**Transgender activism in Sweden and implications for social work**

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**Till läsare av detta paper under NaPSa-konferensen:**Detta är en studie jag valt att ta upp igen efter att den fått vila under ett par år. Det är inte ett helt färdigt paper och jag är öppen för alla typer av feedback. Särskilt undrar jag:

* Vilken tidskrift kan passa?

**Transgender activism in Sweden and its implications for social work**

In Sweden, transgender (in short “trans”) activism is not a new phenomenon, however, it is unclear exactly how long it has been conducted, where some believe that it has existed long before its relatively new visibility. The trans activist movement has extensive knowledge of the situation for trans people and works actively to conduct knowledge-enhancing initiatives in Sweden, including training for staff in human service organizations. Previous studies show that knowledge about trans issues among social workers is limited and that the services for trans people are deficient. This study, therefore, examines personal experiences of people who have been involved in trans activism in Sweden for a long time and how they outline the challenges that social work face in the present time and in the future. The study is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with seven Swedish trans activists and the collected material was analysed using the content analysis method. The analysis is structured around three themes: (1) *Trans activism: Why and How?*, (2) *The role of trans activist organisations: How to achieve change?,* and (3) *Politics and Knowledge.*  Implications as well as challenges for social work are suggested as identifying the own room for manoeuvre as well as a need for increased knowledge and training. Future research is recommended with a larger sample where activists that are not connected to the larger trans organisations in Sweden are to be included to a higher degree.

*Keywords*: institutionalisation, social movements, trans activists, LGBTQI certification, professional training

# Introduction

When meeting with governmental and social institutions, many transgender[[1]](#footnote-1) (in short “trans”) people experience ignorance and shortcomings in terms of services. This has led many trans people to choose not to seek the help and support that they are entitled to. Likewise, social work professionals in Sweden have reported that they are experiencing insecurities, regarding competence and professionalism, when they meet people with non-normative gender expressions (e.g. Smolle & Espvall, 2020). The Swedish Government (2016) and the National Board of Health and Welfare (2016) claim that this indicates that there is a lack of knowledge on these matters. This is also the reason why trans activists[[2]](#footnote-2), which has become increasingly visible since the beginning of the 2000s, actively works with and offers educational initiatives in Sweden. Through these, companies, municipalities, institutions and organisations have the opportunity to learn about trans issues directly from those who push issues forward. This is often carried out for a fee, for example when organisations offer something they call LGBTQ[[3]](#footnote-3) certifications[[4]](#footnote-4) or diplomas[[5]](#footnote-5), where actors can receive training through financial means in matters concerning sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (cf. RFSL, 2022; Smolle & Espvall, 2021). In this way, the trans movement (or the LGBTQ movement on a larger scale) has come to have an increasingly significant and self-explanatory role also in social work in Sweden, where there has been an escalation in recent years for social work institutions wishing to improve their knowledge and skills on these matters, with the help of those offering expertise.

It is thus possible to assume that there is a lot to learn from those who conduct political advocacy work and educate social workers about trans issues.

## Aim and research questions

The study aims to examine personal experiences of people who have been involved in transgender activism in Sweden for a long time and how they outline the challenges that social work face in the present time and in the future.

1. How do transgender activists describe the societal change towards equal legal rights and increased visibility for transgender people?
2. How do transgender activists describe the general knowledge and potential need for knowledge regarding transgender issues?
3. Which areas do the activists identify as most important to continue to monitor in the future?

# Swedish context

In this section, a brief background in terms of the Swedish context is provided, since some aspects in the study are very particular for where geographically the empirical data is conducted.

Sweden is often referred to as a progressive country in regard to transgender people and rights. One of the reasons is that Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce a law in 1972 that made it possible to change legal gender. At the same time, hormone therapy and surgery also began to be performed in Sweden. Further major changes in Swedish legislation during the latter part of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century have continued to strengthen the legal rights of LGBTQI people. These include for example developments in the family law, criminal justice protection and increased protection against discrimination (Malmquist et al., 2017; Swedish Discrimination Act, 2008:567; prop. 2017/18:59; Freedom of the Press Act 1949:105). Further, gender-confirming care and treatment is, in Sweden, subsidised by the state and can include medical help to change the body with, for example, hormones and/or surgery.

