

## The Problem with Gender Essentialism in Anti-Sexual Violence Work:

### The Case of Walk a Mile in Her Shoes©

(By JP Przewoznik)

Many folks in anti-violence movements utilize community awareness-raising campaigns as a mechanism to garner support and raise consciousness about an issue. Perhaps one of the most popular awareness raising campaigns is called Walk a Mile in Her Shoes©. Created in 2001, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes© has become an international phenomenon with walks now taking place worldwide with thousands of participants. The premise of Walk a Mile in Her Shoes© is that men walk in high heels as a show of support to end violence against women. From their website: “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes© asks men to literally walk one mile in women's high-heeled shoes. It's not easy walking in these shoes, but it's fun and it gets the community to talk about something that's really difficult to talk about: gender relations and men's sexual violence against women.” To be clear, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes© has raised serious money for local rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, and other anti-gender based violence programs. It gets communities talking about gender-based violence and has been an entry point for many men who are now very vocal anti-gender based violence advocates. All of this is true. And all of this is important.

That this event has raised money for our movements notwithstanding, many people around the world, and in fact many rape crisis centers and campuses across North Carolina, have shared their discomfort about some of the messages that may be implicit in this event. While Walk a Mile in Her Shoes© may shine a spotlight on men's violence against women, many people believe that it does so at the expense of multiple marginalized communities and, arguably, at the expense of the issue itself. Questions about the event's intent go back to its inception. Forge, a national organization whose mission is to “support, educate and advocate for the rights and lives of transgender individuals and SOFFAs (Significant Others, Friends, Family, and Allies),” penned a very thoughtful piece that highlights the revictimization experienced by people who are rendered invisible by the mainstream SV and DV movements. You can find their piece here: <http://forge-forward.org/2013/04/walk-a-mile/>. Below we highlight some of the concerns many of us have with this event:

- Let's start with the fundamental logistics of the Walk. Men don high heels (read: women's shoes) as a show of solidarity with women. The two concerns are that 1) high heels are a very normative and reductionist symbol of “woman.” Yes, some self-identified women wear high heels, but some don't. If we rely on normative representations of gender to do this work, then we are reifying what we are (hopefully) working against; and 2) (though very much related to 1) we run the risk of creating a category of what kind of woman gets to be considered worthy of “protection.” People who self-identify as girls or women but do not express their gender in ways that match normative societal expectations also experience sexual violence, and some of that violence is a direct result of their non-normative gender expression. Society doesn't like people who don't fit in, especially people who transgress gender norms. Using the high heel as the symbol for “woman” renders other kinds of women invisible in anti-violence work.
- The tone of the event is that it is supposed to be funny, it's a joke. Men dress up like women to laugh at themselves and each other for charity. One of the problems with this is that it devalues some women (see 1<sup>st</sup> bullet) by suggesting that their gender expression should be taken less seriously. Another problem is that there are many self-identified men who wear conventional “women's” clothes. And it's not a joke. These men may see it as fun and sometimes performative. They may also see it as inextricably linked to their identity, as part of who they are, without being either fun or performative. No matter the reason (because it's not our business), it's not a joke. It's especially not a joke when self-identified men are violently abused, attacked, and even killed because they are “men wearing women's clothes.”

- We still live in a society that does not understand transgender or non-binary gender identities. Because of this, transgender women are sometimes incorrectly and offensively viewed as “men wearing women’s clothes.” Transgender women are women. They are not “men wearing women’s clothes.” But, because we live in a transphobic and cissexist society, transgender women, particularly transgender women of color, are at an astronomically increased risk of experiencing sexual violence, intimate partner violence, police brutality, homelessness, joblessness, incarceration, assault, and murder. According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (2011), 64% of transgender people have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. It’s a human rights issue, it’s unacceptable, and those of us who commit our lives to anti-violence work need to do better.
- The event creates for us an essentialist view of what people should look like, act like, and wear. This essentialism makes it impossible to have meaningful conversations about sexual violence, particularly how to prevent it. A comment about the event from a local Canadian newspaper highlights this: *“How does humiliating men bring the sexes closer to being equal? The notion of putting on high heeled shoes is offensive to many men, yours truly included. In some cases men have asked for the practice to be prohibited, citing public humiliation of men as illegal even when voluntary.”* If men wearing high heels is a humiliating exercise that should maybe even be banned, how does that help us have a conversation about gender, masculinity, and violence? It doesn’t. It becomes a tool to validate the notion that men wearing “women’s” clothing is weird, it is humiliating, and it is something only to be done for charity.
- Walk a Mile in Her Shoes positions women as victims and men as perpetrators. On their website, they do acknowledge that men can be victims. But the event itself does not articulate that. In this work, when we position women as victims and men as perpetrators, a few things occur: 1) we render invisible men who are victims and 2) we deny the existence of survivors of all gender identities.

We are not suggesting that a community completely discard participation in awareness raising events; in fact, we are saying just the opposite. Awareness-raising events have the power to act as mechanisms for community mobilization. They have power because they can create norms and tone. Because of this, let’s be really intentional about the tone we are creating and the norms we are trying to change. Sexual violence prevention strategies that rest on the revictimization and mockery of anyone are non-starters. And, since all oppression is connected, we are ostensibly undoing any potential progress. Let’s work harder together to create awareness raising events that don’t exist at the expense of marginalized and disenfranchised communities.

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