seeing sexism from both sides: what trans men experience

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**Three guys are sitting at a Harlem bartop eating fries,** drinking whiskey and talking about love. One of them, Bryce Richardson, is about to propose to his girlfriend.

“I’m putting it together in my head, I’m like: ‘He’s gonna be one of my groomsmen, he’s gonna be one of my groomsmen,’” he points to his two friends and grins. The other men light up when they hear the news and start talking about rings, how much they cost, will it be princess cut or pear shaped? Pictures are Googled, phones are passed around. “That was one of my dreams, to get married, to be somebody’s husband, to be somebody’s father,” says one of the friends, Redd Barrett. “From when I was like 12, I used to think about that all the time.”

I ask the groom-to-be how he knew his girlfriend was the one. They met at work, he says, and by the time he came out to her, they were already in love. “I said ‘I’m trans, and you’re not gonna want me anyway,” he recalls, unable to keep the smile off his face. “And she said ‘I’m in love with you, I don’t care about that.’” His friend Tiq nods and says, “That’s your wife, right there.”

All three men are trans. But if they hadn’t said so, you wouldn’t have known.

Over the last three years, transgender awareness has exploded. From Orange is the New Black to Transparent, from Janet Mock to Caitlyn Jenner, America has a growing fascination with the lives of transgender people, most recently in light of recent debates over[controversial bathroom laws](http://time.com/4324687/even-in-liberal-communities-transgender-bathroom-laws-worry-parents/?iid=sr-link1). But the spotlight on trans issues has mostly been focused on transgender women, and transgender men have been largely left out of the narrative. Our cultural obsession with feminine beauty contributes to the imbalance. “Women’s appearances get more attention, women’s actions are commented on and critiqued more than men, so in that world it just makes sense that people will focus more on trans women than trans men,” says Julia Serano, a transgender activist and author of Whipping Girl.(Because most surveys ask people to identify as male or female but not cisgender or transgender, the size of the transgender population in America is unclear, though [one study](http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/datablog/what-we-know-transgender/) suggests there are about 700,000 trans people in the U.S.; it’s nearly impossible to know how many of them are trans men.)

Yet experiences of trans men can provide a unique window into how gender functions in American society. In the last few months, I’ve interviewed nearly two dozen trans men and activists about work, relationships and family. Over and over again, men who were raised and socialized as female described all the ways they were treated differently as soon as the world perceived them as male. They gained professional respect, but lost intimacy. They exuded authority, but caused fear. From courtrooms to playgrounds to prisons to train stations, at work and at home, with friends and alone, trans men reiterated how fundamentally different it is to experience the world as a man.

“Cultural sexism in the world is very real when you’ve lived on both sides of the coin,” says Tiq Milan, a friend of the future groom.

And that cultural sexism is often more visible to trans men, because most say they find it easier to be low-disclosure than trans women. They’re often not recognized as trans, which means they can be less vulnerable to obvious transphobia. Some call it “passing” or “going stealth”; others say those terms suggest secrecy or deception, preferring the term “low or no disclosure.” In practice, this means that a 6’2” woman is often more conspicuous than a 5’4” man. James Ward, a lawyer in San Francisco who transitioned about six years ago, put it this way: “We have the ability to just walk through the world and not have anybody look at you twice.”

MEN AT WORK

**One day in court, Ward and his opposing counsel** were making a big request to a judge. Ward knew their question would not go over well, so he wasn’t surprised when she reprimanded both him and his opposing counsel for asking. What he didn’t expect was for the opposing counsel lean over to him and call the judge the c-word. “We weren’t out the courtroom door when he said that to me under his breath,” Ward says. “He never would have said that when I was female.”

Many trans men I spoke with said they had no idea how rough women at work had it until they transitioned. As soon as they came out as men, they found their missteps minimized and their successes amplified. Often, they say, their words carried more weight: They seemed to gain authority and professional respect overnight. They also saw confirmation of the sexist attitudes they had long suspected: They recalled hearing female colleagues belittled by male bosses, or female job applicants called names.

“If I’m going off-the cuff, no-one really questions it,” Ward says. “It’s taken as, ‘He’s saying it, so it must be true.’ Whereas while I was practicing as female, it was ‘Show me your authority, you don’t know any better yet.’”

Mitch Davis is now a director of organizational development at Planned Parenthood Federation of America in New York City, but he’s worked in HR for many different companies since coming out eight years ago. In one previous job, he heard his boss call female colleagues “old cows” and refer to a middle-aged job applicant as “Dame Edna” after she’d left an interview. “Evidently men say things like that to each other all the time,” he says.

Other trans men say they’ve heard male co-workers sexualize female colleagues when no women are present. “There’s some crude humor, some crass humor,” says Cameron Combs, an IT consultant in Olympia, Washington. He says he’s heard male colleagues do “appraisals” of women in the office or observe how female co-workers used their “womanly wiles” to rise up the ladder, conversations he says he never would have heard when he was a woman. “When they saw me as female, it was kind of an automatic stop,” he says. “It’s a little less censored, the jokes I hear, the comments.”

Some trans men have noticed the professional benefits of maleness. James Gardner is a newscaster in Victoria, Canada, who had been reading the news as Sheila Gardner for almost three decades before he transitioned at 54. As soon as he began hosting as a man, he stopped getting as many calls from men pointing out tiny errors. “It was always male callers to Sheila saying I had screwed up my grammar, correcting me,” he says. “I don’t get as many calls to James correcting me. I’m the same person, but the men are less critical of James.”