However, despite its progressive reputation, several shortcomings in regard to legislation, care and services as well as mental health in society have been reported. A report published in May 2020 by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), based on the largest survey of its kind[[6]](#footnote-6) with 2500 responses from Swedish LGBTQI people, illustrate several of these issues. The results shows experiences of harassment, discrimination and sexual or physical violence, where transgender and intersex people are overrepresented. This is further stated in reports and research published in Sweden alone where it is indicated that transgender people in Sweden faces offensive treatment, harassment and discrimination to a higher degree than the rest of the population (SOU 2017:92). For example and more specifically, in regard to care, the Swedish transition process have been described as gender normative and strives to materialise bodies to either male or female. For some, this has meant fear of seeking care or that people who do not define themselves in accordance with the gender binary risk their trans-related care or treatment (cf. Bremer, 2011; Linander, 2018). Also, it has been reported a lack of knowledge concerning transgender issues in professions and at workplaces that are meeting with people in vulnerable situations (for example SOU 2017:92; Smolle & Espvall, 2021).

The biggest driving forces in trying to improve the mentioned shortcomings in Sweden today are transgender activists and the previous positive developments are also to a high degree due to the activism that has been performed by activists. In Sweden, five major organisations have been of particular importance regarding trans activism: The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Rights (RFSL), Full Personality Expression Sweden (FPE-S), Club/PF Benjamin, Gender-Sex Identity-Diversity (KIM) and Transammans (cf. Norrhem et al., 2015; Malmquist et al., 2017; SOU 2017:92). The associations have had different target groups included and key issues focused over time, for example RFSL (founded 1950) included transgender people as a target group only in 2001 and FPE-S (founded 1966) was initially organised by and for transvestites, but is today an organisation for all transgender people and allies/relatives. RFSL is currently the largest LGBTQI-related organisation that exists in Sweden, with approximately 7000 members (RFSL, 2019).

Some smaller activist groups have over the years been critical of the views or work that the larger, mentioned organisations focus on, for example, some have felt that they are too focused on rights and assimilation (cf. Linander, 2018). Besides, approaches, goals, and perspectives have differed from time to time between the dominant organisations. All in all, they have tried in various ways, and several times with a positive outcome, to influence politicians, legislators, and citizens, for better conditions for transgender people.

# Previous research

The research on transgender issues in Sweden, which is relevant for social work, has touched on transgender people’s psychosocial health, medical aspects and experiences of care (Bremer, 2011; Danielsson, 2009; Larsson et al., 2008; Linander, 2018; Zeluf et al., 2016). Further, some research have focused on professional experiences concerning transgender issues specifically in the social work research field (Smolle & Espvall, 2021). It is thus possible to say that there is a large research gap regarding trans activism and social work, and more specifically trans activists significance for understanding trans rights, in the field of social work.

Despite this and with a non-limitation to trans activist social movements, research illustrates clear links between social work and social movements, pointing to examples where social workers have had important functions in the progress for social and economic justice, such as in the civil rights movements (e.g. Bent-Goodley, 2015). Many further argue that social work has been influenced by and shares many characteristics with social movements (Smith, 2015; Ferguson, 2008; Thompson, 2002). Both sides underlines the importance of doing social work research on, or in collaboration with, social movement activists.

With an interdisciplinary variation in mind, because there is limited research on trans activism in social work as mentioned, some research could be considered relevant to explain what has previously been done on the field. For example a dissertation by Lauren Joseph from 2010 with the title *The Production of Pride: Institutionalization and LGBT Pride Organizations.* It specifically examines the process of institutionalization within social movement organisations, focusing on LGBT Pride. Joseph also argues that more research on institutionalisation of social movement organisations, and especially LGBT groups, are important.

Following this exhortation, but with a focus on trans social movements in Sweden, from the perspective of the activists, in the field of social work, makes this study somewhat unique. The reason why it is particularly interesting to examine in a Swedish social work context is due to Sweden’s reputation for having achieved some success in terms of equality and trans rights, for example including gender identity and expression in the constitution.

