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Trans Defense Fund LA Analysis

Trans Defense Fund LA (henceforth abbreviated to TDFLA or just TDF) is a Los Angeles-based mutual aid fund and grassroots organization dedicated to raising money to provide self-defense kits to BIPOC trans folks and specifically Black trans women who do sex work. TDFLA addresses the critical intersection between Black and POC trans people, trans women, and sex workers, providing members of these populations with free tools for self-defense, on occasion free beauty + self-care kits, and at other times partners with local queer and Black-led shops and organizations to host events, giveaways, or self-defense classes. TDFLA also regularly boosts other mutual aid funds, gofundmes, Venmos, and Cashapps on their social media and an updating list on their website<sup>1</sup> for direct support to BIPOC trans folks. The organization runs entirely on community-sourced donations through Venmo or Paypal, and sometimes sells zines or stickers to raise funds.

It's no secret that Black, Brown, and Indigenous transfemmes are the most vulnerable subsection of the LGBTQ+ community. The statistics on the TDFLA website state that "One in five trans women report feeling threatened or harassed on an almost daily basis, and 45% of trans women and men report feeling threatened or harassed weekly, compared to 19% of cisgender people. The estimated life expectancy of a Black trans woman is only 35 years old."<sup>2</sup> The source

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<sup>1</sup> "Donate Directly to Trans Folks." *Trans Defense Fund LA*. Shopify, accessed 10 June 2022, <https://transdefensefundla.org/pages/donate-directly-to-trans-folks>.

<sup>2</sup> "About Us." *Trans Defense Fund LA*. Shopify, accessed 10 June 2022, <https://transdefensefundla.org/pages/about-us>.

they pull from is not cited, though the concept is easily corroborated with information from multiple sources such as Susan Stryker's *Transgender History*, which mentions that "the deliberate killing of black trans women has reached an all-time high, with twenty-four known murders in 2016,"<sup>3</sup> and that "Sixteen percent of all transgender people have been incarcerated, including more than 10 percent of trans women and almost half of all black trans people,"<sup>4</sup> policing of course being a huge factor in the dangers posed to the trans population and Black trans women in particular. This is to say nothing of the MMIWG2S (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit) crisis and movement,<sup>5</sup> nor the particular disappearing violence of Brown trans women within carceral immigration systems.<sup>6</sup> When you add a participation in sex work - a marginalized job - on top of these marginalized identities, the danger only intensifies, as A. Revathi, a Hijra, points out in her memoir: "Street based sex work is risky and dangerous. Only a sex worker knows that. There is no guarantee that you will get back home."<sup>7</sup>

The solution that Trans Defense Fund LA provides is a simple one: arming the girls with self-defense tools. A standard free kit comes with a small how-to guide by TDFLA, pepper spray, a window breaker, two variations on a self-defense keychain, and a stun gun.<sup>8</sup> The items are largely sourced from a local Black-owned self-defense supplier, and the organization prioritizes giving them away to transfemme sex workers of color, particularly Black transfemmes. However, their giving out of self-defense kits are not reliant on being a binary or

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Stryker. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. (Berkeley, CA; Seal Press, 2017). p. 210.

<sup>4</sup> Stryker. *Transgender History*. p. 208.

<sup>5</sup> "MMIWG2S." Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women. EnvisionIT Solutions, accessed 10 June 2022. <https://www.csvanw.org/mmiw/>.

<sup>6</sup> Alisa Soloman. "Trans/Migrant: Christiana Madrazo's All-American Story," in *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings*, eds. Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú (Minneapolis, MN; University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> A. Revathi. *A Life in Trans Activism* (New Delhi, India: Zubaan Publishers, 2016) p. 72, Kindle.

<sup>8</sup> Trans Defense Fund Los Angeles. Photo of kit contents labeled "Kit Update." *Instagram*, January 22, 2021. Accessed 10 June 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKXNDFOAXMG/>.

non-binary or even necessarily femme trans person, even if these requests are filled first. This is equally true when talking about their initiatives to provide self-care/beauty supplies and boosting outside mutual aid requests. Thus, the only gatekeeping requirements TDFLA reportedly cares about are 1) one's self-identified status as BIPOC, and 2) one's self-identified status as any type of trans identity, thus allowing them to pry open binary/non-binary tensions and, well, binaries.

