

# **Gender is a Weapon: Coercion, domination and self-determination**

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I was on the bus recently, and a guy about my age got on the bus and sat across from me. He and some others were looking out of the bus windows at some men in red dresses. We didn't know why they were wearing dresses, but the guy across from me said, "That's scary." Another guy said, "Whatever, as long as they don't come on the bus." I wanted to say "what's so scary about men in dresses?" But worrying that I might look enough like a dyke to him to get shit for it, and worrying that the effort and fear involved with confronting someone might make me cry, I didn't say anything. I just wondered. What makes a guy in a dress so scary? And what about homophobia, transphobia, or whatever you want to call it without knowing why that guy was wearing a dress, causes men to bond by shit talking about it? There are many ways in which we are taught what our appropriate gender is, and when someone feels threatened by a gender identity or expression, we can guess that there lies the key to our struggle.

Gender is used against us, but we can also use it to free each other and ourselves. If we start undermining the rules and constraints of gender, we can more successfully fight patriarchy and domination. By writing this, I hope to plant seeds of gender rebellion, solidarity, and gender freedom.

Here's a term you may not have come across: gender self-determination. Self-determination means each person or community being free to determine for oneself the way they want to live and the decisions that affect their lives. In the context of a struggle for gender self-determination, it means, "honoring the rights of each person to make their own choices concerning their body, their identity, their languages and the way in which they present their gender... It is about... being committed to building a world where each and every person is able to express and live their gender and bodies in ways that are liberating, full, and healing... It is our work to challenge the numerous obstacles that encroach on people's abilities to make those decisions for their own." Michelle O'Brien

So in what ways do we not have gender self-determination? To some people it's laughably obvious, and to others perhaps it's not so obvious. How are you not completely free to determine what you do with or what happens to your body? How are you not free to determine your own identity and gender presentation?

The acceptable genders in this society are man or boy and woman or girl. For most of us a medical professional determines our sex the moment we're born. If our genitals are ambiguous, they might further determine who we are and alter our bodies to fit the male or female box without our permission. Then most of us have to wear pink or blue and of course many of us know how we're treated differently as we're growing up depending on if it's been determined that we're male or female. It's often determined for us what we wear, what we can play, what toys are fit for us, what we should be interested in, what skills we're encouraged to have, etc. Not only are these things pushed on us, but we might be punished in one way or another if we don't fit accurately and acceptably into the male or female box. If it's determined that we're male, but we're not masculine enough, we're called sissies, fags, pussy-whipped, etc. If it's determined that we're female, but we're not feminine enough, we are called bitches, whores, or dykes, or we will never get a boyfriend/married (and therefore have no value). All around us we're coerced into fitting into the male or female box and we're taught how we have to fit; we need to fulfill certain requirements starting with our bodies and including our sexuality, how we act, how we look, and what we value. We are made to think there is such a thing as a real man and a real woman, and that we're supposed to be one or the other. We are virtually imprisoned by gender, though we may have some freedom, if we don't behave appropriately, there are plenty of prison guards to

attempt to put us in our place. To what extent do we choose this arrangement or our place in it? What would gender look like if we had gender self-determination?

If we've agreed that we are socialized to fit into one of the gender boxes, even coerced into it, then perhaps we can agree that we are still without choice in many ways.

Is this the natural order of things or does power play a role in the division between genders? Think about why white supremacy/racism exists and how the division between white people and other races is reinforced in different ways. Not to imply that white supremacy and patriarchy affect people or function the same way, but comparing the two can offer us some insights into how they are based on power and how they interconnect.

## Gender and Power

I argue that power has a lot to do with why these social divisions exist and are maintained. In the case of gender, men in general benefit from this social division. Men are given more access, more privilege, and more value. A man must be masculine to climb up the hierarchy. A primary masculine trait that upholds patriarchy is domination. Masculinity does not necessarily involve domination, but domination is a highly valued masculine trait. Patriarchy allows and encourages men in general to control things that are deemed weaker or lower in the hierarchy. Some men even use the model of patriarchal masculinity against others by accusing them of being less than a man (i.e. insults implying homosexuality or womanliness), which is another example of how the gender dichotomy is based on power.

