

A blog by Sunny Drake

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Femme-Ally Conversation Starter

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I wrote the original version of this article for an amazing femme zine called "1-2-3 Punch". This article is now in its 9th revision! I regularly revisit it as I get new feedback – or when me and my friends identify other forms of femme-phobia.

This is a conversation starter (continuer?) about trans-masculine or trans-male peoples being femme-allies. I don't believe it's possible to *arrive* at a feminist, anti-racist masculinity or maleness as long as there is still the white supremacist ableist capitalist heteropatriarchy ruling the world. To me, evolving feminist, anti-racist masculinities are a *process*. A process filled with many responsibilities and joys and heartache and mess-ups and liberations and confusions.

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that I am a white Australian (English & Irish ancestry), grew up with a mixture of working class and middle class experiences. I am trans and a man. I identify as effeminate and femme. Small-ish in body size. Queer (not just in my choices of lovers). I've made many mistakes, including some of the things I point out in this article. I'm not pretending to be perfect or attempting to speak on behalf of other femmes, particularly not femme women. I don't believe the massive unpaid work of educating masculine people and men/boys should be left to femmes, unless they choose to take that on in any given moment. This article is part of my attempt to be accountable, alongside others, for growing new feminist masculinities and feminist manhoods.

In this writing, I'm going to continue an open conversation with examples of how misogyny and femme-phobia play out in subtle and not-so-subtle ways within queer subcultures. I'll follow this with suggestions for ways to be allies to femme-identified peoples.

Firstly, I want to briefly discuss the ways in which trans-masculine folks have some forms of gender privilege, including those who DON'T pass as cisgender (ie, when most people read them as women). Hopefully it is obvious how trans-men who pass as cisgender (ie, most people read them as non-trans men) get a whole set of extra privileges (um, it's called P-A-T-R-I-A-R-C-H-Y). If you're read as a dude, then you're likely to get at least part of the package of economic, social and political privileges – how much you get will depend on an

array of factors such as your race, class, ability, body size, how “masculine” you are, whether you are read as^u gay or straight etc. There has been plenty written about how some men get privileges, however, there seems to be more confusion is about how non-passing trans-men and trans-masculine peoples have privilege. If most of the world reads you as female, then what privileges do you get?

>> Well firstly: Enter, the long-time awkward unwelcome guest inside many people who experience some form of oppression (drum-roll): INTERNALISED OPPRESSION! And it's close buddy INTERNALISED PRIVILEGE. Most of us are steeped in patriarchal ideas about gender roles and a gender hierarchy, and racial hierarchy, class hierarchy etc, from the day we were born. Actually – some even before birth if ultra-sounds announced “it's a girl/boy” before even popping out. These ideas, the dominant ideologies, are so incredibly pervasive that they seep out in subtle (and not so subtle) ways that can be difficult to spot. Clearly, many people who identify as women carry around shitty messages about their worth and their capabilities. Not to mention the ongoing external signals given by other people (e.g. a man and woman go to pick up a car from the mechanic. The mechanic talks to the man, even when it's not his car and he doesn't know anything about cars anyway). Some trans-men or trans-masculine people have complex gender histories and may have internalised *some* of this sexism and misogyny, thus carrying around some of these obstacles too. However, many of us also some or entirely a set of other attitudes and beliefs which we've internalised through having self socialised as masculine or male from a young age (more about this later). Because we were internally identifying as male or masculine, we were choosing to socialise ourselves according to the external messages we were getting about how men or masculine people supposed to behave. Many of us who present as more masculine or adopt some boy/male things such as “he” as a pronoun, or mannerisms which provide social indicators of being a “boy” like clothing, hairstyles, body posture etc, also get responded to by others in particular ways. Within a patriarchy, these things tell us (and others) that we are capable, that we can work on cars and take up space. Still not convinced? There are many examples below of how I see these dynamics play out.

Privilege is a sticky beast. I hear a lot of people say “I'm just choosing to not take my privileges. I live outside the system”. The thing is: privilege is not something that you *take*, it is something that is *given* to you. So even if you don't want it, you will experience it to whatever degree your particular combination of identities and socio-political context give it to you. So, those of us who have or gain privilege, need to pull our socks up and get on with the business of centre-ing people who are most affected by sexism- including femme-phobia and trans-misogyny, especially those who also experience racism, ableism, classism and other nasties. “Privilege” can be a loaded word to use – I don't want to in any way invisibilise the massive strengths of communities who experience oppression.

