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LGBTQ

The Gay Men Who Hate Women



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Ever had a gay man criticize your appearance, or had your ass slapped in a gay club 'as a joke'? Gay male sexism is alive and well.

Ilustración de Katherine Killeffer

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"Some of the worst misogyny I've experienced has come from gay men. It can feel almost more gross than it does from straight men. It's like, you're not even trying to express sexual interest in me, you're just asserting your dominance over my body just because you're a man—you're just doing it because you can."

Victoria Sin is a queer woman living in London and a female drag queen. When Sin recently appeared in a [Broadly documentary](#) about drag artistry, some gay men on Facebook angrily accused her of "appropriation" of gay culture and drag. "What am I appropriating? It's pure misogyny and so stupid on many levels," she says.

The topic of misogyny among gay men is a difficult one to broach. In my experience, men either simply refuse to believe the phenomenon exists, or the conversation is quickly derailed ("yeah, but what about homophobic women?").

I have a male body, I'm bisexual, and I'm also genderqueer. But I've also experienced misogyny from both straight and gay men on the basis of my apparent femininity. At a party attended mostly by gay men who worked in political consultancy, I was asked, "What do you do, darling? Something fun like a fashion degree?" At the time, I was wearing heels, red lipstick, and a sheer crop top. "No", I replied, curtly. "I work as a commercial lawyer in the City and I'm also a freelance writer." His reply: "Really?"

This misogyny can range from the insidious to the explicitly vile and provocative—as Breitbart columnist Milo Yiannopoulos recently demonstrated in an [essay](#) on feminism, where he describes women as "the unfuckable feminist fag hags who have for so long ridden on our tastefully embroidered coat-tails." Last November, actress and singer Rose McGowan discussed the [misogyny she experienced](#) from gay men in the media, saying "Gay men are as misogynistic as straight men, if not more so. I have an indictment of the gay community right now, I'm actually really upset with them."



In reality, conflicts around misogyny have persisted as long as the gay rights movement itself. The Gay Liberation Front, which started the first London Pride march, was the flagship movement for queer emancipation in the UK. It formed in 1970, but by 1973 had largely splintered on several political lines—one of them being gender. An editorial in Issue 2 of [Gay Left](#), a socialist journal published by gay men in 1976, reflects on its effects on the movement:

"When the split occurred between the women and the men in the movement... the gay men became more isolated into the new ghetto. After this, much of the serious questioning of gender roles disappeared... The male gay movement, instead of challenging and confronting sexism, became increasingly defensive."

In her 1995 pamphlet [Lesbophobia: Gay Men and Misogyny](#), writer Megan Radclyffe notes that many lesbians left the GLF by 1971, citing original member [Janet Dixon's belief](#) that "in the end, once again, women were servicing men, women were raising the consciousness...[and] were giving their energy to men."

Historically, lesbian activism was indistinguishable from feminism; after all, liberation for queer women required the dismantling of gender roles and family structures that oppressed all women. For former GLF members like Dixon, it became clear that some gay men were pursuing a form of liberation that created licence for their sexual preferences, at no expense to their social position as men under patriarchy.

Male homosexuality has multiple histories—of course, it was largely demonized by Western Judeo-Christian society as a sexual deviation from the correct gender role for men. Yet there are also other narratives, molded on the romantic and eroticized notion of male bonding in Classical Greece, which was viewed in Homeric poetry as more important than relations with women. This parallel history is visible in the celebration of male beauty in Renaissance art, through to the writings of Walter Pater, a 19th century critic who wrote extensively on the aesthetics of male beauty and 'friendship.'

"It's absolutely true that existed," agrees Dr Sam Solomon, an English lecturer at the

University of Sussex and co-director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Dissidence, "though it was very class-inflected: It was an ideal of social bonding and advancement realisable only for wealthy and educated men. Other men and women were excluded."

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In fact, belief in the inherent superiority of gay men over women has been present since the 19th century. Dr Solomon points to Edward Carpenter, an early socialist defender of homosexuality. He believed that men who desired men "were not 'effeminate,' but rather combined qualities that made them the best drivers of social progress." Carpenter argued that male Uranians (as he called homosexuals) perfectly combined male forthrightness with female emotional sensitivity.

I've seen the social heritage of this idea in my work as a lawyer, where intake at the bottom end of the profession is evenly split on gender. At the top, only 24 percent of partners in British commercial firms are women. In contrast, law firms such as Freshfields and Simmons & Simmons, are among the most praised by LGBT organizations like Stonewall UK for [being gay-friendly](#) and having the most number of gay assistant lawyers and partners.

