

Assessing the Needs of Female-to-Male
Transgendered People of Color
and their Partners



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Executive Summary

In April 2004, at the request of the organization Female-to-Male International (FTMI), a needs assessment was conducted of female-to-male transgendered people of color and their partners. Eight individuals of color who identified on the female-to-male (FTM) spectrum (including male, FTM, butch trans-masculine, and genderqueer) participated in a focus group that was facilitated by two members of the community. Participants were diverse in terms of race, culture, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity. As follow-up, in May 2004 three partners of FTMs of color were individually interviewed. These participants were racially and culturally diverse and primarily identified as femme.

In the analysis of focus group and interview data, it was clear that the community of FTMs of color and their partners are struggling with a myriad of issues, including psychological and economic survival, accessing appropriate health care, and obtaining assistance for legal concerns. Participants emphasized the need for community support, including dialogue and education between diverse communities, and support from FTMI as an organization. Participants felt that FTMI is failing their mission by overlooking the needs of FTMs of color and only serving certain members of the FTM community. There was also significant concern that FTMI as an organization needs to address its history of causing pain to communities of color before it can move forward and better serve FTMs of color and their partners.

Based on the data from this needs assessment, recommendations for better serving this community through FTMI include: be more transparent and welcoming as an organization; provide facilitator training; pursue funding for people of color-specific programming; conduct personable outreach specifically to people of color and their partners; develop community relationships; involve people of color and their partners in organizational development; and promote dialogue and education on FTM of color and class issues.

Background

In January 2004, the Board of Directors of Female-to-Male International decided to prioritize a needs assessment of people of color on the FTM spectrum and their significant others, family members, friends, and allies (SOFFAs). The Board wanted to gather information on the needs of FTMs of color (FTMOCs) and their SOFFAs in order to further their commitment to welcoming and serving this community, as well as further their overall goal of being an anti-racist organization. (As part of their efforts, FTMI requires all new board members and volunteers to attend anti-racism workshops, and holds each person accountable for their behavior.) Board members also hoped that this needs assessment would begin a healing process from past hurts and disappointments that members of the FTMOC community have experienced with FTMI.

FTMI hired consultants Willy Wilkinson, MPH and Prado Gomez, two members of the FTM of Color community, to recruit participants, conduct the needs assessment, and write a report. The Board requested that the consultants conduct a focus group in a safe, supportive environment with no FTMI board members present, so that community members would feel free to express themselves without fear of judgment or retaliation.

The consultants envisioned this project as an effort to not only provide direction to the organization, but also an opportunity to highlight important information about this understudied and underserved community that could be delivered back to the community to further its own efforts to support its members and develop services to meet its needs.

Methodology

The consultants recruited participants at FTMI meetings and through email lists and personal contacts. They worked together to develop the screening questionnaire, survey instrument, flyer, and email announcements.

The consultants co-facilitated the focus group on the afternoon of Saturday, April 17, 2004 in downtown San Francisco, easily accessible by public transportation. A hot meal with snacks and beverages was provided, along with transportation reimbursement. At the group, participants agreed to the use of a tape recorder and flip chart in order to document the data.

The group agreed to continue past the time allotted, speaking for three and a half hours. Some who did not want to attend or were unable to attend, offered their suggestions for FTMI via email.

While they wanted to ensure the inclusion of partners of FTMOCs regardless of their race, the consultants decided that in order to create an environment of safety to talk about race-related issues, it would be best to have the group be people of color (POC)-only space. Though three individuals who identified as partners of FTMOCs (either in the present or past) had expressed interest in attending the group, in the end none attended, either because of scheduling problems or the requirement that the group be people of color-only. In order to address the absence of partners at the group, Gomez individually interviewed three community members who identify as partners.

Wilkinson transcribed the focus group from the tapes and butcher paper, and Gomez transcribed the interviews from hand-written notes. Wilkinson conducted the data analysis by grouping the comments from the focus group, interviews, and emails into categories that emerged from the data, making every effort to document all themes in the report. Wilkinson wrote the report and developed recommendations based on participant comments and the emphasis given to them by participants.

Limitations

Though the community of people of color on the FTM spectrum and their partners is small in number (estimated at numbering under 100 people in the Bay Area), informal networks have been established to keep members of the community in contact with each other. Although the consultants made efforts to communicate within these networks to recruit for the focus group, they found that there was significant resistance to participation in any event sponsored by FTMI, particularly one that involved discussion of race and the inclusion of people of color. A number of potential participants expressed considerable anger and distrust towards FTMI.

Prior to the focus group, it appeared that there would be ten to twelve participants, but in the end, because of illness or other circumstances, turnout was relatively low at eight. Participants were ethnically diverse, with African American, Asian, Latino, and mixed heritage individuals represented equally. There was also age diversity, with participants ranging in age from nineteen to sixty. Fully half of the participants were youth.

There also appeared to be diversity with regards to sexual orientation, with participants discussing involvement with women, men, and transgendered people. The group was fairly diverse with regards to gender identity; individuals identified as male, FTM, butch trans-masculine, genderqueer, and others. It may not have been as diverse with regards to gender expression, however. Much of the discussion referred to medical (hormonal) transition, and no one in attendance discussed identifying with or choosing not to physically transition.

