

Bending Over Backwards: Traditional Sexism and Trans-Woman-Exclusion Policies

*Prejudice usually can't survive close contact with
the people who are supposed to be so despicable,
which is why the propagandists for hate always
preach separation.*

—Patrick Califia¹

OVER THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS, a major focus of my trans activism and writing has been the issue of trans-woman-inclusion in lesbian and women-only spaces. I first heard of the issue back in 1999, around the time that I was beginning to call myself transgendered—about two years before I began my physical transition. At the time, I was voraciously reading everything I could get my hands on related to trans experiences and issues. As I read, I kept stumbling upon past instances of anti-trans-woman discrimination from within the lesbian and feminist communities. These included derogatory anti-trans-woman remarks by influential feminist thinkers such as Mary Daly, Germaine Greer, Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, and of

course Janice Raymond (who, in addition to writing the anti-trans screed *The Transsexual Empire*, tried to convince the National Center for Health Care Technology to deny transsexuals the right to hormones and surgery); stories about transsexual “witch hunts,” in which committed lesbian-feminists like Sandy Stone and Beth Elliott were publicly outed, debased, and exiled from the lesbian community solely for being transsexual; and of course, trans-woman-exclusion policies, such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival’s euphemistically named “womyn-born-womyn-only” policy, which was retroactively instated in the early 1990s after an incident in which a woman named Nancy Burkholder was expelled from the festival when it was discovered that she was trans.²

While I found it disappointing that people who identified as lesbians and as feminists would come down so harshly on another sexual minority, I cannot say that I was really surprised. After all, practically every facet of our society seemed to hate or fear trans people back then, and these incidents seemed more like a symptom of society-wide transphobia rather than something unique or specific to the lesbian community. And as I was giving thought to becoming involved in trans activism myself, there seemed to be plenty of other, more practical and relevant issues for me to take on.

But in the years that followed, I experienced a number of changes in my life that would considerably reshape my views on this matter. For one thing, there was my physical transition and the countless social changes I experienced as a result of being perceived as female. But for me, being trans didn’t merely involve learning how to navigate my way through the world as a woman. I have the privilege of being appropriately gendered as female, so in my day-to-day life, when I am forced to come out to someone,

nine times out of ten it is not as a transsexual, but as a lesbian. It happens every time somebody asks me if I am seeing someone and I reply, “Actually, I have a wife.” It happens every time Dani and I dare to hold hands or kiss in public. It happens when Dani is not around, but someone assumes that I am a dyke anyway because of the way that I dress, speak, or carry myself.

After my transition, I began to write not only about being transgendered, but about my experiences living in the world as a woman and a dyke after years of being perceived as a straight man. Not surprisingly, most of what I wrote had a definite feminist bent. It seemed impossible for me, as a trans woman, to discuss my journey from male to female without placing it in the context of the differing values our society places on maleness and femaleness, on masculinity and femininity.

Unfortunately, many people tend to artificially separate feminism from transgender activism, as if they are distinct issues that are in no way related. However, I have found that much of the anti-trans discrimination that trans women come across is clearly rooted in traditional sexism. This can be seen in how the media Powers That Be systematically sensationalize, sexualize, and ridicule trans women while allowing trans men to remain largely invisible. It’s why the tranny sex and porn industries catering to straight-identified men do not fetishize folks on the FTM spectrum for their XX chromosomes or their socialization as girls. No, they objectify trans women, because our bodies and our persons are female. I have found that many female-assigned genderqueers and FTM spectrum trans people go on and on about the gender binary system, as if trans people are only ever discriminated against for breaking gender norms. That might be how it seems when the

gender transgression in question is an expression of masculinity. But as someone on the MTF spectrum, I am not dismissed for merely failing to live up to binary gender norms, but for expressing my own femaleness and femininity. And personally, I don't feel like I'm the victim of "transphobia" as much as I am the victim of trans-misogyny.

