

Trans Women and Femmes of Color at Work

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In the midst of the upheaval of 2014 and 2015, the trans community had many conversations about “the Trans Tipping Point.” We discussed what it was, if it was real, and if the sudden visibility of transgender people in society more broadly constituted any material gain.

The goal of this project was to assess that very question. The primary purpose was to chart out gains that were made, how they were made and what actually constituted a gain. We wanted to track the gains trans women and femmes of color have made in the fight for access and freedom. This is especially important in this moment of backlash as forces of the Right wing that seek to suppress the gains that have been made over the last decade. Even in this contradictory moment when the judiciary rules in favor of protections for trans people, Trump’s recent order allowing health care providers the ability to reject giving care to trans people for religious reasons gestures toward the significance of having private health insurance tied to one’s job - and the need for comprehensive public care that includes access for trans people.

In this moment of uprising in response to the multiple crises unfolding across the country and world - particularly police violence against black people - it is imperative that we continue to demand what keeps our communities safe. This includes access to housing and healthcare, food and mobility, and of course, livable wages and the power to shape our own destiny.

Research context: The 2015 National Transgender Survey found that 27% of trans respondents had been fired, denied a promotion, or not hired for a job they applied for because of gender identity or expression in the past year alone (UTS Full Report 2017: 148)³. In this racially diverse survey, Black and Native respondents reported highest rates of current unemployment; among Black and Native trans people, trans women and non-binary respondents had higher unemployment than trans men (Survey of Black Respondents 8; Survey of American Indian and Alaska Native Respondents 8).

This data confirms what is widely known within trans communities: trans women and femmes of color (TWOC)⁴ have been historically excluded from the formal workforce and forced to rely on criminalized work for survival. The need to engage in criminalized work leads to police targeting and incarceration.

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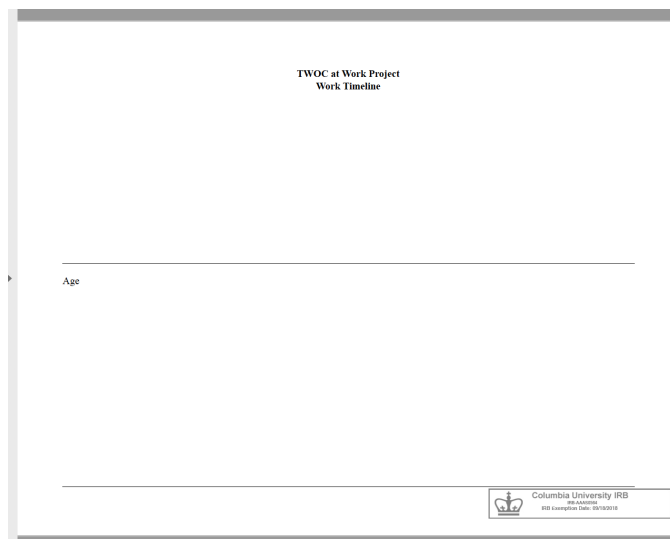
³ James, S. E., J. L. Herman, S. Rankin, M. Keisling, L. Mottet, and M. Anafi. 2016. *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC.

⁴ When we use the acronym “TWOC,” we are inclusive of both trans women and trans femmes of color, both of whom we interviewed for this study.

The 2015 US Transgender Survey assessed the landscape as the so-called “Trans Tipping Point” was occurring. No research has explored what, if anything, the Tipping Point meant for the employment experiences of trans women and femmes of color. In fact, we know little at all about the intersectional ways race and gender shape employment experiences for trans people. Community administered surveys like the US Transgender Survey can reveal rates of unemployment and discrimination, but rates alone don’t tell us *how* people get, keep, and lose jobs. Academic research on trans people at work focuses mostly on white trans people or trans men.⁵ This means that we know the *least about* the work experiences within the segment of the trans population we know to be the most economically marginalized.

Methods: Between 2018-2019, we traveled to 5 cities (Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco) and interviewed 23 trans women and femmes of color about their work experiences. In each interview we collected personal work histories and asked people to reflect on how their experiences compared to what they were seeing among other trans women and femmes of color in their community. By charting work histories on timelines (see image below), we were able to observe historical patterns and shifts in TWOC’s employment exclusion or access.