The three partners who were subsequently interviewed were African American, Latina, and white. All identified as femme, though possibly with varying senses of that identity. Though efforts were made to interview transgendered FTM and biologically male partners, those partners were unfortunately unavailable.

Terminology

In this report we use the term *FTM of color (FTMOC)* to encompass the spectrum of identity among people of color who identify with the FTM experience. The term *transman* refers to an FTM who has transitioned and lives full-time in a male identity. The terms *butch trans-masculine* and *genderqueer* refer to identities within the FTM spectrum and do not necessarily describe a particular hormonal or surgical expression. The term *femme* refers to a feminine gender expression, and does not necessarily describe one's sexual orientation or attractions. The term *T* is a common slang term for testosterone, the hormone that is taken by FTMs to achieve secondary male sex

characteristics. The term *biological male* or *bioman* refers to a man who was assigned male at birth.

Defining the Population

Participants described the community of people of color on the FTM spectrum and their partners as a group of individuals who are extremely culturally diverse with varying gender identities and ways of describing themselves. They depicted their community as people struggling with multiple issues, particularly economic and psychological survival, and who get support for issues in their lives from their families and friends. People felt that because of economic issues (not being able to afford costly transgender events or not knowing about them) and because of social issues (not identifying with the term transgender), people in the community have difficulty being visible to each other.

Participants felt that this community is not easily identifiable and that many FTMOCs do not necessarily identify as FTMs. They felt that FTMOCs have networks and connections with many different communities. It was asserted that the goal for many FTMOCs is to blend in with everyone else and be treated as a man, and that if their partner is willing, FTMOCs often want to leave the queer community; but since some people consider the community to be their family, leaving can lead to isolation. The group felt that it was important to note that though many FTMs come from the lesbian or queer community, many do not develop their transgender identities within a queer context, and this difference may make it difficult to find and connect with each other.

People felt that while their community's history has not been recorded and recognized, they are on the forefront of history because they are living at a time in which options exist for medical transition that did not exist before, though there was concern that most people in this community have limited access to medical resources.

“We’re people struggling with everyday life.”

“I think that in the community of color in the Bay Area that there’s a lot of genderqueer-type people of color that don’t identify as trans and would never show up to an FTMI meeting because they don’t consider themselves FTM of any sort. I think it’s a cultural issue. The whole transgender identity is very white, North America kind of thing. If you’re going to really try to encompass the wide variety of people of color out there, then the term transgender is going to get you into trouble in terms of limiting who you’re talking about and who you welcome into the group. The folks who are out there who don’t call themselves transgender, call themselves other words, like stud and aggressors, are also very poverty level, just-trying-to-make-it-to-the-next-day kind of thing and this kind of stuff is really very out there. It’s a whole ‘nother world that they don’t have any ties to or feel connected to.”

“There’s some people of color who cannot say they’re trans or they will lose everything.”

“I have friends who are trying to save the money for surgery and then something will come up, and they’ll have to spend the money.”

General Wants and Needs

The group discussed their social, health, economic, and legal needs, with an overwhelming emphasis on social support.

Social Support

Participants repeatedly expressed the need to convene in order to feel a sense of community, network, educate and dialogue with other communities, and promote visibility. They hoped to develop more means of communicating information and providing support to people in their community, including developing a phone tree and/or a publication.

Participants need support for multiple issues that does not necessarily take place in a support group environment. They envisioned a non-clinical social space that involves food and entertainment. They talked about the need for people of color-specific space. They talked about needing opportunities to socialize in free/no cost, public venues, in varying locations, including the East Bay, and that don’t take place in a bar. They hoped to see funding for such activities, including for food. It was clear during the group that this focus group provided a well-needed opportunity for participants to connect, share resources, and network about events they are involved in.

FTMOC participants felt that since “people don’t want to see us for who we are,” that they are overlooked or misrepresented, and that much more education in the queer and trans communities is necessary in order to bridge gaps between FTMs, studs, MTFs, lesbians, gay men, and others. They hoped that such activities would become vehicles for finding dates with women, men, and others. They suggested the need for youth-specific resources and spaces, with activities for youth under 21. They emphasized the need for high school outreach and visibility, as well as elder-specific information and support on aging and disability.

Partners emphasized the need to find support and understanding for their specific experience, and would like to see more events where they are welcomed, including parties, community events, family picnics, camping trips, and human rights rallies.

“I’d like to see a place, an opportunity where we can get together. No one has to be 21. It doesn’t have to be a bar thing. I think it’s really good to get thirty year olds, twenty year olds and teenagers just to come together. [We] can add to each [other]’s experience. I like hanging out with guys just to watch sports or just to hang out and talk shit.”

“It’s hard to be a partner of someone who is walking this journey. Not many realize that sometimes partners can be taken for granted because it’s about him. We get lost in that, in the process that has to happen for that person to be happy in their skin.”

Health Needs

FTMOC and SOFFA participants discussed their need for medical, mental health, and other public health needs. They underscored the need for more health professionals who are culturally competent in transgender issues, especially doctors and therapists. They felt that people in their community have a great need for mental health support, such as competent therapists and support groups, substance abuse treatment (alcohol and drugs), medical care for transition-related care (hormones and surgeries), and dental care. In addition, the group felt that violence and smoking were also key issues that people in their communities need help addressing.