I'd also like to point out the different set of privileges afforded to white trans-men, ie, having some form of access to the privileges given the white cisgendered man, whereas trans-men of colour have to deal with a different set of shit (e.g. increased targeting by police and criminalisation). I also think that white privilege is very relevant to some of the examples that follow, and it's difficult to separate out whether white trans-men are behaving that way because of whiteness or man-ness/masculinity (or class, ability or other factors too).

Before I launch into ample examples of ways we trans-men (and non-trans men) and/or masculine folks need to get it together, I want to explicitly acknowledge that it's a bloody hard road being trans*, and this rant is in no

way intended to publicly humiliate or isolate trans-men or trans-masculine folks. Full credit to all those who have had such courage to assert their (our) identities (even if it's just to yourself) – this is a really unfriendly world to be trans* in. Even in politicised queer subcultures, transmen and trans-masculine folks still experience a bunch of oppression, for example, physical and verbal harassment, not having our gender recognised or respected or being judged for choices to alter or not alter bodies, difficulty accessing healthcare and employment etc. I don't want this article to feed into any trans-phobia or unuseful stereotypes about trans-men. We do need to support each other and nurture each other AND hold each other accountable.

Ample Examples. So, into the examples of what I've been noticing and talking about with friends in terms of how misogyny plays out in the actions of many trans-men and trans-masculine peoples. Of course, much of this applies to non-trans-men (cisgendered men) as well.

- How many incidences I've seen or heard of trans men harassing, objectifying, assaulting (physically, verbally or sexually) femmes and women. Frequently trans-men seem to under-estimate how much we may have internalised messages about ownership over women and femme's bodies. Intimate partner violence is real and often goes unaddressed because of these internalised messages because we have built up ideas that trans-men are less sexist than non-trans-men.
- Some specific examples around dating and femme sexuality:

-I am absolutely appalled that this is even necessary to state; any form of overt or covert suggestion that a femme has provoked sexual harassment, assault or objectification is DISGUSTING. Don't say it doesn't happen, I'm thinking about specific examples. Beyond addressing this, I think trans-masculine people have a responsibility to recognise the ways femme sexuality has been contained, squashed, targeted, stereotyped and owned and take steps to pro-actively challenge this.

-conversely, invisibilising femme desire and incorrectly assuming all femmes want a relationship/partnership rather than hot slutty times.

-the tendency of trans-men to expect femmes to emotionally tend to the relationship and do the lion's share of work when shit hits the fan; and then have the nerve to turn around and tell women or femmes that they are bringing drama or being "too much"! "Drama" is a word that has been used to silence and ridicule women's feelings and invisibilise emotional labour. So seriously dudes, when you call women or femmes "drama", you are being sexist. There are other ways to negotiate different styles of communication. If you're thinking she's drama, I would challenge you to look at who's doing the emotional labour. Are they being drama or are you being emotionally careless? Other loaded words which have been used to humiliate, silence and control women and femmes include: "stupid", "hysterical", "crazy", "sensitive", "emotional".

- Some additional examples around trans-misogyny
 - how trans movements (and in fact gay/queer rights movements) have frequently been initiated and led by trans women (especially racialised trans women) and then taken over and co-opted by white trans men

(and/or white non-trans gay men). Consequently movements frequently become derailed and centred around white trans-masculine issues such as top surgery fundraisers and yet another I'm-so-hot-look-at-me-I'm-a-transman-zine (which are great, just wishing we similarly celebrated the hotness of transwomen). This sidelines the super important issues trans-female-spectrum people disproportionately face such as violence, discrimination in employment & housing, criminalisation, sex worker rights etc...

