

If trans women aren't welcome, neither am I

By Guest

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Abstract

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Article

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The question of whether or not to include trans women in women's sexuality-based events is old and tiresome, but it still comes up with some regularity. I recently responded to a discussion on this topic and I realized that it might be useful to post my thoughts here, as I don't know that I've ever done so in full.

I see a few main underlying assumptions come up in these discussions, and I'd like to counter them. Some of these arguments are stated outright, while others seem implicit in the language people tend to use. Most counter-arguments I've seen focus on the stated arguments, but I'd like to incorporate the underlying ones too, which makes the discussion a bit broader.

Comments are welcome, as always. That said, I realize that comments on posts like this often veer into the territory of flame-war pretty quickly. As a result I'm going to keep a tight rein on the comments here, and I may shut down comments fairly early in the game if only because so much of what might come up has already been said and I don't think it's worth rehashing lots of it here. This post is a position statement, not an invitation to a grand debate.

Assumption 1. There exists such thing as a "safe space."

I feel strongly that the idea of safe space is a really dangerous one, no matter who's claiming it for what space. It seems like there's an underlying assumption in some comments that safe space does indeed exist or that it's something worth striving for. For me, as soon as the concept comes up, whether this precise term is used or it just seems to be implied, I immediately become super uncomfortable and feel very concerned about how people will behave in whatever space is being discussed. I've seen this idea used as a battering ram, essentially, in way too many contexts, usually as a way to police behaviour in a mean-spirited manner or to exclude people or create an "in-crowd" of people who "get it." Doesn't really matter whether it's an activist space, a party, a conference, whatever. Almost universally, it's

about people buying into a fantasy of safety that simply does not match reality--and making a lot of people quite unsafe by using policing-style behaviour.

In reality, you are only “safe” from things that might make you uncomfortable or triggered if you stay at home where you have absolute control over everything that happens (and even then, not always). Each person’s idea of “safe” is different, and therefore a group space cannot possibly be “safe.” “Safe” isn’t real, and as such I believe it’s not worth investing energy in. It’s much better, in my opinion, to create spaces where there are a few clear rules for acceptable behaviour (which does not depend on identity or status of any kind, gender or otherwise), a stated expectation of kindness and goodwill, and one or several people who are in charge of smoothing things out if they go wrong.

Assumption 2. We all have the right to expect to be comfortable in sexual space.

Speaking as someone who’s spent well over a decade attending group sexual events large and small in dozens of cities all over the world, I can say that no matter what the gender rules are for a given space, it is best for me to go into them not expecting to feel comfortable, ever. I’ve felt horribly uncomfortable at “women-only” events, and super comfortable in totally gender-mixed spaces. And vice versa too. The factors in that comfort level include people’s attitudes in general, the vibe and layout of the space, the level of alcohol consumption, temperature, the level of privacy, the loudness or nature/content of a scene or sex happening nearby, the organizers’ style, whether or not there’s pressure to play or fuck, the music, how high or stoned people are, what kind of porn is screening, the racial or age or body size or gender mix of the crowd, the presence or absence of one or two specific people... all of these things come into play in terms of my own comfort level, and they are not things I can know or expect going in.

I think we need to stop expecting sexual spaces to be comfortable in the first place, and understand that a thing that makes one of us feel right at home might make someone else feel sick to their stomach. (An intense blood play scene in the middle of the room... the presence of lots of butches... the opportunity to get high... Can you guess which one of those make me feel comfortable and which I find hard to handle? There is at least one of each. Do you think I would accurately guess your response to the same criteria?)

Most crucially, we need to remember that the exclusion of trans women is not the primary standard of comfort for everyone, or even for most people, or even for most cisgender dykes. When we expect a given space to make us feel comfortable in the first place, and then we reduce this question of comfort to a question of whether or not trans women are there, we are functioning from a very skewed picture of what actually makes a space comfortable for anyone outside our own selves, and making a lot of really unfounded assumptions about what works for everyone else around us too.