Participants highlighted the need for information about nutrition, liver health and the effects of testosterone, complementary health care such as Chinese medicine and homeopathy, and different concerns for youth-specific health needs vs. adult health needs.

Partners underscored the need for couples counseling to help couples through the challenges of physical transition. They also emphasized the need for mental health and medical support specifically for partners.

“Every now and then, one of us will just off themselves. People are having issues of not getting supported. Why go to the groups, why bother? Maybe if they had had more connectedness, more people backing them up, maybe they wouldn’t have gone there.”

“We need a referral guide for couples counseling—what therapists are good with FTM of color issues—because a lot of couples don’t make it. It’s difficult to navigate brand new territory without guidance.”

“Around the time my partner started T I became chronically harassed by bladder infections. I’m not sure why, if it was the changes in sexual appetite or activity that could be impacting that. What if I woke up with a [testosterone] patch stuck on me? I did talk to the doctor about it, but it was hard for us to figure out how to deal with it.”

“The money I have goes to my rent. I can get mental health care but I can’t get no dentist.”

Legal Assistance

Participants discussed the need for legal assistance with regards to name and gender change, immigration issues, and other transgender-related legal issues. They also highlighted the need for legal referrals and assistance to address discrimination in housing, employment and other areas, and police harassment. There were concerns among couples about how to protect their relationship and family when they are not legally married, especially with regards to health care settings. In addition, participants would like to see more advocacy and community support for people at trials.

“What happens if my partner has complications from surgery and we’re not legally married?”

Economic Needs

Participants expressed the need among members of their community for employment opportunities, including internships, multi-lingual resources, housing, artistic and performance space, and office support, such as the use of a copy machine. There was also discussion of the need for free or low-cost access to transgender events and organizations. Participants expressed the need for financial education and resources directed at people of color on how to manage money, so that people can develop skills that could help them buy a house and/or pay for surgery.

Challenges to getting those needs met

Participants highlighted ways in which it is difficult to access information and resources, get community support, access appropriate health care, and find employment.

Getting Connected

Participants felt that it is difficult for many people in their community to access information and resources, so consequently it has been difficult to organize amongst themselves. They felt that because many in the community are living in poverty, they are not visible since they are unable to participate at transgender events because of financial hardship. As a result of this economic barrier, as well as the alienation that many people feel when they experience racism at community events or organizations, many in the community feel isolated and marginalized.

“You already have to know someone or you have to have access to a computer, and if you’re not channeled to any one of those outlets, you’re fucked. Maybe we can put together a publication. I read that book [the FTMI newsletter] and they don’t cater to my needs. And you have to pay for it.”

Participants stated that they get information about community events through email lists, newspapers such as the Bay Guardian and the Bay Area Reporter, community events, friends and family, and word of mouth.

Community Support:

FTMOC participants spoke at length about the difficulties of finding community that feels welcoming and supportive of their needs and identities. They spoke to the ways in which various communities do not affirm their identities, such as lesbians referring to them with inappropriate pronouns, and how the lesbian media has misrepresented transmen as butch, rather than FTM. They felt that there is a backlash in the lesbian and queer communities of color, and that their presence is questioned at queer events, clubs, and parties. Though a number of participants expressed that there are many challenges associated with dating as FTMs, they felt that many lesbians believe that FTMs “steal our women.”

Participants also spoke about the transphobia of gay men, and the invisibility that gay FTMs feel around gay biomen, both physically (generally being much shorter in stature) and in the general lack of understanding about trans issues. Several of the youth participants felt that they were not getting appropriate support for being transgender in the youth community, and that there was not enough support in general for trans youth. Participants expressed fear of being stigmatized for being transgender within their own community, and felt that there was a lack of support for other aspects of who they are (artists, writers, etc.) Partners emphasized the need for community support that recognizes and honors their specific identities and experiences.

“That fear is very valid. I date both men and women. I go to the Castro. I go to women of color clubs and every time it’s painful and it’s fucked up. Every time I go to a women of color club I get *she’d*. I don’t get *she’d* anywhere else in the world but when I’m with women of color. You go in the Castro, there’s no place for us to use the bathroom. Gay men are so like ‘your cock, your cock, your cock.’ There’s so much stress in just going out that for four months last summer I just sat in my house because I knew that it just felt safer than even being out in the world. And I’m pretty visible. I have a visible job. I do a lot in the community and it’s really difficult for me.”

“What about the folks who’re not 21? Everything we’ve been talking about is with regard to a bar. I’m nineteen. To go out into the community, I either have to hang out with older trans folks or like try to get into these places, or like hang out with 17 year-old dykes that just are like, ‘Oh, I get it,’ and they really don’t, you know? And it’s just really frustrating and I try to go to queer groups and things but it’s not dating really. It’s more like socializing. And where do I find my support? I can’t really meet somebody to hang out with and date that isn’t either stuck on trying to get into the bar scene or isn’t really young and doesn’t know what’s going on. That section in between that I’m in that I know that other youth are in but we can’t find each other. There’s no resources. No one talks about it. If I go to a youth group, I’m the youngest person there.”