# Theoretical framework

Social movements is in this study defined as a potential consequence, skilled social mobilisation and action of resistance, where the group operates with political, social, or economic intentions (cf. Smith, 2015). Resistance is in this study considered as a strategy for change (cf. Smith, 2015) whether this is considered a beneficial change for the trans community or not. In other words, resistance might be practiced within the trans activist movement in order to achieve change regarding their rights, but it might also be a strategy that is performed by others that wants to regulate trans rights even more. Further, being a social movement activist is also often viewed as a way of trying to change the current situation outside of the ordinary political process, sometimes though referred to as an actor that extend the institutional action (Pettinicchio, 2012). Why many social movements as well as its activists are today called institutionalised is due to its obvious place within everyday politics, which also indicates its close connection to political institutions (cf. Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) as well as being insiders in terms of institutional resources, power and decision-making processes. Institutional activism has the power to affect from within organisations and institutions. One example to such an organisation in Sweden is RFSL, which receive external funding, do a lot of political work in close collaboration with institutions, have a good reputation and therefore are allowed into political forums as well as educate the public and municipalities. The organisation is of course built on activism and does a lot of political good for LGBTQI people in Sweden (and outside of Sweden as well) but can at the same time be considered institutional insiders, unlike some independent transgender activists. To add to that, it is also about how much inclusion and exclusion a movement experiences in political contexts (Pettinicchio, 2012). One of the arguments to why the activism is institutionalised is that the advocacy work always has to adapt to financing as well as institutional irregularities (connected to economic crisis, new policies etc.) (cf. Pettinicchio, 2012).

To continue on this theoretical reasoning, institutionalisation is an important factor in understanding the activist experience, as it clearly affects the organisations as well as the possibility to organise. In this study, institutionalisation is not considered as something good or bad, but rather something that is interconnected with capital with a possibility of growth and impact (cf. Joseph, 2010). With that mentioned, it is difficult to engage in political issues as an activist without touching upon institutionalisation, because institutional resistance and support is always present when engaging in communities, structures and political processes (Joseph, 2010). In this study, this theoretical standpoint is adapted in order to understand how the individual trans activist understand change, political impact, resistance and being insider/outsider in regard to organisational and institutional activism.

Further, this study has a social constructionist starting point where social change is explained and understood based on constructions that emerge from narratives, discourses, and social situations. In this way, the content of the study is not seen as something given by nature and should not be interpreted as the only explanation for change (cf. Wood & Tully, 2006). It is therefore relevant to keep in mind that what is emerging in the study, and the concepts and terminology used, is only one way of describing social change, history, transgender people, and trans activism.

# Method and analysis

This study is part of my PhD thesis that has been reviewed and approved by the Swedish Regional Ethics Committee in Umeå (doc. no. 2018/261-31).

The empirical data in this study is based on in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews, with open thematic questions, conducted with seven Swedish transgender activists (cf. Creswell & Poth, 2017). Five of the interviewed activists have a connection to some type of national activist group or NGO, while two have not a connection to a group or NGO. The informants’ experiences of activist work regarding LGBTQI issues were calculated at 5-20 years. I made contact through the organisations' or groups' official web pages or with some directly through their web pages. The activists lived and worked in different parts of Sweden and were not part of the same local communities. Five of the informants described themselves as transgender, one as non-binary or not sure, and one as cisgender and queer. Interviews were carried out in the places of their choice and these differed between the activists. Some wanted to do the interviews in their home and some in other places like coffee shops. Three of them were interviewed via telephone because of the current covid-19 pandemic restrictions. They were all informed of the aim, confidentiality conditions, such as the promise to stay anonymous for ethical reasons beforehand, as well as their right to decline participation at any time. The informants gave their consent to participate as well as to how the data was to be handled and used (Swedish Research Council CODEX, n.d.).

The time of the interviews differed markedly between one hour and twenty minutes to three and a half-hour. The predefined themes addressed in the interviews were: society and activism, the target group, knowledge and education, and norm-critical approaches.