Being the breadwinner of the family has been seen as man's proper role, but economic hardship due to racism and capitalism has caused situations in many families of color and poor families where men can't make adequate money. Patriarchy (and white men colluding with it) has compelled many black men and women alike to defend black men's manhood in the context of patriarchal racism, which reinforces the divide between men and women. In *Killing Rage*, bell hooks wrote, "Since most black men (along with women and children) are socialized to equate manhood with justice, the first issue on our agenda has to be individual and collective acknowledgement that justice and the integrity of the race must be defined by the extent to which black males and females have the freedom to be self-determining... [Justice] can emerge only as black males refuse to play the game — refuse patriarchal definitions of manhood." Some black female authors have said that due to men's need to defend their masculinity, fighting for the liberation of their race or class is a priority over the fight for women's liberation (which, being detrimental to a struggle against racism and upholding patriarchy, benefits white men twofold).

Having to already deal with the patriarchal standards within their own ethnic groups, women of color also experience to different degrees being exoticized, sexualized, and otherwise dehumanized and treated as property by white people as well. It is the experience of many women that we are taught that the ideal womanhood is white economically privileged womanhood. Think about images of women in the media and who is favored and who is not. Think about how having money and time affects a woman's ability to appropriately perform her femininity.

Patriarchy basically means rule by men. This works in abstract and systematic ways as well as tangibly between individuals. It is about discrimination and especially about control and devaluation. It manifests as abuse, violence against women, disrespect, control of sexuality and women's bodies, objectification and beauty standards, and the devaluation of women's contribu-

tions, views and opinions, etc. Many feminists have argued simply that women are the oppressed and men are the oppressors.

It's obviously more complex than that. It is certainly (white straight able rich) men that are in control, but some women, queer people, people of color and other minorities are gaining access to some of the privilege in a bigger way than they had before. Do they have to buy into the system to get in? Do they have to dominate others to gain and maintain that position? Certainly, the system that they are privileging from is based on exploitation, greed, competition, imperialism, and hierarchy of social divisions. This system can succeed better by allowing a small number to access some of the wealth and power of the elite (and more people to lesser degrees). This is because the (often false) promise/possibility of wealth and power, or at least more comfortable living (as well as, on the other side of the coin, the reality of working constantly and struggling just to survive) keeps people from resisting or fighting the systems of power and that which hold them up. In addition, scarcity of wealth and power makes people with any privilege feel threatened, causing them to hold onto any power they can, keeping those social hierarchies in place. Capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, with domination as their base, work in interlocking ways.

Because of the complexity of which patriarchy must be viewed, we must consider patriarchy as not only the rule of men but also the rule of those that are colluding in and practicing what is a value of patriarchal masculinity; domination. Or perhaps we should only use the term patriarchy when we're talking about the rule of men, and we should use the term gender oppression in other cases (when related to gender). Men aren't the only ones benefiting from gender oppression. Heterosexual men and women privilege from the oppression of queer people. People who fit into their appropriate gender boxes better than others privilege from the oppression of people who cannot fit into those boxes.

I argue that gender divisions are, for the most part, created within the context of power and that the border drawn between men and women is a deception. I'm not arguing that there is no difference between men and women, but that gender is more of a spectrum than a dichotomy.

Perhaps the metaphor of a border is quite useful. In thinking about the U.S./Mexico border, from which I live about 200 miles, we see that this, like many other national borders, is manmade, only to preserve a conceptual difference between places and peoples. There are geographical differences, different people and cultures, but the borders suggest that there is some absolute difference between that which is on either side. This also makes invisible those native and other peoples who live along the border. In the interest of those in power, borders create an "us vs. them" mentality, while the reality of our differences outside of power relationships is trivial.

Even if you believe that there is some biological or essential difference between men and women that is the cause for how different the ideas of "real woman" and "real man" are, it must be acknowledged that there is a wide variety of ways of being a woman or a man, and that there are people who identify as neither.

The idea that there is some essential aspect of a woman that makes her different from a man can be argued against to some extent by the huge variety of experience of being a woman. Womanhood varies by race, class, age, sexuality, ability, size, and more. Can you name one thing that all women (and no one else) share in common? If so, does that erase the experience of anyone (anyone who is intersexed or transgender for example)? Essentialism, the idea that there are essential differences between two groups, is a problematic concept. It has been used against some non-white races for the purposes of eugenicist ideas — that people of color had criminal ten-

dencies or less intelligence and so they deserved to be forcibly sterilized. And of course it was the women and not the men who tended to be sterilized. Different people have critiqued gender essentialism and models of womanhood as based on race or class privilege, like in the case of white feminism. "...the hierarchical pattern of race and sex relationships already established in American society merely took a different form under "feminism": ...the form of white women writing books that purport to be about the experience of American women when in fact they concentrate solely on the experience of white women..." wrote bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman*.

