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Myth #5: I can handle it myself - Contact Improvisation Blog

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6–8 minutes

I've heard it expressed that it's patronizing, or paternalistic, to suggest that people can't "handle" themselves, set their own boundaries or make educated choices about how and with whom they dance.

In other words, some people in the CI community think that precautions such as alerting dancers about the presence of someone known to exhibit problematic sexual behavior, interrupting dances that seem to be taking on a sexual tone, or checking-in with people during an intimate dance, are patronizing.

It should be noted that this line of commentary comes in large part from women in CI,¹ making it a tricky point to debate.

And while I'm not suggesting that every instance of intervention has been either well planned or executed, I bring it up because I have seen multiple examples of communities whose strides towards better ethical standards have been stalled by this critique. So I think it's an important topic to unpack.

I'm not a precious flower (however...)

Being told that you need protecting, that you are incapable of accurately assessing a situation or unable to make choices for yourself is an awful feeling. It can be deeply undermining, and for women, femmes, and non-binary people, it can reinforce deep-seated insecurities stemming from our sexist society.

While we have all internalized the values and assumptions of white, ableist, cis-hetero patriarchy in different ways, one common message that women/femmes/non-binary people perpetually receive is that we are less capable of knowing our own needs or handling situations than our masculine counterparts.

It's therefore understandable how any line of thinking that presumes that others "know best" or that we need to be "taken care of" in CI spaces, can feel sexist and offensive.

That said,

Women/femmes/nonbinary people also receive the message that our own worth and self-empowerment grows when we are able to defend ourselves against male dominance.

This is problematic.

Personally, I will concede that I've experienced rushes of empowerment from successfully fending off or redirecting unwanted sexual advances while dancing CI.

That said, that same rush of empowerment often exists within a cocktail of fear, shame, adrenaline, anxiety, anger, grief, and survival instincts.

More importantly, my self-empowerment shouldn't depend on my ability to react to male violence. To hold this opinion sustains rape culture. At its core, it justifies sexual transgression, framing it as an opportunity for personal growth.

So even though as a "strong woman" I can relate to the feeling that overcoming male dominance contributes to my own empowerment, to me it's important to focus on the question: how much *more* empowering would this world be if such defenses weren't necessary?

Beyond Individual Conflicts

Another problem with the idea that "I can defend myself" is an adequate strategy for dealing with sexual transgressions in CI, is that it creates the impression that these sexual transgressions are purely individual conflicts or isolated misunderstandings.

This has the effect of denying the fact that transgressors often repeat their actions, and also occults the reality that CI systemically harbors predatory behavior by being a form involving touch, physical proximity, and intimacy pretending to exist in a social vacuum.

At the bottom line, "I can defend myself" makes CI spaces more comfortable for people who are behaving in transgressive ways than for people who do not choose (or can't bear) to tolerate transgressions. It's important to mention that this has a direct impact on who chooses to enter and stay in our communities.

Dealing with sexual transgression isn't empowering: it's exhausting

Ultimately the idea that it's empowering to ward off unwanted sexual energy, to me misses the point.

Speaking personally,

- I am a skilled, experienced CI dancer.
- I am white and able-bodied
- I have a lot of practice setting verbal and non-verbal boundaries.
- I have an empowered feminist voice, and have invested time and energy into developing it.
- I am visibly legible as a queer person, so I sometimes attract less male attention than other femme dancers.
- I am usually recognized as a teacher, organizer, or otherwise well-integrated

member of the local CI community.

This puts me in a privileged position on the dance floor, and I *still* regularly receive unwanted sexualized touch and attention in the forms of:

- Men lurking near vying to dance with me when I have made several obvious signs that I'm not interested
- Male dancers attempting to dominate me physically in a dance
- Flirting

For dancers without these privileges the situation is often worse.

So let me be clear.

I do not need, and I am not grateful for opportunities to respond to or overcome sexual transgression.

I don't want to have to communicate my sexual boundaries while dancing CI.

I do not want to have to be on guard.

I also don't want to have to continually observe such behavior in CI spaces.

At the risk of being patronizing, I will state that I'm fairly certain that most people do not want to experience sexual transgression in CI, and are generally grateful for collective support that helps acknowledge and prevent it.

So what if we reframed the issues?

- What if *How do we protect dancers* became how do we educate/ re-educate dancers? What if the focus was placed less on defending recipients of sexual transgression, and more on teaching and upholding standards of non-transgressive techniques/dynamics of dancing CI?
- What if *Controlling the way people dance* became investing in protocols and strategies for practicing consent culture?
- What if *policing CI* was seen as working together to uphold standards for safe and respectful behavior?

Conclusion

Defining empowerment as gaining the skills necessary to resist male sexual transgression fails to shift our current social paradigm towards a consent culture. It also frames the issue of sexual violence in CI as isolated, individual interactions, thus undermining much-needed collective action. And most importantly, it presumes exhausting work on the part of people sexually transgressed upon in CI.

As I discuss throughout [this series](#) (and if you haven't read the previous posts, do check them out!) *setting boundaries is hard, exhausting and not equally accessible to all*. If we are to shift CI culture we need to be doing collective work to prioritize non-transgressive behavior.

Footnotes

1. I've observed this mostly from cis, straight women.