

Outright International announces new executive director

Maria Sjödin to succeed Jessica Stern

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OutRight Action International Executive Director **Maria Sjödin**. (Photo by Carlos Alayo/carlosalayo.com)

OutRight Action International on Thursday announced it has named Maria Sjödin as its next executive director.

Sjödin was executive director of RSFL, the largest LGBTQ and intersex rights organization in Sweden, from 2005-2014. Sjödin had been OutRight Action International's acting executive director since last September.

They will succeed Jessica Stern, who President Joe Biden in June 2021 named as special U.S. envoy for the promotion of LGBTQ and intersex rights abroad.

"I'm super honored and couldn't be more excited to carry on the work that we're doing at OutRight at the moment," Sjödin told the Washington Blade on Wednesday during an exclusive interview. "I'm super grateful and extremely happy."

Julie Dorf, who is now a senior advisor for the Center for Global Equality, founded the group that is now OutRight Action International in 1990.

Sjödin noted OutRight Action International, which has staff in 12 countries and works with advocacy groups in many others, is the world's largest LGBTQ and intersex rights organization. OutRight Action International is the only LGBTQ- and intersex-specific organization with a permanent presence at the U.N.

OutRight Action International earlier this year launched LBQ Connect, a program that seeks to bolster the work of activists who identify as lesbian, bisexual or queer women. Sjödin said they plan to continue this initiative as executive director.

"Over the length of my activism, I have often heard LGBTQ women say, you know, we feel invisible, we're not seen, and we don't have enough resources," they told the Blade. "And LBQ connect, has been developed in response to that."

Sjödín said there “has been an enormous progress in a lot of different countries” over the more than two decades they have been in the LGBTQ and intersex rights movement. Sjödín also acknowledged “there’s still a very long way to go.”

“It takes a long time to create the type of change that we need to see,” they said. “There’s a significant pushback from those who don’t believe that we should have rights.”

Sjödín in response to the Blade’s question about the challenges that LGBTQ and intersex people continue to face said anti-transgender rhetoric has “spread as a wildfire.” They also cited the legacy of colonial-era laws that criminalized LGBTQ and intersex people and the reaction to the monkeypox outbreak.

“It starts with the fact that the colonial powers put in place laws around the world that criminalize primarily same sex relations, but in many other cases there are restrictions on gender expressions and gender identities ... there is a long history of homophobia and transphobia,” said Sjödín. “We see it right now with the outbreak of monkeypox. As soon as we heard about the first cases of monkeypox, we knew that okay, soon the leaders are going to come out and blame LGBTIQ people. And just like that it happens again.”

“LGBTIQ people and LGBTIQ communities get blamed for all kinds of things and are used as scapegoats when leaders want to, often I guess, divert attention from their own failings and just push the idea that somehow LGBTIQ people are to blame,” they added.

Sjödín also said “some people seem to think that progress is kind of linear and ... things that we can take for granted now are things that we can always take for granted.”

They spoke with the Blade less than two months after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade*.

Justice Clarence Thomas in his concurrent opinion said the Supreme Court should reconsider the decisions in the Obergefell and Lawrence cases that extended marriage equality to same-sex couples and the right to private, consensual sex.

“There can be enormous and very dangerous rollback of rights that had already been won,” said Sjödin.

Sjödin in response to the Blade’s question about the Biden administration’s support of LGBTQ and intersex rights around the world stressed it “is critical that governments take a stand and promote human rights for LGBTIQ people around the world.”

“The U.S. has an outsized influence on the world, so when it’s on the agenda of the administration it does make a big difference,” said Sjödin.