



**(E)Merging insights and perspectives: a report on the  
OC Trans Needs Assessment Survey**

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This report summarizes and analyses the key findings which are derived from the OC Trans needs assessment survey, it also aims to provide readers with a context for understanding some issues transgender people face in Singapore.

*Key words:* Transsexual; transgender; ftm; mtf; Singapore; GLBT community

## **Introduction**

**Oogachaga (OC)**<sup>1</sup> is a charitable, pro-family, sexuality-affirming, counseling and personal development agency established in 1999. It specializes in gender, sexuality, identity and relationship issues particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender & questioning (“LGBTQ”) individuals and communities. One of OC's distinctive services is its support groups for gay men and women. Noting the absence of specialized services for the transgender people, and the lack of data on this sub-group of the LGBTQ sexual minority, Oogachaga embarked on this needs assessment survey to gain a better understanding of the transgender community, and gauge what the general concerns are.

The salient findings of the OC Trans survey are explored in this report. In order to better understand the responses of our survey participants, we find it necessary to acknowledge the multiple realities and experiences that transgender people have in the local context and give some mention of the values, resources and influences that may shape transgender lives. We do wish to stress that the transgender population here should not be regarded as a homogenous, monolithic entity, and the views represented in this report may not necessarily reflect on the attitudes of every transgender individual. We also want to mention that because this is a project initiated by a LGBTQ-affirmative agency, it is inevitable that our opinions carry a certain bias.

## **Methodology**

The survey was conducted through two online portals – Oogachaga and SGButterfly and publicized through various online LGBT mailing lists. Respondents were asked to provide some basic particulars such as age and sexuality, their stage of transition. As this was primarily a needs assessment survey, respondents were also asked to share their opinions on what would be useful in a transgender support group. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected depending on the nature of the question. The online survey ran for about a month in August/September 2006, and garnered a fair share of participants whose collective responses helped to support the following key findings.

## **The limitations of this survey**

The sample size of this survey is relatively small. Owing to its small sample, the findings of this survey are not representative for the entire transgender community in Singapore. Being an internet-based survey, this survey was only accessible to certain groups of people. The findings of this survey, thus fails to capture the opinions of people who have been involuntarily ‘excluded’ from this survey. The findings and analysis derived from this survey should not be considered as conclusive but regarded as a reference point in understanding transgender people and their community.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please visit our website at [www.oogachaga.com](http://www.oogachaga.com).

## Demographic Profile of Respondents

The participants of the OC Trans Needs-assessment survey were 38 transgender people, aged between 16 and 48 years. 81% were of Chinese descent, 5% were of Malay ethnicity, 3% were Indian, and the remaining 11 percent were of other ethnicities. While the proportions were close to the overall proportion of the Chinese and Indians in Singapore, there was an under-representation to the Malays.<sup>2</sup> The religious background of our participants were rather varied, 32% of them were of the Christian or Catholic faith, 25% were Buddhists, 8% were Muslims, the remaining participants either felt that the given religion categories did not adequately describe their spiritual belief systems or they considered themselves non-religious.

### Gender

The terminology used in OC’s survey is in line with the understandings of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ that the transgender community tends to be extremely familiar with; where ‘sex’ refers to the biological status, whereas ‘gender’ or gender identity is understood as part of an individual’s sense of self. When we use the term ‘female-identified transgender people’, we are referring to those who identify as female, regardless of natal or biological sex, the opposite applies for ‘male-identified transgender people’.

There was a fairly balanced representation of views from both male-identified and female-identified transgender people, with just slightly more female-identified transgender people as compared with male-identified transgender people, and also a small number of people who were currently uncomfortable with identifying with either gender category (Figure 1).