Following the Swedish Research Council’s publication *Good research practice* (2017), the integrity-sensitive material was handled with great respect.All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analysis of data was initiated by carefully reading through the transcribed text, which I did to get an understanding of the material (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I then read through the collected and transcribed material several times according to the content analysis research tradition (cf. Krippendorff, 2013). Certain agreements, as well as discrepancies, were identified, by me, in the materials in the first couple of readings. By using the software program Nvivo12, these then became easier to distinguish and are presented in the result section. In order to obtain meaningful patterns and themes, I then interpreted the collected material with the helpful direction of my applied theoretical perspectives. In this study, I had no ambitions to generalise to a wider population but to examine individual understandings and experiences. All quotes have been translated carefully from Swedish to English.

# Results

The following section is structured around three themes that emerged from the collected material: (1) *Trans activism: Why and how?,* (2) *The role of trans activist organisations: How to achieve change?* and, (3) *Politics and Knowledge*. The first theme sheds light on the activist experience with the focus on why the activism is performed and in what ways. In the second theme, the trans activism role are presented with a specific focus on how change is achieved. The third theme focuses on how the informants explain the politics and knowledge in the societal context in which they operate. The informants are not referred to with their name, but only by a letter (A, B, C, etc.) in order to remain anonymous.

**Trans activism: Why and how?**

Much of the activist work with trans issues is carried out with certain key issues in mind. This seems to agree well with the fact that a mutual focus is common, and perhaps likewise necessary, within social movements (cf. Risjord, 2014). The key issues is described as to why the activism is needed (“we need to change these issues”) but also sends out a clear message within the organisation (“these are our main focuses”) and likewise to others outside the organisation, such as politicians and decisions-makers. Informant A described their key issues as following:

Meeting needs, transgender care, and social security numbers. These are the three issues we are currently working on. Also, when authorities have suggestions they send it to us, we have to take care of it, and we constantly push them and it feels good.

They all described that during their time as activists some positive change has been achieved concerning legal rights for trans people as well as aspects around meeting needs. However, there are still a lot that needs to improve. Some areas for improvement that was mentioned from all the informants where the ones specified through specific key issues by this informant. The ambition with the key issues seems rather be about changing more specific oppressive social conditions, in contrast to the ambition to bring about revolutionary change (cf. Smith, 2015). The role of trans activist organisations: How to achieve change?

**The role of trans activist organisations: How to achieve change?**

Further, it appears from the activist view, that activism is seen as a long-term process, because of the fact that change takes time. Informant A explained how they reason about this:

If you spit on a rock it eventually gets wet, so it is just a matter of continuing to present our arguments and we have defined those in terms of key issues […]. We have ready-made chains of arguments that we can present every time it becomes relevant.

The quote illustrates a kind of necessary perseverance when it comes to discussions and the possibility of change based on the selected key issues. Further, chains of arguments is mentioned which could be referred to as bearing of institutional value, because they are strategically formulated within the activist social movement organisation to appeal to the actors they meet, for example people of relevance for change (such as decision-makers, political representatives etc). In other words, the arguments are ready made for a political and institutional reality for effectiveness.

To continue on the note of change something that united all the activists who participated in the study was their great motivation for precisely this as well as striving for improving the rights of trans people and thus advocacy work. It is above all the advocacy work that constitutes the activism described in this study. How the advocacy work is expressed is in the concept of, for example, knowledge-enhancing initiatives such as education or training in schools and businesses, carrying out discussions and conducting debates, having collaboration with authorities, and so on. The study also demonstrated how the activists seek opportunities for advocacy work and use the opportunities provided, for example during Stockholm Pride where the availability of central authorities (which often joins the pride week in order to join political, organisational and societal discussions) as well as the possibilities of giving out information to the public is great. The activists ambitions with their work, for example during Pride, is summarised as: to conduct advocacy work directly aimed at the authorities and its employees, to influence priorities concerning the preparation of political decisions and legislative changes, and potentially find allies.

However, all informants described that there is always a certain amount of resistance, during for example Pride, which is noticeable on various levels, such as in politics or among citizens, and especially in recent years. One informant (D) described “We are noticing a harsher climate. We are needed more than ever. We have noticed some changes and we need the advocacy work and making it visible, but it is difficult”.This means, from the informant’s perspective, that the trans activists need to strengthen their work as well as making it more visible, to influence the climate described, in a more positive direction.

