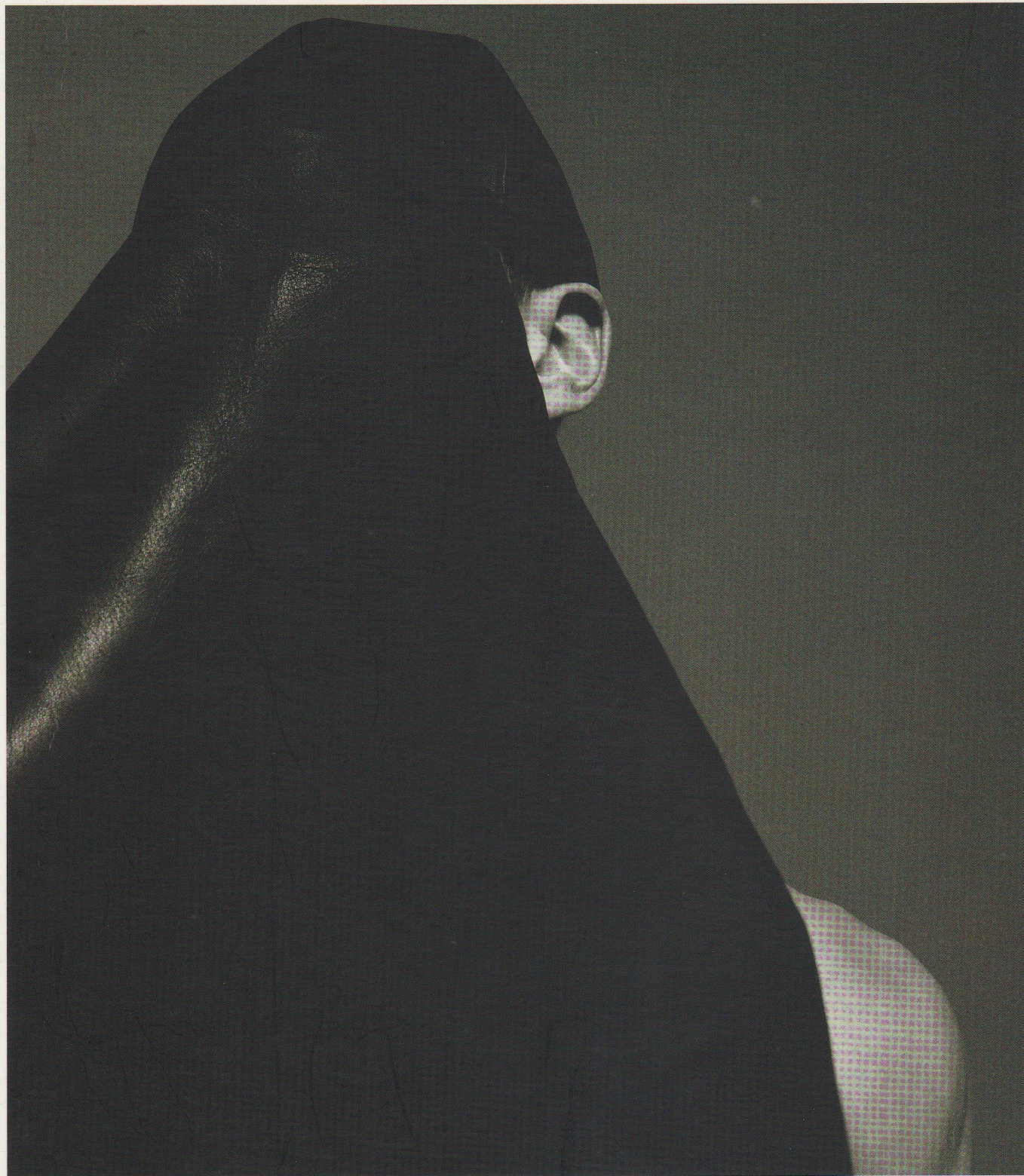


PLUG

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


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Shock Issue

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“One of the reasons I feel less pressure from the Hong Kong Police Force is because they can’t fire me due to the fact that I’m classified as a disabled person. Under a very weird and wrong system in Hong Kong, I have been ‘diagnosed’ as having Gender Identity Disorder, which is classified as a mental illness. In Hong Kong, if you are a transgender person, you have to take on this status.”

abroad, they cited that I couldn’t go on patrol as the emotional stress of her departure would cause me to be ‘incapable’ of carrying a gun. The latest excuse is that my hair is too long and so I can’t wear the male uniform, yet at the same time they won’t give me the female uniform either. So without a uniform I cannot go on patrol.