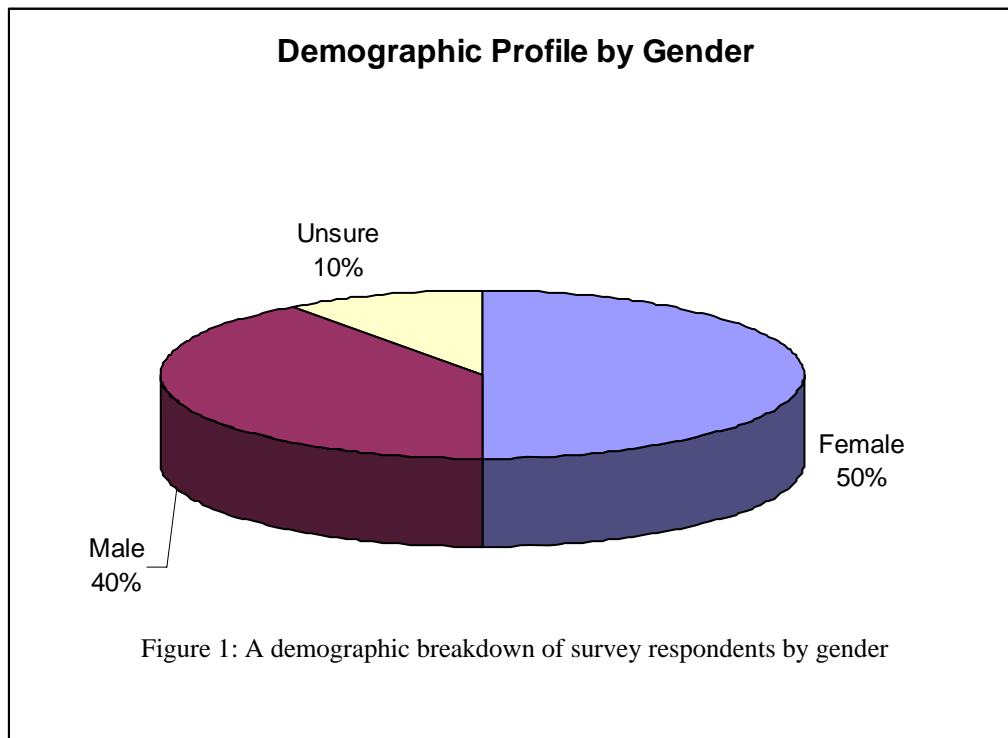


Figure 1: A demographic breakdown of survey respondents by gender

<sup>2</sup> Figures correlated against the Singapore Census of Population, 2000

Sexuality

At this point, it would be useful to draw a distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation; as mentioned previously, gender identity is part of one’s sense of self. Sexual orientation, on the other hand, describes the direction of an individual’s sexuality, often in relation to their own gender. In other words, a person is considered heterosexual if he or she has a continuing affectional, emotional, romantic, and/or erotic attraction to someone of the opposite gender, while gay people are to the same gender and bisexual are to both genders.

Our survey findings revealed the presence of diversity in sexual orientation of transgender people, with 50% identifying as heterosexual. 16% of our respondents considered themselves to be gay, while 18% identified as bisexual. The remaining 16% of respondents indicated that they were ‘questioning’ and have not yet settled for a definitive sexuality category. (Refer to Figure 2) While no conclusive extrapolations on the local transgender population can be made from the findings of this survey, to some extent this data serves to counter blanket statements which assume that all transgender people are only ever heterosexual.