Overall, it appears that the informants are good at identifying and using their room for manoeuvre, for example during events such as Pride (e.g. Svensson et al., 2008). They recognise that they have a significant position and important function as experts and as educators and consequently choose to use this to influence decisions, discussions, approaches, and proposals within, for example, authorities.

**Politics and knowledge**

Politics is presented as both a prerequisite and a challenge for development and change in the area of trans issues, according to the informants. They explained that on one hand, politicians can act as allies or key individuals, and in turn, give proposals or influence decisions. On the other hand, they can stand in the way of change and implementation of proposals and issues. Overall, it appears that a lot of work is put into influencing politicians, and politics is presented as a vital part of the work towards change. As politics and financing are factors that are very important for trans organisations, the activism is partly enforced to adapt to the certain criterion. For example, if the organisation were to be “too radical”, the authorities might not want to finance their projects. Meanwhile, the authorities are in today's Sweden depending on the help from the trans organisations, in the form of them acting as referral bodies or offering education/certification. More on this is presented in the next theme.

However, on the topic of politics, one informant (C) explained:

If you want to change something in society, you can do it no other way than to go through politics, there is no chance. You can write as many reports as you want but it does not leave a mark in society. […] It is politics that must ensure that training is completed. It does not help what education programs we have unless politics ensures that it becomes practice.

The quote illustrates a kind of chain for change, where initiatives can come from below but decisions need to come from above, to ensure implementation in practice. This is also expressed as relevant in the matter of how education is transformed into practical activities or professional practices. Also, in order for something, such as knowledge, to be highlighted (as lacking or needed) in political settings or institutions, it needs to have an institutional value of some sort. In this sense, issues often needs to be institutionalised in order to have a symbolic or economic capital, i.e. to be seen as important (socially, economically, legally etc.) or to be recognised in society (ref). From this understanding, the chain for change is a highly institutionalised process, where adaption is most likely a necessity to achieve change within an institution or professional setting.

All informants described the lacking knowledge about trans issues in society and in different professional and institutional settings, where the knowledge gaps needs to be especially improved. Some that where mentioned where social services, elderly care, schools/universities and healthcare.

One informant (E) mentioned social work specifically and said: “More knowledge is necessary. And especially during the social work education. They have great knowledge about sexual orientation, but concerning gender identity and gender-confirming treatment, especially regarding non-binary people, the knowledge is catastrophically bad”. The quote illustrates a challenge for social work education, in other words, to include perspectives on gender identity and expression as well as related issues, for the social work profession to have adequate knowledge and potentially better meet the needs of trans people (cf. Smolle & Espvall, 2021).

Another informant (C) continued on describing the lack of knowledge, on trans issues in combination with age in particular, in caring professions:

The lack of knowledge and competence, concerning older adults and trans issues, among those who are to care for us, is very scary to me. They believe that they have the knowledge but they haven’t received an hour of education […]. Concerning education, there is very much training that focuses on young people but when it comes to older adults it is non-existent. Older adults are a group that is set aside.

The quote illustrates a need for training on issues regarding trans and ageing in caring professions, because young people is often focused in discussions about gender identity and expression (cf. SOU 2017:92: Smolle & Espvall, 2021). Furthermore, the informants gave very similar descriptions about the societal, legal, social and psychological situation for older trans adults. They described the group as invisible and especially vulnerable because of their care needs and potential loneliness as well as fears of seeking out help when they need it (cf. Siverskog, 2014). They also pointed out that there is rarely a discussion about older adults in the context of trans issues and that they need competent professionals to look after their rights when they are not able to anymore (cf. Smolle & Espvall, 2021). But not only older adults was mentioned as a vulnerable group (within the trans community) by the informants during the interviews, but also homeless youth, people from very strict religious families, HIV positive people and asylum seekers. They mentioned that all these areas need to be highlighted more in institutional and political settings as well as prioritised knowledge wise.

More, a majority of the informants stated that there is a lack of priorities or resources to do anything about it. One informant (C) described:

It is still the case in society - this [trans issues] is outside the norm and everything that is outside the norm is difficult to finance […]. They do not have money, they claim. Although, some companies are certified. But they are few. If you want a diploma in a working unit, that is, in the care and nursing unit, it might cost about SEK 100,000. However, a certification might come to SEK 300,000-400,000 or more.

