

Sexism in the My Little Pony Fandom: An Essay on Inequality

Preamble

When I was first commissioned to write about issues of sexism within the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic fandom, I was sceptical. Not because of the subject matter, which I feel needs to be addressed, but because I am male. And, as a male, everything that I write will always be mediated by a conscious (or, indeed, subconscious) 'male' influence and perspective. The way I approach everything, from my writing style to the way in which I interact with people of both genders, is shaped by social biases and paradigms that I cannot escape. As a result, I wondered if I would be able to truly talk about misogyny and sexism and give voice to the female community within the My Little Pony fandom when I do not represent said community. In the end, I resigned myself to the conclusion that I cannot possibly 'speak for women' in the fandom, and that such an attempt would be patronising and not at all productive. What I can do, I realised, is objectively interview women within the fandom and write up their experiences in an academically objective manner, in the hope that people can hear from those who have experienced sexism and make their own minds up about the severity of the issue.

“Go on,” one female friend encouraged me. “You're the right man for the job.”

It is interesting how unassuming turns of phrase are seemingly filtered through masculine terminology: 'the right man'. She smiled and informed me that I am indeed the right 'person' for the job. Feeling confident in her faith in me, I decided that even if I'm not the best person to be talking about this topic, I can certainly give it a good shot. I must mention off the bat that I am not a brony, or even particularly affiliated with the My Little Pony fandom in any notable way. Instead, I am a writer and journalist who is fascinated by the rise (and, arguably, fall) of an obscure internet fad – often referred to as a 'fandom' in this context - based on a niche and polarizing interest. My distance from the fandom itself, objectively observing the information presented to me, allows me to make (relatively) unbiased remarks based on what I see, hear and read.

For the purpose of this essay, I set about locating my sample, which proved to be easier than I initially expected. Apart from looking at articles published by a variety of media sites, I wished for

direct feedback from females within the fandom who have experienced discrimination. I had already known that some females in the community were unhappy with how they were represented (or, rather, unrepresented) within the fandom from my 'Brony Advice' column, where, during its initial run, members of the fandom addressed their concerns to me and I offered feedback in return. Despite my awareness, however, I was still floored by the sheer volume of responses I received in the form of personal messages from female members of the fandom, some of whom had been keeping quiet about their dissatisfaction for some time. It was useful to hear direct testimonies from females who exist within this creative spectrum, and I was able to gather more than enough information to facilitate the writing of several chapters from these touching and at times frightening contributions.

Before beginning this essay, I would like to point out the limitations of this piece, in the hope that I can avoid criticism at a later date. Firstly, I must reiterate that I am not female. This point is of paramount importance, as I cannot ever truly represent the female side of the fandom – not that I wish to assume that role anyway - because I will never understand what it is to be female, or what it may feel like to be marginalized due to my sex as a result of centuries of cultural misogyny. Furthermore, I am incapable of truly understanding how gender roles have forced women into certain inescapable positions. Instead, I would like to suggest that I am an open-minded male who has seen an issue that many females are facing in the Friendship is Magic community and has chosen to engage with said issue to raise awareness.

I must also mention that I am not suggesting that females somehow require a male voice to get their concerns across. While I am male, I do not feel as if my sex makes my opinion more valid than any other, and neither do I feel that female fans 'need' me to write this. Females are utterly capable of uniting together without male involvement to the same degree of success and influence, and therefore I would hope that nobody feels patronised by the fact that this study is being written by a male. I will attempt to be as objective as possible, using direct evidence to make my points.

*Furthermore, I should note that I am in no way suggesting that this study, and the female voices within, are representative of the entire female side of the fandom. Different people have different opinions and experiences, and for everyone who reads along with this essay nodding their heads, there will undoubtedly be others who will be shaking theirs. Neither do I wish to suggest in any way that males are inherently oppressive towards females, or that every male within the fandom is misogynistic. I am merely providing an insight into issues that some females have factually experienced within this fandom as a result of **some** males.*

With these points said, I hope that the following explorations do not offend anyone. My intention is to raise awareness of how some females within this fandom feel and give a platform to the issue that opens up a larger debate, with the ultimate aim of changing perceptions in a positive way towards those who are targeted. There are numerous examples of females being overlooked, victimized and otherwise alienated within the My Little Pony fandom. These isolated incidences are what I seek to study and, to an extent, correlate. Now that we are on the same page, I hope that the following chapters will be interesting and insightful.

I must also thank every individual who contributed vital information to this study that would have otherwise made it impossible to write. I choose not to name these individuals, as I would prefer to keep those who contributed information anonymous for reasons of privacy and sensitivity, but they know who they are and they have my gratitude.

Thank you for taking the time to read this article.



Chapter 1 – Brony or Pegasister?

“It's a well known fact that it was the guys who started everything that our fandom is and who maintain it” - Brony, Male, 23.

A common misconception, if I ever heard one, follows the train of thought of the above quote: that males started the “Friendship is Magic” fandom, and that, implicitly, males are responsible for its success. I find this little 'factoid' to be quite difficult to stomach, as it ignores contributions by females almost entirely. To be factitious, you could certainly argue that any fandom based around My Little Pony is indebted to a female interest, as it was by designing a product and aiming said product at females that resulted in the first My Little Pony in the 1980s, which is a move ultimately responsible for there being a show and toy line today. Moreover, Generation 4, spearheaded by Lauren Faust, was not designed with males strictly in mind. While the aim was to make a show that everyone could enjoy, the primary objective was to keep the show and franchise appealing to young girls without patronising them with stereotypical didactic messages.

