



Visions of Femdom, Old and New

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50 Shades of Grey (2012, 2015), with its dominant male hero and submissive female heroine, is undoubtedly the most popular representation of BDSM in popular culture; but aside from this behemoth, feminine dominants with masculine submissives are generally the most common portrayals of BDSM in popular culture. One appears in the movie *Shortbus* (2006), and they are the backbone of television shows like Netflix's *Bonding* (2018) and Showtime's *Billions* (2017–2020); even the BBC's *Sherlock* (2012) turned Irene Adler into a professional dominatrix for a popular episode. Based on these portrayals, I have spoken with people outside the BDSM subculture who often assume that feminine dominants and masculine submissives form the core of the subculture as well. Ironically, nothing could be further from the truth: feminine dominants are quite rare in the public BDSM subculture (hereafter “the Scene”), and masculine submissives are rarer still.

My perspective on feminine dominance (“femdom”) comes from my possibly unique position as a professional sociologist who specializes in

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the study of gender and sexuality and has studied the American pansexual¹ BDSM Scene for years, *and* is a feminine cis woman who strongly identifies as pansexual, polyamorous, kinky, and teaches BDSM to other kinky people in the subculture (“kinksters”). I began formal ethnographic observations of the mid-Atlantic Scene in 2012, and I also conducted 70 in-depth interviews with people with varying levels of involvement in it that year. In 2017, I followed up these qualitative studies with an online survey of self-identified kinksters with more than 1600 respondents, most of whom lived in the U.S. In addition to this formal study, I have been a member of the Scene since 2010 and remain heavily involved in it. Though, in the vocabulary of the Scene, I identify as a “switch” (meaning I enjoy BDSM in a variety of role positions as giver (top)/receiver (bottom), in control (dom[inant])/being controlled (sub[missive]), giving pain (sadist)/receiving pain (masochist) as well as ambiguous power arrangements that are intentionally somewhere in between), my kinky relationships skew heavily towards dynamics where I am primarily dominant, especially with cis men. Moreover, I often teach and write about femdom for my fellow kinksters, and I’ve been a very active and vocal participant in what I see as the subcultural feminist “reformation” of femdom. While some traditional sociologists and ethnographers might consider this project of actively trying to change the subculture that I’m studying a contamination of my position as a researcher, I prefer to think of it as a form of public sociology: as a sociologist, I possess knowledge about behaviors and norms that most kinksters don’t, which gives me a responsibility to explain alternatives to patterns and norms that most within the subculture already deem problematic. And many kinksters agree that traditional femdom—particularly its most classical heterosexual incarnation with feminine dominants and masculine submissives—is very, very problematic for a wide variety of reasons.

¹The term is somewhat deceptive, as the “pansexual” Scene primarily consists of bi/pansexual/queer cis women, and hetero/flexible cis men. It is distinct from, though certainly related to, the gay men’s Leather scene, and the dyke + trans BDSM scene studied by Bauer (2014).

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEMDOM AND PRO DOM

Pete: "So is that like your maid?"

Tiff: "He's a client."

Pete: "You pay him to do this?"

Tiff: "No, he pays me. Watch this. Rolph, that kitchen had better be fucking spotless, or I'll chop your dick off, okay?"

Rolph [wearing a BDSM hood and an apron]: "Yes, Mistress May."

Tiff: "See? I'm a full-service fantasy provider."

Pete: "You're a fucking genius." (Bonding, Season 1, episode 2)

Theoretically, there's nothing very special about feminine (as opposed to any other gendered form of) dominance. In its most basic form, dominance is simply a desire to consensually control others for mutual gratification, and this desire is hypothetically independent of biological sex (the gendered bodies we are born to) or gender (the social meaning typically attached to those bodies). In the Scene, these dynamics mostly appear in relatively brief encounters (also, confusingly, called "scenes") or in longer-term *Dominance/submission* ("D/s") relationships. People in such relationships might refer to each other with relationship titles like "my mistress" and "my sub," and both members are presumed to be getting something out of the arrangement, including sexual, kinky, psychological, and/or physical gratification. Many of them are in "normal" romantic relationships like that portrayed by Chuck and Wendy in the show *Billions* and femdom is simply how they relate in the bedroom; for others, the relationship dynamics extend further into what kinksters call "24/7" arrangements, typically meaning that the sub is "collared" and "owned" by the dominant and serves and submits to them in and out of the bedroom, sometimes in very particular agreed-upon ways (e.g. always asking permission to masturbate, or always serving water and cleaning the dishes), and sometimes in extremely general ways (like doing basically everything they reasonably can for the dominant).

Scene culture generally assumes that these preferences for dominance or submission aren't inherently related to biological sex: in my survey with self-identified members of the BDSM subculture, those with low involvement in the public Scene (meaning they were usually privately kinky) were much more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement "I think that biologically, men are naturally dominant and women are naturally submissive" than those with high involvement (22% vs 8%). I am

reasonably certain that the Scene produces such a high level of accord among members (only 1% of whom strongly agree with the statement) both by actively teaching a gender-neutral perspective as well as by filtering out people who disagree with it.

