

# off our backs

a women's newsjournal

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festival: Michigan: transgender controversy... ..and right-wing attacks "americans for truth"  
claims MWMF endangers children

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Source: *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 30, No. 9 (october 2000), pp. 8-9

Published by: [off our backs, inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20836703>

Accessed: 14-05-2015 13:31 UTC

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# Michigan: transgender controversy...

Eight transgender activists, members of a Chicago group called "Camp Trans Planning Committee" and the Boston and Chicago chapters of Lesbian Avengers, were asked to leave the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival this year. The eight were escorted to the Main Gate of the festival, their attendance wristbands were cut off, and they were expelled from the grounds. In keeping with Festival policy, their entrance fees were not refunded.

The expulsion followed a demonstration by transgender activists at the kitchen area during dinner on Saturday evening. Activists held signs proclaiming themselves as "boy," "FTM," "intersex," "drag queen," and "transwoman." They called for festival attendees to join them in their protest and passed out stickers in support of transgender inclusion. Their action was a challenge to the MWMF's express policy which declares the Festival to be "womon-born-womon" space" and requests the "transsexual community to respect and support this intention. The Festival further declared that they will not question anyone's gender at the Festival, but that individuals who self-declare as "male-to-female transsexuals or female-to-male transsexuals now living as men" will be denied admission or asked to leave if on the land.

There was disagreement as to the Festival's decision regarding the eviction of the eight activists. In a press release from [www.camptrans.com](http://www.camptrans.com), the expulsion was viewed as "turning a new page in the escalating conflict over the policy's application" and as "the first time the 'womyn-born womyn only' policy has been used against transnie boys, boydykes, FTM's, Lesbian Avengers and young gender-variant women."

*off our backs* reporters on the scene observed festival staff saying to the

activists, "If you do not identify as womon-born womon, the policy is clear." When challenged repeatedly by the activists to clarify their policy, the staff stated, "We have been clear about what this festival is about. It is for womyn-born womyn. Those of you who are not womyn-born womyn, who identify as transsexual, not as transgender, we are asking you to leave." Activists replied that if the staff were *telling* them to leave, they would leave, but that if they were merely *asking* them to leave, they would stay. Festival staff replied, "Those who identify as transsexual, we are telling you to leave. Anyone else can stay if you want." Then Festival staff declared they would not debate the policy anymore and proceeded to escort those who chose to go with them to the gate. As the activists followed Festival staff to the main gate, they chanted, "We have been asked to leave, we are not going voluntarily."

In addition to the protest at the Saturday evening dinner, transgender activists staged a protest outside the night stage Friday night after the concert was over. Activists held a banner proclaiming "Trans Inclusion Now." Festival goes leaving the concert mostly fell quiet as they passed the banner. One group started chanting "No boys at Michigan" with several women joining in. One of the transgender activists blocked the way of those chanting, and for several minutes there was a tense standoff until the transgender activist, who was blocking the way and yelling at one of the chanters, was finally pulled aside by the other transgender activists. (*off our backs* collective members were among those involved. See sidebar.)

—info from [www.michfest.com](http://www.michfest.com) and [www.camptrans.com](http://www.camptrans.com)

by karla mantilla

## excerpts from Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's statements on the transgender issue

The Festival is womon-born womon space. That means it is an event intended for womyn who were born and who have lived their entire life experience as female—and who currently identify as a womon.

We ask the transsexual community to respect and support this intention....

Just as we call upon the transsexual community to support womyn-born womyn space, we encourage support and respect for the transsexual community. As a community, we in Michigan are committed to fighting prejudice and ignorance of all kinds; we do not want to see transphobia fostered here or anywhere. Claiming one week a year as womyn-born womyn space is not in contradiction to being trans-positive and trans-allies. In the year 2000, the queer community enjoys such rich diversity. We believe there is room for all affinity groups to enjoy separate and supportive space, and also to come together in broader alliances to fight prejudice that affects all of us. We are strong enough to hold our incredible diversity in mutual respect and support.

From a statement by Lisa Vogel, Festival producer:

"Michigan has always been home to womyn-born womyn who represent every point along the continuum of gender identity: from butch to femme and beyond butch and femme, including many who consider themselves transgendered. We remain committed to providing space for womyn-born

womyn to gather in celebration of our diverse identities as womyn-born womyn.