We interviewed a racially diverse group of women (4 Asian women, 14 Black women, and 5 Latinas), and women of diverse ages (born between 1960-1996). At the time of interview, our respondents were working in three primary fields: public health, LGBT advocacy, and trans-specific services or advocacy. It was useful that the women we interviewed tended to be activists and organizers, because they were deeply rooted in their local trans communities and aware of broader economic patterns. All interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for themes, using grounded theory methods. After both researchers had read through and annotated all interview transcripts, we reviewed our jottings and wrote memos based on the most common themes. These memos provided the basis for a write-up of preliminary findings, which we shared with 7 respondents for feedback. 2 respondents reviewed the document and offered insightful comments, especially with regards to the policy recommendations



⁵ Kristin Schilt’s important work (2010), which demonstrates that workplace transition confers privilege for white trans men and discrimination for trans men of color, is an exception and illustrates the need to analyze how gender and racial oppression intersect in workplace experiences. Kirsten Schilt. 2010. *Just one of the guys?: Transgender men and the persistence of gender inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

and implications of the data for community organizing. Based on this feedback, we created a policy brief and finalized this report.

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Key findings:

1. There does seem to have been a **“transgender tipping point.”** Despite historical workplace exclusion and ongoing employment challenges, in the aftermath of the 2015 “tipping point,” some trans women of color *have* achieved status and power at work. We interviewed 4 Executive Directors and 7 women in upper-level management positions. Nearly all of the women in executive or managerial positions advanced to this status during or after 2015. They were either promoted in organizations where they had been working, hired at a higher level in new organizations, or founded their own organizations.

Even though some people within the trans community think of the tipping point as just being about "visibility" and not providing concrete, substantive changes to TWOC, we observed a meaningful increase in TWOC's employment options and access to leadership positions in this period. We believe that these gains were possible because of a broader shift in life conditions for trans people (heightened medical access, anti-discrimination legal protections at federal and state level, LGBT political coalitions taking on trans issues) and specific organizing trans people did in 2014-2016 to seize the moment and demand rights, resources, and recognition. [See line graph at the end of the document for additional data]

I negotiated here and said I don't have a degree but I have 25 years. That's my degree. I have a very special relationship with this organization. I'm not a bad employee. I brought a lot of donors to this agency. I became the face of the agency as an API woman. The least you can do for me is give me a decent position. So, they finally did. I've been the director for the past six months. I was an associate director before then. (15)

So I was like a non-director on this leadership body, not being acknowledged for the work that I really committed to and I built over the years, but loved and all of the things. And so it was a fight and some tussling, but now I'm director as of literally a month ago. (1)

And somebody told me about the job here as executive director, and said... They've been run by 19 years of cis white women, mainly white board. I think you'd be great. And I'm like, you think after 19 years, they're going to hire a Black trans woman of color as their CEO-ED of a million dollar company heavily city-funded? And the young lady who told me says, I don't know why

not. (11)

2. **Employment “success”** could be complicated. On the one hand, women in positions of leadership told us that they had more economic stability and, sometimes, more autonomy at work. On the other hand, the stable, higher-paying jobs that trans women and femmes of color hold are largely in advocacy and social services. Women in those sectors, even those who’d achieved high-level positions, frequently told us that their jobs were exhausting and traumatizing. They may have advanced to a position of leadership and economic stability personally, but their daily work still centered around TWOC’s trauma and precariousness.