“It’s interesting coming up in the stud community and then making the decision to transition and then not being accepted in that community again. It’s kind of weird. I haven’t really changed. I’m still a stud. Like I’m just on T. I’m just enhancing some things, you know what I mean? My big thing is how do we bridge these kind of gaps? Much more dialogue needs to happen.”

“I need to be understood. I stopped attending the Butch/Femme socials because I was not understood beyond my identity as a femme. I was not understood for who I liked, but was expected to understand other people’s attractions.”

Accessing Appropriate Health Care:

Participants stated that because many in their community are struggling financially, they have limited access to transition-related health care, such as hormones and surgeries. They felt that the gender binary of the health care system (the belief that there are

medical services that are only necessary for women, and other medical services that are accessed only by men) makes it very difficult for them to get their health care needs met as transmen. They also highlighted the need for transgender medical providers, therapists and other professionals. Some felt that since it's hard enough to go see a therapist, it would be much more difficult to see a non-trans therapist, even if they were well-informed on transgender issues.

Participants felt that program policies and funding guidelines can make it difficult to get appropriate care, since one often has to have a particular diagnosis or fit a certain demographic to receive services. Participants would like to see more training to address ignorance and insensitivity on the part of medical and mental health providers about FTM and partner issues. There was concern about the scarcity of providers who are equipped to address FTMOC and partner health needs.

“There's a lack of information, fear of being treated badly, fear of discrimination on several levels, and lack of access. In order to find out if a doctor is cool you have to go see them. It's hit and miss and when it's a miss it can be really bad.”

“The Pacific Center screening process was too much. There were too many steps to eliminate or pigeon hole people into or exclude people from certain categories or services. I did not enjoy the process at all.”

“Everyone goes to the same person who is either too booked or refuses to refer to other people because of [wanting to make] money.”

Survival Issues:

Participants felt that it is difficult for people in their community to get their needs met because they are struggling with financial hardship, whether trying to secure employment, working to survive, or dealing with homelessness and unstable housing. Some felt that trans people of color have difficulty identifying their employment options.

“I think a lot of times just being a person of color and trans you don't really realize all that you can do. You kind of feel like I have to stick with community work and I'm not gonna make a good income. I think sometimes it takes a person just really getting frustrated with their experience and what's going on with them to define what else is going on. Some people don't even realize that there is anything else that's possible so you feel like you're stuck in the situation.”

Since survival issues usually take precedence over other issues, it is difficult for people in their community to organize politically around issues of importance to them. Participants felt that since there is no organization to address their needs, and since the leadership in the transgender community often ignores the issues of transgender people of color, community issues are usually approached one person at a time. This challenge to organizing on a group level often prevents people from being able to respond to important issues such as immigration policy, human rights violations, and other issues.

This serves to further frustrate community members and exacerbates the feeling of not having a voice and not having their complex issues addressed comprehensively.

FTMI: What's Working

Following a brief synopsis of the history and current status of the volunteer-run organization FTMI by one of the group facilitators, participants discussed positive as well as negative aspects of the organization. FTMI was described as a volunteer-run organization that provides a number of support groups, a newsletter, and a resource guide. Participants felt that it was a powerful, long-standing organization that provides a good introduction to the FTM experience and related resources. The group felt that FTMI provides helpful access to resources for people who are on the FTM journey, with a particular emphasis on health care access.

“I found out about Tom Waddell Clinic where I could get testosterone, blood panels, counseling, vitamins, on and on, all free. I found out through their resource. They told me how to access it, they told me what to say. They set all that up for me and I just went right to the pipeline, and that is a great blessing.”

“I told them I didn't have no money, and they gave me a free newsletter.”

“[What's working is] the dependability and consistency of their monthly meetings.”

FTMI: What's Challenging

Participants spoke at considerable length about what they felt is challenging about FTMI. Much of the discussion centered on difficulties that participants have had with support meetings. Participants also underscored what they felt are structural problems with the organization, and described the organization's perceived focus, or lack thereof.

Support Meetings

A number of participants stated that when they sought support from FTMI, they were disappointed for various reasons, including: poor facilitation, too few people of color present at meetings, ignorance on the part of facilitators and support group members about issues affecting people of color, lack of support for SOFFA issues, and difficulties with the support group format. Many in the group felt that economic issues, and the fact that many people of color cannot afford or have access to surgery, are issues that are not addressed. Group members described a lack of personal connection to draw them into and feel comfortable with the organization. Participants repeatedly underscored their feelings of alienation and isolation as a result of this disconnectedness.

“When we do get together, in a FTMI support type of environment, I think a lot of us as people of color, we don't deal with things in that fashion. Sit around in a circle and discuss, blah, blah, blah. As people of color, we are already born in a situation where, you know, we already have a lot of obstacles and a lot of oppression and we live with it everyday. So it's not like we go to a group and say hey, you know, we're people of color, the cops are chasing me or people are

annoying me, you know. We don't do that. We just deal with it ourselves and we do the same with being trans. Just treat it in the same way, on our own, or amongst our friends or family.”

“I haven't been in a long time because I felt like our issues were not being addressed in any way, shape, or form. FTMI abandoned me and I abandoned it. The only thing that worked was the significant other group, but it became a problem after a while. FTMI wasn't necessarily reserving space [for the SOFFA group]. It was left up to an individual to rent a space. That felt unfair, like FTMI should have been taking care of that. That person didn't attend half the time.”