– If one more person says to me that trans-women take up too much space because they were socialised male, I think I may vomit all over them. But I'll be a little more diplomatic and suggest a game of Pin The Tale on the Stereotype instead. Firstly, socialisation is a complex thing. People pick up socialisation cues based on how they internally identify as well as based on how people externally attempt to socialise them. I know that as a trans guy, even though I didn't necessarily label myself a "boy" as a kid, I remember always listening to what my teachers/friends/family/tv said about boys and relating that to myself. Secondly, the transphobic and misogynist cultures I grew up in absolutely do NOT build a sense of entitlement in trans women – anyone read as male who has any feminine or womanly presentation, traits or identification gets that ridiculed, punished and beaten out of them. This is hardly likely to build up someone to be able to speak boldly in groups. Also, saying a trans-feminine spectrum person takes up too much space is potentially classist, racist and cis-sexist. Classist & racist: some raised poor, working class and/or people of colour femininities are louder than their middle class or rich counterparts (the ideals many white dominated activist groups run on are very white middle class/rich in terms of what is considered polite and a good way of working – these need to change too!). And it's cis-sexist to assume someone is louder because they are trans rather than because of any number of their other identities or even just their individual personality. Lastly, I believe both misogyny and trans-phobia are more often the root of this sort of comment. Stereotypes are often created to justify unjust behaviour and attitudes and cover over fear – like if someone is threatened by trans-women because they are trans-phobic or have internalised misogyny, it is much easier to come up with excuses like "they take up too much space" than acknowledge those fears or -isms. In the event that she is taking up a lot of space at your meeting, chances are it's because you won't open your group to her, or are subtly ostracising her or because she can tell that you don't consider her a "real" woman, or because she's uncomfortable with how you're glaring at her pants to assess what bits she has.

– How trans-men are often celebrated and fetishized within queer subcultures, whereas trans-women are often isolated and excluded. This is both misogynist and transphobic. Misogyny because: anybody femme and/or woman identifying is seen as lesser, while anybody masculine and/or man/boy identifying is celebrated. Trans-phobia because maybe some queer feminist communities don't count trans-women as "real women" and therefore exclude them because they are still the "enemy" (ie, "men"). Similarly this attitude doesn't count trans-men as "real men" and therefore accepts them as still part of the women's community, whilst ironically elevating their status due to internalised misogyny.

– How 95% of the time we say "transphobic", we actually should be saying "trans-misogynist". I'm not saying trans-masculine people don't experience huge amount of discrimination, just trans feminine people get the brunt of the most violent and pervasive forms of it.

- Not respecting femme-only space as valid and important

- Failing to see femme organising as revolutionary. AND having the gall to claim credit for long-time femme tactics and wisdom, like the importance of relationship building in movements. Because men have such a long history of taking credit for women's labour, ideas and resources, it's essential to acknowledge women and femmes.
- Mocking, belittling, teasing and calling some types of femininity shallow or vain – like make-up, packing 7 pairs of shoes for a week long trip or referring to high-heels as impractical.
- How so many trans-men I know get away with being sexually and emotionally irresponsible and unaccountable in similar ways to non-trans-men. I have directly noticed this in my own attitudes in certain situations, with a tendency to write-off the behaviour of trans-men (e.g. "I didn't expect any better of him"), whereas being hurt in the same situation by the behaviour of women or femme folks (e.g. "She should have known better").
- How I still see mostly women and femmes doing the dishes (I mean, really? This is so basic I'm almost embarrassed to point it out!). Even if I have been messy around the house for my entire life, including when I identified (by default) as female, increasingly uncovering a masculine and/or man identity brings certain privileges (e.g. an expectation that I won't clean) and therefore brings an increased responsibility to address those privileges. Any roles that perpetuate privileges, power dynamics and stereotypes need to be carefully negotiated with all who are directly or indirectly participating (e.g. this doesn't mean if you're a trans-guy you absolutely have to do the dishes – but if you want to contribute in other ways instead, then negotiate it!). I also want to point out that some femmes may love doing the dishes and shouldn't be judged as unradical for wanting to perform "traditionally feminine" roles. In fact, often those roles typically associated with women are seen as lesser or degrading work, effortless, natural or invisible – this needs to change.
- How emotional labour, care and support roles in the communities I live in are mostly done by women and femmes. I think trans-men who request and utilise the support of femmes and women have a particular responsibility to be intentional with that support and ensure that dynamic is not only named, but negotiated as well. Once again, the problem is not when femmes *choose* to do care work – the problem is the assumption/abuse of this relationship and the lack of trans-masculine folks valuing and/or prepared to do this work themselves.
- How trans-men get to fix things. I've noticed a sharing of power and skills from non-trans men to trans-men that often doesn't happen between those two groups and women/ femmes. I challenge all trans-men to not forget how hard it may have been (for some of us) to carve out a space in the woodwork lab at school, or under the bonnet of a car with the dudes or building something for the local activist fundraiser. But at the same time – don't assume that femmes wouldn't know how to fix things or over-insist that they should know – some may not want to (just like some trans-masculine folks don't want to – frankly I'd prefer someone else to fix my bicycle!).
- How femme trans-men or trans-men who choose to not conform to expected models of masculinity or

who don't medically transition are sometimes subtly seen as "fakes" or "not really boys" or "gutless", or at least as lesser in some way.