For black trans people, the majority of what we’ve gained keeps people tied back to the same need. Directors are doing front-line work and director’s work. (13)

I actually love what I do. This is my life work. I love every stitch of pain, every stitch of heartache, every stitch of hurt, every stitch of trauma that my girls and boys and non-binaries go through. [Sighs] I’m not here to be a martyr. I don’t want to be that. But I am here to see what I could do to bring resources back into my community and understand that it can be done and knowing that there’s enough work for us out there to get what needs to be done, right? So, yeah, I love what I do and I wouldn’t change it. (7)

I’m the last girl standing, honey, and that feels really lonely. And it feels really hard and because of the structures that we haven’t been able to sustain... I will say because of the reason that I share, because I’m committed to the vision, I hold the evolution of that vision and I believe in my vision ‘cause it’s been cultivated over three years, three and a half years now by all of the people that I’ve been doing this work with... So I’m definitely committed to that. What keeps me from staying is the sheer struggle piece. I think after a while, just as a black trans person, even though I’m appreciating the ground and the love and the rigor that exists as our team, I don’t want to struggle anymore. I don’t want to, like I said, like having to convince them about anything else anymore. And I’m just really tired of that and I feel like I would leave if I’m able to when I’m able to as I’m able to. (1)

Interviewer: And would you want to stay in your current workplace?

Interviewee: No. The reason I say no is because another thing that people don’t understand is, like, this work that we do for one another is exhausting. (4)

3. Other queer and trans people helped trans women and femmes of color **get jobs**. In rare cases, women were hired or connected to job opportunities through family members or straight, cisgender friends. But most women were supported by queer or trans people who were friends, or relative strangers who nevertheless invested in them. When trans women and femmes of color got into positions where they could pay this forward, they tried to do so.

Anyway she saw me still stripping and taking my clothes off... And she said, “Are you still here?” I was like, “Girl. I’ve got to pay rent. I’ve got to work.” She’s like, “They’re hiring girls like you

now in the movies and TV.” I was like, “Oh that’s nice.” She’s like, “Do you want to be in TV? You want to be in movies?” I was like, “Oh, I’d love it.” So she said, “I’m going to introduce you to this agent and he’s in [the industry].” And I was like, “Ok, girl. Give me his number.” She gave me his number. She said, “You need to call him Monday.” Called him. Got an interview. (19)

I was also going to hop around to get services done for my transition and stuff like that, my transition health, and so I started getting involved in other programs and stuff like that. I was a part of this one program – I forget the name of the program but I know [Rachel]⁶ was the facilitator of it and she was one of the case managers there. So, she told me about [my current organization] and that they was hiring. And so, she put a word in for me and so I went in for an interview. (15)

[Our organization] is a staff entirely of trans women of color, all trans Latina and so that’s like I’m really intentional about keeping it that way. I think we wanted to hire a guy one time and I was like no, we really pride ourselves on investing in our people and being led by our people. (22)

I was already a supervisor, so I was able to – whenever we needed people, I was able to be like, ‘Oh, can you hire...?’ So we hired another trans guy that was one of my friends at the time, and then I hired my gay friend, and then – it was just a bunch. (20)

4. Trans women and femmes of color regularly **lost jobs**. Supervisors expected them to act inappropriately; facing increased workplace surveillance, they were then punished for actual or presumed violation of policy. In some instances, trans women and femmes of color left jobs of their own accord to avoid unaddressed workplace harassment. Even when trans women or femmes of color lost jobs for reasons completely unrelated to themselves (like the organization shutting down), sudden loss of a job created major life instability, homelessness, and a reliance on sex work to make ends meet.

We had taken this retreat... Fast forward to Monday morning, I get called into the office or something like that. I go in or whatever. They’re like we have received multiple reports that you were sexually involved with one of the members. You were drinking and smoking. I was like whoa. At that point, actually, I didn’t even drink. They were like we just have no choice but to fire you. [Dan] was there, who was my supervisor. I will never forget. He was crying. I’m like how are you crying? You’re firing me. What is with these people crying when they’re making mistakes? (3)

How do you get fired on your day off? Well, that’s what happened to me. I went and I was taking my girlfriend [to the club where I worked] for a drink and apparently, I was supposed to have been stopped at the door by this new security person that I was not used to. And so, I feel somebody tap me on the shoulder – I turn around; they’re like, “[Estelle], you’re not supposed

⁶ All names are pseudonyms.

to be here. We got word from [Rick] that supposedly, you did something. And so, you're barred from the club for a week." And when you hear something like that in that environment, that's code for, "You lost your job." (9)

I left the Hollywood Bowl, because there was this man that was sexually harassing me and I was too afraid to report it and so I didn't and then he ended up getting promoted. So I was like fuck that, I'm not working there again, because he would have like supervised me or something. (22)

