

# **Interlinking our Struggles in Gender and Queer Issues**

Bandilang Itim

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## Silence is not golden

Some among us in Bandilang Itim are men who are cisgender and/or heterosexual. As cis/het men in Bandilang Itim who are raised with the privilege of being men, we are not experts on gender or queer issues nor have experience as women or queer. This ought not mean we stay silent on the issues that confront our sisters and queer siblings. As Adrienne Onda declares in her important piece, “Wrath Over Pride: A call-out post to ‘radical’ cis (het) men and their inadequacy in gender struggles,” “[Y]our silence is violence to us.” Our silence is violence to those struggling against gender-based oppression. We have people we love—partners, family, comrades, and friends—who are queer or who are women, and we owe it to them to speak against cisheteronormative discrimination and patriarchal practices that persist in our milieus and in our spaces. Queer people and women are angry that they still experience discrimination, infantilization, and oppression within our spaces. They are tired that they are consistently alone when they speak out against their own oppression. Not having queer experiences is not a reason for staying silent. If we do not have these experiences or expertise, we then ought to defer to the experiences of queer people and women. The issue of silence, censorship, or ignorance of women or queer issues is also a violence itself. When we are silent we are accomplices to the violence of the patriarchal system and the intricate network of oppression. We must join women and queer people and speak out for and with them especially in situations and spaces where they may not be able to speak for themselves.

We must remember that our freedom is interlinked. Our freedom is interlinked in such a way that if our queer or women neighbor is silenced and subjugated, then that would mean our freedom is but a privilege that can be revoked. “Freedom is but privilege extended, unless enjoyed by one and all,” as a version of *The Internationale* is sung. Our freedom is interdependent and complimentary with another in that the flourishing of one allows the flourishing of the other. In the same way, if someone’s freedom is threatened, then all our freedoms are threatened. Our freedom then relies on the freedom of others in order for it to be affirmed.

Thus we cannot call ourselves free if those around us still suffer from domination such as that of transphobia, discrimination, or misogyny. As anarchist theorist Mikhail Bakunin wrote, “I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation.” Black feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde would concur: “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.”

Our attitude as allies ought not be as saviors. We must reject patronizing attitudes behind helping women and queer people and reject the a cisheteronormative equivalent of a “white man’s burden.” We already know that women and queer people have their own agency; our task as allies is then to support their agency, boost their voices, follow queer and women leadership, and work together. As an Aboriginal activist group in Queensland in the 1970s said, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Liberation is a collective task and is not something that can be given or granted.

Likewise, we ought not forward an “allyship” based on mere passive support. As the indigenous provocation “Accomplices Not Allies” suggest, we need to be accomplices in actively dismantling the structures of oppression. This ties into following queer and women leadership and in supporting their agency.

What ought our intersectionality look like? A model for intersectionality comes from Dr. Angela Davis, who said that women, queer people, and particularly the trans community have shown us that, because they show that the normalcy of cisheteronormativity and patriarchy can be challenged, the normalcy of police, jails, and prisons can also be challenged:

So if we want to develop an intersectional perspective, the trans community is showing us the way. And we can’t only point to, and we need to point, to cases such as the murder of Tony McDade, for example. But we need to go beyond that and recognize that we support the trans community precisely because this community has taught us how to challenge that which is totally accepted as normal. And I don’t think we would be where we are today—encouraging ever larger numbers of people to think within an abolitionist frame—had not the trans community taught us that it is possible to effectively challenge

that which is considered the very foundation of our sense of normalcy. So if it is possible to challenge the gender binary, then we can certainly, effectively, resist prisons, and jails, and police.

Because women and queer people are able to radically question what is perceived to be normal, they show us the way to challenge and resist other norms that ought to be questioned. If Dr. Davis suggests that by challenging the gender binary the trans community makes it possible to also challenge and resist systems of policing and incarceration, then perhaps we can take steps further. We can then challenge other norms that so casually dominate, whether it be Capital, the State, or the very notion of hierarchy itself. To put it in another way, the notion of the normalcy or orthodoxy is an instrument of control by the State and Capital, and queerness—embodied and in practice—is an affront to that.

Women and queer people are then integral to the fight against systems of domination like the state and capitalism. Without them, a liberatory project will be woefully incomplete. As Ondaatje reminds us in her piece, “[W]e can create spaces of true liberation without you [‘radical’ cis (het) men], but you cannot create spaces of true liberation without us.”

Support for queer people and women should not be predicated simply on the integral place they have in the struggle against domination; our support for them must be unconditional and for its own end. Just as an ecology thrives and is more resilient in diversity, human society is equally enriched and made stronger in diversity.