Assumption 3. One person having a trigger is a legitimate reason to exclude someone else from an event.

Here’s a list of some of the triggers and squicks I’ve encountered among the people I’ve met in the last few years as a travelling sex educator and event organizer: seeing someone taking off their belt; being touched on the belly; seeing porn; hearing the terms “fat,” “ugly,” and “stupid”; seeing blood; hearing a deep voice; seeing a masculine-presenting person fucking a feminine-presenting person doggy-style; seeing testicles (though a penis would be fine); military uniforms; finding out someone is bisexual or not a “gold-star” lesbian or gay man; watching age play or being in the presence of “littles”...

I could go on. The thing about a trigger is that it's deeply personal, by its very nature. Sometimes it's about past trauma, sometimes not. I know that for me, if I saw someone do a food play scene, I'd have to either leave the room or vomit, and I couldn't tell you why--that's just how it is.

Regardless of what it is, it's super important that we take responsibility for managing our own triggers and squicks rather than expecting spaces to be set up to accommodate us, and all the more so when our trigger is about someone else's looks, presence or behaviour. Outside basic rules of good behaviour, or specific event attendance rules for specific purposes--for instance, this event is only for people in full-time M/s relationships, or this is an event where everyone is expected to dress head-to-toe in red--it's really not fair to ask others to curtail their behaviour or hide pieces of themselves in order to be welcome. I would never think of asking someone not to do food play in front of me. My squick, my responsibility to manage.

Assumption 4. Trans women have penises, and I will see those penises if they're at a sex party.

Added 2013/09/23: I want to preface this bit by stating in no uncertain terms that the configuration of a person's genitals is none of my/your/anyone's business unless you are about to engage in some kind of sexual touching that would require that knowledge. It's also not a legitimate factor in whether or not someone should be considered to "really be" the gender they say they are. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health takes a strong stand against requiring any kind of surgical modification for someone to "qualify" as their stated gender, and everyone from governments to party organizers should take a cue from them. As well, I want to make it clear that many (most?) trans women don't refer to their pre- or non-op genitals as "penises." Some say clit, some say girl-dick, some say strapless - there's a long list. Women's individual choices about what they call their bits take precedence over any externally imposed words. Mostly, though, as with the question of what someone's genitals look like, what they're called is also none of anyone's business unless you're getting sexual together. The following paragraphs cover some basic information about genitals that you can find in a range of trans-101 resources, as well as in the zine I link to in point 9. I'm putting it here purely to counter the misinformation that this particular assumption is based on - not to imply that it's anyone's actual business to know what's going on with any individual trans women's genitals.

I think that a lot of people who are triggered by the idea of penises are very unlikely to be upset by most of what they'd see at an event that includes trans women. For starters, a lot of trans women get bottom surgery--I'd say at least three-quarters of the ones I've met in dyke contexts, though that's anecdotal of course. It is much more common for trans women to opt for, and prioritize, bottom surgery than for trans men to do so (which is surely at least in good part due to cost, but also due to expected results).

The women who don't have bottom surgery yet, but who are planning to, rarely want to show off or use their genitals in public space the way some cisgender men might. For them, the whole point of surgery is that they don't want to have a penis at all, let alone wave it around in public, even less so among people who may be uncomfortable with that.

Among the trans gals who haven't had bottom surgery and don't plan to, the vast majority don't have genitals that look like what most people would understand or immediately recognize as being a penis--the use of hormones makes the genitals much smaller and softer, and it's usually not easy to get an erection

or ejaculate. If you're basing your idea of trans women as "chicks with dicks" you may have been watching too much shemale porn--and understand, please, that even in that kind of porn the trans women in question often have to use Viagra to get it up at all, and still often can't come or ejaculate, and are in many cases keeping their penises for the moment only because porn is a way to earn enough money for bottom surgery. So it's a bad place to judge from, even though it's the easiest and quickest place to go if you want to see images of trans women's non-surgically-altered bits.