I started at Taco Bell, and then I lasted there like a year and a half, and then I got into a fight with someone because of my gender identity, because this was, like, '95, '96, during that time. But I would wear makeup. So then I left that job. (20)

5. Trans women and femmes of color who **transitioned at work** generally experienced hostility, gender policing, and pushout. After being pushed out, it was then quite difficult to find a new job. Until relatively recently, transitioning meant that trans women and femmes of color got exiled from the formal labor market and pushed into lower-paid, higher-risk, criminalized work like the sex and drug trade, regardless of their educational background and prior work experience.

It was a requirement to wear ties. I didn't want to wear a tie. I'm on hormones. I'm going crazy. My eyebrows are shaped like checkmarks. It was obvious that I was doing something. HR caught onto it when I gave the letter: I am going through a transition. It would be great to help out in the therapy that I don't wear ties and maybe start transitioning at the workplace. It didn't go well with HR. So, we were all fighting back and forth. They were saying you applied as a male. You need to be presenting as male. (15)

I'm working at the salon. And it was cool for like a year or so. They knew I was transitioning and all of that. But once I started switching my voice up a little bit and painting my nails and stuff like that – that's when it became an issue. The whole time to them they could still perceive me as a boy. Clients could perceive me as a boy. But now I'm doing things to say look this is who I am. And now I'm getting called to the office to – "Oh yeah well you can paint your nails but paint them a neutral color." And then one time I had some friends there. We were talking about castration and some trans-related things. Apparently a client overheard and got offended. So then I got in trouble for that. And the next thing I'm getting in trouble for all this stuff. And at the time I had friends who were escorting. So that was in the back of my mind you know? So after getting written up at that job so much I was like you know what? Fuck this. I'm leaving. I'm like I'm transitioning. When I decide to transition that's what I was doing. And whoever was not about it it was whatever. So I left the job and I started escorting. (8)

I transitioned in the movie theater. I was 17, 18, 19. So I transitioned there, and my brother-in-law was the manager, so it was really easy for me to be able to transition in a job. (20)

And then I had already begun to transition and I couldn't get a job. So once that ended, I would go in even to places like McDonald's and I couldn't get a job. I applied for about 300 jobs during that year. Professional resume with all this stuff on it. I would walk in and people would look at me, which, in the beginning, the look was rough, and didn't believe I had a degree from [the university I attended], thought I was using someone else's name, didn't think I had been an assistant to the dean. They were like, this look doesn't look like what's in this resume. And it was difficult. And I had to make money. I had lost my apartment. So I found myself on the street with women who basically didn't have a high school diploma. And I got taught education of the street by professors of trans women of color who were like, you out here to survive, baby, and this is how this works. You seem a little frail on what really goes on here. And they taught me how to survive and live on the streets. And that's something I never experienced. In 31 years of living on Earth, I always had a roof, I always had food, had a car to drive, always had a little money. I had never been that poor, that broke, that homeless in my life. (11)

6. Trans women and femmes of color provided nuanced accounts of their own experiences of **marginalization and privilege**. Asian women, white-passing and light-skinned women, women with access to education, women from wealthy families, women with American citizenship, and women with “passing privilege” reflected on how these aspects of their positionality provided them with advantages and opportunities that were not available to other trans women of color (Black and Latina women, women without educational access, poor women, undocumented women, and women perceived as trans).

I consider myself a person of color. But I had more privileges as an Asian person versus an African American or Latina. I had more opportunities than them. (15)

I was really lucky to have educational privilege and be able to go to college because my parents saved up a bunch of money and because I went to a public school with computers and had computers at home, too, that I think I was able to get skills that allowed me to put myself the rest of the way through college. And that's just, I had a lot of privilege to be able to do that. And that was kind of what allowed me to go through the rest of this career. As a trans person, I probably, I would have had much worse luck if I wasn't surrounded by, like I said, people who were trying to look out for me and who cared for me... And of course the ways racism particularly affects people of East Asian descent really, really differently than it does black and brown people. And so, especially since your project is looking at trans women and femmes of color, I think that that's worth noting too that I'm a mixed race, Asian-American woman... I think that's worth noting that I probably do, to some extent, have some white passing privilege. And I think the fact that I am an East Asian person who was raised in a family with some white people in it, so forth probably makes it easy for me to interface socially and probably be accepted with not as much racism from some of these white people in tech where there are a lot of Asian people. I think I would have had a really different experience if I was a black or brown person from a different background who was trying to be trans in these kind of spaces I might not have had people looking out for me. (16)