How do you think this problem can be solved?

My supervisors have been putting this situation off by saying that I need to change my gender legally before they will discuss anything more. The problem is that I cannot go through with the required surgery because my family is not accepting of it. So it is on hold.

How did your family react when you came out as a transgender woman?

I would describe it as a natural disaster. Firstly, the conversation came up in an awkward way; my uncle had come to visit from China, and we were sitting on the peak tram when a girl sat opposite us asked me to take a photo for her, she mistook me for a woman and called me, “Miss”. This struck a nerve with my mother. Later that night, as we had been drinking and were very unhappy, the topic came up out of nowhere – so I just came out there and then. My parents opposed me very strongly and my father got aggressive, so my uncle tried to diffuse the situation and took me back to my home.

Have your family become more understanding over time?

Absolutely not. My biggest pressure comes from my family. Since my brother died and I’m now their only son, my parents don’t want me to have the operation because they want grandchildren. But that’s not what I want.

Do you think the Hong Kong legal system does enough to protect transgender people?

One of the reasons I feel less pressure from the Hong Kong Police Force is because they can’t fire me, due to the fact that I’m classified as a disabled person. Under a very weird and wrong system in Hong Kong, I have been ‘diagnosed’ as having Gender Identity Disorder, which is classified as a mental illness. In Hong Kong, if you are a transgender person, you have to take on this status.

How do you feel about being classified as having a mental illness?

Due to this status I am entitled to free healthcare, such as hormone therapy, and I am protected by a non-discrimination law as a disabled person. However, I disagree strongly with being classified as disabled: everyone knows that I’m normal and that I just want to be a woman. This classification has a very negative impact on the transgender community, as it attacks our confidence. However, the only legal protection that we do have is under this unreasonable classification. That’s why I’ve been working with transgender organisations trying to push forward a new non-discrimination law that not only protects the transgender community, but also the rest of the LGBT community, without the classification of mental illness.

How are you progressing with this new anti-discrimination law?

We are still in the beginning stages as there has been a lot of external opposition from religious organisations such as The Society for Truth and Light. A few transgender organisations are starting an information centre, and in time we hope to be able to establish this LGBT anti-discrimination law.

Tell us about the transgender groups in Hong Kong.

There are a few organisations such as the Transgender Resource Centre (TGR) which is run by my friend, Joanne Leung. TGR helps on different levels; it creates a platform for people to speak up collectively to stand up to the government. Facing the government as an individual can be very painful, but with TGR’s platform, you have group support. On a second level, as a group with varied voices we can formulate a more comprehensive and concise agenda to present to the government.

What motivated you to become an activist for LGBT rights?

In 1986, I watched a documentary on RTHK about transgender people. I revisited this programme recently and was very affected by it, as I realised that not only has society not moved forward but it has actually moved backwards. Why have Hong Kong’s attitudes toward the transgender community

not improved since 1986? It’s because the previous generation didn’t provide a voice for transgender rights, and so there hasn’t been a motivation for change. Therefore, I want to be part of a voice that paves the way for future generations.

What progress has been made so far?

Two years ago, we began meetings with the Health Department to discuss sex reassignment operations and how to provide appropriate medical care for transgender patients. Our relationship with the Health Organisation has improved significantly. The one and only doctor in Hong Kong who is able to perform sex reassignment surgery will soon be retiring without a successor. From our meetings with the Health Department we have been promised that this operation will not be discontinued, and now they are actively looking for replacement doctors.

What else needs to change?

The current law only allows us to change our legal gender once we have undergone sex reassignment surgery. Before we can have this procedure, we must spend two years of ‘real-life’ experience as the gender we are transitioning to. During these two years, it can be particularly difficult to find work because the government doesn’t provide temporary ID to account for this transitional phase. To help make job-seeking easier, we are pushing the government to issue certificates of ‘LGBT friendly’ recognition to companies.

What advice do you have for the LGBT community?

I think more people need to speak up. We aren’t trying to achieve extra benefits but simply human rights and equality. I believe in team power. We are already a minority and so we should stick together as a community and push for our rights together. Hold your head up and be confident in who you are.

What is the most shocking thing you’ve experienced?

Since I came out, I thought I would be alone forever. Then by fate, at an LGBT barbecue, I met my girlfriend and found true love.

