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Gay Rights and Reproductive Rights: Why Don't People Get the Connection?

Supporters of New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center gathered on the evening of November 4 to watch history unfold as the nation, inspired by a powerful vision for change, elected Senator Barack Obama as its next president. The room shook as the audience erupted in applause, whistles, foot-stomping and cheers, as President-elect Obama told us, "It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled. [...] We are, and always will be, the United States of America."

And yet, change is a long and difficult process and one measured not by one person, one election, one presidency. As critical a marker as this election is, true change depends upon a collective vision and movement towards peace and equity for all. And, as a nation, that night we also voted, on state ballots, on what we consider to be our rights and who deserves them.

Three states banned same-sex marriage, bringing the total number to 40 of states with explicit bans on same-sex marriage and other forms of partner recognition, such as domestic partnerships and civil unions. At the same time, voters in three states approved reproductive justice measures, a move that preserved components of women and girl's rights to decide when and if to create families (in this case, via pregnancy), to safely engage in sex for reasons other than procreation and to reproductive and sexual health.

The interesting thing is that the constitutional amendments and legislation banning same-sex marriage effectively withhold elements of the above rights - to family, reproduction and sexuality - from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Banning marriage, civil unions, domestic partnerships and even, as in the case of Virginia, contractual agreements that are deemed to replicate marriage rights, by definition limits our abilities to form families, as we cannot legally provide for and protect each other. For

example, we are denied the legal rights of married couples to jointly parent, adopt or provide foster care; purchase joint home, auto or life insurance policies; pass Social Security or pension plan benefits to each other; make medical decisions on each other's behalf; inherit from each other in the absence of a will; and use sick leave to care for a partner or child. There are 1,138 such rights automatically conferred to married couples, designed in large part to protect the couple and their families, which are denied to LGBT couples.

Control over and choice about our family/reproductive and sexual rights and health is critical for women, girls and LGBT people. In recognition of this, and as further commitment to our official position as a pro-choice organization, the Center created a national organizing initiative, Causes in Common, as a working alliance between LGBT and reproductive rights activists. We must, of course, continue the work towards full recognition and rights of LGBT persons and the work of protecting and expanding the reproductive rights of women and girls. But the impetus to create Causes in Common is that these rights are not mutually exclusive - rights for LGBT people include the rights to create family, rights for women and girls include the rights to create families if and when they choose, and rights for all of these individuals include the right to adult consensual sex. Similarly, as we reflect upon the words of President-Elect Obama, we are called upon not only to recognize, but also nurture, the fact that we are infinitely diverse and intimately linked. And so our rights - the rights of all of us, not simply of LGBT people - include the rights to autonomy in gender expression, the rights of individuals to have control over their own bodies, the right to engage in consensual intimate behavior with partners of one's choosing regardless of sex or gender, the right of all women to safe and affordable abortions and the right of all people to access safe and affordable reproductive technologies and assistance. Many communities across the country acted upon this ideal on November 4 and codified some of the rights just listed. The call is to each of us to now take responsibility for the conferring of all rights to all people.