I'm very lucky that like my family and I reconciled and they are – we're fairly well off. In a lot of ways, I fully recognize that I have it pretty – I have it fairly easy compared to some. Like often I'm ambiguously identified, race wise. Depending on the situation, I pass for white, and sometimes I don't. Sometimes people make up really interesting guesses for my ethnicity. I've had a pretty – I haven't had any explicitly shitty experiences with being – nothing that can be like I can point a finger right here and be like, "And this is when I got fired for when I came out." And that's still the story I hear so often from people I've met. So in some ways, I feel like I have for a while a bit of a lucky streak... I don't know, I mean I think things are still bad. I just don't – I think one thing that made me a little hesitant to do this is because despite everything I just said, I've had a fairly easy time with things. Being half white has been helpful, being from a wealthy family is helpful. I don't want to – and when I meet – especially like black and brown trans women of color who aren't from the same background as me, their stories often of things that would honestly probably break me as a person. I don't know. It's just real – yeah, I think that's the – what I was trying to get across is just despite everything we've just talked about, I feel like I had it really lucky because I know a lot of people who had it worse. (17)

My mom came when she was young, undocumented for a good portion of her life. We didn't have that much money, but I was born here and being documented already is one huge privilege and advantage to getting work here plus I found my way into college. No one had done it in my family before. I don't remember how I got accepted to college. I don't remember applying, to be honest, but I made my way in there. It was really hard at first, I almost dropped out my first and second year, but I was like fuck this, I'm going to stay. Getting access to the institution in the system gives you a bunch of different privileges and access to so much more employment and opportunity that not a lot of people have. (22)

Just because I say that this place feels safe for me, that doesn't mean I'm saying that it's safe for trans people. That's the case for any place. Because, I recognize that, you know, I get access in certain ways from being, you know, a light-skinned person, from speaking a certain way, from looking a certain way. (8)

Conclusion: While trans femmes of color have made great strides, these gains are tenuous. The tipping point occurred during a moment before the election of Donald Trump and the consolidation of Right Wing political forces behind him. The Christian Right has engaged in systematic targeted attacks against trans people at the federal, state and local levels. The current pandemic and economic crisis, which have plunged millions of Americans into unemployment, also poses a major threat to the employment stability recently achieved by some trans femmes of color. In order for TWOC to continue to have access to the resources to live full and self determined lives, the organizing that produced the tipping point will need to be maintained and surpassed.

Recommendations⁷:

⁷ We encourage people to draw on and advance Raquel Willis' platform, "How we can end violence against trans women of color" as part of a broader strategy for justice and safety for trans women and femmes of color. <https://www.out.com/print/2019/11/20/how-we-can-end-violence-against-trans-women-color>

- Pass and defend anti-discrimination legal protections
- Combat transmisogyny and racism in the culture and structure of workplaces
- Hire trans women and femmes of color in all sectors, so women are not pigeonholed into advocacy and social service work
- Improve the trans-competency of social service agencies, so that workers at trans-specific organizations are not forced to meet *all* needs of underserved transgender people
- Fund trans-led organizations, as a strategy for movement building and investment in trans economic opportunities
- Decriminalize sex work and involvement in the drug trade so that people engaged in this work do not face the dangers of policing and incarceration
- Build solidarity within trans community to demand economic justice for all

Appendix: The change in employment access for trans femmes of color over time

Below is a line graph generated from the comprehensive work histories of each of the interviewees. In order to visualize the general pattern of change in the work status of trans femmes of color, we assigned a numerical rating to each job from our interviewees’ work histories. We then computed the average work status for each year and charted the change in this status over time, particularly the dramatic shift in access to jobs after 2016.