If one thing can be said for males, it is that they brought a greater level of media attention to “Friendship is Magic” and its fandom. To any media outlet interested in unusual phenomenon, a group of adult males being interested in My Little Pony is more sensational than females of the same age having the same interest, largely due to the unprecedented nature of such a fanbase and the potential for a story. However, this has likely skewered in many people's minds the individuals who ultimately comprise the “Friendship is Magic” fandom. The media frequently refers to adult fans of the show, but fails to acknowledge females as being as integral to the fandom as males. This results in myriad articles that argue that 'bronies' are males aged between X and Y years who like My Little Pony, while seemingly ignoring the roles that females play.

These classifications have resulted in an odd situation, where females - the intended demographic regardless of age - are being sidelined by males, who are seen as being more radical and thus somehow 'bigger' and 'better' fans by media outlets. Whether write-ups are positively or negatively describing 'bronies' is inconsequential; almost all of the time, bronies are seen as being extreme males with highly focused interests in My Little Pony. Females, comparatively, receive, at best, a mere footnote of acknowledgement, simply because they don't make for such interesting news in the context of My Little Pony.

This is somewhat forgivable given the biased and sensational nature of the media. People are always more interested in news that breaks the norm: a female making it into a world snooker championship final is more 'interesting' than a male, because it's less 'normal'. On a page, your eye drifts to the information that you're not expecting more than what you are, and thus we can observe that while it is unfair that the media has its own vested interests in making male fans the focus of their stories, it is, at least, unsurprising.

What is surprising, however, is that the male-centric nature of these story-grabbing headlines has caused some male bronies to actually believe that it's true. Enough females in the fandom have been told by males that they cannot be bronies *because* they are female for it to be a genuine issue. The interest of the media in arguing that male fans of the show are such a unique case has thoroughly convinced some males of its validity, gaining an unprecedented sense of entitlement in the process. They view themselves as being above females in the fandom, precisely because they are not the target demographic. They have formed a niche, where they, the males, are decidedly the ones in control simply by ordinance of their *superior* sex. Females within the fandom comparatively lack a voice, because *nobody cares that girls are watching My Little Pony*.

Females are frequently cornered off into the 'Pegasister' box - they require their own label, because only bronies can be male, apparently. This is what we are led to believe by some individuals within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom. Bronies, who are supposedly 'breaking gender boundaries' may have become an important voice in relation to the current generation of My Little Pony, but rather than striving for equality, plenty are content to secure males as the dominate and controlling force. When males are in control and sideline females, there is no indication of equality: these are males who want to spread a message that My Little Pony is something that other males can happily watch. The show becomes 'manly'; people boast that masculinity is somehow increased if you can admit you like "Friendship is Magic" and femininity is displaced as a result.

When did 'girly' or 'feminine' become dirty words? When did My Little Pony stop being made for little girls? The answer to the second question, simply, is that it didn't. "Friendship is Magic" is still 'girly', and it is still appealing to little girls. Take a glance at the majority of the My Little Pony toys that Hasbro release and the female focus of the product is apparent: just look at the packaging and you'll see little girls playing with the toys. The people who aren't apparent, however, are older female fans, who hang in some sort of demographic limbo without a clear place to step. There are two types of My Little Pony fan to many people: the little girls who should be watching the show, and then the bronies: males who have taken a liking to it as well. Adult females, sadly, are barely acknowledged, and when they are, they are frequently branded as the aforementioned 'pegasisters'.

'Pegasister' is an interesting label, because it is both loved and despised depending on who you talk to. Some male fans insist that females cannot be bronies; others do not differentiate and believe that anyone can be a brony. Likewise, some females resent being called 'pegasisters', while others actively embrace the term, often because they consciously wish to distance themselves from the male side of the fandom. In most cases that I have observed, however, females do not like to be called pegasisters, and in an alarming amount of instances, they have been told that they cannot be bronies by a vocal male sector; that they are inherently, resolutely 'pegasisters' due to nothing more than a perceived limitation and alienation of their sex.

Who invented the boundaries of what you can and cannot call yourself within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom? If one male says that females cannot be bronies, why does that make it true? Similarly, if one female argues that all females should embrace the 'pegasister' moniker, that, again, does not define anything universally. It is all down to opinion, but it is important to acknowledge where these opinions can be damaging. Saying that bronies can only be male is directly *exclusive*; saying that bronies can be both male and female as long as people choose to associate with the label is directly *inclusive*. Inclusion is more positive than exclusion, and male fans should welcome female fans who wish to associate with the 'brony' label, rather than force them to adopt a different title.

Certainly, there are a good amount of males who don't draw a line between male and female within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom. Many are happy to view the fandom as a mutually inclusive alliance between males and females. But, as seen with our anonymous quote at the start of this chapter, there does exist, at least in some minds, a belief that males are the primary instigators of the "Friendship is Magic" fandom: that *'the guys started everything that [the] fandom is'*. I would like to see the evidence for this – the definitive statistic that suggests that when Generation 4 took off,

people only started liking the show, drawing art and pursuing various other creative avenues centred around it because of the male involvement.

It is offensive to females who actively contribute to the fandom to suggest that the foundations were laid by males. Arguing that males started everything that the fandom is today is to suggest that females had no impact on the direction it has taken; that they were merely watching as the males constructed “Friendship is Magic” as a fandom, cheering them on for doing something that they were fundamentally incapable of doing due to being female. And, even if males were more vocal about their interest – waves of 'I'm a 28 year old guy and I love this show' in Youtube comments were definitely prominent in the early days of the fandom – it does not necessarily mean that males were the dominant force within the fandom. Instead, it could just suggest that males felt that they had something more to prove and justify, being vocal as a way of making their interest acceptable to themselves as much as to other people.