TDFLA began in August of 2020 as a standard gofundme project by Nikki Nguyen, and has since expanded into a proper mutual aid organization that is (presumably) volunteer-run. As of yet the organization does not work in coalitions or have any (official) branches in other cities, though a similar mutual aid group in Eugene, Oregon popped up on Instagram in 2021<sup>9</sup> and doesn't seem to have updated since pride month of that year. Not much is known about the exact specificity of the folks TDFLA delivers to except what can be found based on the short 24hr Instagram "stories" that they repost either in their own stories or in their grid from time to time. They seem to be reaching their goal of providing self-defense tools to Black (or otherwise POC) trans women and transfemmes who may or may not be engaged in sex work, and in their kit request form they also specify that they prioritize disabled folks within these intersections, though nothing else about disabled BIPOC trans sex workers is mentioned on their Instagram or website. Regardless, a cursory look at their social media finds that these kits do indeed go to vulnerable non-white transfemmes who, presumably due to the above factors, is lower-middle class at the very most.

In the last six months or so, TDFLA has also done in-person beauty and wellness gift bag giveaways or 'popups' outside Black-owned businesses in LA. Some queer theorists might say that certain concepts of 'beauty' and 'wellness,' particularly when it comes to trans women

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<sup>9</sup> Queer and Trans Defense Fund. Photo advertising Eugene Defense Fund's 2021 gofundme. *Instagram*, March 9 2021. Accessed 10 June 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMNkY6eB1xJ/>.

(re)creating themselves, inherently falls into traps of Westernization, whitewashing, and even “equivalent forms of commodity fetish,”<sup>10</sup> but TDFLA argues that “access to skincare (and beauty) products is a privilege. We want to see a world where folks have access to not only safety tools but also quality self-care goods!! [sic] TGNCI POC deserve to treat themselves and get treated out and should not have to spend hundreds of dollars by doing so.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, theorists and activists like DasGupta cite beauty, selfies, bodily presentation and body fantasies for BIPOC trans women and trans migrants in particular as “through protest, the transmigrant demands access to a pleasurable and significant skin. Her transformation signifies her desire to create and live in a different body and nation.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, not only is TDFLA allowing BIPOC and migrant transfemmes to protect their futures, but to create and live out a better one.

I haven’t come across many (if at all) criticisms or scrutiny of the Trans Defense Fund or the people who run it, though I do personally have some concerns. It seems that not a lot is known about the team behind TDFLA besides Ngyuen, its founder and the person who set up the initial gofundme. This makes me wonder if there are any Black or Indigenous transfemmes on the team at all - which wouldn’t necessarily be a problem, but has a potential to create issues should the team ever take on a project that their primary audience - Black transfemme sex workers - doesn’t need, or disapproves of. However, there may not be much information about the team because of the inherent risk in running a non-governmental mutual aid group, especially for those of profoundly marginalized intersectional identities - they may be protecting themselves as much as they can. Mutual aid in general is not like an NGO in the way that board members, employees, and volunteers are all spelled out on their website, and they are not

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<sup>10</sup> Aren Z. Aizura. “Where Health and Beauty Meet: Femininity and Racialization in Thai Cosmetic Surgery Clinics.” *Asian Studies Review*, vol 33 (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2009). pp. 304-305.

<sup>11</sup> Trans Defense Fund Los Angeles. Collection of photos featuring various QTBIPOC at a health and wellness popup. *Instagram*, January 10, 2022. Accessed 10 June 2022. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CYj70tKP2\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CYj70tKP2_/).

<sup>12</sup> Debanuj DasGupta. “Rescripting Trauma: Trans/Gender Detention Politics and Desire in the United States.” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, vol. 41 no. 4 (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2018). p. 326.

expected to provide that information either. This lack of transparency can thus be both a blessing and a curse. If donation money should ever be siphoned off by a bad actor, that too has no safety net; but then again, neither do NGOs, truthfully. It's a system of hope and trust. I also wish more of the programming the org came up with was explicitly accessible for disabled folks, or that they did a special drive for disabled QTBIPOC transfemmes, considering this particular intersection is only mentioned once on their kit form and nowhere else in their other materials.

I personally believe that Trans Defense Fund Los Angeles is doing great things within the context of a grassroots mutual aid group. TDFLA supports the most marginalized citizens of Los Angeles by gifting needed resources to live out their lives in safety and health. While it is true that the clouded transparency is somewhat worrying, and that the organization itself is only a stopgap solution in a political and social climate where BIPOC trans women are murdered in greater numbers each year, the services provided are invaluable. Even in a perfect world, organizations that connect people with safety, money, and self-defense resources will always be necessary, and thus it stands to reason that even in the darkest times, arming the girls with non-lethal weaponry is a step towards liberation.

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