



Make culture change, not war

Why the fight for rights needs the fight for culture change

By **Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** | Metropolitan Group Creative Director/President

If the first months of 2012 were a movie, it could be called *Culture Wars: The Sequel*. The state of Washington recently became the seventh state to legalize gay marriage, in order to confer equal rights, status and name for the commitments of its residents, queer and straight. Within minutes of the law passing, opponents decried its damaging impact and proclaimed they would put its repeal on the ballot.¹ Last year, the state of Maryland passed the Dream Act, allowing undocumented young people who had grown up in the state (most of whom were brought to the U.S. as small children), graduated from high school, or served in the military to pay in-state tuition for college. Immediately, anti-immigration advocates announced they would put its repeal on the ballot.² As healthcare reform moves toward implementation and a compromise is reached to have insurance companies, rather than faith-based employers, cover birth control, members of Congress put up amendments to exempt companies from providing birth control.³

None of these reactions is surprising. In fact, they are generally expected as the natural ebb

and flow in the fight for rights. But they are also indicators that our focus on securing rights and policies is vulnerable, lacks resiliency, and does not equate to changes in our lived experience if we do not also invest in changing culture.

Many progressive social entrepreneurs (myself included) shudder at the term culture wars. It brings up frames of self-righteousness, sanctimonious behavior, hypocritical definitions of morality, and inappropriate impositions of religious or political values frames upon others. However, by focusing so much on policy-based changes to rights, we inadvertently cede the work and power of values-based culture change to those who would reduce the very rights we fight for. I am not arguing that we need a culture war arms race. I am arguing that focusing on changing rights, as critical as it is, without focusing on changing culture will not succeed in establishing the lasting social change we desire.

Over the last two decades, we have seen real progress in ensuring basic rights based upon

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sexual orientation. From fair workplace and public accommodation laws to gay marriage laws and the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, advocates for equity have won 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. Let's think about this. The rights of a group of Americans are used as political bait, and it is seen as par for the course.

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. Not only are we stalled on creating pathways to citizenship, but, in state after state, ballot initiatives have taken away rights and, in this political landscape, it has become accepted to demonize immigrants. The fight for changes in enforcement, naturalization, and other policies is critical, as is the need to move our cultural expectation to one that values immigrants and immigration.

And, of course, in recent weeks the highly politicized debate regarding covering contraception has sparked a resurgence of stereotypes and sexist frames that accuse women of being sluts and prostitutes if they speak out 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 that our culture still harbors gender bias and stigma.

To some degree what we need is to clarify the finish line. Victory is not being afforded rights and codifying tolerance, rather it is shifting the culture to value, respect, and appreciate both the rights and the being of people. If we can do so successfully, we positively impact both people's lived experiences and 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 at the front lines and in the strategy huddles driving 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 is the fuel that allows for cultural norms that perpetuate this disparity. Take for example the gay rights movement and how triggering the stigma surrounding gays and children and gay parenting are often used in ads and campaigns opposed to everything from fair workplace laws to marriage equality. By identifying, seeking to understand, and working to address underlying stigma, we can demystify it and remove its power. Check out the work of Face Value,⁴ a group that is building a national coalition and conducting research that focuses on understanding the underlying stigma and effective methods to address it, in order to move our culture beyond seeing tolerance as the end goal and to create a society that fully embraces the queer community.

Connecting with Values

Culture change is a longer road and, as its goal is more lasting than changing policy, this requires connecting with people's closely held 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 values. So much of the immigration reform narrative has been driven by frames that position immigrants

as illegals or cheats with the desired response of criminalization, forcing employers and educators to be enforcers, and driving increased deportation. Yet, we also have the opportunity to look at the majority of immigrants as family providers, hard workers, and aspirants to the American Dream. Advocates for progressive immigration reform can connect to the values of keeping families together, working hard, and helping those in danger or need. 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.⁵

Invest in Relationships

To counter stigma and connect with values requires trusted relationships. Stigma is not dissolved in a 30-second spot. People do not engage in a values discussion 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 with whom we can 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, which is why Basic Rights Oregon⁶ has made the hard choice and a significant investment in conducting deep grassroots outreach and supporting gays and straights who stand for marriage equality. They are helping people engage in dialogue with their friends, family, and communities about the importance of marriage equality, separate from advocating for a specific bill. They are investing in building relationships and changing the culture first in order to create fertile ground for policy changes that will last.

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 key is that 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? We must dedicate ourselves to making culture, not culture wars.

Links:

¹ Washington:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/13/us-gaymarriage-washington-idUSTRE81c15120120213>

² Maryland:

http://www.casademaryland.org/index.php?option=com_%20%20content&view=article&id=1368

³ Birth control:

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/17/us/politics/birth-control-coverage-rule-debated-at-house-hearing.html?_r=1

⁴ Face Value: <http://facevalueproject.org>

⁵ NIF: <http://www.immigrationforum.org>

⁶ Basic Rights Oregon: <http://www.basicrights.org>



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