

Gender warrior wins name-change battle in Ecuador

Activist Diane Rodriguez started out in life with the name Luis. Last year, she shed her male moniker and officially adopted a female one, making her the first person in Ecuador to pull-off an official gender-switching name change.

‘I made legal history,’ says Diana, director of Silueta X, an advocacy group combating the discrimination suffered by transgender people in Latin America. ‘Black people had to fight for their rights. Women had to fight for their rights. We have to keep fighting to end prejudice against transgender people,’ she says.

Ecuador is the only country in Latin America where it’s now legal for transgender people to change their names. Silueta X is now fighting for an amendment that would allow transgender males and females to change their sex on official documents, such as passports, as can be done in Britain. The law should, Diane suggests, be rolled out across Latin America.

Silueta X has its work cut out in a region that chalks up a high proportion of violent attacks on transgender people. In the first six months of 2010, press reported 93 cases of transphobic murders worldwide; 80 per cent of those were in Latin America. Yet, according to Diane, these statistics are only a fraction of the true numbers.

‘When the police find a transgender person dead, they just put “male” on the form. They don’t keep specific statistics on hate crimes against trans people. It’s a

hidden problem.’

The violence extends to people working to protect the rights of sexual minorities. They are regularly subjected to threats and violence, with reported killings in Colombia, Honduras and elsewhere.

Discrimination is rife in all areas of life. Transgender people suffer in the workplace, are excluded from bars and clubs, and often face a turbulent time when ‘coming out’ to family and friends. Some are forced onto the street and into sex work. And despite high levels of HIV in the trans community, they were excluded from a new global AIDS agreement at a UN meeting earlier this year.

Diane says the prejudice against trans people in Latin America has two roots. ‘The first problem is religion. Catholicism and evangelists cause a lot of problems. The Catholics are against it but they don’t say anything. But the evangelists come up to you in public and they say “You have to change”. The second problem is *machismo*.’

Prejudice is often driven by simple ignorance and fear. ‘In Ecuador, children are raised hearing “You can’t go with that man because he’s black” – that sort of thing,’ says Diane. ‘The government has to work to change the education system, so that children are taught about sex, about treating everyone equally.’

‘Until we educate our children differently, our culture will stay the way it is and things will not improve for trans people.’ ■

Graeme Green



Edgard Garrido / Reuters

ON THE WEB

www.newint.org



What are the real reasons for the famine that has struck Somalia? **Mark Bradbury** argues in **How foreign policy blunders helped create the famine in Somalia** (nin.tl/pECIOU) that war, climatic conditions and international policy have all played a part and says that the international community must face up to its part in creating this far-from-natural disaster.

Meanwhile, Africa’s newest country is facing its own challenges. **Ann Morgan**



meets **Deng Gach Pal**, a senior civil servant in the fledgling government in **South Sudan: ‘we’re not totally free yet’** (nin.tl/rteMLy). In a country with few schools, hospitals or qualified staff to run them, and a chronic lack of basic infrastructure, the South Sudanese government has much to tackle.

And in **Back to the future: Genoa** revisited (nin.tl/q6yjmo) **Stefano Berra** recalls a defining moment in the history of anti-globalization activism and argues that the protest movement has come full circle, to look once again beyond national concerns and re-engage with the bigger picture.

Oxfam East Africa under a CC Licence

Copyright of New Internationalist is the property of New Internationalist and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.