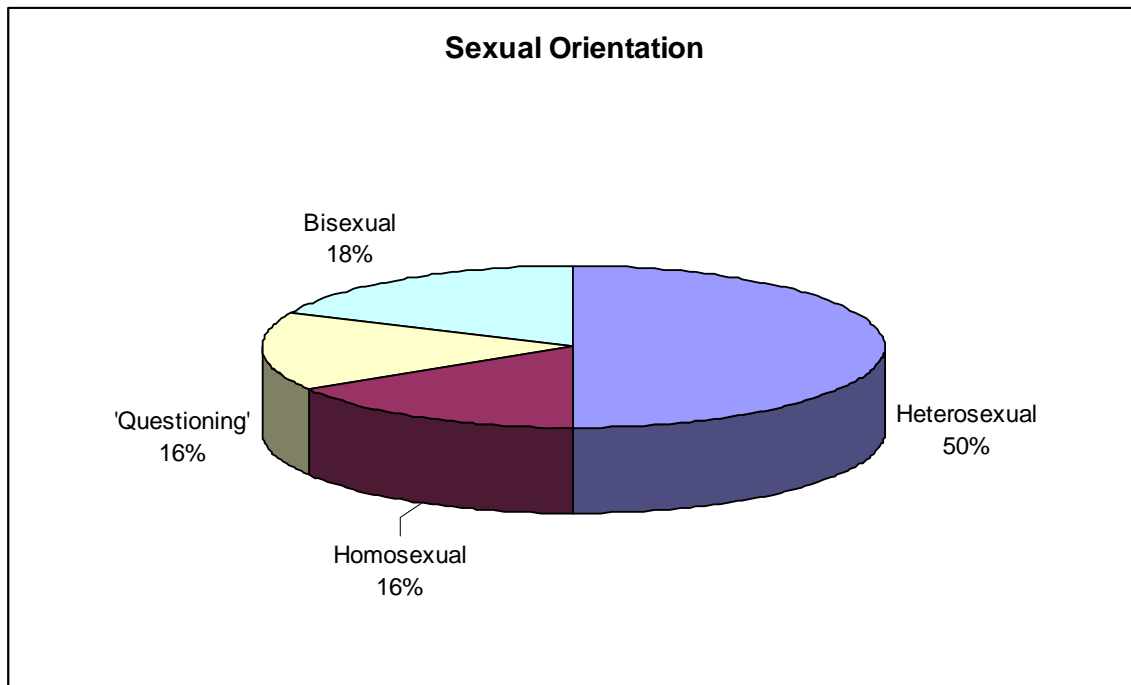


Figure 2: A demographic breakdown of survey respondents by sexual orientation

**Findings and Analyses**

*The correlation between the Stage of Transition and the priority of certain issues*

The vast majority of the participants of this survey indicated that they are currently on hormone therapy and/or have undergone some form of surgery towards the purposes of transitioning. A smaller portion of respondents, were at the ‘Pre-everything’ stage, where they have not yet begun their hormonal and bodily adjustments. 16% of the survey participants were of ‘Post-operative’ status, having completed the necessary surgical procedures towards their emotional and mental well-being. (Refer to Figure 3)

