

Ask Matt: The Politics of Dating a Trans Woman

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Abstract

A reader writes: I've always considered myself to be very well educated on the different letters in our acronym. However, all it took was one date with a trans woman to realize that I am not. I am an FAAB genderqueer individual, so, of course I know all about the gender issues with public accommodations, [...]

Article

A reader writes:

I've always considered myself to be very well educated on the different letters in our acronym. However, all it took was one date with a trans woman to realize that I am not. I am an FAAB genderqueer individual, so, of course I know all about the gender issues with public accommodations, being misgendered, etc. However, as we talked politics, and, specifically, LGBT politics, I realized that there is a whole world out there that I know nothing about. She told me about the HBS (Harry Benjamin Society) contingent of the transsexual movement that wants everyone to live stealth. She told me about the pain of being excluded from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and events like it, and of her fear of going to the women's group at the LGBTQ center for fear of not being accepted. She also told me about how lesbians might treat me if I ever got serious about her, because many lesbians have serious issues with trans women. I've encountered discrimination within our own community with regard to trans people and bisexual people. It often feels like we are LG vs. BT instead of LGBT. In fact, I have come across many lesbians and gay men who think we should have stayed 'gay and lesbian. I just don't quite know how to handle all of these issues all the time, though. Something tells me that dating this woman who I like so much is going to come with a whole new set of challenges. So far, it seems she is more than worth it, though! Any resources, opinions, and education you can give would be greatly appreciated!

I'm glad that you feel that the joy of being with your new partner outweighs all of the challenges involved, because I think it does. And if the politics become too much for either of you, I suggest that you seek out new communities that accept both of you and your relationship. They are out there. You just have to find them.

Let's look at the concerns that you have expressed, one at a time:

1. There are women who call themselves HBSers or maybe who others refer to as HBSers, and sometimes the politics can get a little heated. My understanding of the main issue (and I could be wrong - I hope readers will correct me) is that some women who were born transsexual - who had a medical condition at

birth that caused them to be misidentified as male, and that they have corrected through hormones and surgery - feel that they have been damaged by the “transgender movement.” They feel that they were getting along fine and that they were accepted in society and not harshly judged until this political movement came along and lumped them under an “umbrella” that they did not ask to be under or want to be under. They feel that this has negatively affected them and stigmatized them.

I can’t say that they want everyone to live stealth. My understanding is that they do not want to be lumped in with a larger “transgender movement” or under a “transgender umbrella,” which I believe that many of them see as socially constructed rather than medically based, and they feel that this inclusion has been forced upon them.

I am aware that there has been a great deal of hostility back and forth between members of various factions of this debate, and I think that sometimes the hostility can be overwhelming for all “sides.” When the discussion does not degenerate into name-calling and threats, I think there are valid points to be made by all parties involved.

I have not seen this, at least not to this extent, in the trans man community, and because I’m not a trans woman or a woman of transsexual history, I stay out of it. I feel it’s not my place to become involved. But with regard to your girlfriend and yourself, I would also recommend staying away from places of hostility, either online or in support groups, regardless of which arguments you think are legitimate. I think it is damaging - to your psyche, if nothing else. And I say this about any topic or issue that turns into a major battle.

If I have mischaracterized this particular debate, I hope readers will let me know. But there are many, many different groups in the transgender and transsexual communities, and if one doesn’t ring true to you or your partner, let it go and move on to another group that seems to fit you better.

2. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival has been a huge controversy for years, as have other “womyn-born-womyn-only” events. Many trans women have felt excluded by these events and very hurt by this exclusion. I personally don’t favor “womyn-born-womyn-only” events because I think that it is impossible to determine what a “woman-born-woman” actually is and who qualifies, I think that they are exclusionary to many different people, and I think that any group that does not want to be defined by its members’ bodies should not turn around and define other people by their bodies.

When an event prohibits a particular body type, that means that each and every body has to be examined upon entry to the event. This is extremely problematic, in my opinion, not only when we look at issues of privacy, but when we look at the diversity of bodies that exists out there.

In addition, these events often discriminate against an entire economic class of people who they would otherwise include. For example, a “womyn-born-womyn-only” event that prohibits males (or people with particular body parts) over the age of eight (or eleven or whatever) excludes “womyn-born-womyn” who cannot afford childcare for their older male children. Therefore, only women of a certain economic status can attend.

That said, I also believe (and this will not be a popular statement) that people should be able to do anything they want to on private land or in private space with private funds, including being exclusionary. Groups such as this usually die out eventually as the times change, because as more people realize that they don’t want to participate in an exclusionary event, they simply stop coming. It takes time, but it happens.

Again, as painful as this might be for you and your partner, I recommend attending welcoming events that are open to all. There are many to choose from, and your money is better spent supporting these types of events.

3. It’s true that in some lesbian spaces, trans women are not accepted, and you will not be accepted,

either, by virtue of who your partner is. This can also be very painful for both of you. I'm not trying to minimize the pain of it or the unfairness of it, but it is a battle that you might not win. You can't force people to accept you. You simply have to find better company. I think minds are more easily changed one by one, because when you get into a situation where there is a group-think mentality, such as some support or social groups, minds can be very set - at least as long as the group is together. If you and your partner can interact with certain people at the LGBTQ center on a one-on-one basis, those people will get to know you and will eventually become your allies. Once you have friends there, those friends can help break down that group-think mentality that can be unwelcoming.

One thing that I have found is that just because an organization has T (or B or Q) in its name, it doesn't mean that the organization is truly welcoming or inclusive. The initials are often added to give the appearance of inclusion (or maybe to get grants).

But if your partner is afraid to go to a women's group for fear that she will not be welcome, and she cautions you that you, too, might be excluded, then I would first suggest that you both try going. Maybe that fear is unwarranted. But if you find that it is not, one thought I have is that you go together to the director of the center and ask about starting your own group.

If you are being excluded or mistreated, then others are as well. They are probably looking for an inclusive and welcoming group, so you could really be filling a need here. It's worth a shot.

But overall, with regard to all of the political mishmash that you are discovering now that you are dating a trans woman, I say let most of it go. Yes, there are issues and problems, but they don't all have to be dealt with - and particularly not all at once. Politics are important, but so are relationships, communication, together time, and fun.

Choose your battles wisely. Decide which issues are the most important to you, decide how much time and attention you can/want to devote to these issues, then do that. Just make sure that it does not take the necessary time and attention away from your relationship.

I believe that we should try to change the things that we can and right the wrongs that we see. But I also believe that we should take our personal lives at least as seriously as we take our politics. I encourage you to put politics aside as much as possible and make your relationship - just the two of you together - your priority.

Readers, what thoughts do you have?

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