It is understandable that males would feel a need to defend their masculinity, especially in the earlier days of the “Friendship is Magic” fandom when nobody quite knew what to make of it. But it is important to acknowledge that having a loud voice doesn't necessarily mean that you represent the masses, and nor does it suggest that you're more important than other, more reserved and non-partisan contributors. The very idea that certain people need to suggest that males 'created' the “Friendship is Magic” fandom is unnecessarily exclusive and intimidating, especially when it's difficult to quantify one way or the other.

Bronies are a minority fandom, as is any fandom, and whether there are more males or more females within that fandom should not be an excuse to put people into categories. The interest is ultimately the same, as are the contributions within the “Friendship is Magic” fanbase. To sideline females who actively want to be called 'bronies' is to alienate a valuable, equal part of what the fandom is. The important thing is to be respectful, which, as we will now see, is sometimes forgotten in alarming ways.

Chapter 2 – Tits or GTFO

“The men who comprise the majority [of the “Friendship is Magic” fandom] will either pant and drool over you, or say completely sexist and cruel things, such as calling us “attention whores” for cosplaying as characters we like.” - Brony, female

One female participant who contacted me mentioned how they drew a “Friendship is Magic” image that got popular. They, as the artist, were assumed to be a male by the majority of their viewers. When they corrected people in a cordial and polite fashion by making a journal on DeviantArt explaining that they were, in fact, a female, responses were quite different. They were no longer seen as being the same person, and they were encouraged to provide visual proof that they were female by an alarming amount of males in the comment section.

Some would say that this sort of response is typical of the internet, and they would be right. I am sure that people will be quick to assail this evidence by arguing that such responses are normal and to expected in an online environment. But, suppose for a second that I'm going to acknowledge the 'bronies' as being unique and special, as many of them consider themselves to be, puffed up with vacuous morals of 'love and tolerance'. Also, take into consideration that just because something happens with alarming frequency does not mean that it's right or good or should be ignored and accepted. As a result it is fair to criticise something, even if it is a common occurrence online, if it is offensive. Observing those two clauses, let us explore this sexist attitude towards females a little further.

As the quote suggests, males often act unusually around females online upon discovering that they *actually have a vagina*. In person, this often results in social awkwardness when people don't know how to properly interact with the opposite sex. Online, though, where people can say what they want, and take opportunistic actions that they would not usually take, the result is often 'sexually

repressed creepiness', I term I quote from one of the contributors to this essay. I received responses from many females within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom who claim to have been victimized by sexual comments and flirtatious innuendo; the sort that is not appreciated and that could be described as 'predatory'.

One female, a 16 year old, explained to me graphically how she was approached at a meet-up by males she described as 'quite a bit older than her' and was asked a variety of questions that she had no desire to answer. Her virginity was a common interest for these males. Another individual, aged 14, was asked on a picture of their custom original character (OC) pony if they would be interested in using said character in a sexual internet roleplay. This post was unprovoked and unwarranted, and forced the individual to hide the comments (and later remove the image entirely) as a result.

On the subject of sexual roleplays, several individuals suggested to me that by listing yourself as female in the fandom, the chance of males attempting to sexually liase with you is increased dramatically. I fully assumed that this would be the case, and so ran a test on a website called 'Ponysquare', which was seen as being one of the biggest offenders in this department at the time. I signed up with two accounts, one male and one female, and allowed for individuals to chat with me. After accepting/initiating 500 or so friend requests on both accounts, I can report that in the space of four hours I was approached to casually sex-roleplay seven times on the female account, and not once on the male account.

Of these sex-roleplays, five were impulsive while two were slightly more reserved. What I mean by this is that five refused to ask if I wished to take part in a sex-roleplay before launching into it. They merely ambushed me with establishing messages such as:

- *** swoops down and licks lips * hehe I am _____ (name blanked out). You look lost and scared. Can I help?**
- *** bites ur flank * u are so hot**
- **The majestic stallion see's you from afar and snorts. He knows you have seen him and can sense your blushing. He also senses something else.....something down below that he knows you are interested in.**

Grammatical and conceptual awfulness aside, at least the other two comments were more *respectful* of my (apparently female) personal space. Try this exchange:

- **OOC: hello~ you are very pretty.**
- **(My reply:) I am?**
- **OOC: yes u r lol ...(3 minutes and 5 seconds later) do u want to be my marefirned?**
- **(My reply:) Why?**
- **OOC: we can RP?**
- **(My reply:) On your page?**
- **OOC: no not on page. Not allow**
- **(My reply:) Isn't this a roleplaying site? Why wouldn't we be able to roleplay?**
- **OOC: some rp not allow**
- **(My reply:) What roleplay isn't allowed?**
- **OOC: sex rp**
- **(My reply:) I'm not interested in sex roleplaying with you.**
- **OOC: kk (user stopped messaging me after this, making it quite clear what they were interested in)**

We cannot entirely suggest that people on Ponysquare are representative of the fandom at large. What we can assert based on this minor study, though, is that there are opportunistic people in this fandom who will see a female – or someone listed as being female – and will deem it appropriate to try and engage with them in a seemingly sexual manner behind the anonymity of a pony original character. It is alarming to see how prevalent this is, both from my own findings and from what I have heard from other people who suggested I try the study out.