But no matter how theoretically gender-neutral dominance and submission are, in practice, feminine dominance requires women to step far outside traditionally assigned gender roles as compassionate caregivers and passive sexual recipients—or requires some creative mental gymnastics to justify being within those realms. In spite of its ostensible gender neutrality towards dominance, classic Scene culture also seems to think there is something notably different about feminine doms as it has a designation for them (“femdoms”) but no gendered designation for masculine doms other than “doms.” Moreover, the identity titles masculine and feminine doms use are sometimes different: whereas masculine labels are “dom” and “master,” the corresponding feminine labels are “domme” and “mistress.” (Conspicuously, there are no gendered variations for labels associated with submissives). In the last few years, I have noticed more and more feminine-identified people in the Scene moving away from the “domme” spelling, and it has been common for many years for women to identify as “masters.” Nevertheless, on my 2017 survey, *several* women commented indignantly on it that I only provided an option for a BDSM role label of “top/dom/master,” writing in that they were “dommes” or saying that “women can be dominant too!” The label “dominant” or “dom” is ostensibly gender neutral, and my impression is that more and more women prefer to use it rather than “domme,” so throughout this paper I use the “dom” spelling for all dominants.

Although kink culture usually distinguishes between dominance (control) and sadism (psychological and physical cruelty), some sadistic behaviors are generally expected from dominants, and these expected cruelties are perhaps the most at odds with conventional expectations of femininity. Thus it’s not really surprising that my survey statistics and observations both suggest that feminine dominants are virtually non-existent outside the public Scene with one very important exception: professional dominants (also called “pro doms,” “pro dommes,” and “dominatrices”). Pro doms are paid by clients to control, hurt, humiliate, and manipulate them. Their work was extensively profiled in sociologist Danielle Lindemann’s book *Dominatrix* (2012). Although I have personally known and interviewed several male pro doms, the vast majority of pro doms are women,

and regardless of the pro dom's gender, almost all of their clients are men.² My survey statistics suggest that pro doms exist in large part because, outside the Scene, there are still men who want to be dominated by women, but almost no women who say they want to dominate (anyone).

The result of this kinky demographic quirk is that even though pro doms (who are ultimately doing what they do to get paid, even if they enjoy their jobs) and femdoms (who are presumably doing what they do just because they enjoy it) are notionally quite distinct, in reality the lines between them rapidly blur. Pro doms end up exerting tremendous influence over the social construction of femdom, both in popular and kinky imagination—and in actual practice. This occurs because: 1. My interviews indicate that many of the male submissives who expect to partner with femdoms are introduced to BDSM through pro doms, 2. My interviews also show that porn is one of the main ways that people are introduced to femdom and most “femdom” pornography hires pro doms to work it, thus shaping the way men and women both expect femdoms to act and dress, 3. As implied in *Billions*, many femdoms take classes from pro doms to learn how to be dominants, 4. Many femdoms have worked as pro doms at least part time because it can be a relatively quick and easy way to earn money doing something they enjoy that few people have the skills or inclination to do, and 5. There are few non-professional role models for women who want to be dominants. In the end, I like to half-joke that the main difference between a pro dom and a femdom is that if you want to keep seeing a pro dom, you usually have to keep paying her and not piss her off, but if you want to keep seeing a femdom, you usually have to actively make her happy. Moreover, femdoms are often seeking romantic relationships with subs which the client dynamic of pro doms would obviously make very awkward.

It's difficult to exaggerate how problematic this for-profit reality is for both men and women seeking femdom relationship dynamics. Pro doms have to keep their clients happy in order to ensure they have repeat customers, and that often means doing things that the client wants, whereas Scene doms of any gender generally expect to do things much more based on what they themselves enjoy. Relatedly, many male “fetishists”—people who have very specific usually non-sexual desires that arouse them—often

²Throughout this chapter, when I discuss pro doms, my information comes from a combination of Lindemann's and my own research, as well as personally knowing several people who have worked with pro doms.

pay pro doms to indulge their fetishes. Since those men were used to going to pro doms, the Scene frequently declares them to be “submissives” and expects them to partner with dominants, regardless of whether there is anything conventionally submissive about their fetishes. Many femdoms and would-be femdoms complain that they don’t perceive anything particularly submissive about these men, and that their potential male partner pool in the Scene isn’t very appealing as a result. Moreover, pro doms often dress in expensive, elaborate, and uncomfortable costumes (and perform that way in porn), leading to a perceived expectation that femdoms will do likewise, and that costuming is part of the performative role of femdoms. Pro doms also tend to focus on viciously cruel humiliation and degradation, which many women interested in dominance say holds little to no appeal for them. Pro doms tend to project an “ice queen” image that isn’t terribly conducive to sustainable relationships and that many women say feels incompatible with what they want from relationships, and incompatible with their own identities.

But by far the biggest problem that femdoms inherit from pro doms is that in order to remain on the legal-ish side of the law, pro doms don’t have sex with their clients—and most of them keep to that rule. Yet in order to encourage repeat customers, they devised ways around the law to allow their clients sexual release without technically having sex with them. Typically, these involve fucking men with strap-ons and allowing men to masturbate. Hypothetically, it would have been just as legal for pro doms to have made a general practice out of having their clients use vibrators on the *doms*, or to penetrate the *doms* with sex toys, but these were not the practices they cultivated. I think there were many reasons why, including: the doms didn’t want to feel pressure to experience sexual attraction to or gratification from their clients, the doms didn’t want to spoil their image of unattainable sexual purity, and the clients were more likely to come back if they got sexual pleasure than if they were giving it. As a result, pro dom dynamics don’t really encourage women’s (dom’s) direct physical and sexual pleasure, and this lack of pleasure for the doms trickled down to femdom and would-be femdom interactions. We’ll be returning to this issue throughout the rest of this chapter.

