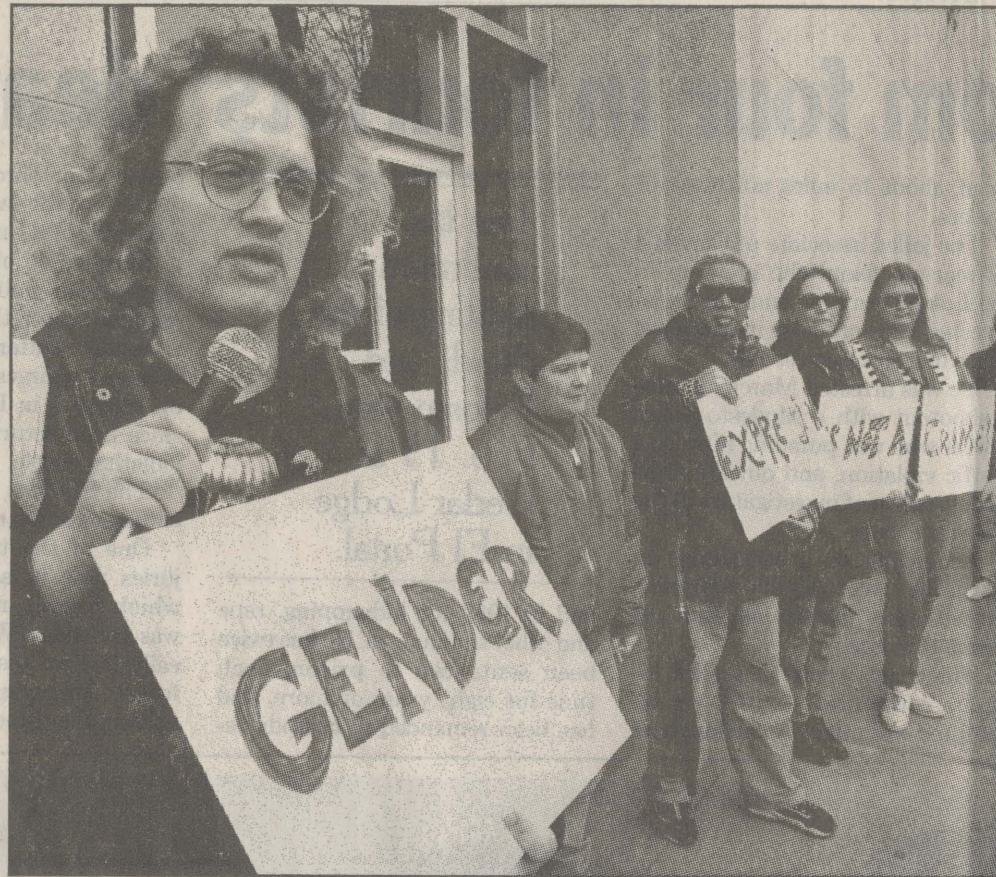


Nadia Cabeza, left, formerly known as John Graham, speaks during a demonstration by the group TransAction, alleging harassment by police and mistreatment by jail personnel.



AP/PAUL SAKUMA

Transgender coalition claims cop harassment

Protesters tell of bad experiences

By Jim Herron Zamora
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

A coalition of transgender people claims they are subjected to "systematic harassment" by police officers and sheriff's deputies by being verbally abused either on the street or in jail.

"When I walk in the Tenderloin ... I feel the police want to stop me because I am transgender," said Nadia Cabeza, who said police frequently have assumed she is a prostitute and erroneously arrested her.

The Police Department and

sheriff's office deny the claims.

But the new coalition TransAction announced at a news conference outside the Hall of Justice on Wednesday that police in San Francisco pick on people who have changed their sex.

"We're seeing transgendered persons who are the victims of police brutality and the numbers are on the rise," said Shawna Virago.

More than a dozen people spoke of bad experiences with police. Several cited cases in other Bay Area cities, but most directed their complaints at law enforcement in San Francisco.

Some of the speakers admitted they were former prostitutes. But they said police use that as an excuse to harass them because they are transgender people.

Veronika Cauley, a member of San Francisco's Veterans Affairs Commission, said she has been verbally harassed by police or mistakenly stopped for questioning.

"I was a prostitute in a past life," Cauley said. "But that doesn't excuse what has been done to me."

Officer Sherman Ackerson said the San Francisco Police Department does not single out "any group for any reason. We do not target transgender people for any reason. We are treating them like any other person in San Francisco."

Several speakers complained about practices in the San Francisco Jail, saying they have been strip searched to determine their gender — an alleged violation of civil

rights. They also complained of being subjected to verbal abuse and harassment behind bars.

The rally was in part to show support for Victoria Schneider, a transsexual who has a lawsuit pending that alleges she was subjected to an illegal strip search by officers following a 1996 misdemeanor arrest.

"When the police strip search women, it's as though we've been raped. It strips us of our dignity and our self-esteem," Schneider said Wednesday.

The City has denied wrongdoing and is fighting Schneider's suit.

Sheriff Michael Hennessey said Wednesday that it is against his department's policy to strip-search in order to determine gender. He said that deputies will perform strip searches only if a suspect's recent criminal history indicates use of drugs, weapons or violence.

"That applies to all arrestees in that category whether they are transgender or not," the sheriff said. "This is in order to keep drugs and weapons out of the jail system."

Hennessey also said his department does not tolerate deputies harassing inmates. He said the jail system has made special efforts to accommodate transgenders and keep "any inmate who is believed to be vulnerable" away from the general population.

"We assess every single person for possible harm," Hennessey said. "We take that very seriously."

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