Last but not least, there is the rare trans woman who has a dick and who understands it as such and is both capable of and interested in using it in typically "male" ways. All I have to say about that is that if I had one--a dick, that is--so would I! I think a lot of women feel the same if the popularity of strap-ons is any indication, to say nothing of the well-known dyke fascination with gay male porn. I've never actually seen this happen at a sex party, in all my travels, and as such I might be a bit surprised if I did. But if I can handle watching countless cis-dykes pound away at each other with dicks they've purchased at a store, surely I can handle watching a dyke use one she happens to have grown. We "allow" trans men the freedom to use the parts they were born with to achieve pleasure--surely we can extend that same acceptance to the very rare trans woman who wants to do the same. It seems a very strange thing to start judging, especially when we're a community of people who gets off on a rather stunning variety of sexual practices to begin with.

And for people who equate "penis" with "ability to rape or assault" and are therefore triggered by the possibility or the reality of seeing one... first, see point 3. Beyond that, maybe your parents were a lot more specific about this, but my mom always told me to watch out for men, not for penises, if I wanted to avoid rape. But this same logic meant that nobody really told me to watch out for women who assault and rape. I know it's a shitty thing to have to face, and I know a lot of dykes don't like to talk about it because it damages their sense of safety in community... but I have met plenty of women who have had experiences of sexual assault or domestic violence with other women (cisgender and otherwise). At play parties and sex parties and bars, at home alone with a partner, with someone they've dated for a little while, with someone they've married... it happens, and way more than we'd like to think. Pretending that assault and rape are only perpetrated by men, or only done by people with penises, allows women and people with vaginas to get away with it that much more easily.

Rape and assault are not about penises. They are about someone's sense of entitlement to touch another person's body without consent. We need to stop projecting our fears onto a body part (regardless of who's sporting it) and start looking at how people actually behave. It will make us feel less safe to acknowledge this, but I think it will make us actually be safer if we can talk about it openly.

Assumption 5. Trans women are aggressive in a way that makes people uncomfortable.

To me this sounds a whole lot like "black people are all so angry!" or "women are so over-emotional and hysterical!" or even "gay men are so effeminate!" It's a stereotype, pure and simple. It's especially similar to those other examples because it's a stereotype that focuses on the way someone expresses themselves. We expect these behaviours or expression styles because we fear them - oppressive white people are scared of angry black people, men who are taught not to feel or deal with emotions are scared of women expressing emotions, people who are taught that masculinity is precious and fragile and absolutely necessary to their survival are terrified to see how easily someone can "lose" their masculinity, and so forth. From there, if we see these things happen in real life once or twice, we believe

them to be true of everyone in a given group all the time. Then it becomes really easy to only see those things, and to miss or simply ignore--or, in this case, deprive ourselves of the opportunity to see --people in that same category behaving in other ways too. Which they/we do, because we are human. We need to get past this, plain and simple.

Assumption 6. Trans women are all the same.

We need to make sure, when we're talking about trans women just as with any other group, that we aren't speaking as though they were all the same. Trans women are as different from one another as any other people are. Some are aggressive, some soft and sweet. Some big, some small; some butch, others femme, others genderqueer, and so forth. Some lesbians, some straight, some bi, some queer. Every imaginable racial and ethnic background. Every imaginable profession and economic status (though statistically more likely to be poor and underemployed, regardless of their education level, due to rampant systemic transphobia). Some pre-op, some post-op, some non-op (bottom surgery). Some on hormones, some not. Some who "pass" easily, some who don't and won't ever. Some who have breast implants, some who don't. So anytime you start a sentence with "trans women are...", think carefully about what you're going to say next and whether it's true all the time or not.

Assumption 7. The term "woman" or "women" is by definition about cisgendered women.