Femdom in the Scene

Wendy [at the door to what is obviously a BDSM dungeon]: “I have something very special planned. And you have earned it in every way.”

Chuck: “I have indeed. I was very good at being bad.”

Wendy: "And you're about to pay for all of it."

Him: "I hope that's a promise."

Her: "And now address me as 'mistress'—if you address me at all." (Billions, season 3, episode 8)

The BDSM Scene is not monolithic, and varies by geography and microculture. In 2012 when I was conducting my ethnographic research, one of the main factors that varied geographically in the mid-Atlantic was the presence of femdoms and masculine submissives, who were much more common in the public New York area Scene at that time than in the surrounding areas. The primary reason appeared to be the relatively heavy involvement of pro doms in the NYC-area public BDSM Scene—a cross-over which kinksters are often very nervous about in general. At every BDSM party or event I have ever attended, even in NYC, it's explicitly against the rules (and enforced) for pro doms to try to recruit clients at BDSM events: everyone who is at the parties is supposed to be there to play³ for free. Nonetheless, several of the men I interviewed in the NYC area had become involved in the Scene initially as the clients of pro doms, many parties in the area were run by pro doms, and (like a number of BDSM dungeons) the main public dungeon in the area at that time often served as a space for pro doms to receive clients when it wasn't operating as a BDSM party space. My impression at the time was that this combination of circumstances had resulted in the NYC Scene having a thriving femdom community in a way that most other areas I visited conspicuously did not: most places I went in the Scene in America and Canada, I saw men topping and women bottoming.

It seemed unlikely to me that there was a hidden cache of femdoms and masculine submissives that I simply wasn't meeting on my travels, but I wanted to have reliable numbers on just how rare this group was. Consequently, I asked a lot of questions about BDSM roles and gender on the large online survey of kinksters I conducted 5 years later. One of the most interesting things I found was that among cis women, the percent identifying as tops, dominants, and master/mistresses steadily increased as level of involvement in the public BDSM Scene went up, from only 2% among those with low Scene involvement (one of whom was a pro dom), to 7% with medium, to 12% with high. It's easy to misinterpret those findings as being solely about gender, because my results for cis men strongly

³“Play” is the Scene's generic term for BDSM activities, which may or may not include sex.

suggest that increasing Scene involvement increases identification with dominance and decreases identification with submission regardless of gender. The increase in cis men's identification as tops/doms/masters with increasing Scene involvement nearly identically parallels that of cis women (from 54% with low to 63% with high involvement). In a similar reverse fashion, cis men bottoms/submissives/slaves decrease as level of Scene involvement goes up, from 12% to 10% to 6%, while cis women bottoms/submissives/slaves decrease at an even steeper rate from 69% to 61% to 51%. The heterosexual partnership gender disparity between women tops and men bottoms is conspicuously problematic at every level of involvement, but it begins with a great excess of men bottoms for those with low Scene involvement, and then changes direction to become a glut of women tops for those with high Scene involvement.

The Scene generally asserts that there are important distinctions between flavors of top-side versus bottom-side roles—i.e. that there are meaningful differences between tops versus doms versus masters versus sadists or the parallel roles of subs versus slaves versus masochists. My interviews, observations, and experiences suggest that those differences are qualitatively real in the sense that they matter to participants and the differences are sometimes discernible by trained external observers as well. But the differences seem to be meaningless at a statistical level, where all measurable trends consistently held among all top-side and bottom-side folks in their gender category, with no significant differences whatsoever among the subtle flavors of those roles, which I asked about elsewhere on my survey. Hypothetically, the importance of these personal role identities may not mean that much in actual practice. People can identify as whatever they want, but they may not be able to find partners who are interested in interacting with them in that role. Thus my survey also asked respondents to name their role in any BDSM relationships they currently had with defined role dynamics, as well as to describe their role in their last first playdate with a new partner.

The results of these questions were a bit startling for femdoms. For respondents with medium or high Scene involvement,⁴ I found that women who identified as bottoms who were currently in BDSM relationships where they were the top actually outnumbered women who identified as tops who were in relationships as tops. Women who identified as

⁴ People with low Scene involvement were usually functionally not involved in the public Scene at all.

tops were usually the tops in their relationships (82%), but at least 20% of women who identified as bottoms were tops as well. Yet women who identify as bottoms so vastly outnumber women who identify as tops that even only having 20% of them topping means that there are numerically more of them. Meanwhile, for their most recent first playdate with a new partner, about 80% of women tops topped, and 80% of women bottoms bottomed, while switches were fairly evenly split between topping (50%) and bottoming (42%). In sum, role concordance between identity and actual BDSM relationships is higher for women tops than women bottoms, but women bottoms and switches so vastly outnumber women tops that the majority of women-led BDSM relationships aren't with women who identify as tops.