“I'm not getting support from the FTM community. Because a lot of the white FTMs can't relate to me so they don't even bother to hear what I'm trying to say. People are just not open.”

“Basically I just hang in there. Ain't nobody from that group called me up. I just go there, know what I'm saying? I'm not really that connected to it.”

“I've been to two meetings, both of which I had to leave. If it is a support group, I'm not gonna bare my soul in a room full of a bunch of white dudes. I'm not gonna do that. That's really hard. Even if I'm trying to talk about my life, I have to translate it for these people to even come close to hearing me. Both times I just left because it's like I'm wasting my time here. So that's why FTMI hasn't really worked out for me. It's political reasons, personal reasons, who I'm gonna invest in. It seems like also it's an older crowd and it's focused a lot on support and how to transition. And it's cool. There needs to be an organization for people to get resources. But a lot of my transition issues have not been around that. So it's like how do I deal with the world now that I'm invisible and a lot of the psychic trauma that I deal with every day as a trans person of color. So those are my concerns.”

“There's an economic stratification going on with their meetings. When I go, I used to go a lot, and one of the big things is I've started T and I'm happy I have that progressing, but I don't have the money to have top surgery. And what they don't really seem to get through their heads is that that's not what I'm focusing on. I've finally fallen into my body. Now that I'm in my body I can focus on actually living my life. And I don't think they realize that some people don't focus on what's going on physically. It's more about being emotionally aligned. It doesn't matter what other people see because they're gonna see what they see, as long as I can actually feel what I feel. And I think they really aren't making that connection. That's how they're not reaching me. Yeah, I'm changing my gender, but a lot of what I'm *really* dealing with now is going from being a black woman to being a black man. It's a big deal. It's *really* different. I don't have the same benefits. I don't really get to walk in the same circles as I used to. And if they can't even reflect on that fact, then we can't really have a conversation on how racism does come into play.”

“The issue of race is not being addressed or allowed to be addressed in general meetings. FTMI, I was told, was a space for FTM issues. That I was to understand meant white FTMs because the issues my partner was going to have to address were very different. There were scary issues that I needed to talk about and my partner needed to talk about and that wasn’t the space.”

“Scheduling a highly informational medical professional at Le Colonial, a very racist, imperialist venue, alienated me and other people.”

Structural Issues

Participants expressed concern about structural problems within FTMI, as a volunteer-run organization with frequent board turnover. There was concern that there is no one to hold accountable to the community. Participants felt that there was a certain mystique to the organization, that it’s not generally understood how the organization operates, how individuals can get involved, and who is actually involved in the organization as a board member or volunteer. There were questions about who votes for board elections and who is considered a member. Participants also discussed wanting to access FTMI resources without having to ingratiate themselves or be tokenized.

The group was concerned that the organization is territorial about wanting to get involved in or take credit for FTM programs and activities that are happening at other organizations, and that the organization is plagued with power struggles and control issues. The group felt that there is poor communication from one board to the next, and between the organization and the community. There was also concern about how conflicts are handled, and how problems, such as concerns about racism, are addressed within the organization.

“Aside from all the really obvious emotional issues I have with FTMI, I think their biggest problem, and the one that underlines all their problems, is their structure, the fact that there is very little carryover from one group of people to the next. There is no one to hold accountable. At one point they were looking for by-laws and they couldn’t find them. That’s not acceptable. You can’t run an organization and have no accountability to the community. And the board. And like, who votes for what? They could never give us an answer. It’s whoever pays for the newsletter and then they give the newsletter for free, and then you think they’re gonna vote, and it’s like OK, if you want to run people as a slate or something, you don’t even know who to go ask for votes.”

“It is hard for me to take the organization seriously without a strong, salaried ED held accountable to a board, a community.”

“Some of these people [FTMI board] never come to meetings at all, ever. But some are really there, you can see them working. Some of these people, you don’t never see them.”

“The last time we talked about this issue [racism, inclusion of people of color] and we had this big conversation where people started screaming at each other, I think there was so much posturing, like male chest-beating kind of crap. It was a little ridiculous. It was unnecessary. All that needs to be addressed as well, just like the very male way that people associate with conflict. People need to understand that being a guy does not mean going out in the back alley and beating each other up.”

FTMI’s Focus

Participants described FTMI as an organization that lacks focus, is transient, and not cohesive. Participants felt that FTMI is not political enough and that as an organization it does not address issues of importance to FTMs of color and their partners. “Social stuff is all good, but problems won’t go away.” There were concerns that the organization is unable to maintain itself. Participants mentioned that the website needs updating, as it has not been updated for several years.

Experiences of Racism within FTMI

“If everything was all good, we wouldn’t even be here. Personally, I feel like there is no support for people of color. I’m so tired of it. I feel like I’m on this fucking journey alone. Let it all out! Let people of color come out and say, as a person of color, as a trans person of color, this is our struggle. If there’s a place for it, make it happen. ‘Cuz there isn’t. And that’s why we’re here.”

The group emphasized that examples of racism in the organization were not necessarily always concrete or specific, such as the use of racial epithets, for example. Participants felt that there are structural problems that have contributed to the experience of racism, and that FTMI is failing their mission by only reaching certain segments of the transgender community, specifically white people of a higher economic class.

