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Not Manly Enough: Femmephobia's Stinging Impact on the Transmasculine Community

By: Tatyana Bellamy - Walker

When Zel Belderiver, 17, wore a knee-length peach-and-floral dress to his therapist's office, the counselor refused to give the then-high schooler in Everett, Washington, a letter of support to begin hormone replacement therapy.

"You're sitting in a dress right in front of me. How am I supposed to view you as a man?" the therapist asked.

Belderiver had been seeing the therapist for more than a year when this conversation occurred. Coming from a trained professional, the remark was especially cutting.

"I shut down," recalled Belderiver. After coming out as transmasculine and agender, an identity on the masculine end of the gender spectrum, he lost many of his friends. "I didn't have the emotional strength to stand up for myself because I have been shut down like that so many times before."

Transmasculine people — an umbrella term for trans men, gender nonbinary and gender-non-conforming individuals who were assigned female at birth — find they are often questioned and judged, even by others in the trans community, on whether they are masculine enough. Masculinity is keenly policed in the United States, with boys often taught not to cry and men ridiculed as "gay" for hugging one another or seeming too soft. On social media, transmasculine people who show femininity, such as by

wearing nail polish or makeup, are often attacked as “transtrenders,” a slur for a person who adopts a trans identity lightly, as a fad.

The prejudice against trans men and nonbinary people who are feminine is part of a larger cultural bias against people, ideas, activities, even modes of speaking that are associated with femininity. While sociologists have studied the devaluation of femininity since the 1970s, the term that describes it — “femmephobia” — was coined in Julia Serano’s 2007 book *Whipping Girl*. When fused with transphobia, femmephobia causes the invisibility and erasure of transmasculine people, leading to barriers to care and stress that can damage a person’s physical and mental health.

“Feeling authentic does have health implications; not just in terms of mental health or threats of physical violence, but also health care behavior and willingness to seek appropriate care,” Rhea Hoskin, a feminist scholar at Queens University in Ontario, Canada, and author of a 2016 paper on sexual health wrote in an email. “So much so that oftentimes even fear of diagnosis did not seem to outweigh these concerns.”

Hoskin’s most recent study on femme identity, published in the journal *Sex Roles*, describes femmephobia as a “regulatory power” within the LGBTQ community.

Hoskin and colleagues interviewed more than 30 LGBTQ people about their dating experiences and discovered many flavors of femmephobia. Femme women reported that others questioned or erased their sexuality if they did not appear butch enough. Some of the profiles on the queer hookup app Grindr read “no fats, fags or femmes.” The researchers also found that non-binary people who were assigned female at birth were sometimes denied gender-affirming care such as hysterectomies because doctors assumed they’d want to eventually give birth.

Two years ago, a report in the [Journal of Pediatrics](#) shows of 100,000 children, transgender boys faced the highest attempted suicide rate — at 51 percent. The second highest was among children who are nonbinary — those who do not identify exclusively as male or female — at 42 percent, while 30 percent of transgender girls reported attempting suicide.

Transgender Youth Suicidal Behavior

Percentages of self-reported suicide behavior among adolescents by gender identity.

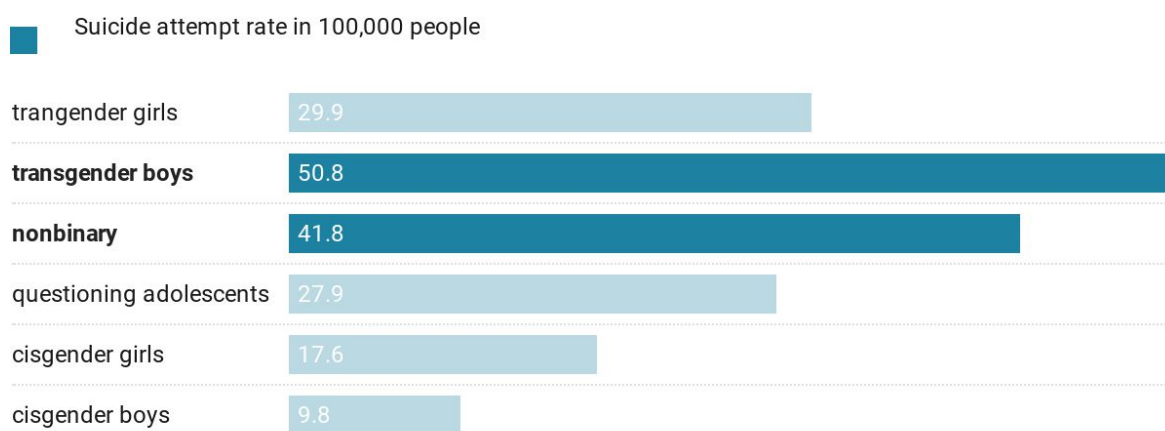


Chart: Tatyana Bellamy - Walker • Source: Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics
• Created with Datawrapper