Dana Delgardo is a family nurse practitioner and Air Force captain who transitioned three years ago. Since his transition, he’s noticed that his female patients are less open with him about their sexual behavior, but his bosses give him more responsibility. “All of a sudden, I’m the golden child,” he says. “I have been with this company for 6 years, no ever recommended me for management. Now I’m put into a managerial position where I could possibly be a regional director.”

Trans women have long observed the flip side of this reality. Joan Roughgarden, a professor emerita of biology at Stanford and a transgender woman, says it became much more difficult to publish her work when she was writing under a female name. “When I would write a paper and submit it to a journal it would be almost automatically accepted,” she said of the time when she had a man’s name. “But after I transitioned, all of a sudden papers were running into more trouble, grant proposals were running into more trouble, the whole thing was getting more difficult.”

“As a man, you’re assumed to be competent unless proven otherwise,” she says. “Whereas as a woman you’re presumed to be incompetent unless proven otherwise.”

HOW MEN THINK

**Every transgender man interviewed for this story** said he wasn’t just treated differently after he transitioned—he felt different, too. Those who had taken testosterone treatments said they noticed psychological changes that came with the medical transition. Most trans men said that after they took hormone treatments they felt more sure of themselves and slightly more aggressive than they had been before the treatment.

“After transitioning I was able to think more clearly, I was more decisive,” says the radio newscaster Gardner. He says the shift has affected his daily routine, even for something as ordinary as a trip to the grocery store. Before he transitioned, he says, he used to spend 45 minutes debating which pasta sauce to buy, which vegetables were the freshest. “I would stand there and look at the different varieties of yogurt,” he recalls. “Now I just grab one. I’m looking for utility, I don’t second-guess myself.”

“As a female there was black and white and everything in between. When I started taking the hormones, it was more black and white,” he explains, adding: “If I get into a disagreement with someone at work, I don’t have that feeling afterwards of, ‘I hope I didn’t hurt his or her feelings.’ I’m not a worrier as much as I was in the female body.”

Of course, Gardner’s story is unique to his own experience, and not all trans men who take testosterone have noticed quite so dramatic a shift. But men’s testosterone levels do have a significant influence on some traits and behaviors that are associated with masculinity. A small recent study on trans men taking T therapy [showed changes in the brain structure](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2015-08/econ-rst082815.php) of those undergoing medical transition—though whether those changes lead to the effects trans men described to me is not yet proven.

The changes in patients taking testosterone are strikingly consistent, says Dr. Joshua Safer, director of the Endocrinology Fellowship Training Program at Boston University. Dr. Safer has treated hundreds of people with testosterone for more than a decade, and says he observes his patients becoming more decisive and more aggressive under testosterone treatment, though he laments the lack of data to back up this observation.

“I feel a sense of urgency, like I just want to kind of do it and get it done,” Tiq Milan says, adding that he was surprised at the personality change when he transitioned at 25. “I wasn’t expecting testosterone to have such an effect on how I think.”

WALK LIKE A MAN

**Most trans men I spoke to also identified another commonality:** Once they transitioned, walking became easier, but talking became harder. To be more specific: walking home after dark felt easier, casually talking to babies, strangers and friends felt harder.

“I have to be very careful to not be staring at kids,” says Gardner. “I can look at a mom and her baby, but I can’t look for too long. I miss being seen as not a threat.” Ditto for kids on the playground and puppies, multiple guys said.

And to a man, everyone said they’d experienced a moment when they were walking at night behind a woman, and suddenly realized that she was walking faster or clutching her purse because she was scared.

“If I start to get too close, I can feel her fear, I can feel that she’s getting upset,” says Milan. “And it’s really just an indication of how dangerous this world is for women.”

As a trans man of color, Milan says he feels that the world perceives him as a menace, and his interactions with police officers have gotten much more fraught. “I’ve had people make assumptions that I was dangerous or I was a criminal. I’ve been followed around stores. I’ve seen white women who look physically scared, visibly shaken if there’s just the two of us in a elevator,” he says. “You can’t even ask a cop for directions as a black man.”

He says that before he transitioned he was catcalled on the street, but he didn’t feel likepeople assumed he was a criminal. “When I walk down the street no one knows that I’m a trans black man, people just see me as a black man,” he says. “So when we’re looking at all of this horrible police violence, it’s scary.”

Dana Delgardo also says that being a man of color comes with new problems. “I bought a Porsche convertible and I’m afraid to be out late at night after having one cocktail driving that car,” he says. “It deters me from doing things that I think a Caucasian male could probably do without fear of being pulled over by the police.”

Many white trans men said they felt it was easier to walk through the world, freed from the myriad expectations placed on women.

“As a female I felt I had to smile all the time, just to be accepted,” James Gardner said. “As a male I don’t feel a sense of having to be pleasant to look at.”

Many also noticed a shift in their friendships after they transitioned, with some struggling to make friends with cisgender men, unsure of the social cues of male friendship.

“I’m still trying to figure out all of the different secret codes that guys use to talk to each other and to make friendships,” says Mitchell Davis. “But I still I don’t know what the language is. I don’t know what that punch on the arm meant.” He says he doesn’t know what a close male friendship looks like, only that it probably looks different than a close female friendship.

For Milan, male friendship has been mostly positive, but occasionally alarming. While he says most cisgender men he meets are fairly respectful of women even behind closed doors, he’s also noticed what he describes as a culture of toxic masculinity. “I’ve heard men say things about slapping a woman or cheating on women in the most brutal ways and think it’s okay,” Milan says. “Being privy to the conversations that men have amongst themselves really does give me an indication of how they think about women,” he says. “And sometimes it can be really scary.”