The group questioned who is doing their anti-racism training and how that knowledge and skill set is employed in their work. There was concern that FTMI board members and volunteers are not getting adequate training to address inappropriate individual behavior, or have a deeper understanding of how racism plays a role in the organization’s doings. Many participants discussed the feeling of alienation that they experience at various FTMI groups and events, and subsequent isolation. They felt that a key part of the problem is that the experience of white trans people is not the experience of trans people of color, and that it appears that there is little, if any, effort on the part of white folks to educate themselves about racism in general, or its specific relationship to gender transition and gender variance.

“I was confided to after the first meeting by the facilitator that they thought my partner was ‘just some black guy who was in the wrong place’ and they were going to ask him to leave if not for my presence as his partner, which made him identifiable. First impressions.”

“I still don’t know how to deal with this issue of these people know nothing, and then who’s gonna tell them, and I don’t really want that to be me.”

The group acknowledged that FTMI has a longstanding reputation of racism and insensitivity to people of color, and that in order for FTMI to improve their relationship with people of color communities, they will need to change their image. People felt that the organization’s leadership ignores the issues of people of color, such as police harassment and the realities of transitioning from being a woman of color to being a man of color. For these reasons, people in the community have deeply held trust issues. Any discussion of the possibility of having a people of color group or a focus group such as this one under the auspices of FTMI brings up distrust and resistance to participation.

The group felt that this focus group was the first step, and though some felt distrustful of the process, there was hope that the group could make a difference, and that FTMI would respond by making necessary changes. Everyone in the group agreed that there was much work to be done. As one participant said, “Given what has gone down, they need to be working twice as hard.”

How FTMI can be more Effective

Participants had a number of helpful suggestions for how FTMI could enhance their organizational capacity and develop their relationship with the larger community and the FTMOC community. They wanted to see FTMI get proper funding so that there would be staff to do the work of the organization’s mission and truly represent the community. There were suggestions about how FTMI could broaden the interaction of the group meeting to be more issue-oriented and less isolating. There were also suggestions for committee structure and training.

There was concern that FTMI needs to improve their image in order to be more effective, be more transparent, and demonstrate more effective ways of handling conflict. The group suggested that FTMI be a visible presence at people of color events and work in coalition with other organizations, such as LYRIC, SMAAC, Pacific Center, and others. Participants wanted to see FTMI be more consciously engaged in POC issues, get involved and be more visible in the FTM of color community, and involve more people of color with the organization. They wanted FTMI to address low income, people of color, youth, and elder issues, as well as update its website. Above all, participants wanted to see FTMI acknowledge the harm and pain caused by FTMI to the FTMOC community and be willing to institutionalize their commitment to people of color.

“Hire a real Executive Director with true accountability to the Board, real measurable goals and responsibilities, a real budget, real programs for our community. People of color outreach could easily be a part of the ED’s mission. I have got to believe that there is money out there. And while I am on the subject, pack the board with people that have board experience, that have professional expertise in grant-writing, fundraising, fiscal responsibility, and are willing to *work*.”

“FTMI seems to be centered around an interesting concept called peer support, which for the most part means sitting around a circle and talking about hormones, surgery, coming out, etc. If you are lucky, you find a connection with others or your significant other can find a connection. From my experience, people with similar interests outside of being FTM-identified have the most ‘luck’ with the organization, be it sex play, politics, art, theater, etc. It might be helpful to have organized topic areas similar to other successful ‘networking’ organizations. Have venues for people to experience FTMI in areas of interest: business, art, politics, training, sports for God’s sake, and health care that allow people to build relationships in areas of commonality, without feeling more isolated when they leave a meeting because the interaction isn’t all about his dick is bigger than mine, or his girlfriend is prettier and ‘femmer’ than mine.”

“Have committees to focus specifically on the following:

- ☛ Partners: recruitment, facilitation and organization of the meeting/group time, location, etc.
- ☛ Communities/people of color: focusing on outreach to and creating and maintaining connections to that community.
- ☛ Outreach: someone to focus solely on outreach and recruitment. Stop being afraid. I think they’re more afraid of [hostility and backlash from] lesbians than straight people.
- ☛ Network with different people: people who hold power and influence in the community or different communities (i.e. fairy butch, *Girlfriends* magazine) to get free publicity.”

“Get active, bottom line. Get out there. Get faces seen and heard. Be on top of events, what’s going on. Get sponsorships. Not all sponsorships cost money.”

“Have an anti-oppression training for everyone: board, volunteers, and members so that they can realize that issues of race cannot be excluded from issues of gender variance and gender transition and adjustment.”

“One of the problems if groups don’t run well is if the facilitators aren’t trained. I went to the New Men’s Group and it was totally ridiculous. Like I was trying to share—this was before I started T—and I was going by he and my male name but I hadn’t told my sister and she had just moved to town, so I was explaining how I’m living a double life and I’m really afraid she’s going to come to my work and you know. And the facilitator just cut me off and was like, ‘That’s like my work.’ And he talked for like twenty-five, thirty minutes. He was like this forty year-old white guy who’d been on T for like ten years and he was talking about his brother and their relationship and like just totally invalidated what I was trying to say. And there was only two members there, me and this other guy. He talked the entire time. They need facilitator training.”