This idea—that much of what is commonly called transphobia is merely traditional sexism in disguise—moved to the forefront of my mind as I began to be invited to do spoken word performances at various queer women's events around the San Francisco Bay Area. While I was welcomed very warmly by most of the women who attended these events, I would sometimes come across certain women who would act dismissively toward me, who seemed bothered by me being there, who acted as if they were granting me a special favor by tolerating my presence, who would make offhand and inappropriate comments about my trans status as if to remind me that I was not a real woman like they were. This sense of ownership and entitlement about being a woman or being lesbian seemed hypocritical to me. After all, as soon as we would walk out the door, all of us would face similar discrimination for being women and for being dykes. But what was most frustrating about the way that many of these women dismissed me was the fact that they seemed to have no problems at all with female-bodied folks expressing masculinity and with trans people on the FTM spectrum attending their events. In other words, they didn't have much of a problem with transgender people per se, just so long as they were male- or masculine-identified rather than female- or feminine-identified.

This privileging of trans men over trans women is not merely a bias held by certain individuals, but rather one that is often

institutionalized within queer women's culture and organizations. These days, it is not uncommon to see the word "trans" used to welcome trans men (but not trans women) on everything from lesbian events to sex surveys and play parties. And even at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, women are no longer defined based on their legal sex, appearance, or self-identification, but on whether or not they were born and raised a girl. And while some performers who identify as transgender and answer to male pronouns are invited to take the festival stage each year, someone like myself—who identifies 100 percent as female—isn't even allowed to stand in the audience.³

As with most forms of prejudice, trans-woman-specific discrimination within the queer women's community seems to proliferate even more in the absence of trans women than in our presence; this is no surprise, as bigots are typically too cowardly to dare have their views openly discussed or debated with the very people they despise. While anti-trans-woman sentiments are generally expressed outside of my view, I still hear about them all the time from my trans male and queer female friends, who often tell me about self-identified dykes in their community who openly discuss lusting after trannybois and trans men one minute, then in the next, deride trans women for being "creepy" and "effeminate."

The popular spin given to this preferential treatment of trans men over trans women states that trans men have been raised female and therefore should have a place in women's and lesbian communities, whereas trans women have experienced male privilege and remain physically male on some level, and therefore should be excluded. However, this argument makes little sense when examined more closely. After all, how can someone who identifies as

female and currently lives as a woman have less in common with women than a male-identified person who has male physical attributes and currently benefits from male privilege? The premise that trans women should be singled out because we “used to be men” is highly suspect. Rather, I believe that this preference for trans men over trans women simply reflects the society-wide inclination to view masculinity as being strong and natural, and femininity as being weak and artificial. In other words, it is a product of traditional sexism.

My appreciation for the ways in which traditional sexism shapes popular assumptions about trans women started to really take shape during 2003 and 2004, as I became involved in Camp Trans, an organization that works to end the exclusion of trans women from women-only spaces, most notably the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. In my work on this issue, I learned firsthand how the occasional anti-trans-woman sentiment I would come across in the relatively trans-friendly Bay Area was just the tip of the iceberg. Some of the women who travel from all over the country to attend Michigan think nothing of wearing their suspicion or hatred of trans women on their sleeves, and they will often make extraordinarily ignorant and insensitive comments about trans women in their attempts to justify our exclusion. I am sure these women believe that they are protecting the values of lesbian and women’s space by opposing our inclusion at all costs, but in reality the specific points they make generally undermine feminist goals and beliefs rather than support them. After all, at its core, feminism is based on the conviction that women are far more than the sex of the bodies that we are born into, and our identities and abilities are capable of transcending the restrictive nature of the

gender socialization we endure during our childhoods. I have yet to meet the person who can explain to me how refusing trans women the right to participate in women’s spaces and events is consistent with this most central tenet of feminism.

Indeed, some of the most common arguments used to deny trans women the right to participate in women-only spaces also happen to be the most antifeminist. For example, many argue that trans women should be barred from women’s spaces because we supposedly still have “male energy.” But by suggesting that trans women possess some mystical “male energy” as a result of having been born and raised male, these women are essentially making the case that men have abilities and aptitudes that women are not capable of.

Another popular excuse for our exclusion is the fact that some trans women have male genitals (as many of us either cannot afford or choose not to have sex reassignment surgery). This “penis” argument not only objectifies trans women by reducing us to our genitals, but propagates the male myth that men’s power and domination somehow arise from the phallus. The truth is, our penises are made of flesh and blood, nothing more. And the very idea that the femaleness of my mind, personality, lived experiences, and the rest of my body can somehow be trumped by the mere presence of a penis can only be described as phallogocentric.

