Change Starts With Us

Mama Cash grantee Trans-Fuzja Foundation reflects on the ingredients for impact
Trans-Fuzja Foundation was founded in 2008 to raise public awareness about transgender issues and increase respect for transgender rights in Poland. Based in Warsaw, it is the only trans rights organisation in the country. Within a few years after its founding, Trans-Fuzja’s work expanded beyond providing support to trans people: Trans-Fuzja has become a politically engaged organisation with clear goals concerning the legal, social, economic, and human rights situation of transgender people. Trans-Fuzja is now a recognised expert organisation on transgender-specific issues.

The challenge

According to recent statistics, 95% of Polish people self-identify as Catholic and more than 40% actively practise on a weekly basis. Most of the Catholic leadership in Poland promotes restrictive views on gender identity and family structure, which Trans-Fuzja believes has a strong impact on both people’s perceptions of sexuality and the policies carried out by the Polish government. The church’s influence also adversely affects the position of trans people, both legally and socially.

Trans children are increasingly receiving the support and understanding they need.

In 2013, for example, Trans-Fuzja received three requests for help from parents of trans children. Two of these requests concerned assistance in persuading schools to acknowledge the child’s gender identity and allow them to function accordingly. Another request came from a parent who was in danger of being denied parental rights for allowing their child to function according to the child’s gender identity. In all three cases, members of Trans-Fuzja’s counselling group visited the schools and held meetings with the principal and teaching staff. In all cases, Trans-Fuzja’s influence had a positive impact. The children who were fighting for proper recognition received the help they needed and are now treated according to their gender identity in

Prior to 2008, trans people were largely invisible in Poland: most trans people kept their identities silent and few people were familiar with transgender issues. Moreover, the gender recognition process in Poland is one of the most complicated in Europe: one must obtain a diagnosis, go through a long civil court case involving one’s parents, and endure numerous, often degrading, physical examinations to obtain gender recognition.

Trans rights as human rights

The visibility of trans people as a group and recognition of the human rights abuses they face has increased significantly thanks to Trans-Fuzja’s work. As awareness and recognition of the organisation has grown, the group has received more and more requests for help, counselling, and legal aid. Trans-Fuzja considers its connection with trans kids and their families particularly important. Through counselling, legal support, mediation, and the provision of information to schools, trans children are increasingly receiving the support and understanding they need, both at school and in the wider community. Trans-Fuzja sees this work as an important part of its effort to change everyday attitudes and behaviours.

1. While Mama Cash normally uses the term “trans*” with an asterisk rather than “trans,” Trans-Fuzja does not. Here we use Trans-Fuzja’s preferred term.
their school environments. The parent of the third child succeeded in maintaining parental rights.

Trans-Fuzja has collected many anecdotal accounts from people who kept silent about their gender identity for years, and finally dared to ‘come out’ as trans to friends, co-workers, and others around them. Many have had positive experiences. “Their families, colleagues, and peers have seen news items on TV,” Trans-Fuzja explains. “They know Anna Grodzka [the former president of Trans-Fuzja and member of Parliament until 2015]. Trans people and the issues they face are known [to] a wide audience, and this makes a huge difference for those of us identifying trans.”

Trans-Fuzja believes that none of its success would have been possible if it were not an organisation led by trans people, and if it were not aiming for structural change alongside of providing support. “There used to be an organisation in Poland working for trans rights, but there was no trans leadership,” explains Trans-Fuzja. “This was why it never really took off, and why it ceased to exist eventually.” The fact that advocacy for trans rights is led by trans people—that its face is a trans face—is very important in Trans-Fuzja’s thinking, both for trans people and for recognition purposes. “Visibility makes all the difference,” says the group. “People are informed. They know where to find us for support.” Moreover, the group believes that visibility is important for reaching allies and the general public. “We exist now, we have a face. That makes the difference.”

In addition to providing support and conducting outreach, since its establishment in 2008 Trans-Fuzja has advocated to change the legal procedure for gender recognition. Progress toward this goal received a considerable boost in October 2011 when Anna Grodzka, then president of Trans-Fuzja, was elected to the Polish parliament, becoming the first transgender parliamentarian in Poland. After Grodzka’s election, the Polish government promised to address the regulations on gender identity and recognition in Poland. When negotiations over a draft of a new law got underway, Trans-Fuzja had established itself as the expert civil society organisation on the issue, earning it a key seat at the negotiating table as a member of the governmental working group on the new law.

Trans-Fuzja ultimately succeeded in ensuring that respect for trans people’s human rights was included in the proposed new Gender Accordance Act. In 2015 the group celebrated a major victory when the legislation passed both chambers of the Polish parliament. Despite this significant achievement, however, the President vetoed the law in October. In response, Trans-Fuzja mobilised over 3,000 people to call on the parliament to overturn the veto. Although their call went unanswered, Trans-Fuzja’s advocacy efforts yielded other positive results. The Ministry of Health, for example, committed to improving provision of health care to trans people, including explicitly ending insurance restrictions on access to trans-specific health care.

Trans-Fuzja has also been successful in engaging institutions like the police and the national ombudsman, whose mandate includes human rights and gender. Trans-Fuzja helped the ombudsman understand that this mandate includes transgender rights issues. The group successfully pushed the ombudsman to take action on individual cases for gender recognition that were taking an unacceptably long time. In 2013 the ombudsman went so far as to organise a conference on trans human rights and to prioritise trans human rights as one of the four topics that would be monitored by the office’s research unit. Meanwhile, the Polish police included a chapter about trans people in its new toolkit for staff on human rights issues. The fact that the content of the chapter was developed in consultation with Trans-Fuzja is evidence of the group’s increasing authority.

