

Questions for the

Women's Secretariat

ILGA's last World Conference witnessed the election of a new Women's Secretariat. The Swedish LGBT federation, RFSL has agreed to take up this challenging role and represent women's needs within ILGA. An interview with Maria Sjödin, Executive Director of RFSL.



Maria Sjödin, executive Director of RFSL - The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights

ILGA is always concerned about being too Eurocentrist, as much of its constituency is Europe-based. The women's secretariat was moved from Mexico to the Philippines and is now in Europe. Why do you think participants at the conference unanimously elected a European organisation like RFSL?

We are very honoured to have been elected and to feel such strong support from participants from all over the world. We feel that there's an expectation that RFSL, as an organization in a relatively strong position, can actually help strengthen the position of ILGA and of women within ILGA. Our aim is to take advantage of Sweden's and the Swedish Foreign Office's very strong support for gender equality in order to raise funds for much-needed work benefiting lesbian and bisexual women in different regions. Sweden supported the panels that ILGA organized to parallel last year's session of the UN Human Rights Council with the condition that one panel would address the situation for women. Of course, we think the Swedish Foreign Office should do more – in addition to sponsoring panels – in order to really honour its commitment to women's issues and human rights for LGBT people. The Women's Secretariat will give RFSL a stronger position as we advocate for this. In terms of the fear of Eurocentrism, we are sensitive to the concern and believe that it should not be ignored - it is very important to address issues relevant to women in all parts of the world, and we need support from women in every region in order to make this happen.

The outcome of the discussions held between the audience and the speakers during the pre-conference on women's issues provides a clear idea of what are the issues women and lesbian orgs would like to see addressed by ILGA.

HOW TO MOVE LBT HEALTH ISSUES FORWARD

- Increase collaborative work with gay men organizations.
- Work with the women's movement – mainstream, address violence against women and domestic violence issues, pressure to marry, and the reproductive value of women.
- Consider the many challenges posed by transgender issues and binary thinking and the need for us to develop our theoretical thinking in relation to these.

PRIORITY FOR ACTION

- Research (regional and countrywide)
- Material development (safer sex, IST, breast cancer prevention, etc.)
- Visibility
- Alliances (ex. with feminist groups and with transgender groups)
- Education of professional staff (such as health care professionals)

WHAT IS EXPECTED FROM ILGA?

- Share skills (train, help apply for funding)
- Disseminate available information
- Research and coordinate global reports

Questions for the Women's Secretariat

What would you like to see achieved in two years time at the next ILGA World Conference in Canada in 2008?

By then, I hope that we have secured funding for ILGA's continuous work on women's issues on a global level - there is so much to be done and resources are necessary. Another concern for us is that women's issues should not just be issues for women to deal with; men should also advocate for women's issues and have both the knowledge and understanding to do this. Of course, we also hope to see a strong presence of women at the next conference and hopefully a pre-conference as well. I could make the list even longer, but the funding is really a core issue and it will take time and effort. Hopefully, if we succeed, it will benefit us all in the long run as resources are required even for very basic things like strengthening the network - we need to be able to gather participants from all parts of the world in order to meet, and that costs money.

What personally motivated you to apply for this position?

Both Madelaine and I are committed to working for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people and have done so for a number of years within RFSL and other organizations in Sweden. We've had good experiences working in mixed organizations, but it's still important to focus attention on women's issues. There is still a lot to do and achieve in Sweden, but there is also a bigger world out there. We both have a feeling that this is an opportunity for us and RFSL to help move women's issues forward and build on the work we are already doing and advocating for in Sweden. We are interested in achieving results and that is a motivator for both of us - and we also feel a big support from the entire RFSL organization and board. The strong show of support from many of the conference participants also made the decision easy.

<http://www.rfsl.se>

Do women who have sex with women have a greater risk of developing a cancer? ILGA works with a foundation against cancer.



ILGA worked closely together with the Belgian Cancer Foundation to publish a preventive information leaflet, in French and in Dutch, entitled Pour les femmes qui aiment les femmes (For Women Who love Women); the text of the brochure was made in and in collaboration with the Belgian organizations: Ex Aequo, Planning Familial Plan F, Tels Quels, Mega Top Biches, Magenta, Goudou Brugge and Casa Rosa.

Do women who have sex with women have a greater risk of developing a cancer of the breast and of the uterus collar? It is because the problem is particularly unrecognized by the public most concerned that this initiative was undertaken.

You can download the leaflet in French on ILGA's website
http://www.ilga.org/news_results.asp?LanguageID=1&FileID=795&FileCategory=1&ZoneID=7

and in Dutch on the Belgian Foundation against Cancer website

http://www.cancer.be/index.cfm?fuseaction=Content.DisplayContent&Content_ID=20C471A7-C931-434C-B9C55A3C706C4F6E&Category_ID=5&lang=NL

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