I do not wish to argue over human nature, but rather to put ideas of difference into the context of power, and to bring to the forefront the realities of lives that are marginalized or made invisible.

Generalizing is easy and it is also easier to think in terms of simple categories. It's easier to justify social divisions and oppression with simplicity, but humans are far too complex. Why is it that those who transcend gender categories are such a threat (and therefore a target of violence and harassment)? Is it because the act of not conforming enough to patriarchal standards of gender throws a monkey wrench into the systems of control and domination? Gender is socially constructed based on the idea that gender can be split simply into two categories and to expose it as otherwise is to undermine what gender oppression is based on.

A good example of how gender is a social construct is the case of body hair. Think about people's reaction to a woman with armpit hair (or a little mustache). Somehow she is a threat, or she's just "unhygienic" — even though hair naturally grows there. Isn't it interesting that our concept of the female body is a body that is shaven? We can conclude that this idea of gender is not based on any real, natural, biological concept of a gender difference, but rather on patriarchal and capitalist domination. (Yes, women tend to have less body hair than men, but some women are hairier than some men.)

We must consider how gender divisions have historically been shaped within power relationships. An interesting dimension to the concept of gender is Butch Lee and Red Rover's theory on the connections between capitalism, race, and gender from *Night Vision*:

Understanding that race was politically constructed by capitalism to carry out class roles, then it's just another step to see that the same goes for gender. Capitalism's ingrained mindset that these things are somehow naturally determined, biologically fixed, is hard to break... these minor physical differences are only a reference point for the vast superstructure of race that world capitalism created... When European capitalism reshaped gender under its rule, they did so around class and race. White women were to be unnaturally "feminine" — which meant weaker, delicate, dependent, "lily-white", housebound, caretakers to men, "alluringly" satisfying to male domination. Only upper-class women and women from the middle classes, the Lady & the Housewife, could truly become these artificial women, of course. By definition, colonial and lower-class women were excluded, had failure to gender, we might say. Race became gender. For the making of the white race involved the politicized unmaking of women to fit into "white." Euro-capitalism artificially remade its women physically weaker, domestic & dependent.

Butch Lee and Red Rover also argue in the same book that capitalism started with the witch trials — the genocide of women and the state's accumulation of their property. Activists, organizers, theorists, and the like can go round and round trying to determine what oppression came

first, what formed what, what's more important to fight, etc. Those who focus on class and/or race often leave the discussion of gender oppression in the dust, if not simply reference it. It is necessary to see the interconnections no matter what oppression we're focusing on.

## Freedom for All Genders

In this context of these power relationships it makes sense for any liberation movement to address the complex system of hierarchies. Narrowing our focus down to gender, how can we strive for freedom for all genders?

All genders?

We are a movement of masculine females and feminine males, cross-dressers, transsexual men and women, intersexuals born on the anatomical sweep between female and male, gender-blenders, many other sex and gender-variant people, and our significant others. All told, we expand the understanding of how many ways there are to be a human being. Our lives are proof that sex and gender are much more complex than a delivery room doctor's glance at genitals can determine, more variegated than pink or blue birth caps. We are oppressed for not fitting those narrow social norms. We are fighting back.

-Leslie Feinburg, *TransLiberation*

Those of us who act and talk like there are only male and female should examine our assumptions and widen our view. There is a variety of ways to identify, perform, and express gender. Based on the actual experiences of people, rather than scientific classification or patriarchal thinking, gender is more of fluid-like than binary.

To deny the fluidity of gender is to deny many peoples' experiences. It is also common among communities where gender non-conformity and gender-variance is marginalized or invisible, to assume that these things come out of race or class privilege, which is also to deny many people's experiences and further marginalize them.

Gender is also intimately connected with sexuality. Whether one acceptably looks or acts an appropriate gender by our society's standards or not, freedom to do what we want or to not do what we don't want with our bodies and our love is restricted in many ways. Therefore, gender self-determination must also include the freedom of consensual sexuality between and among all genders.

Think about the oppression one must face as someone who does not identify with or perform the gender they are expected to. (Why are they expected to?) Consider the safety of a person who is transsexual, transgender, genderqueer or any other gender-variant identity. If a person desires or needs to live as the "opposite gender" from what he/she was born, their ability to pass as that gender may affect their survival (either in terms of possible violence or lack of a good job, etc. or both). Emi Koyama wrote in "Transfeminist Manifesto", "Because our identities are constructed within the social environment into which we are born, one could argue that the discontinuity between one's gender identity and physical sex is problematic only because society is actively maintaining a dichotomous gender system. If one's gender were an insignificant factor in society, the need for trans people to modify their bodies to fit into the dichotomy of genders may very

well decrease, although probably not completely.” Transsexual and transgender people often require the services of the medical community in order to pass (passing describes a transgender person’s ability to be accepted as their preferred gender. The term refers primarily to acceptance by people the individual does not know, or who do not know that the individual is transgender — wikipedia). However, similarly to how being homosexual was/is considered having a condition, often gender-variant people are said to have “gender dysphoria” or “gender identity disorder” based on concepts of “normal” and “abnormal”. The medical establishment is also that which first determines our gender.

