

## GENDER NEUTRAL BATHROOM SURVEY

Summer 2001

San Francisco Human Rights Commission

### Places surveyed

•Went to: TGSF meetings (two), FTMI meetings (two), Transmen of Color meeting, Changeling meeting, Tom Waddell Clinic (twice), Radical Women meeting, Pink Pony (an all gender/trans/genderqueer club), drag king show, Young Loud and Proud Conference (LGBTIQ Youth), San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, and the San Francisco Pride Parade.

•Left the survey at: A Different Light, Black and Blue Tattoo, Red Dora's Cafe

•Publications: TGSF Newsletter published the survey (twice); The Bay Area Reporter wrote an article about the survey

•E-mailed twelve lists: eight transgender (genderqueer, FTM, MTF, transpeople of color, youth), two lesbian, and one general progressive.

### Results

N: Number of folks responding

A: Percentage of folks who want gender neutral bathrooms of some form

B: Percentage of folks who want single person gender neutral bathrooms

C: Percentage of folks who want multiple person gender neutral bathrooms

D: Percentage of folks who want gender neutral bathrooms in addition to male/female bathrooms

E: Percentage of folks who want gender neutral bathrooms replacing female/male bathrooms

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
Transgender and not male or female	70	100	99	96	50	69
Transgender and ftm or male	76	100	97	74	49	46
Transgender and mtf or female	49	98	94	59	65	33
<b>Total transgender</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>51</b>
Not transgender and not male or female	27	96	96	81	59	48
Not transgender and female	195	97	93	78	57	45
Not transgender and male	51	100	98	90	64	48
<b>Total not transgender</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Partially transgender</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>487</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>49</b>

In conclusion: The survey found that transgender, genderqueer, gender questioning, and progressive LGB people are overwhelmingly in favor of gender neutral bathrooms (99%). Transgender and non-transgender people want gender neutral bathrooms almost equally: 99% of all transgender people, and 98% of all non-transgender people want gender neutral bathrooms. Non-transgender women (who make up the largest part of the survey, 40%) are 97% in favor of gender neutral bathrooms.

Most people are open to single person gender neutral bathrooms – 95%. And, only slightly fewer are open to multiple person gender neutral bathrooms – 79%. People are split about half and half on whether or not gender neutral bathrooms should replace or be added to female/male bathrooms (57% in addition, 49% replace).

The progressive LGBT communities are overwhelmingly in favor of gender neutral bathrooms and are also open to all forms of gender neutral bathrooms.

### **Horror Stories – Why do we want gender neutral bathrooms?**

Why are we in favor of gender neutral bathrooms? How pervasive and serious are bathroom problems for transgender, genderqueer, gender questioning, and LGB people? I will start with genderqueer people. Out of 116 responses from those who did not identify as male or female, 48 people took the time to write out specific bathroom experiences, all negative. These experiences ranged from harassment to violence to getting fired. Harassment of genderqueer people is frequent and includes: “being yelled at,” “screams of ‘there’s a man in the woman’s room,’” “frequent horrified looks,” “I get looks/comments whenever I try to use a bathroom.” In addition to getting looks and comments, genderqueer people are often forced to leave the restroom, by other bathroom goers and/or security: “people have told me to leave restrooms because they don’t think I belong there,” “having security called in because people thought I was in the ‘wrong’ bathroom,” “security chased me.” For genderqueer people, going to the restroom can be dangerous: “almost got arrested for using the women’s room,” “got the shit kicked out of me for using the ‘wrong bathroom,’” “I almost got killed.” Facing constant harassment and potential danger, many genderqueer people avoid public bathrooms altogether: “I often ‘hold’ it to avoid bathrooms,” “one time I held it so long my bladder hurt so much that nothing would come out,” “can’t use any bathrooms,” “I would almost prefer to just urinate outside.” How often do genderqueer people face problems finding safe bathrooms? “People have no idea how many times I have not used a public bathroom and been really about to burst and in pain,” “I run into problems 80% of the time,” “This is a problem every day.” In asking for alternatives, genderqueer people often face lack of understanding and support: for instance, one teacher replied to an all-day student, “well, do you have to use the bathroom while you’re here?” An employee was “fired for asking repeatedly for gender neutral/unisex bathrooms.”<sup>1</sup>

Going to the bathroom – we all have to do it. For some of us, it is a daily struggle to find safe bathrooms. Genderqueer people have a particularly hard time accessing bathrooms. And, genderqueer people are not alone. Transgender people who identify as ftm or male or mtf or female face similar problems. Out of 76 ftm/male identified transgender people, 31 took the time to relate bathroom experiences. Out of 49

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.

