

On International Women's Day, Is There a Place for Men?

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Let me start with an affirmation: I consider myself a pro-feminist man. I believe it's possible to be a man and to view gender equality as being as important as any social cause on this planet. I have a daughter and a partner and a mother and a sister. I founded an [NGO](#) in Brazil that works to engage men and boys in achieving gender equality and ending violence against women. *Of course* I think there is a place for men in achieving full equality for girls and women. I've got skin in this game.

As a man, I celebrate the advancements the world has made toward gender equality. Women are now 40% of the global paid workforce and half of the world's food producers. With a few exceptions, girls are as likely as boys today to be in primary school. Millions of women in the Global South benefit from microcredit programs, and millions more are being lifted out of poverty with cash transfer programs. Fewer women today die during childbirth. There are more women in politics, in business, in government jobs and working outside of their homes than ever before.

But women's income continues to be on average at least 20% less than men's for the same work. About a third of the world's women will experience violence from a male partner, or some form of sexual violence. Women's full participation in the highest levels of decision-making, the media and in business is shamefully unequal. Women and girls carry out two to 10 times more of the unpaid care work in the Global South and even the most progressive countries in the global North have not achieved full equality in domestic work and childcare.

I'm outraged at how far we still have to go to achieve equality even as we have achieved so much.

At the same time, I think that too much of the work to achieve full rights for women and girls lets men off the hook. Too much of the women's rights field ignores that *men have skin in the game*.

We know that some men are opposed to full equality for women. But we also know that many men and boys support equality. By not shaming the vocal male opponents to women's equality, and by not capitalizing on the male advocates, many women's empowerment initiatives ignore men's and boys' role in gender equality.

Why do we need to engage men to empower women?

Let's start with ending violence against women. As Jackson Katz so powerfully [reminds us](#), violence against women is *men's violence against women*. There are many reasons men use violence against female partners. But this we know: it's not genetic. It's not part of our biological make-up as men; it is learned. The violence men see as children is the violence men use as adults. Our research finds that men who witness violence against their mothers growing up are 2.5 times more likely to use violence against a female partner when they become adults.

Men who grow up with violence are traumatized men. This does not excuse men's violence against women. It explains why effective prevention must include men and boys, while we also enhance laws and law enforcement. And it makes clear how our lives as men improve when we grow up in households without violence.

What about reproductive health?

Every woman's integrity over her body and her ability to choose when and if she has children must be

a core tenet of women's rights. But we must include men in this equation. This doesn't mean taking away women's right to choose and control their bodies. It means acknowledging that men are half of reproduction. To state the obvious: Except in the fairly limited cases of assisted fertility, men are equally responsible for pregnancy and should be equally responsible for contraception.

Biology determines that only women can become pregnant, but the responsibility for contraceptives and condoms is something men and women can and should share. Family planning that only focuses on women is not a step toward equality and empowerment. It is a resignation that we don't think men can change; it lets men off the hook. Currently, women are responsible for about 75% of contraceptive use in the world. Equality means that men must take more personal responsibility for their sexual and reproductive health, and must be supportive of women's contraceptive choices. And it wouldn't hurt to have men involved as allies to counter the conservative male voices that would take away women's reproductive rights.

What happens at home?

Achieving full economic equality for women means full and equal access to employment, credit, education and ownership of land and property. And it means that men and boys must do 50% of the world's unpaid [care work](#): that includes washing dishes and waking up for 2:00 a.m. feedings. The only countries in the world that have achieved something closer to equality for women and girls in the workplace have simultaneously advanced paternity leave and other policies to promote men's participation at home.

Where do we go from here?

This International Women's Day, let's affirm that we're in this together as women and men. Our lives are intertwined. The second-class status of our partners and daughters and sisters is our loss and our shame. It corrodes our lives as men.

In her eloquent short story, "The Matter of Seggri," the science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin creates a powerful allegory of a fictional planet where women and girls live in towns and men are banished to the outskirts. Some "tamer" men are allowed occasional interactions (for sex, or for trade) with the townswomen. At the age of 10, boys must leave their mothers and sisters and live with the other banished adult men in a semi-feral state. It's a powerful, telling fable of what a world of violent men could become.

But back here on Earth, women and men live together. Sex segregation (and ethnic segregation and class segregation) is nearly always a sign of inequality, not a sign of equality. There are men whom we might wish to ban to the outskirts of our towns, but the more realistic path, and the only path to lasting change, is to help (and to obligate, if necessary) men realize the benefits of gender equality.

As a man, I affirm this: Feminism is not exclusively for women or exclusively about women. Feminism is the simple, radical notion that women and girls are human beings. That affirmation means that men are inherently involved in feminism and it means that men's lives improve when we embrace the full equality of women.

To men who are brave enough to fully accept and support it, feminism offers us the chance to see that we are not born to cause harm to others -- that we are not inherently violent and don't need to be banished to the edges of civilization. That our birthright, and that of women, is to the full range of human potential and human relations, including having close, connected, caring, non-violent and equal relationships with others.

That's what I want for my daughter and my partner and my mother and my sister. That's what I want for myself as a man and for all men on International Women's Day.