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Transmisogyny

The term *transmisogyny* (also written *trans-misogyny*) was coined by writer, scholar, and activist Julia Serano in the mid-2000s as an intervention in discussions about anti-trans prejudice. At the time, such prejudice was generally conceptualized in terms of transphobia, which targets people for their failure to conform to gender norms. Serano pointed out how, in a male-centric culture, gender transgressions toward the female or feminine—as typically occur in assigned male at birth (AMAB) trans people—tend to garner more public sensationalization, consternation, and demonization than their trans male/masculine counterparts. Transmisogyny (a portmanteau of “transphobia” and “misogyny”) was intended to better capture this disparity.

Transmisogyny and the “Lesser Sex”

A rudimentary understanding of transmisogyny follows from the fact that women have historically been viewed as inferior to men in Western, North American culture, and therefore people tend to view AMAB individuals who express a desire to be female or feminine as more perplexing or pathological than assigned female at birth (AFAB) individuals who desire to be male or masculine. This premise is supported by research showing that feminine AMAB children are viewed far more negatively and are brought in for psychotherapy more often than masculine AFAB children. Furthermore, throughout the mid- to late 20th century, trans-related psychiatric studies, diagnoses, theories, and therapies were centered on “effeminate” boys and men, AMAB cross-dressers, and trans women. Serano called this tendency *effemimania* (an obsession with “male femininity”).

During this same period, the media exhibited a similar effemimanic focus, often depicting these same AMAB groups as either potential threats (such as the killers in films like *Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, and *Silence of the Lambs*) or as objects of ridicule (e.g., cliché jokes about men who dress or behave femininely, and/or want their “penis cut off”). The pervasiveness of these stereotypes, and the fact that they were constantly reproduced by media creators who were not personally familiar with trans people, indicate that they were primarily rooted in sexist presumptions about women and men.

Transmisogyny, Femininity, and Artificiality

Transmisogyny also relies heavily on sexist presumptions about gender expression. In Western, North American culture, femininity is marked relative to masculinity, with the former garnering far more attention and scrutiny. Furthermore, feminine dress and behaviors are often interpreted as “frivolous,” “manipulative,” and

“artificial,” whereas their masculine counterparts are taken for granted as “serious,” sincere,” and “natural” (as evident in the notion that women get “all dolled up” while men simply partake in “grooming”).

Given these disparities, it is not surprising that those who wish to portray trans people as “fake” women and men will be inclined to dwell on trans female/feminine individuals. In her aforementioned analysis of media depictions, Serano showed that, even though trans women vary in how femininely they dress and act (just as cisgender women vary in these ways), they are almost always portrayed in a hyperfeminine manner, and feminine accoutrement (e.g., displays of putting on clothing or cosmetics, slipping while wearing high heels) is regularly employed as a device to emphasize their supposed “fakeness.” In contrast, because masculine dress and mannerisms are viewed as “natural” and “practical,” it is more difficult to depict trans male/masculine individuals as putting on an “artificial exterior.”

In the eyes of society, trans women are doubly marked for being both trans and feminine, and this often results in excessive attention, much of it sensationalistic and scrutinizing in nature. In contrast, the fact that masculinity is unmarked and viewed as the default in western North American culture seems to contribute to the media’s and general public’s relative disinterest in trans men—a phenomenon often referred to as *trans male/masculine invisibility*.

Transmisogyny and Sexualization

Sexualization may be the most blatant manifestation of transmisogyny. Trans female/feminine individuals are routinely depicted in sexually provocative and objectifying ways, and people often project sexual motives onto them. Historically, the two most common stereotypes of trans women have been the imagined “sexual deceiver” (i.e., “men” who “impersonate” women in order to “trick” or “trap” straight men into having sex), and trans women who do not “pass” as female but transition anyway in order to fulfill some personal sexual fantasy or fetish. Serano has chronicled the proliferation of these two stereotypes in both media depictions and psychiatric discourses.

Perhaps the most notable example of the latter is psychologist Ray Blanchard’s theory of *autogynephilia*, which asserts that there are two fundamentally different types of trans women: those who are *homosexual* (driven to transition by their desire to attract men) and those who are *autogynephilic* (driven by a sexually deviant/paraphilic desire to become women themselves). As with the analogous media depictions, autogynephilia theory completely ignores the existence of trans men, perhaps because it is difficult to conceptualize them as being primarily motivated by sexual desires (or “erotic anomalies,” in Blanchard’s parlance). While

subsequent research studies and critical reviews have disproved autogynephilia's proposed taxonomy and etiology, the theory is still sometimes cited by those who insist on attributing sexual motives to trans female/feminine people.