**The tools for influence**

“When we started our idea was . . . to make change,” explains Trans-Fuzja. “We did not know how though. We started with five, six people, with little clue of how to make change,
and no recognition by anyone as a player in the political scene. The biggest change between where we were then and where we are now is that we have tools now to do advocacy, to influence. We also have the management tools. We worked from home, kept our documents in various places. We worked from project to project. Now we have become an actual organisation, with space, with dedicated staff, with an advocacy agenda, in addition to the community and education work we do. Also, importantly, all of this is done by professional trans activists. Our mindset changed, our mindset as a community. Now we are heard, we are recognised, as a human rights organisation, as experts, and as professionals. This was not in our plan when we started. We had no plan.”

Originally the organisation’s work was done exclusively by volunteers: Trans-Fuzja chose to prioritise its educational and advocacy work over paying staff and renting an office. In 2012, however, the organisation secured a grant from the Open Society Foundation to establish an office and create three part-time paid staff positions. At the same time, Trans-Fuzja continues to benefit from increasing engagement from trans people and allies in its work. Trans-Fuzja volunteers include psychologists who offer counselling, lawyers who have been involved in advocacy for the proposed gender recognition legislation, and communication experts that support Trans-Fuzja’s campaigning. In total, 35 people regularly work for the organisation on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, like other young trans organisations, it remains a challenge for Trans-Fuzja to fill all governance positions with qualified trans people.

Although Trans-Fuzja is organised as a foundation and is not membership-based, community-building is an important part of its work. “People feel they are part of the community when we do social events,” the group explains. “The monthly trans party in Warsaw, movie nights, the support groups in various towns—we hope to see those become independent organisations.” The group wants to replicate its success in Lublin, where a group of trans people organised an independent support group following workshops conducted by Trans-Fuzja. “This has become the first trans support group in the Eastern part of the country,” Trans-Fuzja explains. “There are LGBT organisations in different cities that can help [in] forming local trans organisations.”

“How is it a movement?” Trans-Fuzja asks. “We’d call it a movement if there was something besides Trans-Fuzja. One of the LGBT orgs has lots of trans members. . . . We see much more engagement of trans people in activism.” While Trans-Fuzja’s constituency has grown and more trans people are engaging in activism, Trans-Fuzja believes that “trans people are too often still supporting the work, not leading it.” Trans-Fuzja collaborates with a large number of LGBT rights, human rights and feminist organisations, in joint advocacy initiatives and in an effort to work towards inclusion of trans people and trans human rights in these organisations’ and movements’ agendas. The interest from other organisations in such collaboration has significantly increased in the past year and Trans-Fuzja sees change: “The number of spaces opened for trans people has definitely grown beyond our expectations, with feminist organisations and cisgender LGB spaces working on increasing their inclusive agenda.” The group appreciates support from LGBT rights and human rights organisations for trans human rights issues, but laments the fact that “the face of trans rights is not always a trans face yet.” The group adds: “We are working to change that.”

For its own part, Trans-Fuzja supports other social justice groups and initiatives by opening its multi-purpose office space to them. The Pride organising committee and a group of LGBTQ people with disabilities are among the groups that meet at Trans-Fuzja’s office. Trans support group meetings and movie nights are also held there, as are trans friends and parents group meetings. Trans-Fuzja also provides support and expertise, and exchanges information with emerging trans organisations in other Central and Eastern European countries, including Trans-Fuzia Slovakia and Insight Ukraine (a Mama Cash grantee). The group engages in various regional and international initiatives and events, ranging
Role of Mama Cash

In 2010 Trans-Fuzja’s budget was just €2,500, derived exclusively from individual and corporate donations, and allocations from the 1% tax programme. (Polish citizens can donate 1% of their personal income tax to charities). Trans-Fuzja received its first grant, from Mama Cash, at the end of 2010. Trans-Fuzja describes the grant as instrumental in building its organisational strategies and skills, and enabling it to mature into a small but strong organisation with visibility, credibility, and influence. The grant helped Trans-Fuzja approach other donors and secure additional funding which it eventually used to rent an office and create paid staff positions.

By 2013 the group’s budget had grown to almost €60,000, with funding from five institutional donors, including Mama Cash. Trans-Fuzja describes Mama Cash’s support as “more than helpful. . . and not just when it comes to grant-related activities or issues.” Specifically, Trans-Fuzja valued the support Mama Cash staff offered during its process of professionalisation, as it restructured its governance system and developed its long-term strategy.

From 2010 to 2015, Trans-Fuzja received a total of €82,000 from Mama Cash.

[This story of change is based on documents Trans-Fuzja submitted as part of Mama Cash’s monitoring and evaluation during the grant periods; notes of progress review conversations conducted over skype; and an interview with Wiktor Dynarski of Trans-Fuzja. All quotes are Wiktor’s. The original case study was researched and compiled by Esther Vonk.]
Mama Cash
PO Box 15686
1001 ND Amsterdam
The Netherlands

T  +31 (0)20 515 87 00
F  +31 (0)20 515 87 99
E  info@mamacash.org
I  www.mamacash.org /
    www.mamacash.nl

Bank: IBAN NLS8INGB0000000528