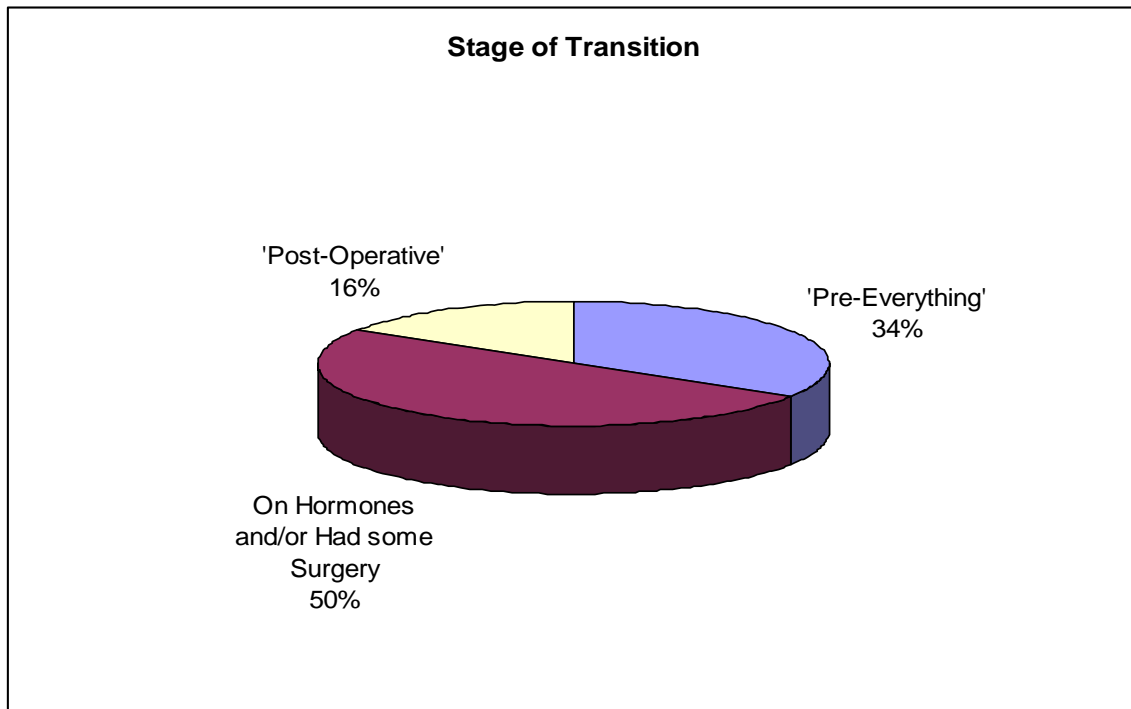


Figure 3: A demographic breakdown of survey respondents by stage of transition

Participants of this survey were also queried on what might be issues of relevance which this support group could address. The strongest interest was shown to matters which related to:

- 1) Transitioning
- 2) Medical and emotional well-being
- 3) Relationships with family, friends and society

The findings showed that these very areas of concern also point towards the self-determination of transgender people. The desire on their part for a more active and better involvement in their physical and social transition process is one such indicator. Arguably, transgender people have always been the primary drivers of their own

transition process, a support group will be of help in enhancing their capability and capacity to act in the interests of their personal and social welfare.

Through our survey findings, transgender respondents indicated that among alternative issues foremost priority involved health maintenance and emotional-well being. In general, transgender individuals have two sets of health care providers, those involved with the transition process and those who are involved with regular health care (Middleton, 1997). There has always been a lot of emphasis on the physical transitioning process, which focuses on hormonal and surgical intervention. Conversely, there is a dearth of information and resources that gives enough attention to the aspects of medical and emotional well-being *during* and *after* the physical transition process. Transgender individuals do require a specialized sort of care owing to their specific condition, and it may be difficult to gain access to affordable and professional treatments. Along a similar vein, access to healthcare for non-transition related issues may also be a problem if the transgender individual feels he or she may not be treated with enough respect by healthcare professionals. A support group may allow transgender individuals to pool their resources and share their experiences to enhance their understanding of such issues and how they may take steps to better their personal situations.

The transition process that a transgender individual undergoes affects relationships with family members, friends and the people that one interacts with on a day-to-day basis. Family members of transgender individuals often find it hard to accept the idea of a gender identity condition, along with the physical and social changes that it entails. And the support that transgender individuals experience from their families is often temporarily or permanently strained. Family members themselves go through their own unique “coming out” process as they come to terms with a loved one’s transgender identity, they may go through overlapping stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996). Furthermore, the visibility of the transgender condition can also cause a lot of stress for the transgender individual in various social situations. A support group could provide a venue for people with similar experiences or situations to explore ways of coping with the difficulties in managing their relationships in the different social spheres.

The survey findings note the correlation between the stage of transition that individuals are at and the sort of issues and concerns that transgender individuals find important. For instance, several ‘post-operative’ respondents showed greater interest in exploring a personal reconciliation between differently gendered perspectives and life experiences. A single support group for both male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals is deemed to be feasible as it does not impose qualifying criteria based on transition status, being an inclusive and diverse group, it could also introduce a kaleidoscope of perspectives and experiences which can open up new possibilities and opportunities for members to achieve their personal goals. The challenges of addressing the needs of group members as a whole, and balancing the need to be sensitive to specific concerns of individual group members would still apply

### A space to safely be transgendered

One issue that featured prominently in survey responses was the desire for a *safe environment* for people to express the transgender aspect of their identities. This was reflected through 71% of respondents who felt it was important for transgender support groups to provide a non-judgmental, affirming place for people to *be* transgender. The demand for this surpassed the other possible functions that a support group might have, such as exploring transgender related issues or allowing members to benefit from the social aspects of getting to know other transgender people.