In certain corporate spheres, gay men are advancing further and faster than their female colleagues. It's perhaps unsurprising if they prefer to present less challenges to the gendered status quo; they may even reinforce male-centred ways of working that don't consider ongoing barriers affecting women, such as childcare or maternity leave.

Perhaps the modern professional gay man is more often guilty of benefitting from sexism, rather than directly perpetrating it. But sexism amongst gay men can take more direct forms. The most common complaint from the women I spoke to involves gay men's often-inappropriate invasion of women's bodies. At times, this can be under the guise of appreciation—drunk gays grabbing women's breasts or dancing up against them in clubs, and getting angry when challenged.

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woman, how to present myself in order to 'fit.'

"When I was younger a lot of gay men would touch me inappropriately and say, 'It doesn't count because I'm gay!' Yeah, it still counts because I'm still a person who deserves respect," Victoria Sin says. I tell her that I often hear off-handed remarks like, "Vaginas are disgusting, I don't know how anyone could have sex with one," and Sin agrees. "If I mention my period, I have gay friends say, 'Ewww, stop that's disgusting!' No, it's my body and it's not disgusting." This, I would suggest, also comes from a lazy, thoughtless assertion of gay men's sexual identity—but to assert you love dick doesn't mean you have to feign disgust at women and their bodies. It's as offensive as it is ridiculous: After all, calling vaginas gross is pretty rich coming from people who have anal sex.

The gay 'scene,' if such a thing exists, also displays signs of institutional issues with women. "When I went to G-A-Y [a club in London], I was told, as a femme-presenting woman, that I was 'not a member'—whatever that means—while my male friends, all read as gay, were greeted with open arms," Berlin-based writer Josie Thaddeus-Johns told me. "This was before I identified as bi, so it's also sad to think that women who might not be ready for labels have to deal with being gay-policed before even entering a queer space... A male-dominated and run party is basically telling me, a woman, how to present myself in order to 'fit.'"



Photo by Mattia Pelizzari via Stocksy

When women are allowed in, they are often relegated to a separate space entirely. "Why are the lesbians always put in the fucking basement?" Sin asks. "Even when there's a night that is supposed to be lesbian or just 'queer,' if it's in a gay space marketed at men, there will be men who see it as an invasion of 'their space.' A guy in a bar once interrupted conversation between my friend and me and said, 'Ugh. Sorry, there's too much estrogen in this conversation.'"

Lyall Hakaraia, the owner of East London queer venue [Vogue Fabrics](#), believes this comes from the history of gay venues in most cities. "It's all to do with sex. It's a mind trap hangover that men can only function in a sexual manner if women are not around, which is true for some but not for all. This has been twisted to mean that women shouldn't be around at all and would somehow spoil their vibe if they are. There's a big difference between a sex club, designed specifically for picking up or cruising, and a night out—that some gay men cannot see the difference between the two is limited, to say the least."

As it turns out, Sin's reference to femininity "in the basement" is a pretty good metaphor for a lot of gay men's attitudes to sex itself. On gay dating apps, men frequently describe their preference for straight-acting or masculine partners, with some profiles explicitly specifying, "No femmes." Conversely, expression of desire is often fetishizing, crude, and unsolicited. Just this morning, one charmer asked me on Grindr, "will u dress up in knickers and stockings for me slutty boy?" This refracted misogyny is also projected onto the top and bottom roles in gay sex: If I wear mascara in a profile picture, I can reasonably expect to be told how my 'hole' will be pounded, ruined, or devastated.

"I've never told anyone I've hooked up with what I would like them to behave like or to look like—I find gay men are completely unaware they are exercising that privilege," Shy Charles tells me. The 25-year-old genderqueer musician sports long hair and a beard, alongside elaborate nail art and eye makeup, on a daily basis.

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"Gay men don't realize that if they say, 'Don't meet me looking too feminine,' they are asking you to pretend to be someone else in order to gratify their sexual preferences," Shy Charles adds. "A gay man once told me the fact I didn't bulk up and cut my hair was a 'waste'—that by not looking conventionally masculine, I was 'wasting' myself. Like my main purpose in life was to be attractive to people like him, and I just needed some guidance! As if how I look is some kind of accident."

Some gay men don't just feel entitled to police the appearance of non-binary or femme-presenting queers in romantic or sexual contexts—they also do so readily when it comes to women, particularly women in the media. The frequent 'celebration' of female pop icons is most in danger of greenlighting a sense of entitlement about 'critiquing' women more generally, especially on typically sexist criteria like their weight or physical beauty. While women in the media may not have to be *sexually* attractive to gay men, there is still a widespread expectation for them to look glamorous, effortless, and "iconic"—an unrealistic and idealized demand for powerful, flawless womanhood.