mtf/female identified transgender people, 16 shared bathroom experiences. The experiences of mtf's and ftm's sound similar to the experiences of genderqueers. Ftm's and mtf's also experience harassment and violence: "Yelled at -- 'you're using the wrong bathroom'" (mtf), "I have been slapped, pushed, and dragged out by security guards" (ftm), "got physically pulled out" (mtf), "having the door almost knocked down by teenagers" (ftm). Due to fear of violence and harassment, mtf's and ftm's, as genderqueers, often avoid bathrooms: "hold it" (mtf), "I try not to use bathrooms" (ftm), "I have spent so many hours avoiding public multi-stall bathrooms that I have damaged my bladder and put pressure on my kidneys" (ftm). Are these frequent problems? "Being in gendered bathrooms consistently makes me feel vulnerable to violence and possible arrest" (ftm), "it is always stressful figuring out where to relieve myself" (ftm). The simple act of going to the bathroom becomes a daily challenge: "The problem was a daily one. I'd think about where I was going, what bathrooms I'd have access to, how much I drank during the day, whether I'd be with people who could help stand guard..." (ftm).<sup>2</sup> Going to the bathroom should not be so difficult, should not require this much planning and strategizing, should not be fraught with fear of violence.

Why is it that many ftm's and mtf's face similar problems as genderqueer people? For one, some mtf's and ftm's are also genderqueer and/or do not identify as strictly male or female. Further, some of the ftm's and mtf's who do identify as male or female do not or chose not to pass.<sup>3</sup> And, many of the mtf's and ftm's who identify as female or male and pass went through a period of transition during which passing was difficult. So, many ftm's and mtf's share with genderqueers a non binary identity and/or a non-binary presentation (temporarily, or permanently; purposely, or not).

Genderqueers, mtf's, and ftm's are not the only people who have difficulties finding safe bathrooms. People are often harassed, not because of how they identify, but because of how they are perceived. Even those who do identify as female or male are put to a strict gender test: does one appear sufficiently male or sufficiently female to satisfy the gender police? Androgynous and masculine women face enormous problems finding safe bathrooms. So do androgynous and feminine men. Out of 192 women and 51 men, 52 women and 9 men took the time to share negative bathroom experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Masculine and androgynous non-transgender women face many of the same bathroom problems that transgender people face. Many non-transgender women are harassed in women's rooms: "told to use the men's room," "made eight women scream," "security called," "being followed by a police officer," "women told me to leave the women's room and then tried to beat me up." Many non-transgender women have no place to go: "women jump out of their shoes; I get harassed by the guys," "I hate it when people give you a hard time for going into the 'wrong' bathroom. What the hell are you supposed to do!?" Many non-transgender women avoid bathrooms. How frequently are non-transgender women denied bathroom access? If one is a masculine or butch woman, often: "I run into problems all the time," "all of my butch female friends, ex's, etc. ALL have experienced stares, harassment, threats, etc. in the women's room. Some only use

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.

<sup>3</sup> Passing: An ftm passes if others read him as male. An mtf passes if others read her as female.

<sup>4</sup> Bathrooms are not only segregated by gender. Bathrooms are not only dangerous to differently gendered people. Bathrooms were segregated by race. And, currently, bathrooms are still segregated by class (for e.g., homeless people have difficulty using many 'public' restrooms.)

the bathroom when they have a group of friends to accompany them.”<sup>5</sup> Again, finding a safe place to relieve oneself should not be so difficult.

Some non-transgender men have difficulties finding safe harassment free bathrooms as well: “all my childhood, people told me I was in the wrong bathroom (long hair, too girly), “if my hair is long, I get stopped from going into the men’s room.” One father is worried about his intersex child not having safe bathroom access in schools.<sup>6</sup>

It is these experiences which drive the need for alternative bathrooms. Finding safe bathrooms is a widespread difficulty in the LGBTIQQ communities -- and, I’m sure, not in the LGBTIQQ communities alone. We all have to use the bathroom, each day, several times each day. And, yet, anyone whose existence does not fit neatly into the narrow prescribed gender norms has enormous difficulty finding safe harassment free places to perform this basic and necessary human function. One should not get yelled at, chased, arrested, beat up, or fired for trying to use the bathroom.

Safe-stress free bathrooms should not be a privilege for just a few traditionally-gendered individuals.<sup>7</sup> (genderqueer)

### **Why else do we want gender neutral bathrooms?**

I just need a place to pee.”<sup>8</sup>(genderqueer)

The “best way to solve this is to have gender neutral bathrooms.”<sup>9</sup> (ftm)

We need safe accessible bathrooms. In gender neutral bathrooms no one would be yelled at, thrown out, arrested, etc. for being in the ‘wrong’ bathroom. There would be no ‘wrong’ bathroom. A safer place. This is one issue, the practical issue: the very real need of all human beings to relieve themselves without being harmed.

There is another set of issues: Male/female bathrooms are a daily structural reminder for genderqueers that we do not exist in the eyes of society (the law, medicine, etc.). We do not have to go to the bathroom. We do not exist. Bathrooms reinforce the current gender system. Bathrooms are a daily structural reminder that we must know at each moment whether or not we identify as female or male. Male and female, these are our only choices. Why must we artificially divide the huge gender diversity into two groups? Why is it so important that we relieve ourselves with only those who are lumped into the same group as ourselves? What if we are not easily lumped into a group? Do we not go to the bathroom? Bathrooms keep gender segregation alive – reinforce every day, several times a day, that there are men and women, women and men, men and women only and that we can easily tell who is a woman and who is a man, definite boundaries. Bathrooms tell me that I do not exist. Invisibility.