It is pertinent to recognize that being transgender is just one aspect of a transsexual person's identity, transsexuals have other social roles and identities to perform in various other contexts, as is the same with non-transgender people and their dynamic and multi-faceted identities. Transgender people often encounter a great amount of fear and apprehension when it comes to disclosing their transgender identity to strangers, even if these people are likely to be tolerant, accepting or even transgender themselves. This discomfort arises from the uncertainty of how another would react to the news, and how this very personal information would be regarded.

For some transgender people, being 'invisible' is an option, but this also means that they have to deny ever having lived as the opposite sex, a large chunk of their lives and their personal stories and memories may be 'hidden', as they live out their lives being known as simply as ordinary men or women. And even if transgender people are 'out' about their identity, they may find it difficult to speak freely and openly about certain subjects in hetero-normative settings. 'Queer' or LGTBQ settings also provide no guarantee that transgender people will be respectfully accepted because other sexual minorities can be just as insensitive to transgender people. There is always a certain amount of risk in choosing to disclose their transgender identity to anyone, yet being deeply 'closeted' could also have a psycho-emotional toll on a transgender person

It appears that the desire to perhaps strike a balance between these two extremes is possibly why our respondents feel that it is of paramount importance that a support group be also an emancipatory space for them to safely be transgendered, to be able to disclose the transgender aspect of their identities in a positive, supportive and affirming setting.

### The need for transgender-specific services

In all, 57% of survey participants indicated 'Yes' to a straightforward question asking if they would like to be part of a support group for transgender people. The more qualitative survey questions which asked respondents to share their coping strategies and sources of social support gathered quite a variety of responses; some respondents revealed that they turned to their partners, friends or family members, along with religion or faith. A significant portion revealed that they did not know who or where to turn to, while others exhibited a strong sense of self-determination and independence, preferring to rely on themselves during times of personal crisis.

Based on our findings, it seems unfair to make a general statement about how transgender people are able to cope with the potential difficulties of transitioning; some appear to be doing fairly well, being rather resourceful individuals. Nevertheless, gauging from the majority who are in favor of a support group, there seems to be a demand for a transgender-specific service, which is able to accommodate an interesting spectrum of individuals, while allowing some versatility in how they could use and benefit from this service.

### Confidentiality and Privacy

The findings also showed that there is a significant portion that declined to participate in a support group. The vast majority of these respondents were apprehensive about joining a support group because they did not feel confident about certain aspects of a support group such as confidentiality and privacy. A number of respondents were unwilling to interact with other transgender people in a face-to-face situation as they felt that the confidentiality of their transgender status would be compromised; they were highly uncomfortable with the disclosure of their identity to people inside, and potentially outside of the support group.

The lack of enforceable boundaries for confidentiality is an issue that OC support groups often grapple with. This fear that identities would be made known is both real and valid, and can translate into real consequences for the lives of sexual minorities such as gay men and women, and not just the transgender community. OC support groups rely heavily on the premise of mutual trust which is one of the foundations for successful group work. By letting members set their group rules set and abide by members, members would value confidentiality and privacy more, with group facilitators' guidance rather than through enforcement.

The processes that occur during the course of group work, such as in a support group setting, usually has an inbuilt mechanism which helps to satisfy the certain objectives that are set by group members. A sense of ownership and belonging that is cultivated as the group progresses, not only allows members to bond and empathize with each other, but also helps to diminish the sense of apathy, particularly to the needs of others. Members grow to be more sensitive to the need for confidentiality, given that they understand how much it matters to them personally, and that they are able to extend this to encompass the group, and engage in ethical conduct.