It’s distressing that such phallogocentric arguments, along with related arguments that harp on the idea that trans women “physically resemble” or “look like” men in other ways, are so regularly made by lesbian-feminists, considering that they are based in the society-wide privileging of male attributes over female ones. In what is now considered classic research, sociologists Suzanne Kessler and

Wendy McKenna showed that in our culture, when people (both women and men) gender others, we tend to weigh male visual cues as far more significant than female ones, and almost invariably consider the penis as being the single most important gender cue of all (i.e., its presence trumps all other gender cues; the presence of a vagina does not elicit a similar effect).⁴ In their words, “There seem to be no cues that are definitely female, while there are many that are definitely male. To be male is to ‘have’ something and to be female is to ‘not have’ it.”⁵ Kessler and McKenna view this privileging of male cues as resulting from male-centrism (similar to how people often favor using the pronoun “he” when speaking generically). Taking this into account, it becomes rather obvious that when cissexual women deny trans women the right to participate in women-only spaces because of their own tendency to privilege any “mannish” or “masculine” traits we may have over our many female attributes, they are fostering and promoting male-centrism.

Of course, trans-woman-exclusion cannot be justified solely on the basis that some of us look or act “mannish” or “masculine”—otherwise, butch women would have to be excluded as well. Indeed, in recent years, as feminism itself has shifted away from gender essentialist theories and toward more social constructionist ones, the basis for trans-woman-exclusion is more frequently our male socialization rather than our male biology. This approach also provides convenient intellectual cover for those who wish to include FTM spectrum folks (who were socialized female) in women’s spaces. But once again, such an approach runs counter to the precepts of feminism. After all, feminists regularly insist that women are capable of doing anything men can despite having been raised as girls and encouraged to take a subordinate position

to men. Thus, women can (and often do) transcend their female socialization. It remains unclear why these same feminists would paradoxically insist that trans women are unable to similarly transcend our male socialization.

The fact that socialization is a specious argument became obvious to me during an exchange I had with a trans-woman-exclusionist who insisted that my being raised male was the sole reason in her mind for me to be disqualified from entering women-only spaces. So I asked her if she was open to allowing trans women who are anatomically male but who have been socialized female—something that’s not all that uncommon for MTF children these days.⁶ She admitted to having concerns about their attending. Then, I asked how she would feel about a person who was born female yet raised male against her will, and who, after a lifetime of pretending to be male in order to survive, finally reclaimed her female identity upon reaching adulthood. After being confronted with this scenario, the woman conceded that she would be inclined to let this person enter women-only space, thus demonstrating that her argument about male socialization was really an argument about biology after all. In fact, after being pressed a bit further, she admitted that the scenario of a young girl who was forced against her will into boyhood made her realize how traumatic and dehumanizing male socialization could be for someone who was female-identified. This, of course, is exactly how many trans women experience their own childhoods.

Another popular reason used to justify trans-woman-exclusion is cissexual women’s fears that we will somehow make women-only spaces unsafe. For example, it’s common for trans-woman-exclusionists to express concerns over the possibility that we might

assault other women—an accusation that is entirely unfounded, as there is no credible evidence to suggest that trans women are any more violent or abusive than women as a whole. Even in San Francisco (the U.S. city most likely to have the highest percentage of trans women per capita), there has never been a single police report of a trans woman harassing another woman in a bathroom.⁷ Others argue that trans women could potentially trigger those who have survived physical or sexual violence at the hands of men—a suggestion that is offensive not only because it is rooted in the male-centric tendency to view trans women as “men” (which is the result of privileging male attributes over female ones), but because it denies the fact that many trans women are physically violated and sexually assaulted for being women, too. But what I find most dumbfounding about lesbian-feminist arguments that trans women might somehow threaten cissexual women’s safety is how eerily similar they are to the arguments some heterosexual women have made in the past in their attempts to exclude lesbians from women’s spaces and organizations.⁸

This is why it’s so disappointing for me to see members of my own dyke community practically bending over backwards, embracing hypocrisy, in a last-ditch effort to prevent trans women from entering lesbian and women-only spaces. Women who are appalled by the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding homosexuality seem to find no fault with Michigan for enforcing a similar policy regarding gender. Women who have struggled against patriarchal ideals of what makes a “real” woman think nothing of turning around and using the word “real” against trans women. Women who would be outraged if an all-male panel were to discuss women’s or lesbian issues in *Newsweek* or *Time* magazine see

nothing wrong with the fact that, in the last few years, several of the largest lesbian and feminist magazines have run articles and roundtable discussions on the issue of Michigan and trans-woman-inclusion without inviting any trans women to participate.⁹ It’s sad to see women so desperate to prevent trans women from attending Michigan that they will actually try to make the ridiculous case that this “womyn’s” festival was never actually meant to be an event for women, but rather for those who were born and raised as girls.