In my world, when we talk about women, that includes trans women, because trans women are women. If we're trying to say something specific about women who were assigned female at birth and are still happy to be referred to that way today, we call them cis or cisgendered women. If we're trying to say something specific about women who were assigned male at birth but later transitioned, we call them trans women, or possibly women with a history of transition. But "women" on its own doesn't imply anything about how someone was born. There's nothing offensive about any of these terms unless they're applied to someone inaccurately or with intent to shame or hurt.

For me personally, I don't love being called a cis woman, not because there's anything wrong with the term or because I think it's pejorative, but because I am actually not always comfortable living in a female body and I feel like I float in a middle space between several genders. "Woman" I'll accept, though only barely, and I wish I had another option than either that or "man." But when someone calls me "cis," to me that makes me feel they are making some very mistaken assumptions about me, and that --not the term itself--can be offensive. (Same as being assumed straight, or femme, or able-bodied... nothing wrong with those terms, they're just inaccurate when applied to me.) But even then, I can still recognize that most of the world, most of the time, sees me as a woman, and that I get certain privileges because of that. So being perceived as a cis woman still gives me advantages, even if I don't apply the term to myself. As such it's still a useful term.

Assumption 8. Trans women aren't really women, because they weren't socialized as women.

This one falls apart on several levels.

First, it assumes that all women were socialized the same way. This makes no room for the vastly diverse types of socializing we each go through. A past butch partner of mine, for instance, refers to her childhood as being a "boyhood"--she played sports, spent time with her dad learning about woodworking and was never forced to look or dress girly. I, on the other hand, was very much socialized to be a girl,

with all the expectations and prohibitions that come along with that. This is a pretty stark difference in childhood gender-socialization experiences despite how we were both raised in white, Ontario-based, heterosexually-parented, middle-class families with religious mothers and multiple siblings. As soon as we start adding on other differences--race, economic status, geographic location, age, number and configuration of parents, sexual orientations within the family, religion, schooling and so forth--we multiply the ways in which our gender socialization might change.

Second, it assumes that the way we are socialized “sticks” the same way on everyone. I would argue, for instance, that probably none of us who are queer were socialized as children to be queer. Most of us who are gender-independent weren’t taught to be that way by our parents. And I’ve only rarely met people who are what I’d call second-generation poly--as in, they had openly non-monogamous parents and are themselves non-monogamous. Possibly even more rarely than that have I encountered people whose parents were openly kinky such that they were socialized from childhood to be perverts. (And certainly, I was never taught, as a girl, to be a dominant or a top!) I could say similar things about feminism--I don’t think, for instance, that I’m any less “real” or “legit” a feminist because my mother and father most certainly aren’t feminists. And I can assure you that I was never socialized to work primarily at night, or have a freelance career, or to do a PhD--I’m the only one in my entire family doing any of those things, and they are huge pieces of how I understand myself as an agent in the world and of how I live my everyday life. And so on, and so forth. So it’s very odd to see people who’ve made life decisions that for the most part radically depart from what they were taught to do as children try to argue that on this singular point--the question of gender--socialization trumps choice, trumps our innate sense of who we are and trumps all the efforts we make to do about that. It just doesn’t work that way. Of all people, we should know.

Third, the socialization argument dismisses and disrespects the enormous challenges that trans women have to go through to understand themselves as women, and to assert themselves as such in the face of huge social forces that tell them they are not and cannot be what they are. There are plenty of trans women who never felt like men in the first place, for whom existing in an assigned-male body was a horrific experience of dysphoria and disconnection, for whom being raised and socialized as male was deeply damaging to the point of leading them to depression and suicidality, or for whom the presence of a penis and the lack of a vagina (for those who haven’t had bottom surgery) is an ongoing source of trauma, not a free pass into male privilege. If we can understand our own struggles to self-define, to make sense of our desires and identities and bodies, surely we have it in us to understand others’ when they are arguably even more complex and more strongly discouraged by the world around them.