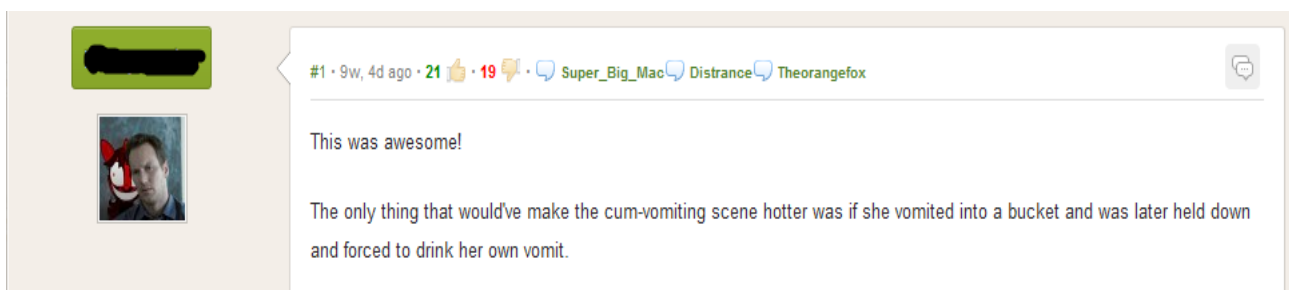
At times these comments can become quite frightening. Alarmingly, age does not appear to be much of a boundary to some. I encountered one user on Ponysquare who was listed as having been born in 1986, making him an adult by any criteria (it being 2013 at the time of study). He was listed as being 'in a relationship' with another user. Chasing up this user, I saw that she was 14 years of age. I was surprised that a male who was nearly 30 years old would be listed as being in a relationship with a young girl openly. On their page were a series of sexual exchanges. While the messages were not explicit, they were definitely flirtatious and were speaking about some sort of sexual exchange that *had* happened previously (mentioning the cleaning up of semen). I do not assume that the older man physically met the young girl, but I do assume that they had been engaging in some form of online sex roleplaying based on the connotations of their exchange.

I approached the 30 year old and asked him why he was interacting with a 14 year old in such a way

at his age. He confirmed that he was indeed as old as his profile suggested and that the girl was a young teen, having seen her on a webcam. He explained that he was married and that the flirting and online 'relationship' status was 'just a bit of fun'. I asked him if his wife knew he was talking to a 14 year old girl in that way, and he replied that his wife did know and was absolutely fine with it. After that, however, I found that I was blocked from his page before I could investigate further.

While this focuses more on the victimisation of a minor than general female oppression, it is interesting to note that I have seen a pattern emerging of older men within the fandom 'preying' on younger girls. While these females are apparently consenting and actively involving themselves in sexual discussions, it is the duty of a responsible adult not to allow things to get to that stage in the first place, even if the younger person is agreeable to it. Discussing sexual matters with children and young teens when you're nearly 30 is alarming, especially if the individual was indeed married. I cannot claim to know if his wife really was okay with it, but I can certainly assume that she probably didn't know (if she even existed at all).

Not all of this sexual voyeurism is consensual. "Tits or GTFO", a long-standing, and, when said in earnest, *disgusting* phrase, occurs at times within the fandom (as well as around the internet in general). Many female members of the fandom have described this attitude as extending to the pony characters themselves, who are frequently sexualised within the community. It is important to state that pornography is relatively rampant within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom, and that both males and females undoubtedly find enjoyment in it, for better or worse. This does not change the fact that many females have told me that they find the male fascination with sex within the community to be concerning, however. Here is one example that a concerned female sent to me taken from a website called FiMFiction. I have blanked out the user's name, but I felt it appropriate to keep the entire message to show how disgusting it is:



I do not wish to criticise the pornographic side of the community itself in this essay, as that is an argument for another day, and it is difficult to establish how many males compared to have many

females are interested in it. However, if we use the above example (and there are plenty more like it), you can see that some male bronies have a real addiction to sexual domination and the victimisation of females, fictional or not. There are certainly a lot of thumbs down on that comment, but there are slightly more thumbs up, suggesting that at least half of the people who saw that message thought it appropriate enough to voice their support. While I cannot guarantee that no female thumbed up a message about another female being held down and forced to consume their own vomit, ask yourself how likely it is that the majority of the people approving that comment are male. In your heart of hearts you'll probably agree that they are, more likely than not, male.

Based on comments on observed websites containing My Little Pony pornography the majority of viewers tend to be male in almost all instances that I have seen. Clicking profiles more often than not shows the sex of the user, and in almost all cases on websites I viewed males far outweigh females on pony pornography sites. I lack tangible evidence to state that females have more of a right to be offended than males by My Little Pony pornography, when it can just as easily offend males as well. What is directly offensive to females, however, is the amount of artwork depicting the rape and sexual exploitation of a female that is, more often than not, made by males. There is a casual attitude towards rape within the community from many people, with one user who contacted me finding blogs such as 'Princess Molestia' (which has now been taken down) to be offensive, while other blogs go to much more sordid depths.

Rape is a serious issue, and while males can be raped, evidence will almost always suggest that females are the main victims of this injustice. There is little that represents sexual domination to a greater extent than a male raping a female, and the "Friendship is Magic" fandom has been observed by many people who contacted me (both male and female) as having an enormous amount of pornographic content linked to rape, or, at the very least, the graphic depiction of sexual unwillingness. One user pointed out a popular shirt that illustrates rape along the lines 'Join the Rule 34 community of we'll rape you'. This is offensive to both males and females, but more females contacted me showing concern about rape within the fandom than males.

There have been specific examples of alleged physical rapes within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom, and while I do not wish to engage with the 'popular' one that I see a lot written about (conflicting stories make it difficult to discern, as an outsider, what actually happened), there is clearly a predatory side to this fandom in certain cases that unsettles a lot of people, including females. One person who contacted me explained that despite loving to cosplay and attend conventions for other fandoms, such as Homestuck and Dr. Who, they are terrified of attending

another brony convention due to the perverted things they have seen and the experience they had at the first My Little Pony convention they attended. This individual is a young teen, and yet they have been given reason to believe that “Friendship is Magic” conventions are unsafe places to be because of males.