### A Mixed group for Male-identified and Female-identified transgender people

Although we have mostly referred to transgender people, both male-identified and female-identified as a singular unified category in this article, it is pertinent to note that the needs and interests of male-identified and female-identified transgender people can differ substantially. And, the communities of male-identified transgender people and female-identified transgender people in Singapore are also fairly segregated from each other. Some respondents opined that they were not entirely in favor of participating in a mixed support group as they felt that both populations dealt with different problems. For

instance, the surgical and hormonal intervention procedures are different for both groups of people, and likewise with the experience of adapting to particular social norms and gender roles. Though we do not discount or ignore the existing dissimilarities, we also see how a transgender person can relate to the narrative of another person when it is centered on a broader, general subject such as ‘family’ which applies to sexual minorities regardless of their gender. A mixed group also allows both male and female-identified transgender people to examine these issues from another angle, and also allows for the exchange of information that segregated groups and individuals would normally not be privy to. A mixed group for both male-identified and female-identified transgender people will make for interesting dynamics, introducing fresh perspectives and new discussions.

### **Transgender identities and the LGBT community**

Another reason put forward by participants who declined to participate in a transgender support group is the discomfort with the idea of being in a ‘transgender’<sup>3</sup> support group as compared to a ‘transsexual’<sup>4</sup> support group.<sup>5</sup> Both male and female-identified respondents explicitly stated that they did not wish to be associated with other gender-variant people such as butch-lesbians and transvestites, and neither do they wish to be confused with these other gender-variants. Although we observe that the basis of this tension differs in the case of male and female-identified respondents and can be rather complicated (Halberstam, 1998; Hale, 1998), it appears that this is a similar sentiment voiced by both groups of people.

Having only a cursory understanding of this complex issue, OC is in no position to comment on the dynamics and tensions within the transgender community. However, the support group OC Trans is not looking to admit non-transsexual transgender members for the moment. Although OC recognizes and respects the diversity of gender expressions and sexual orientations, we are also very aware that non-transsexual transgender people tend to have different motivations and purposes for non-conformist gender behavior than as compared to transsexuals. OC Trans will be focusing on specific issues that transgender people who undergo the process of hormonal and surgical transitioning encounter, therefore we find that it would serve the group’s purpose better to include only the people for whom this support group is designed for.

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<sup>3</sup>“Transgender” is term used to refer to the full spectrum of non-traditionally gender-identified people, a variety of individuals, behaviors and groups involving tendencies that diverge from gender role commonly, but not always, assigned at birth. It is not a diagnosis like “transvestite” (psychological definition) or “transsexual” (medical condition). Transgender people do not necessarily want to change their sex, it is not a euphemism for ‘transsexual’, the way gender is a euphemism for sex.

<sup>4</sup> “Transsexual” is the term that the medical profession has applied to the subset of transgender people who identify as the opposite sex from that assigned at birth, and who usually seek hormonal and surgical assistance to change the sexual characteristics of their body to bring their gender and body into alignment. People for whom surgical change is the only possible satisfactory accommodation to their transgender status, and who wish to be accorded full legal and social status in their congruent gendered sex. Most transsexuals strive to live full-time as their chosen gender, but the medical options they exercise to reach that point may differ.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘transgender’ was used in our survey to refer to our potential clients; this dispute surrounding the use of this term was subsequently highlighted through respondent feedback.

Other respondents also expressed uneasiness with the idea of participating in a transgender support group because it runs contrary to their preference in obscuring their identities as transgender (or their previous history of having lived as a member of the other sex). Although these people are understood as ‘queer’, ‘transgender’ or ‘transsexual’, they may reject these categories or do not use it to describe their own identities even though they know it was used about them. For these individuals, “passing over to the ‘other’ side is precisely what they desire to do (Gagne, Tewksbury & McGaughey, 1997). And this may mean disavowing any relationships to transgender politics and transgender community identity, or resisting attempts at linking their political and legal needs with those of other gender-variant people, whom they often refer to in disparaging terms (Lev, 2006).

Being an agency that is dedicated to the enhancement of human well-being through the provision and development of appropriate services, the staff at OC will abide by our professional values and principles which includes being people-centered and non-ideological. We fully respect and affirm the right of people to make their own decisions, especially in the way they wish to live out their lives. Our services only serve as an option for people who do not wish to suppress their identities and issues, but wish to come to terms with, and possibly embrace this side aspect of their personal self.