Role concordance is *much* higher for cis men, with over 90% of tops topping and about 80% of the very few bottoms bottoming in their relationships. There is no tortured math here with complicated role reversals. Whereas the plurality of cis women topping in relationships identify as bottoms, the majority of men bottoming in relationships identify as switches. Men switches appear to be pushed into topping in their initial playdates (58% topping versus 30% bottoming), but they are spread somewhat more evenly in their relationships, with about 40% topping and 24% bottoming. In sum, role concordance between identity and actual BDSM relationships is high for all men, but men switches so vastly outnumber men bottoms that most men who are bottoming for relationships and play identify as switches.

Overall, my statistics overwhelmingly support the impression that femdom (and masculine submission) are relatively uncommon in the Scene. Men tops outnumber women 5:1, and women bottoms outnumber men 8:1. This gender skew likely makes heterosexual pairings among women tops/men bottoms theoretically tricky, although this disparity is somewhat less relevant for women in the Scene, the majority of whom are bi/pansexual/queer. Moreover, women tops plus switches total to 43% of women, and men bottoms plus switches total to 38% of men, which makes the gender skew look rather less severe. And yet, the absence of top-identified women outside the public Scene strongly suggests that the Scene is the main mechanism through which women learn to be dominants. With virtually no femdoms *outside* of the public Scene, whatever the Scene teaches and believes about femdoms almost inevitably becomes what they are.

GENDER AND SEXISM IN FEMDOM

Tiff [tying Pete's wrists⁵]: *"You see, Pete, masculinity is inherently constricting. Expectations, dominance, emotions, powerlessness. So. Men come to me to escape this crippling societal prison."* (*Bonding*, season 1, episode 2)

As I have said, the images of femdoms in movies and TV—aside from *Billions*—are almost always pro doms: a courtesan class of extremely elaborately dressed women from head to toe. Their hair is well-done, their make-up is intense, they're frequently corseted or sometimes wearing complex latex outfits, in addition to garter belts, stockings, and terrifyingly high heels. This vision of femininity hardly seems created for the dom's pleasure: corsets constrain your breathing by design, latex dresses take forever to put on and feel vile if you sweat—all while smelling like you're wearing a giant condom, high heels limit movement and can hurt your feet and legs, and even fishnet stockings will often abrade and blister your feet in your shoes if you're not careful. Meanwhile, the masculine subs they hurt usually wear some configuration of leather straps or nothing at all. I have always seen several sub/cultural messages in this costuming dynamic:

1. Women need elaborate costumes to perform dominance because it's a stretch for them to be doing it in the first place
2. Women's appearance is a key feature of how well they perform as dominants, but men's appearance has no impact on how they perform as submissives
3. Even dominant women dress for men's arousal and pleasure, but men's appearance is mostly irrelevant
4. Being naked, and especially showing genitalia, makes a person vulnerable and by extension, more submissive

In the world of pro doms, these clothing norms actually do make practical and commercial sense. Keeping their bodies fully covered reduces the likelihood of pro doms being sexually assaulted and helps them to preserve an image of themselves (to their clients, themselves, and external observers) as sexually inaccessible. Having very low standards for their clients'

⁵As someone who has studied bondage for many years as both giver and receiver, I feel it is important to note that *all* of the bondage in *Bonding* is terrifyingly and dangerously wrong.

attire and appearance seems almost necessary since, after all, the clients are the ones paying *them*. Keeping their clients in very minimal attire really can make them more exposed and vulnerable, since even most male masochists usually have definite limits on how much pain they can take to their cocks and balls.

But these norms make a very awkward transition to the world of the Scene where femdoms are no longer being paid and are doing what they do purely for their own pleasure. I've heard many femdoms complain that masculine subs expect them to make a great effort on their own appearance while the subs expect to make none themselves. Moreover, these femdom costumes really aren't very comfortable, so many women don't want to be in them when they're just hanging out for fun. But perhaps most awkward of all is the conspicuous contrast in the Scene between the clothing norms of masculine doms—who can often get away with wearing black jeans and a t-shirt—and femdoms, who often still show up in play dungeons in truly spectacular getups.

That said, equating nakedness with submission isn't really gendered in the Scene—that idea applies across genders. One rarely sees masculine doms naked either, to the point where I've witnessed many male doms getting blow jobs from naked female subs while the doms were still wearing kilts; both men and women subs in the Scene are often naked or scantily clad while bottoming. The idea that nakedness, especially on the part of highly desirable women, can be a power move in many contexts rarely seems to play out in the Scene's world of femdom. The sort of amusing scene in *Sherlock* where pro dom and seemingly hobby dom Irene Adler receives Sherlock for the first time while she is stark naked in an obvious (and mostly successful) attempt to distract him isn't really part of the Scene's femdom culture at all.