Three people contacted me claiming that at child-friendly My Little Pony conventions they witnessed pornographic art being drawn and distributed. Only one of these examples said it was drawn in a secretive way: the other two say that the artists were guests who drew porn despite people of all ages being present at the convention. They argued that it was particularly alarming that at conventions a lot of the time the special guests from the fandom are known artists of My Little Pony pornography. There have even been 'clap' panels at conventions that celebrate the joys of masturbating to My Little Pony fiction and images. From the panels of this nature sent to me on Youtube, the people on stage were male. One concerned individual who contacted me refused to let their kids attend one of the conventions because of one of the artists who had been invited – he was revered as some sort of idol despite having a penchant for drawing the sexual exploitation of the Cutie Mark Crusader characters (female children in the TV show).

On the subject of conventions, several females who contacted me complained that they have been approached in a sexual manner, or had their physical appearance commented on in a sexual way, due to cosplaying. While they admit that sometimes their costumes have been 'slightly revealing', they argue that they did not dress that way to attract males or 'to be groped'. One, who wore a mid-length skirt while cosplaying as the character Pinkie Pie, recalls how she had heard males wolf-whistling at her, taking photos of her with a deliberate focus on her from behind, and were more than eager to try and get hugs out of her that she did not wish to give. Some actively threw their arms around her without being asked, and one went as far as to pat her on the backside. Her objection was met with patronising comments from other males that only half-disapproved of the action and called it 'harmless', and for the rest of the convention, I am told, she felt uncomfortable.

Similarly uncomfortable are females within the fandom who have been alienated due to their sexual orientation. Despite the male side of the “Friendship is Magic” fandom often having an interest in lesbians insofar as most 'shippings' (the often implausible romantic pairing of characters in a work of fiction) are between female characters, I have received messages from several concerned lesbians who have been anything but revered within the fandom. One female announced on her blog that she was a lesbian and received a considerable amount of hateful comments in response. The fascination with lesbian artwork does not appear to extend to real lesbians in the brony fandom, who are quite

often the subjects of homophobic insults within the community. Another lesbian informed me that they feel as if the fandom treats lesbianism as a casual affair, and that fan-fictions, more often than not written by males, depicting female characters from the show 'suddenly having sex with each other out nowhere' is unrealistic and hurtful. Another told me that they have been approached by overly zealous male bronies who attempted to draw them away from homosexuality. The only thing worse, they said, was when a male brony attempted to tell them that 'lesbians don't exist' and that if she 'slept with a male she would enjoy it more than [lesbian] sex'.

This point was particularly despicable. The individual in question had one eager male user, plus a handful of his friends, inquiring into her sex life. After finding out that she had never had sex with a male, not feeling attracted to males for as long as she could remember, he informed her that she couldn't truly know she was a lesbian unless she had sex with 'a bunch of guys'. She was appalled by this comment, and even more appalled that other males seemed to be agreeing with the person who had encouraged her to have sex with males despite being a lesbian. The male suggested, she concludes, that she have sex with other bronies at a meet-up or convention who would help to 'educate her'.

Females being sexualised on the internet is not a new thing, and it would perhaps be naïve to believe that things would be any different within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom. That said, just because it is a common occurrence does not make this sort of behaviour any less concerning to the people it impacts upon. Issues of females being sexualised within the fandom are prevalent, and many females wish to engage with this fandom without wishing to be 'put upon a pedestal and gazed at by panting, drooling males'. Most females I have spoken to within the community want *equality*. They wish to be treated in the exact same way as the male fans. However, too often they are either treated as being somehow *lesser* fans by indignant males, or are shown such an egregious level of attention by horny male fans that they become suffocated by it.

One concerned individual explained to me how she constantly has male fans trying to 'protect' her from things, deciding what content within the fandom is and isn't appropriate for her to look at. She felt utterly patronised as a result, despising how the males believed they knew better than her and could mediate what she was 'entitled' to take part in. She wasn't able to decide for herself, and being told that she wasn't able to appreciate "Friendship is Magic" as much as a male *because she liked My Little Pony before Generation 4* made matters worse. To this issue we now turn.

Chapter 3 – There's No Place Like Ponyland

“Kill it with fire!!!!!!” - Brony, male, 19

In the earlier stages of the “Friendship is Magic” fandom, a lot of people were quick to point out that the show and the art style (and the toy range) was infinitely 'better' than the previous generations of My Little Pony. While this opinion has perhaps fallen out of favour in recent times, certain members of the fandom still enjoy drawing a distinction between the old My Little Pony and the new, sparkly version that is 'infinitely better in every way'.

There is a problem here. Most of the fans of the older generations of My Little Pony were, and still are, female. This is not in any way to suggest that females do not enjoy Generation 4, of course, but it does suggest that males who have latched on to Generation 4 can use females as a scapegoat for why the older generations are as they are. This has happened within the My Little Pony fandom. Several concerned users contacted me, explaining how they have been held personally responsible as older fans of the series for the 'girly' and 'awful' quality of the older TV shows and toys. The logic appears to be that because females watched these older My Little Pony generations and bought the toys they were 'supporting Hasbro in making a bad show' and should therefore feel guilty about the quality of the old generations, which these people believe to be unforgivable. If this misguided notion wasn't bad enough, it has also resulted in people claiming that those who were involved in the My Little Pony fandom before Generation 4 cannot make the transition to the new series and should 'stay in the old circles'.

This has been a concern for many people, and it is not difficult to imagine why. Consider that there have been collectors of My Little Pony toys and fans of the TV shows and films since the 1980s, and a good amount of these will have been female. Suddenly a reboot comes along that all sorts of new people, including many males, latch onto, but because My Little Pony has a degree of stigma attached to it as a 'thing for girls', these new people try and describe Generation 4 as being

independent of the previous incarnations. There have been people who have claimed that “Friendship is Magic” is 'nothing like' the older generations. While following this train of thought, these people are alienating the fans of these older generations.