Being a femme-ally: a conversation starter about some stuff men and/or masculine peoples can do to challenge misogyny, be feminist and be allies to femmes (and also to other women, whether or not they are femme). Some of these things are interpersonal allyship, and others about organizing and doing solidarity work.

- Learn about feminist and femme and women's (trans and non-trans) struggles and histories. ESPECIALLY Indigenous and women of color feminist writers. Set up a reading/ discussion group. Read the words of femme/women activists. There are so many amazing femmes and women who have been doing a lot of work for so many years now – pay attention and learn! It is not the responsibility of femmes and women to educate other folks, however, some may be happy to be on an informal or formal advisory group (especially if you actually build relationships with femmes based on respect and accountability) – to provide suggestions, be a guest speaker and make sure that the group doesn't sail off into irrelevance. Consider first volunteering and supporting femme/ women's collectives, individuals and organisations before asking them to support your learning group.
- Do anti-racist work. Racism is so inextricably part of femme-of color oppression in queer communities (not to mention in the mainstream), that addressing racism in queer communities is completely essential and central to femme-of-color solidarity.
- Directly support femmes and women in your life. Listen to their experiences and try to understand how their oppression and marginalisation is different from your own. Then if you think it is appropriate, ask them if/ how you could support them (but remember it is not their responsibility to educate you).
- Do the fucking dishes! (and clean the toilet/mop the floor/cook/caretake etc). Or explicitly negotiate other roles that are mutually agreed upon by all involved. (Note: negotiation means C-O-M-M-U-N-I-C-A-T-I-N-G about something and making sure everyone has equal power to say what they really want/need, and that a solution is agreed upon). This is so obvious I almost didn't want to write it (because I think some trans-men also think that's all there is to being a femme ally). And make a point of stepping back and looking at your behaviour in various situations (household, work, encounters with strangers/ friends/ lovers), and thinking about how your interactions/choices/communication/behaviour was influenced by your perceptions of other people's gender identity and expression.
- Don't assume all femmes identify as women. Don't assume all women identify as femmes (even if they wear makeup or skirts). And don't assume you are the only one with a radical gender identity. Learn about how being femme is political. Be aware that femme can mean different things to different folks who identify as femme, and make space for various kinds of femme identities.

- Don't assume a femme person presents their body for your visual pleasure. Femmes may not want you to comment on how gorgeous they are, or be unconsensually touched (including hugged).
- Don't fetishize femininity or femmes in nonconsensual ways.
- Proactively build alliances that both explore and support the similarities in struggles between the trans-masculine and femme/ women's (trans and non-trans) movements. Acknowledge the differences and seek to figure out what being a good ally means.
- Seek to understand how all the different systems of oppression are linked – find the intersections with other struggles – don't just think about gender – think about class, race, age, sexuality, body size, ability, history of abuse etc. There are some good resources out there – find them!
www.coloursofresistance.org and www.collectiveliberation.org are great starts. Then spend a certain proportion of your time making linkages between different struggles and supporting other causes.
- Centre the people most affected by oppressions – femmes, women (trans-women and non-trans-women), Indigenous people, people of color, queers, people with disabilities, fat folks, refugees, working class peoples etc. “Centre-ing” means those people are key decision makers and have a crucial role in shaping the movements. Don't assume you know what is best for people other than yourself.
- Work with people within your own layers of privilege (e.g. if you are a white middle-class trans-boy, work with other middle class folks/ white folks/ trans-men to challenge misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism etc) AND support the movements of people with less privilege (e.g. volunteer to do the boring office work 4 hours a week with a local femme or women's collective or organisation).

About Making Mistakes: I don't claim to be any sort of expert on being a feminist dude. I've been schooled by listening to femmes and the generosity of so many amazing femmes in my life – lovers, friends, my heroes and work-mates. Dudes – I can 100% guarantee we WILL mess up. It's not possible to be perfect. So, we also need to learn how to be accountable for making mistakes. For example:

1. deeply listening without defensiveness to the experiences of and impact on the person who was hurt (if they want to share this),
2. clearly acknowledging how you messed up (without making excuses or subtly expecting support for how bad you feel about it),
3. apologising (that's right, take a deep breath and practice in front of the mirror. “I'm sorry”. “I'm sorry”. “I'm sorry”. I know it's complex, but you can do it. Keep breathing).
4. doing work to come up with suggestions of ways you could address your behaviour/ mistake/ make amends,
5. listening to the wishes of the person who was hurt,
6. taking the agreed upon steps,
7. and having a process for re-checking in over time (for example – ‘would you like me to bring this up again or would you like to be in control of when we check in about it?’).