Among both pro doms and femdoms, for many years, “sissification play” was a common style of BDSM play where men dressed as women for purposes of humiliation and degradation. As recently as 2015, I attended a BDSM event where many older (age 50+) couples were still publicly doing this, but the practice has become much less popular among younger (age <45) kinksters. In the traditional version of this play, it's common to see large hairy men in lingerie, French maid's outfits, aprons, garter belts and stockings, or other intentionally excessively feminized attire being led around on leashes by femdoms. While some submissive men (who still identify as men and use male pronouns) wear women's clothing with pride, the men in sissification scenes do it as an act of humiliation. Notably,

I've never seen these scenes played as intentional gender-switch scenes publicly, with the femdom dressing as a man, and the submissive man dressing as a woman. All the scenes I've ever seen involved the dominant woman dressed as a woman, and the submissive man dressed as a woman. There is conspicuously no parallel form of gender humiliation kink among women submissives; I've never heard of someone dressing up a cis woman sub as a man for any kink-related reason, let alone humiliation or degradation.

Lurking beneath the surface of these different clothing norms seems to be the assumption that men and women get something different out of domination and submission. Men dominate because it gets their dicks hard and well-sucked, while women dominate because... well, why do they dominate? I told a male mostly-dom former partner of mine about my elaborate cock-and-ball torture fantasies, and his response was, "Wow, you must really hate men." I retorted truthfully, "I've seen you beat the shit out of pussies, is that because you hate women?" Predictably, he had no response. But the same general sentiment—that men's kinky dominant and sadistic desires stem from sexual desire, pleasure, and arousal, while women's don't—seems to be widespread among many, both in and out of the Scene. In particular, the idea that women want to hurt, humiliate, and degrade *men* often becomes a point of suspicion and interest, in a way that men (or women) wanting to hurt, humiliate, and degrade *women* often (strangely) does not. The contrast in the Scene is especially ironic, since most femdoms are bisexual (and do what they do to both men and women), while most men doms are straight (and almost exclusively do what they do to women).

As mystified as people often are by women's desire to dominate, they seem even more suspicious of men's desire to submit. Whereas submissive women often just learn to think of themselves as normal and are treated as normal by others as well, submissive men often learn to think of themselves as trash and expect to be treated that way by others as well. For example, in *Billions*, Chuck goes to visit a BDSM dungeon while on the phone with his dominant wife, Wendy. He describes scenes that he's witnessing to her, including one where a well-clad femdom is flogging a man with a hood over his head. Wendy tells Chuck that that man is a "pathetic worm" because he's completely in his dom's power. Though fictional, this attitude accurately represents the way that the Scene treats submissive men and the way submissive men often treat themselves. Dominants have conventional words to degrade feminine submissives, who generally become

“sluts,” “bitches,” and “dirty whores,” but are very rarely demoted to insect status. Moreover, women subs’ degraded state is usually regarded as an inherent quality of them (e.g., they *are* a dirty whore *and therefore* they get used by a dom), whereas men’s degradation is much more likely to occur *because*, as Wendy’s comment suggests, they have come under the power of another. I can’t remember ever hearing so much as a suggestion that women’s submission in and of itself somehow compromises their dignity or self-worth (although certainly there are many acts that submissive women can engage in that are regarded as having done so)—but the idea that men’s dignity is compromised through submission pervades the cultural experience of it.

At the root of much of this doubt and confusion is a persistent and pernicious cultural idea that dicks represent power while pussies represent weakness. Numerous cultural observers have pointed out the absurd irony of this perspective since pussies push out babies while males can often be promptly physically compromised even with relatively slight violence to their genitals. But the idea nonetheless persists that penises are inherently a little bit threatening—and in the kinky world of the Scene, sometimes sexily so—but the only way for cis women to take on that kind of threat is to put on a dick (i.e. a strap-on). Strap-on play and “pegging” (women fucking men in the ass with dildos) has long been a classic part of pro dom’s gray-legal technically-not-sexual repertoire, but it’s a common practice among many femdoms as well. I’ve known many men who say they consider the experience the height of submission for them. And while I’ve personally been happy to do it with men I’m attracted to, I’m always troubled by the sense that I have to add something to myself in order to get their submission, and haunted by the lingering cultural suspicion that having a dick is the only way to actually be a true dom.

Because penises are so strongly associated with power, traditional femdom play has heavily emphasized locking them up and preventing them from becoming hard as a strategy to secure men’s submission. This includes everything from chastity devices and cages to torturous devices designed to prevent men from being hard or to torture them if they become so. While locking up submissive women’s pussies with chastity devices is also a common style of play (at least when they play with men), it is nowhere near as common as locking up men’s dicks when they’re submitting to women. The *style* of these two ostensibly similar forms of play tends to differ greatly in its gendered dynamics. When women subs’ pussies are locked up, it’s usually with the idea that their pussies have been

exclusively reserved for their doms/owners, or at least are only to be released at the discretion of their doms/owners. But when men subs' dicks are locked up, it mostly seems to be based on the idea that they've been locked up from *themselves*, and not really as a reminder their dicks are only to be used for the pleasure and discretion of their dominants, who, as we'll see in the next section, don't seem to use them very much at all, really...

FUCKING WITH FEMDOM

Wendy [speaking off screen to Chuck, laying on the floor tied, gagged, but mostly clothed]: "You're in need of correction, aren't you?"

Chuck: Yeah.