The people who contacted me about the older generations tend to be older, having grown up in the 1980s. One individual who spoke to me, a teacher, argued that unless things are connected to the “Friendship is Magic” variant of the My Little Pony name, they are automatically seen as being undeserving of praise and are instead considered a source of ridicule. And, it is sad that one of the primary insults made about these older generations is that they were 'too girly'. Again, femininity is used in a degrading fashion: because these products were not marketed for men, and cornered a market that was occupied predominantly by females, they are seen as being 'bad'. I have encountered very few, if any, females who have remarked this about older generations of My Little Pony. It is the males, almost exclusively, who use the 'too girly' phrase as an insult to demean something that a lot of females feel passionately about.

Apart from the fact that undermining previous generations of the franchise is largely pointless, it also seems unusual to make outrageous claims, as one observed person has, that '[the older generations] should never have been made'. This kind of hyperbolic statement is worrying, especially when considering that previous incarnations of My Little Pony resulted in Generation 4. You would not have “Friendship is Magic” without these older generations. Many of the people complaining about the earlier generations appear to be quick to sing Lauren Faust's praises, which strikes me as odd: playing with earlier generations of My Little Pony inspired her to make “Friendship is Magic” in the first place. She would not have spearheaded Generation 4 had she not played with earlier generations of My Little Pony and enjoyed them. Realistically, there's no sound reason for being appalled by the earlier generations.

Similarly, the earlier generations raise an interesting point about how influential some male fans of “Friendship is Magic” think they are. Despite My Little Pony lasting until at least Generation 4 without the involvement of bronies, some fans have claimed that it is the fandom that made My Little Pony a success, and that without the fandom Hasbro would be struggling to turn a profit. One comment from a male who was angry with Hasbro read: 'Good luck surviving without bronies when we stop throwing money at you!'. They did. They survived twenty years before the Generation 4 fandom came into being, and they survived long before that with a variety of other products (many of which are still going today).

This hatred of earlier generations of My Little Pony is alarming. One female who loved My Little Pony from Generation 1 was told by an enraged male that they would 'undo the shit' that her generation caused, as if people who liked My Little Pony prior to "Friendship is Magic" systematically chose to like something in order to spite a fandom that had not yet come into existence. It is ridiculous and illogical, but it is an argument that has been used to attack female fans of the previous generations of My Little Pony. The false assumption is made that females who enjoyed the older forms of the brand cannot enjoy them as much as males can enjoy the newer version, because, at least in their mind, the older versions had no redeemable features. Clearly, people liked them for a reason, and it's incredibly petty to attack people for having fond memories of earlier generations simply because they may not appeal to both males and females in such an apparent way.

Attacking earlier generations on any pretence of being 'bad' as a direct result of being 'girly' is inherently sexist. Despite what some people might argue, being 'girly' or 'feminine' is not a license for something to be awful. Shouting 'Kill it with fire!' at a screen of older My Little Pony videos is incredibly immature and ignorant to the people who liked them. There are all sorts of 'Bronies react' videos where males, more often than not, watch older episodes of My Little Pony or look at the toys of the older generations and hurl abuse at them with a degree of pompous exaggeration and sneering cynicism that is to be despised by anyone who grew up enjoying these toys and shows. It's disrespectful, and it permeates an attitude of division between the fans of previous generations of My Little Pony and fans of "Friendship is Magic".

These two forms of the same whole are not mutually exclusive. While there are some fans of the older generations who dislike "Friendship is Magic", most of the females I have spoken to who liked My Little Pony growing up very much enjoy Generation 4. However, they feel alienated from the fandom surrounding it because, as a general rule, the fandom is hostile towards the previous generations and antagonistic towards their fans. Male fans of Generation 4 have claimed that it is impossible to like the older generations as much as "Friendship is Magic", and that anyone who does either 'has no taste' or 'doesn't belong in the [brony] fandom'. Assuredly, this level of resentment towards the previous generations of My Little Pony pushes fans who have grown up with all iterations of the popular franchise away, making the "Friendship is Magic" community seem more like an insular, misogynistic cult than ever before.

Hatred of earlier generations extends to the toys, although interestingly not just the toys of the older generations. There are plenty of male fans who get angry with the current toy range for a variety of

reasons. One male embarked on a large rant about how the Princess Cadance doll said phrases that were 'stupid and girly' when pressing the button to make her talk. Another claimed that the Shining Armor and Princess Cadance Royal Wedding Castle Playset had 'too much pink on it'. 'Pink' has, in these people's eyes, become synonymous with 'bad', which is concerning, as there is nothing inherently wrong with the colour. Similarly, the individual complaining about the audio phrases of the Cadance doll being 'too girly' should step back and take a look at who these toys are being marketed to.

Attacking a toy range designed for females as being *too feminine* is ridiculous. You would scarcely hear people complaining that Transformers or G.I Joe figures are *too masculine*. But, when it comes to My Little Pony, because so many of these male bronies wish to distance themselves from the feminine tag and redefine "Friendship is Magic" as some sort of 'manly' pass-time, 'female' becomes the dirty word and the qualifier for low-quality and patronising products. And, of course, the logical progression of these complaints, if these products are indeed seen as being *too feminine* to males, is that making them more *masculine* would somehow make them better. Again, we see this trajectory of 'male = better' within the "Friendship is Magic" fandom, with a dense layer of ingrained misogyny underpinning it.