The quote illustrates the costs for training on trans issues (in this case regarding diploma or certification) that not all businesses, organisations, or municipalities are likely to have access to or prioritise economically wise (cf. Smolle & Espvall, 2021). The trainings are often highly customised to work for different institutional settings and follows market demands.

Further, many times political parties, companies and municipalities can use the received certification and new knowledge to create a better image for themselves, and maybe increase for example sales or interest from the outside society. However, this comes with a warning, because the outside society then trusts that the actors have enough knowledge to meet the needs of trans people. Also, this could be considered, depending on the reason of course, as *pinkwashing*, which is about profiting on for example the struggle of trans people. This means that a company might see the opportunity to use the struggle as a marketing strategy to improve how they are perceived or increase their sales.

In addition, resistance is illustrated in the study in both individual form and collective form where ideological, political, and personal differences are focused. For example, the majority of the informants talked about the Sweden Democrats which is one of the largest Swedish political parties. They explained how the party wants to pursue hostile politics and is rarely contributing with votes to address the issues that the trans movement is facing. A few informants also emphasised that several smaller local parties suggest municipalities not spend money on LGBTQI education. Regarding more threatening situations that appear during activist action as a consequence of ideology or political views, the experiences differed. Although, all informants described experiences of argumentations or threatening confrontations, both institutional and personal.

Further, while the Sweden Democrats claim to be allies of the LGBTQI community, they simultaneously express negative opinions towards other people, such as Muslims, in accordance with the informants. This can be interpreted as a homo nationalist strategy (cf. Puar, 2013), where they, on one hand, can get a larger crowd of followers from people within the LGBTQI community and on the other hand, they also appear in a certain way in the national debate, for example as progressive. In doing so, they use rhetoric or a strategy where, based on fears or prejudices, they pit people against each other and use LGBTQI people as a way to benefit their political agenda. The oppression of Muslims is thus increased. They, therefore, contribute to conflict or polarisation within the LGBTQI community, because religious beliefs and practices of course vary within the LGBTQI group.

In sum, there is a lack of knowledge about trans issues in among various actors who meet people through their daily work, which was evident in this study as well as in previous research (e.g., Swedish Government, 2016; National Board of Health and Welfare, 2016; SOU 2017:92; Smolle & Espvall, 2021). This lack of knowledge may counteract or complicate for change to be achieved. Also, public discussions are constantly relevant to respond to in the activism work. In the case of negative or, especially, false portraits, the advocacy work can potentially be made more difficult as well as require more time and resources. Lastly, as shown, it is also relevant to acknowledge variations and nuances within the trans movement, where some groups are especially vulnerable, for example older trans adults. This has also motivated the trans activists to starting projects with certain groups in mind as well as focus their trainings of professionals on different target groups. They also try to influence politicians to seize issues regarding vulnerabilities within the trans community, which is to a large degree both a political and institutional issue because it is necessary for actors, such as social services and elderly care, to have the knowledge to meet the needs of older trans adults.

**The role of trans activist organisations: How to achieve change?**

In Sweden, trans activists in the larger organisations (such as RFSL, FPES and Transammans) has a quite prominent role. Likewise, the activism performed does not appear as threatening as activists sometimes are portrayed (called radicals etcetera). This is possibly due to the fact that there is some collaboration between authorities and the organisations but also because the organisations have existed for some time and are well established and to some extent, institutionalised. They also frequently contributes to other societal institutions by spreading knowledge in for example educational initiatives and give them more knowledge, and sometimes diplomas that are used to create a symbolic capital for different institutions. Meanwhile the trans organisations are depending on funding from members, institutions, such as The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen), as well as economic compensation for educational initiatives. This makes it a complex discussion concerning expectations from the funder.

Furthermore, one informant (A) explained one way in which they are collaborating with authorities:

We are a referral body – inquiries are sent for a referral to various organisations and those who may have an interest in or knowledge of this – so we write our response and then we contribute to moving the issues forward, in a sensible direction, so that it does not get too crazy […] we cannot be a prisoner of power in any case and we are free, so we write what we want, what we think we need to write in our comments […] but that is the cooperation with the authorities, that is the big part.