Mara Keisling, director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, a non-profit in Washington, D.C., that releases the U.S. Transgender Survey once every 5 years, said femmophobia hits trans men especially hard because their gender identity or expression may challenge stereotypes about masculinity.

”There are a lot of misogynistic people who are internally feeling, Why doesn’t this person want to be a man? Or, This person can’t possibly be a man because they’re feminine,” she said. “There are a lot of harmful effects. It kills people in terms of the violence [transgender people] face, but also the mental health challenges and the suicidality it causes.”

What is Femmephobia?

According to Hoskin, femmephobia is different from sexism or misogyny, which by definition target women. Femmephobia, by contrast, targets people based on how much femininity they demonstrate, regardless of their gender.

“Femmephobia reproduces the idea that masculinity is elevated above femininity, which has many consequences for a variety of reasons and people,” Hoskin wrote in an email. “I think the way we devalue and regulate femininity, separate from women, says a lot about what we value in society.”

Masculinity is elevated in society through the mocking and bullying of feminine people. According to Hoskin, femininity is demeaned in many ways. People who dress or act in feminine ways are assumed to either be a woman or interested in attracting men’s attention. Hoskin calls the latter, ‘[masculine right of access](#)’ — the idea that femininity is cultivated for men’s consumption. She notes that these assumptions erase femininity as an authentic form of individual identity and agency.

For transmasculine people, these societal expectations can be especially confining, Hoskin said. Trans men may be held to a higher standard of masculinity than even cisgender men.

“Femininity is always already limited for cisgender men if they want to be seen as a ‘real man,’ but there is more weight to the notion of ‘real man’ for trans men,” Hoskin said. Femmephobia requires men and nonbinary people to “distance themselves from femininity to be seen as authentic,” she added.

Femmephobia and Mental Health

Dr. Alex Keuroghlian, director of the National LGBT Health Education Center at The Fenway Institute and Massachusetts General Hospital’s Gender Identity Program, said many doctors have a bias against gender-nonconforming trans and nonbinary patients.

“Many clinicians are uncomfortable and confused by the idea of a trans nonbinary person or a transmasculine person who has a feminine gender expression. They don’t know how to make sense of it,” said Keuroghlian, who added that many clinicians want patients to be either entirely masculine or feminine. “Clinicians are socialized in the same way as everyone else to have a lot of implicit binary assumptions about what is healthy [gender expression] and this can adversely impact care in a way that excludes people who are gender diverse.”

When Belderiver’s therapist rejected his trans status, the experience was more than just upsetting. Belderiver needed the therapist to provide a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, without which his health insurance company would not cover testosterone treatments.

“It slowed my transition greatly,” said Belderiver, who has recently started hormone therapy. “She could never take me seriously with being trans. She was always, like, But you like to wear skirts and dresses.”

Belderiver describes his gender expression as androgynous and femme. A typical outfit includes shredded jeans with a pair of fishnet stockings and a crop top. Belderiver’s hair is partially shaved. He wears black eyeliner and occasionally tops off the look with an electric-green lipstick.

“I’ve accepted a long time ago that I won’t be the most masculine guy,” Belderiver said. “Growing up I felt very stifled. I felt like I didn’t have a personality of my own. It has meant a lot to me to branch out and define who I am as a person.”

For Belderiver, the clothing he wears is about more than just gender expression. Dressing is an act of resistance against his overbearing parents. As a child, Belderiver’s mother overscheduled him in extracurricular activities.

“When my parents got divorced, my mom became clingy, overprotective and wanted me to present and be the way she wanted me to be. But that was not who I am,” he said. “She wanted me to be the ideal gifted student.”

Later, when Belderiver came out as transgender, his mother was initially in denial and confused because of his femme gender expression.

“She said, ‘I don’t understand. You’ve always been feminine. You were in ballet. You like pastel colors,’” recalled Belderiver. He told her, “That doesn’t change who I am.”