## **Institutionalized Gender Oppression**

It is important to consider how the medical establishment is an institution of gender oppression. There is a history of patriarchal heteronormative development of western medicine. The lack of respect for women and their choices, lack of non-sexist research on women’s health, denial of female experiences such as PMS, lack of respect for queer people (even considering them crazy or diseased), lack of adequate AIDS research and affordable drug costs, lack of respect for intersex people, non-consensual mutilation of most/some intersex people, circumcision of most boys without consent, strict rules on how mothers should birth their babies, high cost abortions, risky unhealthy contraceptives, lack of appropriate education about and screening for HPV which can cause cervical cancer, lack of respect for transsexual and other gender-variant people (and on and on)... not to mention that being poor or brown compounds the disrespect and lack of proper care and access. This is an example of institutionalized gender oppression.

Institutionalized gender oppression can even be as simple as going to the bathroom. Many of us don’t have to think about it. Or perhaps we’re reminded of the story about how the equal rights act was argued against because it was said that eventually men and women would have to share public bathrooms. What if you avoid going to a public restroom because you don’t know if you are safe doing so? Many transsexual, transgender and other gender-variant people may not be able to pass as an appropriate gender to “belong” in one gendered restroom or the other. The reaction of other people is one situation which can be a matter of physical safety or harassment or a weird expression on someone’s face, but one can get fired, or even arrested for entering the “wrong” bathroom. A report on bathrooms on the Transgender Law Center website stated: “Bathrooms reinforce the current gender system. Bathrooms are a daily structural reminder that we must know at each moment whether or not we identify as female or male. Male and female, these are our only choices. Why must we artificially divide the huge gender diversity into two groups? Why is it so important that we relieve ourselves with only those who are lumped into the same group as ourselves?”

What if you are gender-variant and you have to go to jail or prison? Think strip-searches, harassment, improper medical care, verbal and physical abuse... What about employment...?

Nearly every social institution is founded on the assumption that people can and will fit properly into their gender boxes. This is not freedom.



## Gender Self-Determination

“The continued oppression of women proves only that in any binary there’s going to be one up and one down. The struggle for equal rights must include the struggle to dismantle the binary”.

– Gender Outlaw

“When we say we are fighting the patriarchy, it isn’t always clear to all of us that that means fighting all hierarchy, all leadership, all government, and the very idea of authority itself.”

– Peggy Kornegger, *Anarchism: the Feminist Connection*

We may be imprisoned by gender, but we can also use gender to set ourselves and each other free. We should address strict, rigid divisions of mutually exclusive genders as false and consider how they’re used against people. This social division of genders, the gender dichotomy, is what patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia are based on.

Should we smash the gender dichotomy, get rid of gender? In an essay called “Politicizing Gender: Moving toward revolutionary gender politics” the author, Carolyn wrote,

For many anti-authoritarians there may be the temptation to “smash gender” or “destroy gender roles.” This may seem logical to some. However, I believe this too leads to an alternate form of authoritarianism... a gender revolution will only be meaningful if it substantively empowers everyone... Gender must be liberated, but we all must have a voice in what that means, not from an abstract pre-determined theory, but a synthesis of real people’s experiences. From this I believe we will see that many people find gendered roles liberating, while others experience serious oppression through these roles. Any strategy toward liberation must maintain the integrity of all our experiences and be willing to question how different communities can accept divergent and antagonistic needs without creating an atmosphere of punishing silences and real violence.