Along a similar note, some transgender people were also apprehensive about joining a support group that is run by an organization which specializes in ‘LGBT’ individuals and communities. Besides the OC’s lower appeal to transgender individuals who do not consider themselves ‘queer’, the concept of a ‘LGBT’ community proves to be problematic for transgender people. The ‘LGBT’ category which includes lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people tends to lump together ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’, and subsumes the former under the latter. ‘Transgender’ identities flow from the experiences of ‘gender’ which is different from the ‘sexual’ identity’ of ‘gay’ (Stryker, 2004; Valentine, 2004).

Transgender people tend to have different personal and political goals from the other sexual minorities (Minter, 2000), often overlooked despite the promise of ‘LGBT’ organizations to cater to the needs of the collective ‘Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender’ community. It is understandable why transgender people feel skeptical about such claims when “Many LGBT organizations are transgender-inclusive in name only...when only the letter ‘T’ but no actual content is included in LGBT programs, publications and policies” (Cook-Daniels, 2001:1). The disappointing level of transgender-inclusion is a common problem in LGBT communities globally, in Singapore this problem is further exacerbated by the invisibility or lack of transgender involvement in local queer community and culture.

Singaporean transgender people are inclined to be much more reclusive, and the extent in which they actively participate *as* transgender people or even as a community in the local LGBT community is very minimal. The absence of transgender people is itself a barrier in formulating transgender-inclusive LGBT programs, publications and policies precisely

because they are not present to lend their opinions and efforts to inform or contribute to LGBT community building. Even OC and the OC Trans support group ran into these very problems at the beginning. Transgender people underestimate their ability to affect change at a larger scale; they themselves are the ‘experts’ of transgender knowledge and issues, their contributions can make a significant difference to the larger LGBT community. Given that the local transgender community is emerging and evolving, there are many directions that it could grow towards. But what is central to the actualization of a holistic and transgender-inclusive LGBT community is the involvement and participation of transgender people themselves.

### **What’s in a name?**

Carrying over from the discursive tensions of transgender identities and community membership, one of the difficulties OC had to grapple with was the terms ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual’. The debate over these terminologies is not merely linguistic quibbling but is embedded in the social-cultural realities of transgender/transsexual people. The term ‘transgender’ rides on a more inclusive concept which encompasses *all* gender-variant people (Bornstein, 1994; Green, 2004), but is sometimes rejected by transsexual-transgender people who wished to distance themselves from other gender-variants. The word ‘transsexual’ although is more accurate in referring to the specific group of sexual minority which OC Trans is designed for, it is also a term the medical profession applied to the subset of transgender people.

OC feels that the medicalization of transgender people has, and could potentially bring about other forms of discrimination and disempowerment that is unfair and unnecessary. To elaborate briefly, OC disagrees with the perceptions of medical institutions as individuals suffering from ‘Gender Identity Disorder’ but recognizes this phenomenon as a ‘Gender Identity Condition’. As a counseling and personal development agency, it is important to respect our clients and to maintain an outlook which will serve to affirm their identity and to empower them. We are looking to change the perception of transgender people from one of people ‘suffering’ from mental health problems to one of individuals deserving respect.

We also observe that the medical model of diagnosis and approval based on psychosocial assessment has come under critical examination in the past decade by clinicians as well as activists in the United States (Denny, 2004; Lewins, 1995; Raj, 2002; Nelson, 1998). Similarly, the accuracy of classification systems and the necessity to approve or refuse those seeking medical aid based on rigid diagnostic markers that may nor may not represent the diversity of extant gender expressions is also being questioned by members of the transgender community in Singapore. Although it is important to recognize the seriousness and irreversibility of transsexual surgeries and procedures, as well as the importance of mental health evaluation, it is equally necessary to recognize client autonomy and the limits of clinical control.

