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HUMAN RIGHTS

Make Culture Change, Not War

The fight for rights needs the fight for culture change.

By Eric Friedenwald-Fishman | 5 | Mar. 12, 2012

" Culture wars" tend to make many progressive social entrepreneurs, myself included, shudder. We associate them with self-righteousness, hypocritical definitions of morality, and inappropriate impositions of religious or political values. But if the first months of 2012 were a movie, it could be called *Culture Wars: The Sequel.* In response to recent policy changes around gay marriage, immigration, and contraception, opponents have decried their damaging impact and vowed to put repeals on the ballot. These reactions are not surprising; we should expect them. But they also indicate that our focus on securing rights and policies is vulnerable and lacks resiliency. By focusing so much on policy-based changes to rights, we inadvertently cede the power of values-based culture change to those who would reduce the very rights we fight to protect. We do not need a culture war arms race. But changing policy around human rights, as critical as it is, cannot establish lasting social change without a change in culture.

Over the last two decades, we have seen real progress in ensuring basic rights based upon sexual orientation. Fair workplace and public accommodation laws, gay marriage laws, and the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell show that advocates for equity have achieved significant victories that make a real difference. At the same time, many of these basic rights are readily used as political wedge issues and/or placed on the ballot for repeal.

Another example is the millions of undocumented Americans who live in the shadows, most of whom work, pay taxes, and contribute to our communities and economy. We are not only stalled on creating pathways to citizenship, but in state after state, ballot initiatives have taken away rights from immigrants. The fight for changes in enforcement, naturalization, and other policies

is critical, but so is the need to move our cultural expectation to one that values immigrants and immigration.

Then, of course, in recent weeks, the highly politicized debate regarding contraception health coverage has sparked a resurgence of stereotypes and sexist frames that attack women who speak up for basic reproductive health and anything but abstinence as birth control. While the sexual revolution, Title IX, and other policy and practice changes have broken many a glass ceiling, it is clear our culture still harbors gender bias and stigma.

What we need is to clarify the finish line. Victory means more than affording rights and codifying tolerance; it means shifting the culture to value, respect, and appreciate all people. If we are successful at that, we improve people's lived experiences. We also create a more resilient base and broader political support for policies that sustainably protect rights.

So, what can we learn and do? As social entrepreneurs who are often in the front lines and in the strategy huddles that drive community action, we must advance culture change by understanding stigma, connecting with values, and investing in relationships.

Understanding Stigma

Core to cultural expectations are our underlying perspectives, biases, and beliefs. Often in issues of rights, where a group is experiencing disparity, stigma fuels cultural norms that perpetuate that disparity. For example, ads and campaigns opposing everything from fair workplace laws to marriage equality aim to trigger the stigma surrounding gays, and children and gay parenting (the "Mommy I Can Marry a Princess" ad during the California Prop 8 election illustrates my point). By identifying, seeking to understand and working to address underlying stigma, we can de-mystify it and remove its power. The Face Value Project is an example of an organization doing just that. This national coalition conducts research on stigma and identifies effective methods for moving our culture beyond seeing tolerance as the end goal.

Connecting with Values

You can influence a particular vote or decision by pushing a hot-button issue, but to shift the normative expectations of a community, you need to demonstrate connection to common values. So much of the immigration reform narrative has framed immigrants as "cheats" or criminals. But we have the opportunity to look at the majority of immigrants as family providers, hard workers, and aspirants to the American Dream. This is why organizations like National Immigration Forum are working to build a new consensus around immigration that goes beyond partisanship by engaging faith, business, and law-enforcement communities through shared values.

Investing in Relationships

A 30-second TV spot won't dissolve stigma. People do not engage in discussion about values with their television or their newspaper. We create openings to explore, discuss, question, and reconsider our cultural frames when we connect to people we trust and to whom we relate. It is this power of relationships that is the *lingua franca* of culture change. My home state of Oregon has been a testing battleground for anti-gay ballot measures since the 1980s. Basic Rights Oregon has made a significant investment in conducting deep grassroots outreach and supporting anyone and everyone who stands up for marriage equality. They are helping people engage in dialogue with their friends, family, and communities about the importance of marriage equality—all separate from advocating for a specific bill.

Ultimately, we must impact both policy and culture to create lasting social change.

The question of policy and culture change is not a zero-sum game, but rather a both/and proposition. The externalities of the political process (legislative, administrative, and initiative) combined with the "horserace" focus of media on issues, drives attention and resources to the immediate rights-based policy fights. Too often, investment in cultural change and work to shift the normative expectations of our communities are left to some halcyon or mythic future time. We must make that time now and as social entrepreneurs ask ourselves at every turn, how are we both fighting for rights and transforming culture?

Eric Friedenwald-Fishman is the creative director/president of Metropolitan Group (MG), a leading social marketing firm with offices in Chicago, Portland, Oregon, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. He is the co-author of *Marketing That Matters* (Berrett & Koehler), which has been translated into six languages; the primary author of MG's *Public Will Building Framework: An Approach for Sustainable Social Change*; and co-author of MG's article "Relevance, Relationships and Results: Eight Principles for Effective Multicultural Communication." Full disclosure: He was a volunteer board member of Basic Rights Oregon and his firm has consulted with Face Value and National Immigration Forum.

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