I am sure that a lot of the same people who support Michigan’s trans-woman-exclusion policy, or who sit on the fence on this issue, would have a very different opinion if it were their own inclusion that was being debated. Can you imagine how angry these very same women would be if the largest annual women-only event in the world was run by straight women who decided to exclude queer women from attending? Can you imagine how insulted they would feel if they were told that they were not allowed to enter women-only space because they were not “real” women, or that their attraction to women might threaten the safety of other women? Can you imagine how condescending they would find it if straight women talked to them about being queer-positive one minute, then turned around and purchased a \$400 ticket to a “queer-free” women’s event the next?

As much as I am bothered by the long history of trans women being expelled from the lesbian community during the ’70s, ’80s, and early ’90s, I am willing to chalk that up to the fact that the transgender movement hadn’t fully come into its own yet, and there were few people who were able to articulate a clear message for transgender rights and inclusion at the time. But now, in 2007, there is no legitimate excuse for trans-woman-exclusion in lesbian

and women-only spaces. Most LGB groups have long since added Ts to the ends of their acronyms. And while there was a time when trans-inclusion debates only took place on the outskirts of the queer community, they now take place in workplaces and courthouses all across the United States. In the last twenty years, nine states (Minnesota, Rhode Island, New Mexico, California, Maine, Illinois, Hawaii, Washington, and New Jersey) and scores of cities and counties across the country have extended their nondiscrimination laws to explicitly include transgender people.¹⁰ It's downright embarrassing that so many folks within the queer women's community, who generally pride themselves on their progressive politics, have managed to fall behind Peoria, Illinois, and El Paso, Texas, in recognizing and respecting trans people's gender identities.

But trans-woman-exclusion in lesbian and women-only spaces is not merely a trans rights issue—if it were, I would consider it to be important, but I probably would not have devoted so much of my time and energy to it. The main reason why trans-woman-exclusion evokes such passion and frustration in me is precisely because it is both anti-trans and antifeminist. And as a feminist, it gravely disturbs me that other self-described feminists are so willing to overlook or purposefully ignore how inherently sexist trans-woman-exclusion policies and politics are: They favor trans men over trans women, they rampantly objectify trans female bodies, and they privilege trans women's appearances, socialization, and the sex others assigned to us at birth over our persons, our minds, and our identities.

And what saddens me even more than the irrational trans-misogynistic fear and hatred displayed by the vocal minority who most adamantly oppose our inclusion is the apathy of the silent majority of queer women and feminists who enable that prejudice: those

who continue to attend women's events that exclude trans women; those who excuse or choose not to confront antifeminist/anti-trans-woman comments and actions made by members of their own community; those who tacitly give credence to antifeminist/anti-trans-woman rhetoric by referring to the issue of trans-woman-exclusion as a "controversy" or a "debate." I would submit to them that there has never been a legitimate debate regarding this issue, as the overwhelming majority of dialogues and discourses on this subject have taken place among cissexual women in the absence of any trans women.

Perhaps the most naive and condescending refrain apologists for the trans-woman-exclusionists make is that these apologists are working hard to change these women-only organizations and spaces from within. This is a seriously flawed notion. If you look back at history, there has not been a single instance where people have overcome a deeply entrenched prejudice without first being forced to interact with the people they detest. Mere words cannot dispel bigoted stereotypes and fears; only personal experiences can. The queer rights movement would not have made the progress that it has if activists merely relied on queer-positive straight people to lobby on our behalf, to speak as our proxies. Social progress was only made through both the frontline work of outspoken activists shouting, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" and that of committed straight allies who absolutely refused to tolerate anti-queer remarks and discrimination from members of their own communities. Similarly, I entreat all feminists and all queer women to recognize that the divisive issue of trans-woman-exclusion will continue to be with us as long as we fail to directly confront and repudiate antifeminist/anti-trans-woman policies and rhetoric wherever they exist.