

Words Still Matter

How the Marriage Equality Movement is Leaving Bisexuals Out

“Words matter.” With this phrase, San Francisco Deputy City Attorney Therese Stewart summarized for the California Supreme Court why keeping same-sex couples out of marriage relegates us to second-class citizenship.

As LGBT people celebrate the Court’s decision allowing same-sex couples to marry, many organizations focused on fighting Prop 8 this November—including Equality for All, NCLR, and Equality California—have decided to speak only of “gay and lesbian couples.” Their rationale is that undecided moderate voters in focus groups for the “Let California Ring” education campaign found the language more acceptable than “same-sex couples.” It has continued despite the fact that many bisexuals have told the organizations’ leaders that they feel marginalized and attacked by the non-inclusive language.

Certainly, the stakes are enormous this November. But however these organizations explain the strategy of erasing bisexuals from this moment in LGBT history, no one asked us if we were willing to make the sacrifice.

Why This Matters

- ♦ **Talk of “lesbian and gay couples” completely erases bisexuals, particularly those in committed same-sex relationships.** Many bisexuals have eagerly awaited the opportunity to marry their same-sex partners.
- ♦ **Marriage equality efforts have left bisexuals out.** None of the 30 plaintiffs in the California marriage lawsuit was an out bisexual. No bisexual organizations are part of the 55-member Equality for All coalition. And as far as we know, no bisexual leaders were contacted about this communication strategy, whether for input or simply out of respect.
- ♦ **This exclusion is deeply painful and undermines bisexuals’ ability to share in the joy of this historic victory.** At the same time, we are still asked to give time and money to secure marriage for “gay and lesbian people.”
- ♦ **It reinforces stereotypes about bisexuals, including whether we even exist.** It unravels decades of work making our community visible and educating LGT and straight people about bisexual issues and lives.
- ♦ **The fact is that half of LGB people identify as bisexual.¹ Therefore, the strategy of excluding bisexuals risks alienating many potential volunteers, donors, and voters.** The LGBT movement cannot afford to lose these supporters at such a critical time.
- ♦ **The ends never justify the means.** “It’s only until November” doesn’t address the harm done to bisexuals’ dignity and humanity in the meantime. What if the California Supreme Court had put same-sex marriages on hold until after the November election, as requested

¹ According to research from the CDC, Hunter College, Witeck-Combs, and other sources

by the backers of Prop 8? How would the LGBT community have reacted to being told, “It’s only four months”?

How We Can Move Forward—Together

- ♦ **Use inclusive language—all the time, every time.** Develop clear and unwavering guidelines to be used in all organizational communications, whether electronic/printed materials or statements by staff and board members.
- ♦ **Educate your staff, board, and constituencies about bi issues.** Even if your mission primarily focuses on another population, you will likely have bisexuals among the people you serve. Become a fierce bi ally.
- ♦ **Add bisexuals to your board, committees, staff, and policy boards, including in leadership positions.** This will help ensure that the bisexual community will not be forgotten, dismissed, tokenized, or blindsided like this in the future.
- ♦ **Review your programs and policies to see if they truly serve the needs of bisexuals.** If not, adjust or add to them as needed.
- ♦ **Reach out to bi organizations such as the Bay Area Bisexual Network, BiNet USA, SoBOA, or Bisexual Resource Center to actively involve them in the Equality for All coalition.**

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BiPOL is a bisexual feminist political action group founded in 1983
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