It is as if the males are 'liberating' the females, because My Little Pony was 'bad' and 'suffering' in its old state, but because the show is moving in a new, universal direction, so too must the toy range appeal to adult males. The argument appears to be that before "Friendship is Magic", everything was girly and crap, but because males came along and put their mark in the product, it somehow became more credible, more respectable and more appealing. Anything that clings to the 'old ways' is left looking foolish as a result, and females should either embrace that the old generations were bad or should be considered an enemy of the new, male-controlled fandom based around the latest product.

This is not to argue that there is anything wrong with the new generation, or that the show shouldn't be aiming for a universal audience. My Little Pony is arguably more accessible now than ever before to both males and females, but it is important to understand that this does not render the older products and TV shows, which were, perhaps, more consciously aimed at females, as being without worth. Neither are the fans of the older generations of My Little Pony any less of a fan of the new generation than the people who joined during "Friendship is Magic". And, those people who did enjoy the older generations but do not enjoy Generation 4 should not be considered stupid or wrong simply for having an opinion or preferring things as they used to be.

Chapter 4 – No Woman, No Cry

“It was like someone smacked a big 'ol Calvin-and-Hobbes-style 'NO GIRLS ALLOWED' sign on the door before shutting it in my face” - Brony, female

A common criticism of the brony documentary, *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*, was that it failed to represent females. Bar a secondary mention of females in the song, 'Let's Go and Meet the Bronies', it is true that the documentary failed to represent the involvement of females in the community. Of the many people that the documentary focused on, there was only one female who received any major kind of exposure. Her role, however, was minor in comparison to some other case studies explored, and she wasn't independent: the male in her story was equally as important as her, as they were using the two of them as an example of people within the fandom finding love and entering a relationship together.

The absence of females in the documentary has come under scrutiny already, and seems to be emblematic of the way in which males dominate the focus of the fandom, while females are resigned to mere footnotes and comments of 'Oh, and then there are some adult girls who like it too'. We have already established how exclusion is an issue, and when a documentary that is supposedly representative of a community enforces this sense of exclusion, despite being funded by people within the fandom, many of whom are female, it isn't difficult to see that there is a very real and very concerning problem regarding the role of females within the fandom.

Females do not appear to have an established 'role' within the brony fandom. While there are some popular females, the bulk of the popular artists, musicians, hosts, site-runners and so on within the community are male. It would be unfair, perhaps, to criticise this if these people just happen to be more prolific in their respective fields, but at the same time there is no escaping that the work produced by the fandom is often filtered through male eyes and given voice by males. Certainly, the

way in which the documentary, which had a big enough budget to include males and females, had its own interest in allowing for males to dominate screen-time, has resulted in some people planning, at the time of writing, a documentary that rectifies this imbalance.

The lack of a distinct role for female fans is not unique to the documentary. Keeping with the theme of conventions, one female fan explained to me in detail that they have been instrumental in the creation of two conventions within the fandom. They explained:

“I have been involved in the planning of two pony conventions, only to see female planners relegated to 'girl jobs' like running art and cosplay booths, while the convention chairs, marketing people, people dealing with finances etc. all are guys. All of this, even when I was the one who brainstormed the initial convention idea in the first place!

"Check the con lists of any pony convention and ask yourself where the girls are. I have over 15 years con experience, whereas the people I was passed over for had [considerably less experience]."

This is clearly a very worrying trend. Assigning females marginal roles as if they are seen by some as being incapable of dealing with marketing, for example, is not only patronising, but it's also not terribly fun for the people involved. It is awfully reductionist to assume that females can only lend their skills to art and cosplay (I.e making things look pretty) while the males have to do the logistical bureaucratic work. Again, if these were just natural roles that males ended up in during the organisation of conventions it would be more forgivable, but the concerned organiser who contacted me has clearly seen, in their own words, 'female planners relegated to 'girl' jobs'. Given their 15 years of experience, they would know how conventions work, and the implication is that these two brony-orientated conventions have been more susceptible to sexism than other ones they have taken part in organising external to the fandom.

While females are certainly going to be incorporated equally at some conventions, I must reiterate that these are specific cases that are being documented here. That said, many of these cases could be representative of wider trends. If we do not report and comment on examples of negative behaviour, whether they are isolated incidences or not, then we are merely accepting that inequality occurs with a tacit shrug of the shoulders without concerning ourselves enough to criticise it. Instead, it is important to acknowledge individual cases that dig beneath the surface to uproot the nasty underbelly of a fandom such as this one, in the hope that people with the wrong sort of attitude will change for the better.

I have received multiple responses from females within the community who have been sidelined due to being female, lacking a comprehensive role in all sorts of things. Four people contacted me and said that when talking about upcoming fan-made games with males they have been undermined as being unable to play with them because they would 'clearly suck at them' due to being female. Others told me that during Skype calls with males discussing various things they are often ignored: points they raise are shrugged off or do not receive a response, and males have repeatedly demonstrated their reluctance to listen to females with the comment: "You're a girl, so you don't get it."

The real injustice of it all is that many females were initially elated by the sound of the "Friendship is Magic" fandom. One individual commented:

"When I first heard about 'bronies' I was thrilled (being an advocate of gender-transcendence and metrosexuality). Finally, I thought, an equivalent male-to-female fandom to equal comic books! I was content to fiddle about on the fringes, feeling great because, hey, we're all equal in the anonymity of the internet, right? And even better, my very first fandom was getting a new lease of life (I grew up with G1 and the whole pony phenomenon of the 80s was an integral part of my childhood). Even BETTER better, the new My Little Pony fandom seemed to be the most creative one I'd ever witnessed: pony-themed original music; thoughtful episode reviews and dissection by online critics; more fanart than you could shake a stick at! AMVs with such on-model fanmade animation. I was DROOLING to be a part of it all!"