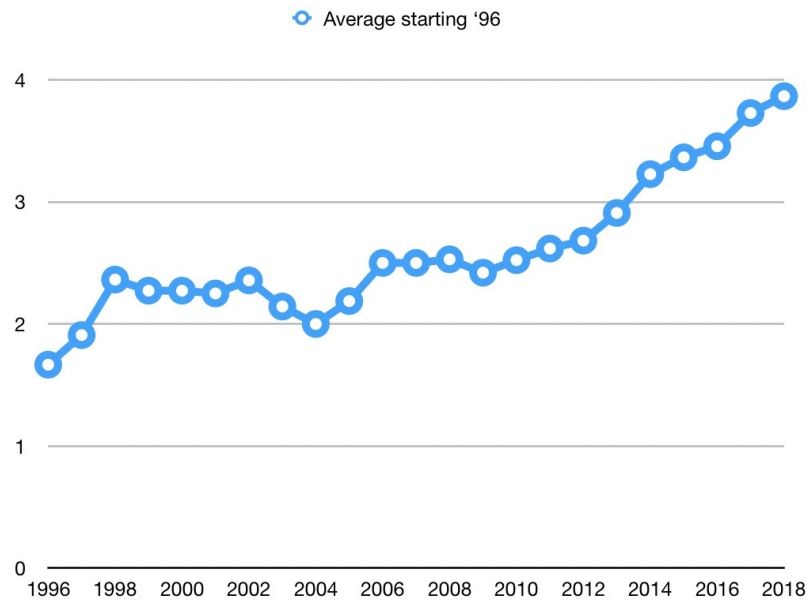
Work status ratings:

1	Informal/criminalized economy or materially supported by others (family, partner)	
2	Low-wage service work, factory work, domestic work (in-home care)	Most people at this level are still engaging in criminalized work (e.g. sex work)
3	Professional work (entry-level), college, military	Most people at this level are still engaging in criminalized work (e.g. sex work)
4	Professional work (managerial level), graduate school, or self-employed entrepreneur with a high income	
5	Professional work (executive level), such as being an organization’s Director or Executive Director	

Each job held was taken as a discrete category and assigned a ranking based on status in relation to the job market. The system runs from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest (Executive Director) and 1 being the lowest (criminalized work in the sex or drug trade). This ranking order is not a proxy for income level: women could potentially make more money doing criminalized work than low-wage service work or even entry-level professional work. Rather, these rankings reflect class mobility, economic security, and social status. We included “being a student” within our rankings, for similar reasons. While students may not have immediate income, college or graduate degrees have the potential to shift class status and increase employment access. We recognize the imperfect nature of comparing positions across organizations. Serving as a manager at Applebee’s is a quite different job from serving as a manager at the local health center, and both these jobs are distinct from serving as a policy manager at a national LGBT rights organization. The graph does not capture this variation. However, our graph does provide a clear snapshot of the growth in trans femmes of color’s access to higher-paying, leadership positions within the labor market.

As the graph on the following page shows, trans women and femmes of color worked, on average, in criminalized work and low-wage service work through 2013. Between 2013 and 2015, the number of trans women and femmes of color in managerial (level 4) or executive level (level 5) jobs in our sample more than doubled, going from 5 to 11. In other words, transwomen and femmes of color rapidly

gained access to higher-status work positions. Although these trends were consistent across geographic region, trans femmes of color in the Bay Area gained access to higher status work a little bit earlier (starting in 2005). Only four women in our sample moved into managerial level positions before 2013; all are based in the Bay Area.



This convenience sample cannot attest to changes in employment for all trans women and femmes of color. Yet, the data are striking. For instance, we show that trans women and femmes of color currently in leadership positions nearly all advanced into these positions over the past 5-7 years. Future research with a larger number of respondents should further explore who has benefitted from an expansion of job access, and who remains economically marginalized. Larger studies should also examine statistical differences in employment access among trans women and femmes of color of different races. Lastly, future research could evaluate the impact of workforce development programs, nondiscrimination protections, and social movement advocacy on increases in trans women and femmes of color's job access in order to make more informed recommendations around how to increase economic equity.