In sum, they play central roles for each other. This means that the authorities need the knowledge and insights from the activists meanwhile the activists need the resources and potential influence within the authorities. The activists that are not doing work in the trans organisations instead do not receive funding in the same sense and do not receive the same legitimacy, for example, are not serving as referrals. Different reasons to why some activists don’t want to be active within an organisations where presented. For example, one informant (G) said: “The tone that has characterised the organisation [referring to one in particular], that it was considered as something secretive, that you could not talk about it. There was a lot to be considered, like regulations. It created an awful worry in me”. The reasons for the secrecy is unknown from the informants perspective, but sometimes secrecy is considered a necessity because of internal conflicts, political reputation, collaboration with authorities/other groups or because of all its members right to stay anonymous.

Another key aspect that was pointed out by the informants was the experience of people changing their opinions after being recipient of educational initiatives or other advocacy work by the activists. This could work as a clue in how change can be driven. In this case, the study indicate that some have changed their minds in a more positive direction after increased awareness and potentially more visibility. The aspect of visibility is noted as relevant in this study and is interpreted as linked to norms and privileges, where something often becomes visible only when it deviates from norms. However, it is a matter of complexity because invisibility cannot be considered something solely desirable or positive as it can be linked to a lack of recognition and/or invisible needs (cf. Smolle & Espvall, 2020). At the same time, increased visibility is a factor that the informants highlighted a lot which follows the arguments by FRA (2020) that visibility contributes to positive change. Another aspect that contributes to positive change, from the activist perspective in this study, is the activism they perform per se. That may be considered a reasonable argument because of the earlier results from the referral and advocacy work. Their contribution to visibility and increased knowledge might have increased the level of acceptance and tolerance in society (cf. FRA, 2020). However, the knowledge-enhancing training and educations seem to be controlled by and influenced by institutional values and market logic whereas certifications and diplomas furthermore can be considered a neo-liberal solution (cf. Smolle & Espvall, 2020). The training conducted by the activists takes place mostly to the extent that inquiries are received and there is money to pay for training. However, it is important to mention that the payment rarely goes to the individual activist, but contributes to continued activism work or to different projects within the activist organisation.

In the advocacy work, allies and people “on the inside” appear to be important in driving development and change. These can be referred to as allies, but also institutional insiders (cf. cf. Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) in the sense that they have access to resources, decision-making etc. At the same time, building networks is an important function, as the work towards change may need to take place at several levels. Besides, the activists require financing, visibility, and so on, which reinforces the importance of contacts in various functions in society. This seems to be of particular importance regarding contact with current politicians, decision-makers and legislators.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this study, the aim was to examine personal experiences of people who have been involved in transgender activism in Sweden for a long time and how they outline the challenges that social work face in the present time and in the future.

In this study, the aim was to examine personal experiences of people who have been involved in transgender activism in Sweden for a long time and how they outline the challenges that social work face in the present time and in the future.

This study shows that some change has taken place concerning trans issues in the last decade, such as increased visibility and strengthened rights, but that this is still not enough (Jämför med källa). The mentioned factors, visibility and rights, appear to be necessary for acceptance and tolerance in what may be perceived as a harsher climate. However, something that is specifically underlined in this study is that change, towards for example visibility and legal rights, takes time. Regarding visibility the results also indicate that there has been some changes in how certain target groups within the trans community has given representation in recent years, for example through started projects (and to add, new research). Although, the study also points to the necessity to continue on changing the situation for vulnerable group within the trans community, such as older adults.

Further, certain areas that the activists are focusing on changing to the better are summarised in key issues that are: meeting needs, transgender care, and social security numbers. The work with these issues can be concluded to that change is still necessary but also that there are highly institutional values at stake. This is because all these key issues are formulated from a political and an institutional reality, and the processes are therefore challenged in these areas.