However, they went on to explain to me that while this was the idea that the fandom attempted to project, the reality is far less desirable. They went on to admonish:

"What I landed on when I was summarily told that my childhood fandom was a place I was no longer welcome. It was like someone smacked a big 'ol Calvin-and-Hobbes-style 'NO GIRLS ALLOWED' sign on the door before shutting it in my face and partying on where I could hear and peep at the action through the window, but not partake...When I observe them interacting with each other online everything is hunky-dory and everyone seems happy. Introduce me and my lack of Y-chromosome to the mix, however, and those same proud fans go sour

faster than milk in front of a heating grate”

Another user commented:

“I (and other fans in my position) can SEE all the fun to be had and desperately WANT to be a part of it. However, it's hard when the moment you mention you're female other fans turn nasty”

For some females, there is evidently an imbalance in the fandom that comes due to not being male. In all facets of the fandom, and in any online space connected to it, females have been marginalized for no reason other than the fact that they do not comprise this 'male' side of the fandom that has 'seized control of it'.

Conclusion

At the risk of making broad cultural and historical sweeps, it is reasonably fair to argue that females have always been seen as second-class citizens. Female suffrage is a relatively new concept, and we've only contemplated females having the right to vote in Western society in the last one hundred years. Throughout the world there are many countries where females are still heavily oppressed, and even in the Western world things could be better: a steady trickle of bills and acts have been passed over the last century that have slowly put women into a more fortunate position, but there is work that still needs to be done.

Ultimately, I have no aspirations of grandeur with this essay. I know that it will not make the slightest bit of difference outside of its niche circle and the select few people who might read it, and even within the My Little Pony community it will have its detractors and its critics. However, to conclude I would like to draw a reader's attention (if, indeed, a reader has made it this far) to a comment that I received from a male when it became apparent that I was putting together this body of text. This male made a point that concerned me more than it evidently concerned him. He said, to paraphrase:

'Of course females are marginalized, but why does anyone need to write about it?'

'Of course women are marginalized'. Let that sink in for a moment. The person who wrote this comment has at least a latent acceptance that equality doesn't exist between males and females, either within this community or at a greater cultural and social level. He has stated that he knows this to be the case, and yet he is sceptical, almost critical, of anyone actually attempting to *do anything about it*. Challenging my desire to shed light on a flaw within the community because it is an issue that *obviously* exists is a rather unusual criticism. Are we to just accept the unsavoury position of some females within the fandom; are we to just consider it normal and allow it to exist? My mind does not work that way, I'm afraid, and I cannot fathom that train of thought.

If there is anything I would like people to take away from this essay, it would be that inclusion is, quite obviously, 'nicer' than exclusion. I feel that people sometimes forget this and treat others as outsiders, whether that's due to their sex or other factors. If you do feel yourself marginalizing other people, I would like you to take a moment to think about the ramifications of your behaviour. Sure, you could shrug it off and say that people like me are overreacting or taking the internet too seriously. And while that could be true, I don't honestly believe that there is any shame in attempting to right societal wrongs. Making a difference to even a few people in a small, largely insignificant internet social circle such as the My Little Pony fandom *still has significance*, and if you see something happening that you know is wrong or unfair, I would encourage you to speak up and criticise it. Don't just let bad things happen – at an individual level, the way you act around people and attempt to influence them for the better can have a larger impact than you might think.

If anyone wishes to refute any of what I have written here then you are welcome to write a rebuttal, although I'll remind you that everything stated here has been factually observed as being the case and is based on real life testimonies. While these events are isolated and are not representative of everyone within the fandom, they are the dark undertones that are unfairly masked by a veneer of happy-clappy self-congratulating that the My Little Pony fandom loves to entertain. The issues outlined here, furthermore, are representative of wider issues within the fandom specifically, and some apply more broadly to the internet in general. If I, a relatively unknown person, can be contacted by nearly one hundred people within the space of a week who consider themselves victims within the brony fandom, then chances are quite high that these issues of sexism and male dominance are more significant and widespread than might be believed.

Even if they are not, and I just happen to have been contacted by the only irritated females in the whole My Little Pony fandom, then that doesn't change the fact that the people who make up my sample have been victimised and marginalised for no other reason than as a perceived limitation of their sex. If such a thing happened to *one* individual I would be concerned; that it is happening to at least nearly a *hundred* suggests that something within the brony fandom is fundamentally wrong. It isn't my job to now outline how change should come about; instead, I would like to simply argue that anyone who is guilty of excluding females in the brony fandom should re-evaluate their perspectives and attempt to treat others equally.

The brony fandom is flawed. Some people don't like to believe it; others outwardly deny it. I have been warned off from writing this essay by a group of people who considered it to be negative

propaganda; another concerned male told me that I was utterly wrong and that sexism doesn't occur. One even had the audacity to say that the sample of females were lying in order to make the brony fandom look bad. Having spoken to the people who testified, I can say with confidence that they are without a doubt passionate fans who desperately wish to be a part of the brony fandom, but have been systematically pushed away from it for a variety of reasons that all relate to their sex.

If you still resolutely deny that any of the above actually happens, I would ask that you look a little deeper beneath the surface; and, if you are convinced that these issues only affect a minority, then it is precisely the duty of the majority to respect said minority as equals. Any argument suggesting that 'these are just isolated cases' or that 'this doesn't happen often' will fall on deaf ears; I don't care how frequently (or infrequently) something bad happens – that it happens at all is what your fandom, and people in general, should be fighting against.

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Information was acquired from over 100 testimonies from concerned people who reached out to me upon finding out that this study was taking place and served as my sample. In addition to this, the following is a sample of articles read during the writing of this piece that influenced its structure.

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