balanced investigative reporting, rather than relying on sensationalist, tabloid-style journalism. To this end, we invite the editors and author to meet with transgender community leaders and members, especially those from the Bay Area's Latina community, to better understand the real lives of transgender San Franciscans and immigrants.



Masen Davis
Executive Director
Transgender Law Center



Rebecca Rolfe
Executive Director
San Francisco LGBT Community Center

Transgender Law Center
870 Market Street #823
San Francisco, CA 94102
415-865-0176 phone
877-847-1278 fax
info@transgenderlawcenter.org

The Center
1800 Market Street
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 865-5555 phone
(415) 865-5501 fax
Info@sfcenter.org