Joanne

Joanne Leung is the face of transgender activism in Hong Kong and China. In addition to drawing the media's attention to transgender rights, and sitting on the boards of a number of LGBT organisations, she is the founder and Chairperson of the Transgender Resource Centre (TGR). She managed to fit us into her packed schedule for a coffee and to let us know all about TGR's invaluable work within the transgender community.



What motivated you to start TGR?

When I was transitioning, I asked for help from some transgender friends. But they didn't want to help me. They were more concerned with their appearance. Every time we went out we only talked about makeup, dressing and wigs. They told that me I wasn't qualified to be a transgender woman, and they saw me only as a cross-dresser. In Hong Kong, the community is split into cross-dressers and transgender people, and there is a lot of discrimination between the two groups. Transgender people see cross-dressers as men dressing up and fucking their girlfriends, whereas cross-dressers believe that transgender people think too much and aren't good to their own bodies

I want to break through this discrimination. I began as a cross-dresser but I realised that I was a transgender woman as I had a desire to change my body. I asked a lot of people about hormone treatments but nobody helped me. Then when I began to visit the sex clinic, I realised that there was a doctor's letter I could carry so that I could go to a female bathroom.

I then asked my friend what the content of this letter was about and I was told that the doctor would just issue it. She didn't tell me what was in the letter. Now I have some samples of this letter and if asked, I will send them to people.

Realising that there were no transgender people willing to help, I made the promise to myself that if I can complete my surgery, I will stay in the community to help others. There are around 200-300 transsexual people in Hong Kong, why am I the first one to offer help?

What are the biggest issues faced by transgender people in HK?

It's hard to say, but generally it's discrimination. However, this is hard to prove. Most people won't tell their employers that they are a transgender person. You can only prove discrimination if the employer fires you after you tell them that you are transgender. But there are stories from my friends where the employer was okay with their identities.

A lot of transgender people say that they face a lot of discrimination, but that wasn't the case

for me. When my previous colleagues found out that I was a transgender woman, they said things which made me feel embarrassed and asked me, "Why are you like that? In all other ways you're normal, but why do you behave like that?" I spent years living with this situation, but in time they treated me quite well. I think that when something happens, you have to spend time to build relationships; it's not fair for you to jump out and say that they're discriminating against you. So in the workplace, I have heard a lot of stories of people negotiating with their bosses and HR with good outcomes.

But I think the most serious issue is self-acceptance. I don't think being a transgender person is so bad - I always say it's a good thing; I understand women and I understand men - my boss always says, "Joanne can do the 'man things' and the 'woman things'". But not everyone thinks like that.

A lot of transgender people have problems with confidence. Even those who look happy have a lot of emotional problems. Over 60% of transgender people have attempted to commit

“Recently, I was having dinner in a food court with my friends after a TGR gathering. A transgender woman was talking to a director who wanted to make a movie about her. There was a girl sat by them and when she stood up to leave, she left a message for my friend saying, ‘be yourself, be whoever you want to be, and keep on going’.”

suicide - so we launched a counseling service to tackle the problem. Although, I have invited people to take this service, they reject it by saying that they're okay and fine...

So we have another approach: we have a few counselors who join our gatherings and we even have speech therapy sessions teaching them how to speak like a woman. In the next few years we want to establish a centre to give transgender people a place to get together and to see counsellors. I have a new project called, 'Walk with Transgender', where we invite people and students from churches and schools to participate. In each team there will be six to eight non-transgender people with one or two transgender people. Every month they will get together for movies, BBQs, etc. They will have to commit for a year and will also have some missions to accomplish. We hope this project will empower transgender people to be more confident; they are so isolated and often live in their own world. When I began our gatherings in 2011, I brought a lot of transgender people into the gatherings but through 'Walk with Transgender' they can also know a lot of non-LGBT people and be better connected with society.

How does TGR help the transgender community?

We have two main focuses: one is the transgender community, and the other is society.

For the community we offer a lot of services, such as monthly gatherings. The transgender community rarely held events before TGR was formed. There were some non-regular gatherings, but they were only focused on appearance. So when I formed our gatherings, we focused on relationships and we have a different topic every month. We try to empower our members by giving them information and mental health guidance. We also have some makeup, dressing and funny things to balance

it out. Sometimes we have a workshop to talk about psychological issues, where doctors come in to share information. The gatherings also create a platform for newcomers, students or volunteers to join - this is the entry point to learn more about transgender people and transgender issues.

