AN EPIDEMIC OF VIOLENCE

RACE, DISCRIMINATION AND TRANSMISOGYNY

By MJ Eckhouse

A STATE OF EMERGENCY

Although visibility is a useful tool for progress, it does not equal acceptance. The year 2015 brought unprecedented transgender visibility, including the highest reported rates of trans murders. These victims are overwhelmingly trans women of color. Addressing this crisis requires considering its underlying factors.

Unfortunately, there isn’t much research on the subject. International reports of violence against trans people have only been systematically collected since 2009. Many trans people do not report crimes against them due to legitimate concerns of humiliation, physical violence, victim-blaming and police brutality.

According to a 2013 report by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, transgender crime victims are seven times more likely to experience physical violence when interacting with the police compared to cisgender victims. Knowing this, under-reporting is not surprising. Plus, cisgender journalists, police and EMTs often inaccurately document trans victims. This leads to incorrect and insulting headlines like, “‘Man in dress’ found dead.”

DISAPPOINTING EXAMPLES

When reporting the death of Bri Golec, a trans woman allegedly killed by her father, Akron police used he/him pronouns despite corrections from local transgender support group members. Ignoring trans people’s actual genders interferes with pressing hate crime charges, renders statistical data inaccurate and disrespects the deceased.

“When we investigated the case of Golec, he was dressed as a male and his girlfriend was there,” said Akron Police Information Officer Lieutenant Rick Edwards. “We [had] no prior knowledge of him being a transgender or any of that community, nowhere until organizations started calling […] If he was then he was, but if he was, [we weren’t] trying to hide it. He was dressed as a male, all his body parts [were] male.”

According to Akron’s LGBT Liaison Lieutenant Cynthia Christman, all Ohio police academy recruits are required to complete 12 hours of diversity training. She added that in previous years this was not the case.

The same insensitivity is applied to housing trans prisoners. Inspector Bill Holland explained Summit County’s policy regarding incarceration, saying if transgender people “were ‘born female’ and have ‘female genitalia,’ they will be housed accordingly.”
THE MYTH OF DECEPTION

The fallacy that genitals determine gender provokes another dangerous concept: the trap. Men accuse trans women of trapping them into sex, as if their existence is dishonest. In some cases men become so disgusted with their attraction to trans women, that violence — even murder — results. In 49 out of 50 states, if a man is charged, he can legally plead the “panic defense,” blaming the victim for his reaction, which legally excuses him from guilt.

Like cis women, trans women are sexualized and defined by the cis-constructed contradiction between different aspects of their bodies. Popular pornography emphasizes this perceived contradiction, exploiting the “transsexual surprise” narrative.

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

Unemployment is another systemic and crucial issue for the transgender population. Trans people are four times more likely to live in extreme poverty, with annual incomes under $10,000. Workplace discrimination forces many into sex work for survival, putting trans lives in danger of violence and incarceration.

In some areas, sex workers avoid carrying condoms or lube because police can use those as evidence against them. Cases of the “anti-condom” enforcement gained media attention in New York City, where 99 percent of recent diagnoses of HIV were transgender women. Of those, approximately 90 percent were black and Latina.

It’s clear minorities aren’t just at risk, they’re also targeted. The highest rates of extreme violence are among black trans women. This trend stems from the intersection of racism, poverty and transmisogyny. Cissexist culture upholds the idea that trans people are inferior, dishonest and unworthy of basic rights and respect. Additionally, structural racism increases the likelihood of discrimination and violence, leaving trans women of color powerless against a society that considers them subhuman.

Viewing trans women as sex objects also has dangerous consequences. Monica Loera, a sex worker and trans woman of color, was the first trans person to be reported as murdered in 2016. As in many of these cases, a john killed her. Because his ideas were bolstered by sensational media voyeurism, politicians legislating bathroom access and the porn industry reducing human beings to “trannies” and “shemales,” the killer didn’t see Ms. Loera as a person. She was dehumanized enough to be considered disposable. The importance of treating trans women like humans, not sex objects, should be clear.

INCARCERATION AND VIOLENCE

When trans people are incarcerated, they are nearly always housed according to the gender assigned at birth and/or placed into solitary. They suffer physical and psychological violence. We spoke with a local trans man who related his experience with Summit County police. Fearing workplace discrimination, he spoke on condition of anonymity.
“He pulled me over, and everything was fine until he checked my ID. He kept calling me this female name and obviously I don’t look female. Once he pulled me out of the car I was like, ‘Okay, just so you know, I’m trans, I go by [name]. Could you please call me [name]?’ And he was just like, ‘Well, the law says that you are [birth name], and you are female, and that’s the way I’m to refer to you.’ So, in every sentence he referred to me by my female name and emphasized the female pronouns,” our source said.

“WE DON’T HAVE ANY RESTROOMS HERE FOR YOU.”

“He took me, on the way to to get booked, to two different police stations, to parade me around and show me to other police officers, saying, ‘Look at the freak!’ They laughed, and he put me in the car and took me to another place, and took me, finally, to the booking station. I don’t know if there wasn’t a restroom or if he was just being a dick, but I asked if I could use the restroom, and he’s like, ‘We don’t have any restrooms here for you.’ I felt very humiliated.”

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Learning to recognize systematic oppression is crucial. We must realize this violence stems from fear and ignorance, and grows with misinformation and self-interest. To hem this violence, we first must notice its motivations.

Transphobia begins with the notion that cisgender is the default, because everyone is assigned a gender at birth based on the appearance of one’s genitals. Transness becomes othered and can only be validated by cisgender professionals. All states require a doctor’s note and/or surgery to alter a trans person’s legal documents. Three states, including Ohio, refuse to correct original birth certificates under any circumstances.

The widest propagated narrative of trans lives is the definition of being trapped in the wrong body. “An X trapped in a Y’s body” and “This Y was born an X.” Defending the humanity and legitimacy of trans people requires understanding that no one is born any gender. We are assigned a gender at birth, and our parents, teachers, government employees, doctors, peers and media enforce that gender’s rules, punishing us when we stray from society’s expectations.

Listening to people who live outside gender’s rules can help us replace the ideologies we’re all taught during childhood. These ideas are so entrenched that most people don’t even notice them, let alone critically examine them. Many people believe the idea that women have vaginas and men have penises is a universal truth. Protecting trans people means unlearning these harmful ideas.

The next step is to talk about it. If you hear someone say something like, “She looked hot but then I saw it was a tranny!” you might say, “That’s not okay to say. It makes me uncomfortable to hear her talked about like that.” Objecting to this hate speech sends a powerful and necessary message to the speaker and anyone within earshot. You can plant a seed of change.

“THE NEXT STEP IS TO TALK ABOUT IT.”

Micro-aggressions like these matter because people justify violence with ideas. The ideas that trans people are wrong, that sex workers deserve whatever they get and that trans women are deceitful are rationalizations to excuse and ignore violence. They encourage the dehumanization of trans women, making violence against them acceptable.

Education programs to enact and improve cultural competency in law enforcement, correctional, educational and medical facilities and other institutions must be started and maintained. According to a GLAAD study in 2015, only 16 percent of Americans said they know someone who is trans-gender. Though that figure has doubled over the past seven years, it still leaves a large majority of people who only associate the word “transgender” with pornographic images, murder victims and celebrities insulated by wealth.

If you don’t know anyone who is trans, you do now. I am a transgender man named MJ, and I’m more than willing to be the “trans friend” you reference when you hear transphobia. “Hey, I’ve got a friend who’s trans and they’re just people, like everybody else.” Those statements go a long way in fighting transphobic violence and discrimination.