It saddens me that the young womyn we used to call 'baby-dykes' are now growing up questioning the validity of the very concept of being female. Many of us growing up, myself included, struggled fiercely with the limited societal definition of what being a "woman" meant. That's why we created this Festival—as an exploration and celebration of the full range of who we are and all we can be as womyn. We refuse to see "woman" turned into a dirty word or defined as an out-dated construct.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival remains clear and firm in our commitment to maintain the Festival as womyn-born womyn space. At the same time, we stand as allies with the trans community and refuse to be forced into false dichotomies that equate being pro-womyn-born womyn space with being anti-trans.

We believe the greater queer community is strong enough to support separate space for all affinity groups. There are times all oppressed communities need separate spaces, even away from their allies. The Festival community learned this in the creation of a separate and honored Womyn of Color space. We call upon the transsexual community to respect and support the community of Michigan, which by its very definition is separate space for womyn-born womyn."

## excerpts from Camp Trans press release

Eight young attendees variously identifying as transnie boys, boydyke, FTM, and lesbian were evicted from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival this Saturday evening after they refused to meet the Festival's "womyn-born womyn only" policy....

More than 60 gender activists from these groups [Camp Trans Planning Committee, Boston and Chicago chapters of Lesbian Avengers] plus members of Transsexual Menace, supportive attendees and renowned activist Dana Rivers gathered across the road from the Festival this year to do outreach and education on what they viewed as a discriminatory policy being unfairly applied....

As thousands of attendees looked on during dinner in the Festival's huge dining area, the young activists held aloft

signs declaring themselves a variety of identities, including "boy," "FTM," "intersex," "drag queen," and "transwoman."...

[t]he eight's expulsion marks the first time the "womyn-born womyn only" policy has been used against transnie boys, boydykes, FTM's, Lesbian Avengers and younger gender-variant women.

...Said one activist, "Vogel's policy towards transsexuals is now the same as the US military's toward homosexuals. But 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' only works when the target group collaborates by remaining silent. Well we aren't silent. We don't identify as 'womyn-born womyn'—we don't know what it even means or why it should be used against us or our transnie friends."

—from [www.camptrans.com](http://www.camptrans.com)



## the controversy: up close and personal

It seems to that there has been a subtle, unacknowledged silencing of those who favor Michigan's womyn-only policy *vis a vis* transsexuals. During the Saturday evening dinner protest, there was an atmosphere of subdued quiet and tension among most of the festival attendees. Although women talked privately about their distress over the transsexual disruption of the festival, there was little if any public vocal dissent against the demonstration. For some reason, those who disagreed with the protestors seemed to feel reluctant to confront the protestors.

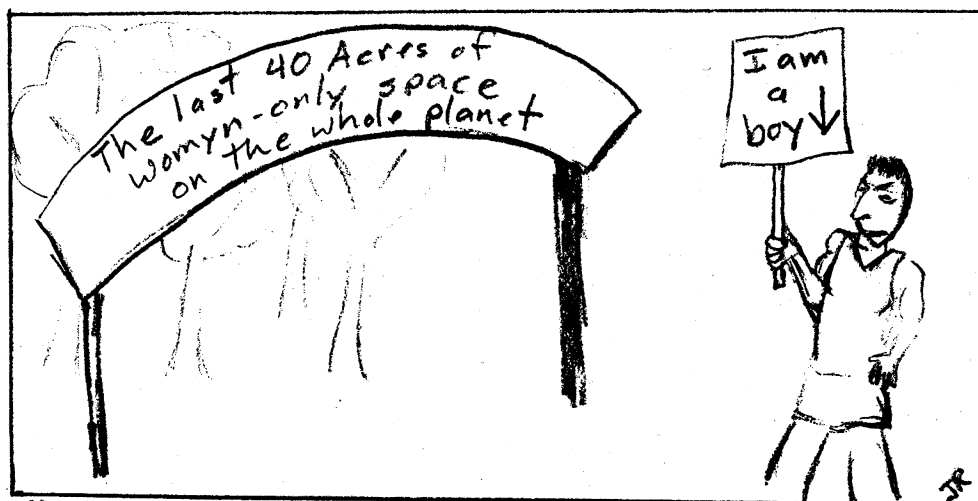
This was perhaps justified, given my own experience the night before. Upon leaving the stage at the end of the Friday night concert, festival attendees encountered transgender activists with a banner proclaiming "Trans Inclusion Now." I decided to stage a minor counter protest by chanting "No boys at Michigan" with some others in my group. I was immediately confronted by one of the transgender activists who stepped in front of me, blocking my path, yelling at me—her face only inches from mine—something about how dare I exclude her, that she was a woman, etc. I certainly had not wanted personally engage with her, just to let transgender activists and festie-goers know that there was indeed an opposing view. I repeatedly requested in a calm voice that she move out of my way, but she kept yelling at me. I tried to step to the side to move past her, but she stepped in front of me again. There were a lot of women surrounding us so I could not pass by with her blocking my front. Finally, after several very tense minutes, several other transgender activists pulled her away from me and let me pass.