## **What must we affirm?**

We affirm an opposition to patriarchy, that system of domination which predates capitalism. We affirm that women, transgender people, and gender non-conforming individuals all experience oppression due to the patriarchy. Patriarchy as a system has not always existed. If patriarchy had to be built and instituted, it can also be dismantled and abolished. If there are cultures and peoples in this world that have not instituted patriarchy, then we know for certain that a world without patriarchy is a very real possibility. In the Philippines, patriarchy was institutionalized in the colonial system that systematically erased indigenous practices. Among the Bontok people of the Cordilleras who resisted colonization until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rape was unheard of and did not exist until recently, as documented in the documentary *Walang Rape sa Bontok (Bontok, Rapeless)*. If patriarchy is not a natural or eternal institution, then it can only mean that patriarchy and rape culture had to be learned and instituted. Similarly, if patriarchy, including cisheteronormativity, are forms of domination that had to be learned and institutionalized, then it can be unlearned and abolished.

We affirm an opposition to cisheteronormativity, that norm upheld by the patriarchal order. Patriarchy as a social order privileges certain bodies over others, even certain male bodies over other male bodies. To counteract such privileges, we must platform, listen to, and follow voices who are deliberately underprivileged by cisheteronormativity. We must hold ourselves accountable to harms perpetuated and make real steps towards reconciliation and the cessation of harms.

We affirm the need for intersectionality. We affirm that the struggle for equality and justice is one with the struggle against oppression by the State and by Capital. Issues that face women and queer people are not confined to our own circles and organizations, but also in the workplace and the streets. Discrimination continues to adversely affect women, who face harassment and objectification in the workplace. Queer people can be disqualified from jobs and face prejudice at the hands of the government who refuses to recognize—and as such invalidates—their identity.

As we affirm intersectionality, we then reject class reductionist attitudes. The plurality of struggles does not distract from the struggle in class; rather intersections of struggle are integral in combating domination in all its forms. We do not think liberation from Capital or the State can be complete without liberation from cisheteropatriarchy.

We affirm that trans women are women, that trans men are men. We affirm that while gender is a social construct, it has real material consequences in the form of not just discrimination, but a positive identity.

We affirm that gender is a spectrum, that other genders outside the gender binary are valid. This means we explicitly affirm the validity of non-binary genders and people who identify as non-binary.

## How We Will Be Better

We have a sexist problem in our anarchist milieu as evidenced by the lack of women and queer people who inhabit our spaces. If our spaces are supposedly radical, ought that mean it is also radically inclusive? It is an unfortunate fact that anarchist spaces in the Philippines have been overwhelmingly centered around men. Or to put it another way, men dominate anarchist spaces in the Philippines. Our spaces then are not as inclusive as we claim. As cis/het men, we must acknowledge the space we take up even in online spaces. We have to find a way to make our spaces more welcoming for women and queer people. There are no easy answers to this and we have to take the initiative to implement such changes towards safer spaces because we have the privilege to do so: the privilege to counteract our own privileges.

So what can we do to counteract sexism and make our spaces safer? For starters we can listen to women and queer people when they speak up and platform them so that their voices may reach farther. There is a certain cycle in which women and queer people can get trapped in. They experience oppression or are excluded, speak up about it, and then are manspained to (that is, their experiences invalidated by men who say so in so many words) which of course angers them, which then results in their exclusion. Such a cycle only reinforces the predominance of men in our radical spaces. We must break this cycle through listening to women and queer people, platforming them in our spaces and platforms, and following their leadership.

Another way we can counteract sexism and make our spaces safer is by being mindful of the space we take up, how we—as men—are not bothered by a certain macho tendency to talk over women and queer people. Being mindful of the space we take up can be in the form of normalizing pronoun checks as an acknowledgment that “he/him” is not a default gender. (On that point, we can also use the Filipino pronoun form “*siya*” which is already gender neutral, or if in English, the use of “they/them” or a deliberate use of “she/her” in hypothetical examples.) We need to develop the self-awareness to question if and when our perspective are male-specific. Just as “he/him” is not the default gender, so is the male experience not the default experience. Issues like menstrual poverty, unpaid labor, rape and sexual abuse in workplaces and prisons are all experiences we overlook if we default to a male experience. Even experiences like poverty which men, women, and queer people face, is experienced differently by women and queer people. Such issues necessarily have different implications if a person is queer or of a different gender

We can also be mindful of women and queer people in our spaces by asking them “are you okay?” and taking considerations for their well-being. We can ask them how we could help them feel more welcoming in the spaces and take steps to eject people from our spaces who are dominating, being creeps or acting in an abusive manner. It is the barest minimum to keep our spaces free from sexual harassment or oppression.

If there is harm done within the movement, whether specific abuse or a systemic issue like sexism, then these should be addressed by real steps towards accountability. We need to be able to hold individuals accountable and for individuals to hold themselves accountable. Accountability is a recognition that a harm has been done and real steps taken to be better. These sort of problems must be confronted up front, with both hurt and those who did the hurting being able to acknowledge the problem and take real steps toward reconciliation and doing better. If the harm cannot be reconciled like in sexual abuse, then the milieu is better off ejecting the abuser from their spaces altogether. Harm done is not a matter of intent, and those who do harm must understand that, otherwise we risk upholding individual reputations over the valid experiences of those harmed. Regardless of intent, this happened and these are the effects. The question now is: How can we do better and prevent this harm from recurring and reproducing? Such accountability measures are not there to destroy individuals or organizations—unless of course the matter is sexual abuse and rape, which in case, such individuals absolutely must be ejected from our spaces and organizations that defend them similarly ejected. Except in the cases of rape and sexual abuse we do not want to destroy anyone, we want them to be better and to make our spaces safer.