The then-teenager faced mounting pressure to prove his new gender, and he tried giving the world what they wanted — a masculine-presenting trans person. “When I got that dismissive attitude [from parents and therapist], I gave away all my dresses,” he said. “I wore nothing but baggy clothes and button-up shirts.”

But Belderiver then felt even more depressed than before. It felt like he was “living a lie.”

“It felt like I was silencing myself,” he said. “It felt like I was forcing myself to be the image of an ideal transmasculine person.”

“If mental health clinicians do not support or affirm femme expression in transmasculine and assigned-female-at-birth nonbinary people, it can exacerbate psychological distress,” said Keuroghlian.

Femmephobia in the Trans Community

Lukas K., a 23-year-old transgender man who works in a funeral home in Chicago, said he routinely experiences discrimination for not being “manly enough.” He has shoulder-length curly brown hair and likes to wear sparkly outfits. His grandmother once scolded that he’ll “confuse people” with his gender non-conforming style.

“She couldn’t wrap her head around it,” Lukas recalled. “She said, Why bother being trans?”

But cisgender people are not the only ones who demand masculinity from trans men. Transgender people can be equally prejudiced.

“Even other trans people turn on me for wearing bright colors and wearing a skirt now and then,” Lukas said. “Trans guys say, ‘You’re making it hard for the rest of us.’”

Lukas has been taunted online for making a “mockery” of transmasculine people. Another trans person in a comment thread accused him of “appropriating trans culture.” The person added sarcastically, “We’re just cis women pretending to be trans for fun.”

“How can I appropriate trans culture?” Lukas said, recalling the incident. “I am trans. I am not appropriating anything because that’s who I am.”

Lukas asked himself: Should I hide this part of my life? Is it too femme? “I felt betrayed and disappointed,” he said of the harassment that can come from “another trans person, a person you would hope would have your back.”

Dara Hoffman-Fox, a gender therapist in Colorado who is nonbinary, said at the root of this discrimination is internalized transphobia, or negative feelings trans people have about themselves.

“This type of gatekeeping within the trans community can be especially hurtful to those trans-masculine and nonbinary individuals who embrace feminine gender expression,” they said.

According to Hoffman-Fox, one might expect to find within the transgender community a heightened level of understanding and acceptance of the complexities involved with gender expression. But the reality is that social notions of gender are so powerful that they seep into the LGBTQ community as well.

“Perhaps a trans-masculine person is threatened by this display of femininity because they haven’t yet recognized that it is okay for them to have a certain degree of this within them as well,” Hoffman-Fox wrote in an email.

“The combination of being fearful of their feminine energy (because it threatens their newfound masculinity), along with negative messaging around what it means to embody femininity, is what then leads to internalized transmisogyny (the intersection of transphobia and misogyny).”

Addressing Femmephobia

According to femmephobia researcher Hoskin, to combat this cultural oppression society needs to value femininity and adopt language that underscores these positive judgments. She adds that rape culture, sexism and transmisogyny are all a product of the bias against femininity in society.

“Rethinking femininity offers so many avenues that will not only help trans/cis men or transmasculine folks to access a full range of human/gender expression, it will also help to combat a variety of sources of oppression,” Hoskin said. “I also believe that this revaluing will shift and erode the gender binary in substantial ways.”

Hoskin adds that Western culture has forced masculinity to be at odds with femininity, even though it’s unnecessary to create an either/or antagonism. Masculine and feminine traits coexist within everyone, regardless of gender. Trying to silo them creates artificial boundaries and taboos.

“To be a man who chooses to be feminine is a challenge to the power order,” she wrote.

All Lukas wants is to be able to wear his hair long and not be labeled a “girl” because of it.

“Having to be pigeon-holed into one side of the binary or the other doesn’t make things better,” he said. “People think to be trans you have to flip a switch and go all the way to your new chosen gender, and [that] if you do things that are associated with your assigned gender at birth then you’re not trans.”

At one point, Belderiver tried dressing in dark colors and buzz cutting his hair to deter discrimination — but he couldn’t get away from gender stereotypes. People assumed he was a “butch lesbian” and abused him for not being feminine enough.

“I still wasn’t believed even though I tried so hard to make myself palatable to cis people,” he said. “I don’t think it’s fair for them to expect all of us to be hypermasculine in that way. It stifles who we are and who we can be.”

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