Among white gay men, the idolizing of black female artists such as Beyonce, combined with slang picked up from [RuPaul's Drag Race](#), can produce excruciating

stereotypes of black women—all dressed up as appreciation. At Push The Button, a gay pop music night in London, white gay men attended its [annual Spice Girls party](#) in Afro wigs, blacked up in an apparent homage to Mel B.

"I've heard white gay men joking about having a 'strong black woman' inside of them. It's a cultural stereotype that implies [black women] have no problems and is reductive about our experience," explains Ava Vidal, a British TV stand-up comic and writer. "There's a lot of this stuff—mimicking Ebonics, joking about their 'weaves'—not realizing it dehumanizes us. It's not flattering. They want all the fun parts of our culture without experiencing any downsides."

What happens when she challenges these gay men? "They turn nasty and almost bully you about it. These white men are not listening to black women. How many times do they have to be told before they listen?"

Black women face a double discrimination in white, patriarchal society; the casual conflation of a white gay male's experience with that of black women is appropriation, not solidarity. Transgender women face similarly complex oppressions and—like black cis women—can often be reduced to media stereotypes divorced from their lived experience of being strong, fierce, or brave.

In fact, cisgender gay men owe so many of their own historic freedoms to trans women; it was trans women who led the Stonewall riots in 1969. But gay men (along with cis lesbians and bisexuals) have a checkered history when it comes to political solidarity with trans people, and trans women in particular. The leading British LGBT charity Stonewall, named after the riots, did not engage officially with trans issues until this February—16 years after it was founded. It's clear that most major organizations have learned from past mistakes and are committed to doing better on trans issues. But if a [recent online petition](#) calling to "drop the T" from "LGBT" is any indication, transphobia can and does persist in the gay community.

In order to truly include trans women in their politics, gay men (indeed, all cis LGB people) need to listen to where the community is still ignoring or failing them. However, being open to this criticism is a lot more challenging than the celebratory note of "acceptance" hit by the mainstream media. For example, while Caitlyn Jenner's *Vanity Fair* cover was undoubtedly a landmark for trans visibility, its big-budget and airbrushed packaging had all the shallow performativity of celebrity. Many gay men's reactions on Twitter followed suit: "Yassss kween, slay!"

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But Jenner's effective performance of acceptable femininity in her coming out did not reflect most trans women's experience of transitioning. Trans actress and model Hari Nef noted this in an interview with [The Coveteur](#), remarking, "People see trans as presentational, hence inauthentic; people see trans bodies as 'inauthentic' in themselves. Even if I'm wearing a baggy sweatshirt and pajama pants, it's still 'Yaaaaas!' and 'Slay!' from the peanut gallery."

It's important that gay male allegiance with Jenner and her non-famous trans sisters goes beyond a mere aesthetic appreciation of their bravery and cosmetic 'success,' and towards a realization that all female bodies are not up for review, critique, or consumption. For trans women, their bodies are the site of a cultural war—and one that kills an increasing number of people.

Nick Adams, the director of Programs in Transgender Media at GLAAD, has worked on the representation of trans issues in mainstream American media for 17 years. Nick is himself trans, and a gay man. "It's impossible to establish a scientific-style correlation between the increased visibility of trans women in the media and the rise in number of trans women killed in the US," he says, "but we need to be aware of the possibility. In 2015 thus far, 20 women or gender non-conforming people have been murdered, more than last year."

Adams remains optimistic about the gay male community's political support for trans people, pointing out the landmarks achieved in recent years for trans representation, and the increasing impact of online activism and communication. "If you look at the widespread, angry reaction to the recent Roland Emmerich movie, *Stonewall*, which foregrounded a white cis gay man in the story instead of Martha P. Johnson, the real life trans woman of color—you can see gay men's understanding of this is growing, which is positive."

It is positive, but to progress further is always to examine critically what can be done better. Homophobia is not misogyny's sibling; it is his son. Patriarchy hates gay men because they behave sexually "like women," it hates lesbianism because lesbians are women who "refuse" to fuck men, and it hates trans people who call bullshit on so many of its supposed truths.

We are all harmed by patriarchy, but in many contexts gay men are the ones best placed to be seduced into conspiring with it. Calls to such conspiracy are insidious and often imperceptible within masculinity itself. Therefore, listening to the voices—and complaints—of women, femme gays, and trans non-binary people is crucial for all gay men. Otherwise, they may find that a world in which a fragile liberation, bought at the expense of others, is in fact a confusing and contradictory world—with no real liberation at all.

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