I was surprised that merely voicing my opposing viewpoint would result in such a personal confrontation. Perhaps the most ironic thing of all was a woman afterwards who came up to me and told me that the incident was my fault because if I had just not said anything, they would have left me alone. She even said that although the transgender protestor's actions verged on violence against me (by blocking my path and yelling in my face), I was just as violent because speaking up in counter protest was also a violent act.

Perhaps the women at the Saturday evening dinner were wiser than I to not publicly acknowledge their dissent with the protestors. There was a cost to speaking up. The experience was upsetting and intimidating. I felt shaken, upset, and angry, along with the others in my group. It certainly made me think again before speaking out on this issue.

To the extent that we allow this tiny faction to silence dissent and dominate the debate on this topic, we endanger the continuation of womyn-only space. The convictions, needs, and vision of the thousands of women who support the MWMF as a womyn-only space with their dollars, their work, and their presence should not be overridden and silenced by the a small group of people who just don't get what womyn-only space is about.

by karla mantilla



"Whad'ya mean I'm not welcome?"

# ...and right-wing attacks

## "americans for truth" claims MWMF endangers children

*The following is an announcement by Lisa Vogel, MWMF's producer, that was posted on the MWMF website in response to an article written by a right wing reporter accusing the Festival of endangering children and subjecting them to sexual abuse.*

To womyn who use the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's discussion board, friends and allies—please pass this on through personal emails.

I'm sorry to report the temporary closure of the Festival's bulletin board. We've been dealing with a situation over the last few days and it was necessary to close the forum while we sort things out. The group "americans for the truth" has petitioned the Michigan State Attorney General and the Oceana and Mason County prosecutors to investigate the Festival regarding six Michigan penal codes they claim we have violated. Allyson Smith, a "free lance reporter" affiliated with the AFT who has never attended the event, constructed a sensational portrait of the Festival by clandestinely eavesdropping on anonymous postings on the bulletin board, then selectively quoting these comments out of context. She melded this with Festival childcare materials to paint a picture where she claims children are endangered and subjected to sexual abuse.

This distorted picture, which is their primary "evidence" of any wrongdoing, has been sent to the press as well as state and county officials and is posted on their website. ([www.americansfortruth.org/michfest.html](http://www.americansfortruth.org/michfest.html)).

This organization's purpose, in their own words, is to "expose and oppose the homosexual movement". They have attacked many queer organizations and individuals throughout the U.S. Of

course we all know this is a smear campaign and they are attempting to alarm our neighbors in Oceana county and to provoke state and local officials to investigate the Festival. Since part of their material came from the discussion forum, and because they directed the straight press to our site, we pulled the forum until we can sort it all through.

No investigation has been initiated at this time, and it is unclear whether the Attorney General's office or the Oceana County prosecutor will investigate these trumped up claims.

After the initial shock and anger at being attacked by these people, I'm invigorated to take the strongest, smartest and most lesbian-loving response possible. They are using the Internet, print media and elected officials to attempt to advance a very hateful position. It's important that we speak up proudly and positively about our Festival community and culture. We can, and will, use the same channels that are available to all of us to tell the simple truth of who we are. I'm currently developing a plan with the help of friendly legal counsel, experts on the right wing and the best thinking of our Festival community. As things evolve, I will circulate updates and let you know how you can help. I'm certain that we will emerge from this skirmish stronger and even more committed to the positive values that we celebrate at Michigan.

With love and thanks,  
Lisa Vogel