What it Will Take to get more People of Color Involved with FTMI

“I think what ends up happening is someone will go for a specific length of time to FTMI and be like, all right I’m tired of this crap, and then either I’ve taken time off and like, all right, I’ll give it another try again and go through another couple of months and like, fuck, I still haven’t seen another guy, haven’t seen anyone with brown skin, I’m gonna stop going. And someone’s going to show up when I’m not there and he’ll be like, well, this is fucked up, no brown people. So I see how the cycle goes on, and see how we kind of get stuck in being the one left, the token one. ‘Cause we have the energy. It’s just draining being the only one.”

Participants were overwhelmingly concerned about the lack of participation of people of color in the organization, and had numerous suggestions for how FTMI could improve their relationship with the FTMOC community and potentially get more people of color involved. The primary concern was the legacy associated with FTMI and the need to acknowledge this history and make changes to their reputation in order to build trust with the FTMOC community. The group put forth a number of suggestions for activities and events that could potentially involve people of color, but felt that the organization would first need to improve their relationship with the FTMOC community before people of color would participate in any meaningful way.

“If the damage that’s been done is irreparable, how are they going to address it? And how are we going to change what FTMI represents symbolically, the reputation that it has? These are walls that we’re going to come up against regardless of what we’re trying to do, and we can’t do anything until we address that.”

“Keep race on the table. Never deny it space. Never deny its importance. Never deny its essential relationship to gender transition.”

“Honest and expressed recognition of the value of our perspective encourages [people in our community to serve in positions of leadership and authority within FTMI.] Dismissal of our perspective and our racially-charged concerns discourages our participation.”

Programmatic Suggestions

Though participants were very concerned about FTMI’s need to change their image before providing support services to the POC community, it was suggested that FTMI have a people of color group run by people of color. Additionally, the group wanted to see FTMI bring in more people of color and youth as group facilitators. Another suggestion was to have FTMI sponsor an event, organized by and for people of color, at a neutral place such as The LGBT Center, with food, entertainment, socializing, and opportunities to discuss ideas and provide feedback to the organization.

Participants wanted to see FTMI take action to conduct more effective outreach to people of color by talking to people on a personal level. The group was extremely enthusiastic about the suggestion that FTMI secure funding for a program to address FTM of color issues. Ideally, funding would allow for a part-time position for a person of color to conduct outreach to people of color, and organize POC events and workshops. Additionally, funding would cover food for support groups, workshops, and events. It was suggested that in addition to going after grants, FTMI fundraise within their membership for such a program.

It was also suggested that FTMI get a grant for a strategic planning retreat, in which people of color receive stipends for attending. The goal of the retreat would be to further the work of this focus group by brainstorming on how to improve FTMI's programs and services for people of color. Participants felt that since non-POCs do not understand POC needs, people of color should get involved to help determine programming. The group felt that it's not easy for people in their community to volunteer, since survival needs take precedence and people are overextended. Providing a stipend would increase potential for participation.

“The topics that are discussed in support groups mainly focus on non-race related issues. Since the white folks don't have to deal with race-related issues in their reality, the only thing they can do in that group support setting is to pity the POC, which is clearly as many of us stated not what we want. Therefore, POC attendees end up not bringing up their real issues and receive no real group support in the existing support groups. In order to provide real group support for POC, I propose that FTMI to start a group only for POC with POC as the facilitators/coordinators for support groups and/or social meetings. A space where POC on the FTM spectrum can *openly* discuss their race-related issues regarding their transition, and share related stories/experience and coping mechanisms with each other. Although the support group is only for POC, the effort behind having this support group under FTMI shows *unity* between POC and white allies. We have more power as we unite together, and move forward by providing support for *all* people on the FTM spectrum.”

Structural Issues

Participants felt that if FTMI were more transparent, and if there were a visible, diverse board, people of color might be more likely to get involved. They wanted to see the organization provide information about the board process and discuss what is happening on the board level with the general FTM community. Additionally, they wanted information on how one could get involved with the organization as a volunteer. Participants felt that it was essential to support people in their community who are involved with the organization (whether as board members, staff, or volunteers) so that they don't “get the life sucked out of them” and leave psychologically drained.

“They're not reaching out to people of color to be on the board. We don't even know how to be on the board. Let us know what's going on.”

“You don’t want to get into the situation where they find this person and then they run them through the ringer and they leave so disgusted and angry. It can be the situation where it’s bad and you need a critical mass of people to come in and change it. How you gonna get that critical mass? Anywhere you fall short of that critical mass, it’s gonna fail. It’s not just oh, OK, that was a mistake. It’s crying and you don’t even want to have anything to do with trans people after it. At this point we ourselves need to figure out what we’re going to do first, and then not actually try to tackle FTMI issues. But organize amongst ourselves first, get that critical mass, and then try to deal with FTMI.”

Other Concerns

Participants were clearly uninterested in being the ones responsible for educating people in the organization about issues of race and racism. The group felt that this work was the inherent responsibility of the organization, and absolutely necessary in order to be accountable to the POC community. The group acknowledged that there are white allies who could be utilized effectively to further support for people of color, but expressed concern that there are some white people who are not interested in making any individual or institutional changes.