Other common manifestations of trans female/feminine sexualization include the media's recurring portrayals of walk-on sex worker characters and the proliferation of trans-themed porn, the latter of which overwhelmingly features trans female/feminine actors and relies on the presumption that such individuals are inherently hypersexual. In stark contrast, trans male/masculine people are not typically portrayed in a hypersexual manner, nor are they depicted as being sexually motivated in their transitions. Instead, the most common ulterior motive projected onto trans men is that they transition in order to attain male privilege and status. Thus, the popular assumptions that trans men transition to become men, but that trans women must be doing it for sexual reasons, imply that women categorically have no worth beyond their ability to be sexualized.

Over the past decade, there has been a sharp rise in coordinated anti-trans politics and propaganda promoted by the far right, social conservatives, and self-proclaimed "gender critical" feminists. The recurring bogeyman in these campaigns is an imagined predatory "man" who dresses as a woman and/or adopts a female gender identity in order to infiltrate women's restrooms and other sex-segregated spaces with the intention of "preying" on unsuspecting girls and women. Although multiple empirical studies have shown that trans women and trans-inclusive policies pose no such threat, these narratives continue to proliferate, most recently in claims that trans adults are "grooming" or "sexualizing" children in schools and other settings. Notably, while these campaigns emphasize the premise that trans female/feminine people are "really men" (and thus potentially sexually aggressive and violent), they never raise similar concerns about the reality of child sexual abuse and sexual violence perpetrated by cisgender men. Similarly, while trans men are not entirely immune from these "grooming" and "sexual predator" charges, they tend not to be the focus of these campaigns—in fact, more often than not, trans male/masculine people are portrayed as "girls" who are the victims of said "grooming." In other words, these pervasive "trans sexual predator" tropes have nothing to do with fears of "men" *per se*; rather, they are steeped in the transmisogynistic assumption that trans female/feminine people are hypersexual and sexually motivated in their actions.

Transmisogyny and Intersectionality

As the term has caught on, *transmisogyny* has increasingly been used as shorthand for any prejudice expressed toward trans women or transfeminine people, regardless of content. Others have argued that trans male/masculine people also experience transmisogyny—in such cases, the term is often interpreted as "some

combination of transphobia and misogyny.”

These latter debates can be resolved by recognizing that what has historically been called *sexism* consists of at least two components. Serano used the term *traditional sexism* to describe the assumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to maleness and masculinity. But in order to maintain that hierarchy, there needs to be a secondary force discouraging people from blurring or traversing those states of being. Serano called this latter force *oppositional sexism* and defined it as the belief that “male” and “female” represent mutually exclusive categories, each possessing diametrically opposed attributes, abilities, and desires. In other words, homophobia and transphobia are manifestations of oppositional sexism.

Together, these forces create the double bind that feminists have long described, where if a woman behaves femininely, she will be deemed “appropriate” but not taken seriously (due to traditional sexism), but if she behaves masculinely, she will be deemed “inappropriate” and subjected to derision (due to oppositional sexism). Trans male/masculine people tend to face an analogous dynamic, experiencing traditional sexism when they are imagined to be “girls/women,” and oppositional sexism (in the form of transphobia) when they are understood to be trans male/masculine. In some cases, traditional sexist sentiments may be invoked during the enforcement of oppositional sexism—for example, when transphobic/homophobic harassment is rationalized as “putting her back in her place”—but, by and large, AFAB people tend to experience these two forms of sexism under somewhat distinct circumstances.

In contrast, transmisogyny arises at the intersection of oppositional and traditional sexism: The increased artificialization, scrutinization, sexualization, and demonization of both trans and female/feminine bodies and identities compound one another, resulting in the previously described trans female/feminine-specific stereotypes. Of course, anyone who is perceived to be an “effeminate” or “womanly” boy or man (whether they are trans or cisgender, AMAB or AFAB) may experience transmisogyny to some degree or on certain occasions. But the primary target of transmisogyny is AMAB people whose gender transgressions/transitions toward femaleness and femininity appear to undermine the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity.

Recognizing that transmisogyny arises at the intersection of oppositional and traditional sexism facilitates consideration of how the phenomenon intersects with additional forms of marginalization. For instance, while studies indicate that roughly 50% of trans female/feminine people experience sexual violence at some point in their lives, trans women of color and those who are low-income, houseless, and/or engage in sex work are disproportionately affected. Relatedly, trans women of color experience relatively higher levels of public harassment, physical violence, and being profiled by police as potential sex workers—what is often referred to as *walking while trans*. Studies of trans-related homicides have shown that trans women of color make up

the majority of victims, and they are also most likely to experience “overkill” and to be depicted as “sexual deceivers” in subsequent media accounts. The term *transmisogynoir* (which combines *transmisogyny* with Moya Bailey’s concept of *misogynoir*) is often used to describe the intersection of racism (and especially anti-Black racism) with transmisogyny in the lives of trans women of color.

Thus, rather than view transmisogyny as a single issue unto itself, it should be recognized as a broad category of sexist attitudes and sentiments that intersect with other social forces, and which may play out in various ways in different individuals’ lives.

See also [Femininities](#); [Trans People and Violence](#); [Trans People of Color](#); [Transphobia](#)

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