As put by those who participated in the survey:

How sad that I have to make a decision about my gender each and every time I enter a restroom. (genderqueer)

My ideal bathroom world would be one in which gender identity expression was accepted and this question would not matter. I think people should be accepted for who they are! (genderqueer)

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.

<sup>6</sup> Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

As a transperson who felt considerable anxiety using women's rooms for most of my life, the ability to have people perceive me as a human being rather than as a woman or a man who isn't passing as one would be such a great relief! GNB's could go far to help people stop being so anxious about who is in the room and whether they conform to gender norms. (ftm)

I think it would benefit the non-queer people by having mixed bathrooms. It will demystify and break down gender barriers. (non-transgender woman)

Teach the culture not to freak. (non-transgender woman )<sup>10</sup>

Gender neutral bathrooms would be educational. Gender neutral bathrooms would be a physical reminder that the current gender categories are inadequate, that there are in fact uncountable different genders. We are all human beings. We all have to go to the bathroom. Not being able to tell and box the gender of a person is not the end of the world.

### **Even more reasons for gender neutral bathrooms**

Long lines in women's bathrooms: "Having m/f bathrooms is unfair to women who have to wait in longer lines." (non transgender woman) Parents who are differently gendered than their children, e.g. father with daughter, have difficulties going into gendered bathrooms. Several parents suggested gender neutral bathrooms: for instance "gender neutral bathrooms with changing tables so I can go in with my son, and my husband can go in with our daughter."<sup>11</sup> (non-transgender woman) Gender neutral bathrooms – so many advantages.

### **Safe Suggestions**

For some reason its ok for me, a trans person, to be uncomfortable while I protect my delicate non-TG citizens from their own discomfort with the reality that not everyone is all pink or all blue. And that sometimes the pinkish blue or bluish pink people have to pee.<sup>12</sup>

We have to find safe accessible bathrooms for ALL people. And this is possible. Several suggestions are in the survey:

Fort Mason rules. Lots of single person gender neutral bathrooms.<sup>13</sup>

In Israel, they have gender neutral multiple stall bathrooms – they were a welcome relief. They looked like multi-stall women's bathrooms, no open urinals. Inside most stalls was a single toilet, some had a urinal too (which would address the stinky problem). I wasn't aware of people being afraid. Personally, I was just so thrilled that gender was a non-issue.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Five quotes from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.

<sup>11</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

My favorite public bathroom experience was in Malmo, Sweden, in a museum – a multi-person gender neutral bathroom. Nobody made a big deal about it; it was just the way it was! Absolutely no one was freaking out. The stalls had floor to ceiling doors and walls all around. The doors were like doors to a room, no crack to peer through, with bolts that locked and let others know it was occupied. Then there were 10 sinks, commonly used. The entry way into the hall was open, so no one was ever far from assistance (a yell would have been easily heard). It was all very civilized and took a lot of energy away from the anxiety-producing aspects of sex segregation. Also, there was much less scrutiny and wariness present in the energy people brought into the space with them.

I think that one of the factors in American bathrooms that leads to assaults is the isolation. I think women's safety by virtue of a women's sign on the door is an illusion. I think requiring people to behave responsibly by making their behavior public is a more community-oriented solution. Gender neutral bathrooms were common in Sweden. I'd really like it if we could do that here.<sup>15</sup>

Reed College has predominantly gender neutral bathrooms -- which most students prefer. There have been no reported problems with the gender neutral bathrooms.<sup>16</sup>

Single stall gender neutral bathrooms with locking doors are about as safe as it gets. Multiple person gender neutral bathrooms can also be made safe, as safe or safer than sex-segregated multiple person bathrooms. The separate stalls can have doors with locks – just like single person gender neutral bathrooms. The entrance to the bathroom could be open, as in an airport. Yells would be easily heard. This type of multiple person bathroom is similar to having a row of single person gender neutral bathrooms with a shared sink area. “We can all share sinks, can't we?”<sup>17</sup>

The sign on the door could read “bathroom,” or “human.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey.

<sup>16</sup> Kelsey Wirtzfeld, from Residential Life, mentioned that there have been no reported complaints about the gender neutral bathrooms.

<sup>17</sup> Gender Neutral Bathroom Survey

<sup>18</sup> The survey had many comments about the current sexist symbols on bathroom doors. “Change the signs, not all girls wear dresses,” “Change the sexist symbols.” Alternate suggestions are “bathroom,” and “human.” If we cannot live without segregated bathrooms, we could try “pee room vs. powder room” or “clean room vs. messy room” or “urinals vs. toilets” or “relieving oneself vs. other activities.”