Last but not least, this argument also assumes that trans women are not treated as women by the world at large. It is true that some trans women are not read as women by the world around them. In those cases, they are often shunned, assaulted and disrespected--as “failed” women, as “failed” men, or as freaks in general. In this sense, trans women who don’t “pass” are punished in much the same way as cis women are punished when they fail to do “woman” right. For being too fat, or too hairy, or not passive enough, or too smart, or too capable, or not straight enough, or too slutty, or too frigid, or not curvy enough, or whatever else.

Trans women know exactly what it’s like to be told they’re not doing it right, and cis women know exactly how much that hurts because it’s done to many of us too. Trans women who do “pass,” on the other hand,

are subjected to the same kinds of bullshit that many cis women are just for being women, even when we are doing “woman” right--essentially, lots of misplaced entitlement. People, especially but not exclusively men, feel entitled to comment on or touch or fuck our bodies, to expect our sexual interest, to measure their masculinity by how different it is from our femininity, to get paid more than we do, to be aggressive and active to our receptivity and passivity, to be physically strong to our weakness, and so forth. And beyond all this... trans women who sometimes “pass” and sometimes don’t get the unenviable privilege of being on the receiving end of both these kinds of bullshit, both of which are clearly linked to being a woman, if from different angles.

So I call bullshit on this socialization question. It just doesn’t hold water.

Assumption 9. The “cotton ceiling” is a way for trans women to bully cis women into having sex with them.

The idea of the “cotton ceiling” is intended to draw attention to how even in spaces that are politically and socially welcoming of trans women, transphobia often retains its influence on how we understand who is sexually desirable and who isn’t. It’s no different from other politicized criteria for desirability--people who are, for instance, fat or disabled are also often welcomed into queer women’s space but not seen as desirable compared to those hot slim, muscular, able-bodied sorts. This isn’t our fault--our entire culture tells us what’s sexy and what’s not, 24 hours a day, and that definition is terribly narrow. But it is really easy to forget how much influence advertising propaganda and social pressure can exert on what gets us wet and hard, and to let the mainstream’s terms dictate our desires.

It is possible to read the idea of the cotton ceiling as being about pressuring people to change who and what they desire. And that pressure can feel unwelcome. With that in mind, I would challenge those who feel it that way to look very carefully at the message that’s being delivered. Is it actually about you being told you need to go out and fuck people you’re not attracted to? Or is it about someone asking you to think about how much of your attractions are based on an underlying assumption of cissexism? Or perhaps, might it be about challenging women-centred sexual spaces to talk openly about trans women’s bodies and how to safely and enjoyably have sex with trans women--a topic about which it is ridiculously difficult to find solid information? (Try Mira Bellwether’s awesome zine, *Fucking Trans Women*, if you are in search!) Or perhaps it could be about challenging the producers of dyke sexual representation to include trans women as objects of desire--in porn, in art, in erotica--which is only barely beginning to happen?

This is a difficult line to walk in terms of messaging--there is a subtlety to the argument that can easily be misunderstood. And to be fair, some people delivering the message about the cotton ceiling may not be doing it in a skilful way. But I think mostly the misunderstanding here comes from people who are very attached to a body- or genitals-based understanding of gender and very threatened by anything that comes along and challenges that.

Fundamentally, it doesn’t do anyone any favours for a person to fuck someone for political reasons without genuine attraction. I really hope nobody goes out and fucks anyone just to prove a political point or make a statement about how wonderful and open-minded they are. I certainly wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of such false desire, and I would feel pretty disappointed in myself if I noticed I’d started to collect a list of sexual partners who conveniently belonged to stigmatized minority groups so that I could brag about it.