The group felt that a first step would be to give voice to people of color issues by widely publishing the findings of this needs assessment. Participants wanted to use the media to highlight FTMOOC issues and develop the relationship with FTMI so that the FTMOOC community could benefit from the organization’s resources.

Consultant Observations

The consultants observed that when speaking about FTMI, participants did not always draw a distinction between the actions of FTMI leadership and its members. Moreover, many participants developed their impression of FTMI at support meetings. As the FTMI leadership considers the findings in this report, it would behoove the organization to look at improving program policy and training with the hopes of decreasing the likelihood of inappropriate behavior among organizational leadership and membership alike. One possible solution includes maintaining a zero-tolerance policy for inappropriate remarks with regards to race, including enforcing clear guidelines at support meetings to encourage the voices of people of color and low-income individuals, and discourage domination by white people or those with more financial resources.

Recommendations

Structural:

- ☛ Secure funding for staff positions, at the minimum an Executive Director, who would further the organization's mission by developing programs with measurable outcomes.
- ☛ Make a commitment to addressing the needs of people of color on the FTM spectrum and their partners on an organizational level.
- ☛ Provide information about the board process with regular updates on board activity to the general FTM community, especially ensuring that the information gets out to FTM of color networks.
- ☛ Ensure that FTMI membership guidelines are not economically based.
- ☛ Provide anti-racism training to all board members, staff, volunteers, and members with an emphasis on appropriate behavior within the organization.
- ☛ Train facilitators to be effective in their role and socially conscious about interpersonal issues.
- ☛ Provide support for SOFFAs by taking responsibility for ensuring that there is meeting space and attention given to the needs of partners.

Programmatic:

- ☛ Pursue funding for programs that support FTMs of color and their partners through outreach, activities, events, and support groups. Develop a part-time position to address programming for people of color.
- ☛ Establish program committees to recruit and develop relationships with people of color, partners, youth, elders, and other underrepresented communities.
- ☛ Conduct one-on-one outreach to people of color and other underserved populations.
- ☛ Explore the possibility of establishing an FTMI-sponsored support group by and for people of color.
- ☛ Pursue funding for and develop non-support group programs that bring people together for socializing, information, political activism, and entertainment.
- ☛ Update resource guide and website. Provide updated referrals to medical and mental health providers for people on the FTM spectrum and those questioning their gender and their SOFFAs, including couples counseling and support for partners.

Community Relations:

- ☛ Develop the organization's public relations and networks with various communities.
- ☛ Publish findings of this needs assessment on the FTMI website and in the media.
- ☛ Distribute the report to the community of FTMs of color and their SOFFAs, and the general community. Ensure community awareness about the report by getting the word out at organizations frequented by transgendered people, such as Dimensions, Pacific Center, Tom Waddell, SMAAC, and others.
- ☛ Encourage dialogue in the transgender community, and between diverse communities, about the issues of people of color on the FTM spectrum and their partners. Raise awareness on issues of class, youth, elders, health concerns, and other topics.
- ☛ Involve people of color in the proposal-writing process for people of color programming.
- ☛ Maintain commitment to FTMs of color by being a visible presence at people of color events and by addressing political issues of importance to this community.

Attachments

1. Recruitment Email

A recruitment flyer was distributed in paper form.

Attn: People of color on the FTM spectrum and SOFFAs of color

Seeking FTMs, transmen, transgendered, and other folks on the FTM spectrum, and SOFFAs/partners, who are self-identified folks of color in the Bay Area.

Would you be interested in participating in a focus group to assess the needs of FTM & SOFFA communities of color in the Bay Area?

What does the community (people of color on the FTM spectrum and partners) need and want?

Have you had any interaction (positive or not) with FTM International?

Are you interested in giving your feedback on how FTMI can better meet the needs of folks in your community?

Got suggestions for changes? Come to an upcoming focus group and share your opinions!

Date: Saturday, April 17

Time: 12-3pm

Location: TBA

Catered lunch will be provided.

If you are interested or would like more information, please contact:

Willy Wilkinson (willywilkinson@earthlink.net) or

Prado Gomez (nativeson941@yahoo.com)

2. Survey Instrument

FTMOC Focus Group Questions

[Intro, purpose of group, confidentiality, agreements, agenda]

- 1 Who/what is the FTM & SOFFA community of color in the Bay Area?
- 2 Where do we get info about FTM/trans events?
- 3 What are our needs and wants generally speaking? (free-thinking, brainstorming—support services, activities, events.)
- 4 What are our health care needs?
- 5 What are barriers to getting our needs met and receiving these services?
- 6 What/who is FTMI? (mission, services, etc.)
- 7 What elements of our needs and wants do we think FTMI is responsible for addressing?
Services, activities, best times of day or week
- 8 What do we like about FTMI? What's working?
- 9 What have been the challenges with FTMI and their attempts to serve the folks in our community? (Experiences with racism)
- 10 How can those challenges be addressed by FTMI? By us?
- 11 How can FTMI recruit and retain the membership and participation of FTMs of color and our SOFFAs?
- 12 What encourages or discourages people in our community to serve in positions of authority and leadership within FTMI?
- 13 What would it take for FTMI to be a place where FTMOCs & SOFFAs feel ownership?
- 14 Recommended next steps?

Note: Interviews conducted with partners used the same format.