Furthermore, factors that drive change found in this study are concluded to increase people’s knowledge formation within politics, society and in different societal institutions. The increase of knowledge through the method of advocacy work, which could correspondingly take place in the form of education and training as well as increased visibility, are especially highlighted as relevant for counteracting future challenges. In addition to this, the market seems to be of importance, where the demand for knowledge-enhancing initiatives can increase general knowledge. Meanwhile, the market might limit the activists’ channels and opportunities for awareness-raising activities to spread the word, that is, contribute to dissemination or distribution of adequate and informed knowledge formation. Politics is also portrayed as a challenge, or in other words aspect, that can contribute to as well as counteract change. This is because of the possibilities within politics to achieve change institutionally since political decisions can add to visibility, knowledge-enhancing efforts, and implementations of methods or approaches. However, politics is additionally highlighted as something that can spread homo nationalist agendas, within or outside of institutional arenas. In addition, politics is described as a challenge when activists or other individuals are attempting to implement certain ideas or theories into professional practice. This is considered to be due to the force of political decision-making, that is, the practical impact that political decisions have on authorities and their professionals.

Something that emerged in this study is that activists use their discretion using the opportunities provided for advocacy work based on their positions in well-known and respected organisations. Focusing on social work, most social workers are employed by institutions and, despite legislation and guidelines, have a certain room for manoeuvre based on their positions (Svensson et al., 2008). Following the results of this study, it may be a matter of seeking opportunities, identifying opportunities, and using the opportunities provided to present arguments that are in line with one’s priorities and values. The activists also provide examples of how contacts, networking, and collaborations with allies and other interested parties – institutional insiders and outsiders – can work and strengthen the opportunities in order to counteract the challenges. The social work profession is often used to collaborating with other functions in the welfare society and often has established methods or guidelines to do so. However, the activists do this with great creativity, which social work perhaps can draw inspiration from. Moreover, the importance of self-reflexivity should be emphasised, where it is not sufficient to merely point out that the profession is striving to achieve these. For a change in the field of trans people to take place within the own institution, social work needs to actively implement useful approaches in practice, and perhaps it is conceivable to learn more about how to do this from the experts in the area of trans issues, i.e. trans activists.

Most social workers are experts in several areas (bureaucracy, legally, economically, socially etc.), in order to do their jobs successfully, however there is increasingly more research that supports the claims in this study. That is, there is a lack of knowledge regarding trans issues, which is also to be considered as one big challenge for social work (KÄLLOR). Challenges for the present as well as the future in this area is therefore to make decision-makers, institutions and politicians to prioritise for professionals (in this case social workers) to learn about the situation that trans people are facing. Therefore, it is reasonable to call for greater cooperation between social work practice and trans activists, that is based on reciprocity and not market logic and economic growth, in order to achieve change and counteract present and future challenges.

## Limitations and future research

Some limitations should be kept in mind regarding the study results. First and foremost, the results are based on a relatively small sample although the empirical data came to be extensive, because of a deep approach to the interview format. Second, going through the organisation's channels to find suitable activists to interview may mean that these activists might not be randomly chosen and might not be representative of a bigger group but rather a conform selection. These may, therefore, return in study materials if follow-ups or other studies on activists are done.

Regarding future research, I would recommend doing a study with a larger sample where activists that are not connected to the main trans organisations in Sweden are included even to a higher degree than in this study. Thereby, in future research, the validity, as well as the reliability in new upcoming studies with a similar focus as the present, could be strengthened. Possibly, greater dimensions of variation may occur when examining a larger number of informants, who are selected from different contexts.

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1. An umbrella term for people that do not identify with the sex assigned at birth. This includes when the gender identity differs from the cultural and social expectations that is connected to the sex assigned at birth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Activism appears from experiences of oppression, exclusion, and stigmatisation and as a result, evokes action from individuals or social movements. It can be interpreted as challenging actions to achieve political or societal changes and/or to enable arenas of visibility and opportunity (Caraccioli and Wright, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Short for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An LGBTQI certificate (organised by RFSL) can be awarded to a business, group, or workplace that has undergone knowledge-enhancing training that focuses on terminology, norms, and living conditions for LGBTQI people (RFSL, 2022). Today, RFSL has certified more than 550 workplaces in Sweden (RFSL, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. LGBTQI diplomas are awarded by different actors, such as municipalities, businesses and private educators. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The survey is based on responses from almost 140,000 LGBTQI people in EU member states plus the UK, Serbia, and Northern Macedonia. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)