Wendy [puts out a cigarette on his chest]: That's gotta burn. Let me fix it. [she pees on him]

To the best of my knowledge, the only popular cultural portrayal of a couple in a femdom/masculine submissive relationship is Showtime's very successful show *Billions*, with its central power couple (in multiple senses of the word), Wendy and Chuck. Chuck is the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York (which is an extremely powerful position), but even though Wendy describes him as a "superhero" in the first episode of the show, in the same episode she also angrily reminds him that she makes 8 times as much money as he does (working as a psychiatrist/life coach). The show went out of its way to humanize the relationship of the married couple, who sometimes have steamy times, but who also sometimes have unfulfilling encounters. In season 1, episode 3, Chuck is tied to the bed and gagged, and Wendy complains, "you're not here with me," and Chuck says, "I'm sorry, I just can't concentrate." She brandishes a violet wand⁶ in her hand and retorts in irritation, "Really? This makes cattle concentrate. The whole point is this keeps you in the present." In season 3, episode 7, she's very dressed up and laying in bed. When he comes home, she says, "I really wanted to put on a show for you tonight,

⁶The show's producers have obviously confused a violet wand, which is used for light "electrical play"—meaning shocking someone—with a cattle prod, which is used for much more severe electrical stimulation.

but I just don't have it in me." He says, "I don't either," and they just lay side by side.

Again and again, Wendy's comments, like those above, subtly reinforce the idea that her desire for domination is less compelling than Chuck's desire to submit, and the actress who plays the character has confirmed this impression (Snetlker 2016). When Wendy and Chuck separate in season 2, she sleeps with another man and there is no obvious BDSM in their relationship, suggesting that Chuck's desire for kink runs stronger than hers. Perhaps most telling of all, when she and Chuck reunite in season 3, episode 1, she asks as she has him strapped to a cage, "Have you missed this?" and he says, "Yeah. Have you?" and she says, "It's not about me." When he asks her about her having had sex with another man, she retorts, "That's your fantasy, isn't it?" It never feels like she *isn't* into it, but it does feel like something she does in large part because *he's* into it.

And I strongly suspect that many women end up doing femdom in very much the way that Wendy does, partly because there are so few opportunities for their physical pleasure within its traditional construction. Despite often showing the couple engaging in sexy times, the only time the show ever shows Chuck fucking Wendy (which he presumably must have done at some point to beget their two children) is in season 1 episode 6 when he rips her blouse and starts fucking her on the kitchen counter—conspicuously devoid of the classic dominance/submission dynamic the two usually seem to keep. Throughout the show, we see her put out a cigarette on him, pee on him, put her high heel into his chest, pull his hair, slap his face, threaten him, tie him up, gag him, and more besides; but never, during any of those activities, does he provide her with any obvious sexual satisfaction, or do much to her physically at all. I don't mean that to be a criticism of the show. I'm pretty sure that's a reasonably accurate portrayal of the way a lot of femdom dynamics end up working in real life, based on my observations and statistics.

On my survey, the desexualization of femdom dynamics was stark. I asked my survey respondents to strongly disagree, disagree, be neutral, agree, or strongly agree with the statement "I prefer for my BDSM play to include sex"; I gave these terms values from -2 to +2. Women with medium or high levels of Scene involvement who identify as tops are much less likely to say that they prefer for their BDSM play to include sex (average value of -0.24) than women who identify as bottoms (0.59), with switches partway in between (0.26). These differences persist in multivariate regression models where I control for other factors, including age and degree of

Scene involvement. Women who are bottoms are also twice as likely to have had sex with their last first BDSM playdate as women who are tops, although this difference disappears when I control for preference for sexual BDSM (strongly suggesting that BDSM role identity is operating as a proxy for preferences for sexual BDSM). Controlling for outliers, women tops also have the smallest number of sexual partners in the last year compared to other women. These numerical measures matched subjective identities as well: women tops were by far the least likely of any gender + BDSM role group to say they “identified as a slut” on my survey, with only 21% saying they did.

Similarly, men who are bottoms are much less likely to prefer for their BDSM play to include sex (0.17) compared to tops (0.75) and switches (0.68). Likewise, men who are bottoms are much less likely to have had sex on their last first play date than men who are tops, and this difference also disappears when I control for a preference for sexual BDSM. And men bottoms have had by far the fewest sexual partners in the last year compared to men in other BDSM roles, and are also the least likely to self-identify as “sluts” among men’s BDSM role groups. In short, by multiple measures, women tops and men bottoms in the Scene are the least interested in combining sex with their BDSM and seem to be the least interested in having it in general.

So if they’re not doing it for sex, what are they getting out of it? Based on the interviews I had conducted, I had a pretty good sense of the reasons people generally give for engaging in BDSM, and I asked my survey respondents to check all the reasons off from a list. Conspicuously, women tops check far fewer reasons than women bottoms in general, and the only categories where women tops’ enthusiasm exceeds that of women bottoms is for three things: aesthetics (including aesthetic objectification, artistry, and visual pleasure), satisfying primal urges, and emotional pleasure and satisfaction (including non-sexual sadism). The two most popular motivations among women tops were connection/feelings of emotional closeness (including love), and emotional pleasure/satisfaction/non-sexual sadism, then followed by a more distant tie between sexual pleasure and arousal and altered mental state (including subspace and domspace). Men bottoms were more likely than tops to say they enjoyed physical, non-sexual pleasure (including sensual pleasure and non-sexual masochism), altered mental state, roleplay, and service (giving or receiving). The most popular reasons men bottoms gave were sexual pleasure and arousal, physical non-sexual pleasure, and connection. Previous research (Simula