The airing of critiques and of the demands to rectify harms are not simply the airing of “dirty laundry,” so to speak. There will be people whose gut reaction is to associate such critiques and demands with malicious intent. We must resist this urge to dismiss these critiques and demands as malicious as these are the defense mechanisms for preserving the status quo of the patriarchal order and the intricate network of oppression.

Another way we can make our spaces safer is by upholding an anti-oppression stance that takes a proactive stance against misogyny, rape culture, transphobia, and other harmful attitudes. We cannot compromise on inclusivity. What

would this look like? For example, we, as Bandilang Itim, are very much willing to break with anti-trans individuals and organizations even if this means forgoing cooperation with larger groups. Cooperation with partners cannot be predicated on a compromise with transphobia or any other discriminatory practice. We absolutely cannot tolerate harmful behavior and we will very much cut ties with people who persistently and unapologetically continue to do harmful behavior. We must remember that such discriminatory practices have real fatal consequences for higher rates of suicide and inflicted violence (including murder) among and against women and queer people. Exclusion from supposedly safe or radical spaces is a violence against them that invalidates their identities and experiences which leads to their isolation. Exclusion is then literally fatal in such circumstances.

As a consequence, this means we cannot and will not work with groups that have taken an overtly transphobic stance, such as Deep Green Resistance (DGR). We then urge the anarchist milieu in the archipelago to either ruthlessly demand associates like DGR to cease their anti-trans positions and demand official apologies *or disassociate with such anti-trans groups and persons altogether*. The DGR group's transphobia is well documented in articles such as "Against Deep Green Resistance" published in the Institute for Anarchist Studies. The primary author of *Deep Green Resistance* (the book) and co-founder of DGR, Aric McBay, even came out and said that they left DGR due to its transphobia and re-affirmed that need for solidarity and trans-inclusion. Numerous other articles document DGR's transphobia, including its Wikipedia article. The transphobia of DGR is not merely a slip of the tongue or a one-off event that can be apologized for, *it is a recurring harm* and their trans-exclusionary feminism is enshrined *in their ideological program itself*. Unless DGR removes their trans-exclusionary ideology from their syllabus, they will remain to be a transphobic organization. The continuing support and collaboration with DGR is a compromise based on excluding trans women and men and this is unacceptable. To continue to platform DGR *is to continue to platform transphobia*. Ejecting DGR from our anarchist spaces or at least demanding them to renounce transphobia is a very much achievable goal. If they do not renounce transphobia, we must make it clear that they will be isolated and atomized in their struggle; we can make spaces for liberation with or without them. Rejecting harmful practices and rejecting alliances with groups that perpetuate discrimination should be the bare minimum. If our values is hinged on fighting oppression in all its forms, then actively and loudly speaking up against these harmful practices and ties ought be our norm.

Beyond the minimum then, we need to step up and amplify the voices of queer people and women. As allies, our task is to listen to them and support their agency. In the same sentiment, we must make known the efforts of our sisters and queer siblings, recognizing their contributions to liberatory art, music, and literature, and the actions they take alongside us in struggle against the State and Capital across the world. By raising the issues of systemic discrimination in labor, by pursuing education on gender inclusivity in our communities, and supporting feminist and queer movements and organizations, we can overcome the status quo and give attention to issues that affect them, and in turn, affect us too. We must also raise the issue of violence against non-men committed by men like domestic abuse and rape and absolutely eject abusers from our spaces and demand accountability where there is harm.

In a case like the Pride 20 where members of the queer NatDem org Bahaghari were warrantlessly arrested for organizing a Pride rally and protest, the barest minimum would be to add our voices to the chorus of rage. In a case like Fabel Pineda—who was raped by police and then assassinated after filing cases against the rapist cops—we can highlight the intersection of police violence and gender-based violence. In a time when women are treated by police as commodities in exchange for safety, and queer activists are brutally detained while their identities are insulted, the least we can do is to show their captors the true meaning of *bayanihan*: solidarity, regardless of sex and gender; a revolutionary love.

We hope that this document can be part of the discussion to fundamentally abolish the patriarchal and cisheteronormative norms present even and especially among the anarchist spaces in the archipelago. This is not an easy task, and doubtless there will still be mistakes, but we must persevere in our commitment for total liberation if we are serious about anarchy in the archipelago. We hope that other infoshops and collectives both in and beyond the Local Autonomous Network take similar steps in self-reflection and take positions as allies.

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