Fundamentally, it also doesn't do anyone any favours for a person to pressure anyone else to have sex, for political reasons or otherwise. So if a trans woman cruises you with a line like, "Hey, you should have sex with me to prove you're not transphobic," you have every right to say, "Uh, no thanks." Failing that highly unlikely situation, though, I think a lot of cis and otherwise non-trans gals need to ratchet down the defensive reaction and take the opportunity to really examine how much of our desire rests on cissexism, and how much of the sexual culture we create and consume excludes trans women, even if we're not doing it on purpose. That thought process may never change our physical attractions, and it doesn't have to. But on the other hand, it might, and we shouldn't be afraid of that. For a bunch of politicized people who are committed to resisting the patriarchy, fighting racism and advocating for accepting our bodies at any size, and then going ahead and representing those various bodies in all their delicious glory, this one really shouldn't be a big stretch. And at the bare minimum, whether it changes our sexual practice or not, it could possibly help us to change a culture of exclusion such that the people next to us at that sex party--cis, trans and otherwise--can more easily access the kind of sex they'd like to be having.

Assumption 10. Trans men are a lot like women.

This one comes up as a counterpart to the "socialization" argument, specifically when people argue for the inclusion of trans men in women's spaces as a counterpart to arguing against the inclusion of trans women in those same spaces. This is especially unhelpful to trans men.

A significant percentage of trans men are, well, men. They look like men, smell like men, identify and move through the world as men. If they're told they're allowed to attend a women's event because they're not really men, that's pretty insulting.

Of course, some trans men are gender-fluid, or strongly attached to their history as dykes or as women, or see their transition as an extension of their former or current butch-ness and still prefer to date queer women, or what have you. So as such, some of them feel at home in queer women's spaces, and it would be very sad and hurtful to exclude them. I totally get this. But let's be clear that we are not talking about all trans men here. It's a very specific range of trans men, and there's a whole other range of trans men out there for whom such inclusion would be unwelcome at best and outright damaging at worst.

There are lots of trans men who never felt like women in the first place, for whom existing in a female-assigned body was a horrific experience of dysphoria and disconnection, for whom being raised and socialized as female was deeply damaging to the point of leading them to depression and suicidality, or for whom the lack of a penis (for those who don't get bottom surgery) is an ongoing source of trauma, not a free pass into women's space. Please let's not disrespect these guys by assuming they're "one of us" because they have vaginas. That's what the rest of the world has been doing to them forever and sometimes it quite literally kills them.

This post is mostly about analyzing a set of arguments, sometimes in ways I've seen done by others, some less so. But in addition to the argumentation piece, I'm writing this to publicly say, in no uncertain terms, that as a woman who's not trans, I fully support events that include trans women and tend to feel personally way more comfortable when trans women are welcome than when they're not. For me, events that include trans women create a baseline of respect for people's chosen gender identities--my

own included--where I can breathe at least somewhat easier, instead of worrying about people making misguided assumptions and applying them to me and others. It's a statement that clearly says "who you are is important, not who the world tells you to be." This isn't just symbolic. It makes a real difference in the vibe of a space, in my experience, and makes a lot more room for me too.

P.S. Adding this a day after first posting: I want to acknowledge an additional assumption that underpins everything I've tried to challenge here. This is the assumption that there is an "us" made up entirely of cis and otherwise non-trans women who are in charge of all women's sexuality-based events and who get to make the decisions about including "them," the trans women who'd like to attend. In fact my experience has been quite different from that. Trans women have been around for decades - "they" aren't a sort of perpetually new part of "our" community, but rather a part of the fabric of it, of its history and its present and absolutely of its future. Several generations of trans women, and their contributions, long predate my own organizing efforts, for instance - so it's a testament to the persistence of transphobia that somehow I, when I started organizing events in my early twenties, still understood that it was my job to "let" the trans women in (or bar them access). To me this feels like the height of disrespect - that some parts of the dyke world are still stuck on whether or not to include people who've been around since, y'know, the middle of last century. Many of the trans women in my community are older, wiser and more experienced than I am. I am fortunate to have many smart, powerful trans women as my elders - as scholars, as SM players, as dykes, as organizers, as role models, as writers and artists and activists. I'm grateful for their presence, their persistence in the face of discrimination, and for their willingness to let me in, to whatever extent they have.

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