and Sumerau 2019) with a very small sample suggested that men bottoms were more likely than women bottoms to complain that they felt they had difficulty achieving subspace. With a much larger sample, I cannot really support this finding; I interviewed a number of submissive men, none of whom made such a complaint. On my survey, men bottoms were not statistically significantly less likely to say that altered mental state was one of their motivations for engaging in BDSM than women bottoms, and men switches, women bottoms, and women switches were all almost identically likely to check altered state as a motivation (keeping in mind that the majority of men kinksters playing on the bottom identify as switches). In short, even though their motivations seem to be considerably less sexual than men tops and women bottoms, women tops' and men bottoms' other motivations look otherwise fairly similar to their opposite-gendered counterparts, with an emphasis on connection and sadistic/masochistic pleasures.

Femdom 2.0: Now with More Sex and Less Sexism!

Irene: "I would have you on this desk until you begged for mercy twice."

Sherlock: "I've never begged for mercy in my life."

Irene: "Twice."

Irene: "He's good, isn't he? I should have him on a leash." (Sherlock, season 2, episode 1)

Years ago, I posed an internet challenge to my kinky friends: find me femdom porn where the dominant woman is still obviously in control but getting sexually penetrated (not just gone down on). No one ever sent any to me or said they'd seen any. Since I eventually spent a lot of time studying the pornography industry, so I finally inevitably met a (very famous) male porn star who makes that porn on his own time for his own personal website, but he notably isn't making it for anything resembling a mainstream site (and he's mostly famous in gay male porn⁷). The desexualized nature of femdom dynamics stems from multiple factors and is, I suspect, deeply self-reinforcing. The desexualization of pro doms, and their desexualized presence in femdom porn, shapes femdom fantasies in the general public to become less sexual and also, I suspect, attracts people to femdom who are just less motivated by sex in the first place. In the process, femdom has intentionally or accidentally pulled in some of the worst

⁷Like a large percentage of men in gay porn, he isn't gay off screen.

gender-sex tropes of our culture: often heavily implying that penises (and the masculinity attached to them) are sexually barbaric and in need of women's control in order to civilize and control them; that women are sexually pure and contact with men's penises would defile them; and that penetration equals power, and being penetrated compromises a person's control and makes them helpless.

The commercialization of femdom through pro doms and pornography—both of which are almost entirely bought and paid for by men⁸—has meant that very little of its traditional vision is particularly pleasing or liberating for women. Many women (including myself) complain that they feel grossly objectified by traditional femdom's portrayals of women as hyper-eroticized and hyper-feminized, yet somehow simultaneously cold-hearted de-sexualized ice queens. That's not to say that some women don't enjoy playing in this mode (I occasionally enjoy it quite a bit myself), and I don't want to criticize those who do, because the problem isn't some women and men enjoying this vision: the problem is a lack of easily available alternatives, particularly ones that allow women as doms to spread their legs. While asexuals and graysexuals often find a comfortable home for themselves in the intimacies of kink (Sloan 2015), the vast majority of kinksters still want relationships that include sex,⁹ and traditional femdom arrangements make it hard to imagine how women can hold onto their dominant/submissive status as “dom” while also receiving diverse forms of sexual pleasure—including penetrative sex.

Even among very open-minded kinksters, the idea that a woman on her back with her legs spread is still in control is often a hard sell. One of my friends teaches a class for kinksters called “tie ‘em up and fuck ‘em” that teaches a simple and very basic bondage tie intended for use with penetrative sex. When I attended his class, he demonstrated the tie with penetrator-on-top-penetratee-on-bottom first, and then with penetrator-on-bottom-penetratee-on-top with the implication that he'd covered the basic range of dominant/submissive fucking arrangements at that point. I laughingly raised my hand and asked him what to do with his tie if I wanted to be penetrated while on bottom and still in control because that was the whole reason I had

⁸I have studied the pornography industry extensively, and with the exceptions of a handful of content producers (none of which create femdom porn), I have been assured that literally almost all porn is bought and paid for by men, even though women often watch it.

⁹On my survey, 2.7% of respondents involved in the public Scene identified as asexual, and 1.4% as aromantic. 6% of respondents said they had had no sexual partners in the last year.

come to his class; he said no one had ever asked him that in years of teaching it, but he proceeded to show that the tie worked just fine in that configuration. I tell this anecdote not to call out my friend for his lack of imagination, but to point out that *no one else had asked either*. Similarly, many times when I teach a class for kinksters called “fucking a femdom,” someone (always a guy) often raises his hand and tries to insist that the only way a woman can “really” be in control if she’s getting fucked is if she’s on top. The comment is invariably met with several exasperated sighs from women in the class who say, “fuck that, that’s not the way sex feels best for me, so how is that supposed to make me feel in control?”

For several years now, I’ve been preaching a feminist vision of femdom to my fellow kinksters; even though I personally find the traditional vision of feminine domination to be generally unsexy and unappealing, I still find consensually telling people what to do hot as fuck. So I started to assemble a set of organizing principles to make femdom more appealing to more women (and possibly to more men as well). After describing some of these principles, I inevitably have a number of women come up to me and say, “wow, I think I’m a lot more dominant than I previously thought.”