Additionally, we offer support groups with professional social workers and we are trying to work out a parents' support group. They really need support too. My friend told me that her father was not very accepting and he couldn't understand her situation, and that he had just ignored it. So I asked how long ago she had told her father, it was only two months ago. It's unfair on the father, you can't be so harsh to your parents, you need to try to give them some support.

Other services we offer include counseling, a hotline service, support for those who want to see doctors and an online outreach system where we can answer questions regarding transgender issues.

For the wider society we do some education work and a lot of sharing with universities, organisations, professionals and social workers. I'm also a member of the Advisory Group on Eliminating Discrimination against Sexual Minorities (AGEDASM). We have meetings with stake holders and report our progress back to the government. I often have meetings with legislators, government officials and doctors. I'm involved with other LGBT organisations as well. For example, I'm the vice chairperson of the Pink Alliance. I always have a full schedule of meetings and work to be done at home - I don't get enough sleep!

What progress has TGR made so far?

Among the transgender community in Hong Kong, I get the most media exposure. I do think that there is a lot of impact from the media, as people often come to ask me "are you

Joanne?". People are starting to realise that the acceptance of transgender people is improving. Being transgender right now is not that difficult in terms of dealing with discrimination, but there are still a lot of transgender people who are scared to come out.

In what ways have you seen an increased acceptance of transgender people?

Thirty years ago, everybody knew that if you dressed up and people realised that you were a transgender person, you'd be in trouble - you may have been bullied or even beaten. But now in HK, there are a lot of positive stories: when the police ask for your ID and realise that you are a transgender person, it isn't seen as an issue. On the street, some transgender people may not 'pass' convincingly as the gender that they are expressing. There's some staring, but it's just staring - nothing happens.

Recently, I was having dinner in a food court with my friends after a TGR gathering. A transgender woman was talking to a director who wanted to make a movie about her. There was a girl sat by them and when she stood up to leave, she left a message for my friend saying, 'be yourself, be whoever you want to be, and keep on going'. Another time, I was on the MTR with the same friend, and suddenly a man who was leaving the train came over to us. He said, "Excuse me, are you Joanne? Keep on going". My friend was very happy to have witnessed this.

What would you like to see happen next in HK for the transgender community?

I hope there will be more transgender activists coming out to work for the community. I've come up with a project called 'SuperTrans'. I want to hold some workshops with transgender people to help them see that one day they can also be like 'Joanne'. It will be a programme to help them move forward step-by-step, how



to come out to their family and the public, and how they can help their transgender friends. Hopefully one or two years later, TGR can expand and grow to have more 'SuperTrans' in the organisation.

I'm also working really hard on the Gender Recognition Ordinance (GRO), which allows transgender people to change their legal gender, and the government has already set up a cross department committee to look at how to legislate the ordinance.

What do you want to achieve with the GRO?

In the UK, the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) doesn't require transgender people to have sex reassignment surgery in order to change their legal gender. However, in Hong Kong, sex reassignment surgery is a compulsory requirement if you wish to change your legal identity. This is difficult to deal with because in some cases, people don't meet the criteria to complete the surgery. So we want to take this requirement out and follow the UK guidelines. I think this

is quite difficult but we are putting a lot of effort into making it happen in HK.

And finally, what shocks you?

I have tried to commit suicide 4 times before. I really felt that there was no way out. But now I really think that it's so amazing that I can live so happily, and do what I'm doing now. I never would have imagined this would be the case. There are still a lot of difficulties, but I'm still here and I'm enjoying being a transgender woman. I always tell myself that I'm so lucky to be a transgender woman: if I was just a woman or a man, you wouldn't want to interview me, right? I'm 50 now, there are still a lot of things that I want to explore. I'm trying to not only focus on transgender work; I want to go further. My thought is that transgender rights are part of LGBT rights, and LGBT rights are human rights. Therefore I want to contribute to human rights.

PLUG HIGHLIGHT

Transgender Resource Centre

www.tgr.org.hk

"The Transgender Resource Centre was established in 2008. With education as our main aim, we hope to provide information about the transgender community to everyone. We hope to help society develop a deeper understanding of the transgender community and of transgender issues. We aim to assist those in the community by informing them of their rights and by offering them support."

TGR Gender Care Hotline

(+852) 8230 0838
Every Wednesday Night
8:00-11:00pm
Except public holidays.

If you, a family member or friend has questions about gender orientation or identity, please call our hotline.

TGR Counselling Service

If you have anything you want to share or seek advice for, contact counselling@tgr.org.hk to arrange a meeting with a transgender-friendly counsellor. All conversations are confidential.