- This process may be very quick if the hurt was minor, or you may need to invest a bunch of energy over a long period of time if the issue was more serious. Sometimes the person may not want to have a process with you, in which case you will need to respect their wishes (including no contact), reflect on and modify your own behaviour so that it doesn't happen again. There are some great resources on accountability, mostly for sexual assault incidents – but similar principles can be used in any case where someone has caused someone else harm). For example: the last chapter in the Color of Violence anthology and the resource list on the INCITE! webpage <http://www.incite-national.org/index.php?s=114>
- Develop your misogyny radar (both for your own behaviour as well as the behaviour of others) and be prepared to give constructive feedback to people in loving, supportive ways. In my experience, this often works best when done within friendships, or from people who have similar identities/ privileges (plus, it shouldn't be the responsibility of femmes/ women to call this sort of behaviour out!). This may involve:
 - one on one conversations (“hey, are you open to hearing some feedback on something I noticed? Well, I’m telling you this because I respect/love/like you. When you said/ did _____, I wonder if you considered how your gender/ racial/ class identity played into that...”)
 - writing a letter to the person
 - researching and sending people articles written by others
 - approaching someone else (another ally, a person’s trusted friend/ workmate etc) to support in addressing the person
 - bringing in a guest speaker/ articles/ processes/ workshops to address the general issue (without addressing the specific incident)
- Receive criticism with full attention and without defensiveness. Even if you initially feel like the criticism is not true – resist the urge to write it off or be defensive. How about trying: “thanks for the feedback, I’m going to take some time to think about that and then respond to you”. Never ever ever dismiss someone who experiences oppressions (or even vaguely may be experiencing oppression) as overly sensitive. Ever. No matter how much you disagree with what they are saying, just don’t ever ever say it because chances are there is at least some truth in what they are saying and “You’re being overly sensitive” has been used to silence oppressed people for so long. People with privilege are trained to not see it. That’s part of how it gets perpetuated. Just because you can’t see how what the person is saying is true, doesn’t mean it’s not happening.

The Flip Side: I also want to say how much I appreciate that so many femmes are kick-ass allies to trans-masculine folks. THIS IS DEFINITELY NOT AN EXCUSE (warning: kids, do not try this at home – ok?): I have often wondered if the actions of some trans-men or trans-masculine folks is a reaction to not being validated as a real “man”, or really “masculine” (often even with queer subcultures). Sometimes I wonder if I and others are tempted to replicate patriarchal versions of manhood and masculinity in an attempt to get some validation. So, even though ultimately it is totally up to us trans-men and trans-masculine folks to wean ourselves off these misogynist behaviours, also it is greatly appreciated when anyone (femme or non-femme) goes out of their way to change their conceptions of what a “man” or “masculine” means, and creates a little more space for all of us. I find women and femmes have often been my best allies for which I am deeply grateful.

And Guess What? in my opinion, this work is not tedious or boring or arduous – it's exciting! I mean, I get to be a part of directly challenging patriarchy. Hell yer. Sign me up! I get to participate in carving out a new man, a new masculine. In fact, a myriad of new ways to be man or masculine through visioning and living and growing the new always-learning-feminist-man I am. Hooray! Who else is in? And how?

Thanks. A massive thanks to all the people who have contributed ideas for this article, particularly the amazing femmes I am lucky to have in my life.

Feedback: This article is now in it's 9th edition in part because people keep sending great feedback on things to refine/change/add! Please feel free to distribute this article to others, and send any feedback or if anyone is interested in collaborating on further resources: sunny@sunnydrake.com

I also run workshops relevant to this article:

Feminist Masculinities Workshop: Explores the question: what is a feminist masculine person? Relationships, emotional labour, consent, challenging femme-phobia, masculinism and trans-misogyny (transphobia/ sexism faced by trans women), fashion, accountability, care, cake baking, political priorities...? Hands on activities, presentation and discussion about how dudes, butches, masculine women, trans-men, cisgendered men, males, bois, genderqueers can be feminist. The workshop comes from an intersectional analysis including class, race and disability. People of all genders welcome.

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