

Gay Men's Sexism and Women's Bodies

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At a recent presentation, I asked all of the gay male students in the room to raise their hand if in the past week they touched a woman's body without her consent. After a moment of hesitation, all of the hands of the gay men in the room went up. I then asked the same gay men to raise their hand if in the past week they offered a woman unsolicited advice about how to "improve" her body or her fashion. Once again, after a moment of hesitation, all of the hands in the room went up.

These questions came after a brief exploration of gay men's relationship to American fashion and women's bodies. That dialogue included recognizing that gay men in the United States are often hailed as the experts of women's fashion and by proxy women's bodies. In addition to this there is a dominant logic that suggests that because gay men have no conscious desire to be sexually intimate with women, our uninvited touching and groping (physical assault) is benign.

These attitudes have led many gay men to feel curiously comfortable critiquing and touching women's bodies at whim. What's unique about this is not the male sense of ownership to women's bodies—that is somewhat common. What's curious is the minimization of these acts by gay men and many women because the male perpetuating the act is or is perceived to be gay.

An example: I was at a gay club in Atlanta with a good friend of mine who is a heterosexual black woman. While dancing in the club, a white gay male reached out and grabbed both her breasts aggressively. Shocked, she pushed him away immediately. When we both confronted him he told us: "It's no big deal, I'm gay, I don't want her— I was just having fun." We expressed our frustrations to him and demanded he apologize, but he simply refused. He clearly felt entitled to touch her body and could not even acknowledge the fact that he had assaulted her.

I have experienced this attitude as being very common amongst gay men. It should also be noted that in this case, she was a black woman and he a white gay male, which makes this an eyebrow-raising dynamic as it invokes the psychological history of white men's entitlement to black women's bodies. However it has been my experience that this dynamic of assault with gay men and women also persists within racial groups.

At another presentation, I told this same story to the audience. Almost instantly, several young women raised up their hands to be called upon. Each of them recounted a different story with a similar theme. One young woman told a story that stuck with me:

"I was feeling really cute in this outfit I put together. Then I see this gay guy I knew from class, but not very well. I had barely said hi before he began telling me what was wrong with how I looked, how I needed to lose weight, and how if I wanted to get a man I needed to do certain things... In the midst of this, he grabbed my breasts and pushed them together, to tell me how my breasts should look as opposed to how they did. It really brought me down. I didn't know how to respond... I was so shocked."

Her story invoked rage amongst many other women in the audience, and an obvious silence amongst the gay men present. Their silence spoke volumes. What also seemed to speak volumes, though not ever articulated verbally, was the sense that many of the heterosexual women had not responded (aggressively or otherwise) out of fear of being perceived as homophobic. (Or that their own homophobia, in an aggressive response, would reveal itself.)

This, curiously to me, did not seem to be a concern for the lesbian and queer-identified women in the room at all.

Acts like these are a part of the everyday psychological warfare against women and girls that pits them against unrealistic beauty standards and ideals. It is also a part of the culture's constant message to women that their bodies are not their own.

It's very disturbing, but in a culture that doesn't see gay men who are perceived as "queer" as "men" or as having male privilege, our misogyny and sexist acts are instead read as "diva worship" or "celebrating women", even when in reality they are objectification, assault and dehumanization.

The unique way our entitlement to women's physical bodies plays itself out is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to gay cisgender men's sexism and privilege. This privilege does not make one a bad person any more than straight privilege makes heterosexuals bad people. It does mean that gay men can sometimes be just as unthinkingly hurtful, and unthinkingly a part of a system that participates in the oppression of others, an experience most of us can relate to. Exploration of these dynamics can lead us to query institutional systems and policies that reflect this privilege, nuanced as it is by other identities and social locations.

At the end of my last workshop on gay men's sexism, I extended a number of questions to the gay men in the audience. I think it's relevant to extend these same questions now:

How is your sexism and misogyny showing up in your own life, and in your relationships with your female friends, trans, lesbian, queer or heterosexual? How is it showing up in your relationship to your mothers, aunts and sisters? Is it showing up in your expectations of how they should treat you? How you talk to them? What steps can you take to address the inequitable representation of gay cisgender men in your community as leaders? How do you see that privilege showing up in your organizations and policy, and what can you do to circumvent it? How will you talk to other gay men in your community about their choices and interactions with women, and how will you work to hold them and yourself accountable?

These are just some of the questions we need to be asking ourselves so that we can help create communities where sexual or physical assault, no matter who is doing it, is deemed unacceptable. These are the kinds of questions we as gay men need to be asking ourselves so that we can continue (or for some begin) the work of addressing gender/sex inequity in our own communities, as well as in our own hearts and minds. This is a part of our healing work. This is a part of our transformation. This is a part of our accountability.

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