The first of these principles is that we have to get rid of the idea that penetration and penises equal power. An imagery and language shift helps with this reconfiguration a lot: instead of emphasizing the idea that dicks (or fingers) are doing something to vaginas, vaginas can “squeeze,” “milk,” “consume,” “encompass,” “engulf,” and “devour” the things penetrating them. The concept is brutally illustrated by the scene in Neil Gaiman’s novel *American Gods* (mostly replicated in the TV show) when the goddess Bilquis has penetrative sex with a man who she eventually completely consumes with her vagina. Our culture has pretty thoroughly inculcated us with the belief that penetrating is active and being penetrated is passive (we even use the “active” versus “passive” voice of the verb to describe the actions), but we can re-frame these concepts if we want. And even if we decide to work within that classical active/passive perspective, it still seems to me that if I get to lazily lay on my back while someone else works very hard to physically please me, that puts me in a much more dominant position than if I’m working hard to please *them*.

Second, whereas the traditional femdom paradigm treats penises and submissive men’s bodies as implicit threats that dominant women have to entirely restrict, limit, and control, updated femdom regards them as tools for pleasure, pain, entertainment, and/or restriction, limitation, and control—at the whim and will of the dom. Penises can become signs of a good

sex toy (i.e. the sub), mocked for their absurdities, treated as sites of vulnerability and exposure, or whatever else the dom wants and desires. Most women I have spoken to who are interested in dominance and attracted to men find the idea of rarely or never engaging with men's bodies and penises for pleasure to be boring and depressing, and expanding the list of available options of what to do with them beyond "constraint" seems essential to improving women's experience of femdom (and again, probably men's too...).

Third, we have to get rid of the implicit idea that femininity is weak, and that feminizing men is an act of humiliation and degradation. I don't mean to say that *sissification play* is morally wrong and should be banned, merely that it should be treated in the same category of cautious edge play that kinksters reserve for *race play* (which is any type of play that fetishizes or eroticizes the players' race(s), either positively or negatively (Cruz 2016; Weiss 2011)). Men submissives who simply expect that dominant women will be happy to degrade them for looking more like their doms (i.e. by dressing as women) are likely to find that many dominant women are unimpressed, uninspired, and unaroused by this expectation. For a long time, sissification play seemed to almost be an expected part of femdom play with men, but younger kinksters seem to find it very distasteful.

Fourth, femdoms and their submissives have to be allowed to develop meaningful human relationships with one another. I had a conversation with a young submissive man, frustrated with traditional femdom who said, "I want a relationship with a person, not a vending machine that fucks me with a strap-on." The commercialized and pornographed nature of traditional femdom leaves little room for modeling compassionate and romantic dominant/submissive relationships where partners cuddle together on the couch, eat popcorn, watch silly movies, and do the thousands of other things that most couples, kinky or not, like to do together. Even ice queens who like to be aloof "evil bitches" while playing can still want to be kissed and nuzzled and cuddled afterwards. Based on the complaints of many femdoms and masculine subs, it appears to me that the commercialization of femdom has greatly interfered with its would-be participants' ability to navigate more conventional dating and courtship.

But most importantly, a less sexist version of femdom puts a lot more emphasis on the "dom" than the "fem." It's impossible to escape gender and its influence on our sexuality and kink, and it's impossible to escape some of the physical realities of how our bodies experience sex and

BDSM. Those facts make it naïve and simplistic to suggest that femdom/masculine sub dynamics are no different from masculine dom/feminine sub. But hyper-emphasizing the differences creates weird distinctions where there often are none. I was once teaching a class on bondage where my boyfriend and I were the only male bottom and female top. The class was discussing the reactions that rope bottoms liked to get from their tops, and the reactions that tops liked to get from their rope bottoms. Someone paused the discussion to ask my boyfriend and I, who I had already laughingly pointed to as the token masculine bottom/feminine top in the small class, if the reactions we sought were different. We looked at each other and shrugged, both saying no.

I have dommed women and I have dommed men; I have also subbed for both women and men. Drowning in the depths of what kinksters call “space”—the delicious flow state where a person loses themselves in the kinky interaction (Carlström 2019; Newmahr 2011)—I have never personally felt there to be any meaningful gender differences at all. Even the basic biological cues that experienced kinksters learn to look for to identify subspace and domspace—a dilation of the pupils, a glint in the eye, an altered pattern of breathing, even a certain body stance—are the same, regardless of gender. Though there does seem to be a cultural chasm of sexual desire between femdoms/masculine subs, versus masculine doms/feminine subs, I think that this chasm is mostly an artificial byproduct of commercialization and a warped construction of the relationship between “sex”/“penetration” and “dominance.” I believe that bridging that chasm would ironically reduce the need for femdom to be so commercialized. Part of *why* pro doms fill such a large gap is because so few women outside the Scene (and even in it) find femdom appealing. By reconfiguring femdom to be more appealing to women, more women might take it up for pleasure rather than just for profit. There’s a relatively simple art to making femdom more attractive to women: ask women who say they like the idea of consensually erotically controlling people what would make them feel good, and then do it.

Or, in the words of a good friend who came to my “fucking a femdom class”: “this should be a short class. The answer to how to fuck a femdom is however the fuck she wants.”

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