The struggle for gender self-determination should include the dismantling of the gender dichotomy – but not to the extent that gender identities are replaced by androgyny or genderlessness, that any gender identities are prohibited, nor that people who conform to accepted ways of being male or female are looked down upon. The dismantling of the gender dichotomy is a process of looking at the social division of gender as based on power relationships, to fight that power, to accept a variety of ways of expressing, and performing gender, to destabilize ideas of a “real man” and a “real woman,” to respect people’s decisions about how they identify and what language they use regarding their identity (pronouns, labels, etc.). What each of us can do depends on our position in the gender hierarchy. Addressing our privilege where we have it, listening to others, overcoming assumptions, confronting domination, addressing the limits that have been forced on us, being disloyal to patriarchy, and seeking out our own identities with a vision of a world without the coercion of the gender dichotomy and patriarchy. Those of us who are subjugated by gender oppression need to have solidarity with each other. Those who privilege from gender oppression need to see where they are also repressed by patriarchal expectations and lack of choices for expression. We need to look for those things that threaten the patriarchal

power structure and use those things against it. We need to come together against patriarchal masculinity. It is necessary to undermine men's assumed access to privilege and control.

We must see the interconnections of oppressions and make our goal the liberation of all. Michelle O'Brien wrote in an article called "Gender Skirmishes on the Edges; Notes on gender identity, self-determination and anticolonial struggle,"

A revolutionary politics of self-determination must also be about recognizing and challenging systems of white supremacist capitalism and neocolonialism. Self-determination isn't just about making individual decisions — it's about communities, classes and nations seizing control of one's own destiny from the grips of the domination of capital, state violence and colonization. A substantive radical gender politics must challenge all structures of domination as they are deeply interconnected across the surface of our lives and across this planet.

We need to address and confront institutionalized gender oppression. Some will find it necessary to think in terms of reform, while others will seek justice and solutions through direct action. We must address our own attitudes and actions, those within our community, and gender oppression on a larger scale.

Self-determination is a freedom that would ultimately require that we are no longer ruled by the state nor by anyone else. The state, embodying domination, seeks to control our bodies and our lives. No authority can tell us who we are, and no one can rightfully control our bodies.

We cannot simply say that fighting against patriarchy is a fight for the freedom of more than half the population. We know that it is/has not been all feminists' goals to set all women free; that racism and classism has permeated much of the mainstream feminist movement. However, those of us who are feminists know that the feminist movement has been criticized as racist more than race and class-based movements have been criticized as sexist. We also know that many feminists (particularly anarchy-feminists) have struggled and are struggling for freedom from all oppressions.

My vision of anarchy-feminism is a feminism that is anarchist, not only in the sense that the objective isn't "equality" with men within an domination-based system, but also in the sense that we question the basis on which gender divisions and roles are shaped by power.

It makes no sense why gender self-determination and freedom from patriarchy can so easily be left out of discussions about power and absent from liberation movements. As long as patriarchy is not addressed, domination will be a central value in our society, people will be oppressed based on their gender or sexuality, and freedom is not possible.

Gender oppression is an incredibly old oppression. It's likely that people's unwillingness to address it on a larger scale is because it is so daunting. How can we change ingrained attitudes, how we've been taught to think and act? Another difficult dimension to this problem is that for so many of us, gender oppression is a very personal experience. How do we empower ourselves and everyone to fight against gender oppression? These are issues around which we need to think and talk about and create strategies.

## Further Resources:

- “Politicizing Gender: Moving toward revolutionary gender politics” by Carolyn: [www.spunk.org/library/pubs/lr/sp001714/gender.html](http://www.spunk.org/library/pubs/lr/sp001714/gender.html)
- “Gender Skirmishes on the Edges; Notes on gender identity, self-determination and anti-colonial struggle” by Michelle O’Brien: [www.deadletters.biz/skirmishes.html](http://www.deadletters.biz/skirmishes.html)
- “Intersex and Trans Demands” [www.geocities.com/gainesvilleavengers/intersextransdemands.htm](http://www.geocities.com/gainesvilleavengers/intersextransdemands.htm)
- *My Gender Workbook* by Kate Bornstein
- *TransLiberation* by Leslie Feinberg
- *Transfeminist Manifesto* by Emi Koyama [www.transfeminism.org/pdf/tfmanifesto.pdf](http://www.transfeminism.org/pdf/tfmanifesto.pdf)
- “Politics of Safety in Women-Only Spaces: An Opening Statement for the Dialogue” [www.eminism.org/readings/bitch-mwmf.html](http://www.eminism.org/readings/bitch-mwmf.html)
- Trans/Gender Variant in *Prison Committee* (webpage) [www.prisons.org/TIP.htm](http://www.prisons.org/TIP.htm)
- Sylvia Rivera Law Project (webpage) [www.srlp.org/](http://www.srlp.org/) (check out the issues section)
- Intersex Society of North America (webpage) [www.isna.org/](http://www.isna.org/)
- *The Will to Change* by bell hooks
- *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* by Bruce Bagemihl

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