The official name for OC’s support group for transsexual-transgender people, ‘OC Trans’ will be left ambiguous and open to interpretation, in order to allow members to think

about the intricacies these terminologies and how they fit into the social matrix of their communities. “Self-awareness involves the ability to name oneself, and it involves the recognition of others who are like oneself” (Lev, 2004). However, OC will continue to refer to transsexual-transgender people as transgender when it comes to writing and speaking about them as we wish to move away from the medical model of gender identity as a disorder because we find it damaging to transgender people’s self-esteem and has negatively impacted their social cohesion and collective sense of identity (Korell & Lorah, 2006; Lev, 2006; Raj, 2002 ).

## **Conclusion**

Our intention with this report is to share some of the interesting findings that have surfaced; we hope that this helps to provide some insight into the transgender community, and provoke further thought about transgender individuals and how they fit (or do not fit) into the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender (LGBT) grouping as sexual minorities, as well as their place in the larger hetero-normative and gender-normative society.

Throughout this article we have stressed that our survey findings and analysis are not meant to be as representative of the entire transgender population that exists in Singapore. The data collected from 38 unique individuals helps to demonstrate the diversity that exists within the transgender population; we observe how some individuals have different personal understandings of their own gender identity and that some people may not feel entirely comfortable identifying with the ‘male/female’ gender binary. In recognizing that gender identity and sexual orientation as separate, and by making no assumptions or value judgments about the sexuality of transgender individuals, not only are we able to observe the heterogeneity of the population, but also how romantic or sexual attraction can transcend, and inadvertently destabilize understandings of ‘gender identity’, ‘biological sex’ and ‘sexual orientation’.

We have also gained some insight into the stage of hormonal and medical interventions that our respondents have opted for in their process of self-actualization; this information is relevant because the stage of transition does have a bearing on the sort of issues of importance to a transgender individual. Gauging from survey data, our respondents are keen to work with the topics of transitioning, medical and emotional well-being and their relationships with family, friends and society. The process of transitioning is undoubtedly challenging, individuals who journey through this process often have to cope with a lot of stress and uncertainty along the way. It is hoped that the support group can serve as a platform for people with similar identities, experiences and issues to meet and co-operate in working through shared concerns. This would not only help limit their feelings of isolation, but also expand their knowledge and resources, which contributes to the enhancement of their coping skills and confidence to endure, change, or gain greater control over aspects of their lives.

The survey responses have also served to confirm our speculations of what OC Trans should be, and how this support group will be run. Respondents have largely asked for a safe and affirmative setting where they feel comfortable enough to disclose their

transgender status, in doing so, they have helped to define the basic parameters that this support group will work with. One of the fundamental elements that will enable this support group to thrive as a safe environment for its members is that the staff of OC and the members of the support group fully understand the meaning of confidentiality and privacy for sexual minorities, and always strive to conduct themselves in an ethical manner.

In designing a support group program for transgender individuals, it was important to be familiar with the history, culture and politics of the transgender people and community. While we relied largely on existing Anglo-centric literature and information to enrich our understanding of these issues (mainly due to the poor availability of meaningful information about Singapore transgender people and the transgender community), there were some obvious similarities between the transgender movement in our specific context and elsewhere, particularly with along the issues of transgender identity, community belonging and the need for careful and conscious use of language while discussing transgender issues. Without suggesting that the transgender movement here is likely to mimic what has occurred elsewhere (due to significant differences in cultural, socio-political contexts) , we prefer to consider these common issues which arise as transgender people and communities find their place in the larger society.

We believe that an understanding of the transgender situation and the sort of issues the individual and the community encounters is pivotal in the implementation of improved ways to bring about better quality to their individual lives and significant relationships. This was the original impetus that gave rise to the OC Trans Needs-assessment Survey, however our secondary objective in publishing the findings of this survey is to also produce a more nuanced and fair representation of this highly diverse group of people in the hopes of affecting a positive change in how they are regarded by others.

### **Acknowledgements**

Oogachaga is extremely grateful to those who have participated in our survey; the data that was gathered will be particularly helpful in designing a program that will hopefully meet the needs of transgender people.

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