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# Can Men Really Be Feminists?

Misogyny affects people of every gender.



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NOAH BERLATSKY | JUN 5, 2014

Why do I call myself a feminist? As a guy who writes about feminist

issues, I get asked this with some frequency—by men, women, feminists, and non-feminists alike. Feminism is about women, they say; why are you trying to make it about you?

These questions make some sense—and [they have been discussed a lot](#). But they seem to come from a particular world of feminism. I think of it broadly as empowerment feminism—a feminism focused on women gaining power and equality. Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* movement is one high-profile version of this. She is focused on getting women into boardrooms and into high-level jobs, doing away with the idea that there's something wrong with women being bosses or "bossy." Beyoncé's "Independent Women"-style, girl-power anthems are also based on this idea, which is probably why the singer [collaborated](#) with Sandberg on the "ban bossy" campaign.

One of the major goals of feminism has always been empowerment: Women should be bosses, just like men. Women, including women of color, should be multi-millionaires who let their men know in no uncertain terms that they aren't irreplaceable. If those are the only goals, then yes, there's not a whole lot of reason for men to call themselves feminists, except perhaps in a secondary, supporting capacity.

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## **One thing feminism is about, and has been about, is questioning what it is to be a man.**

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But I don't think feminism is only about women's empowerment—or, at least, there have been other feminisms, too. Specifically, feminism

often takes the form of critique, especially of misogyny. This is often defined as the hatred of women, but in her book *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serano provides a broader definition. She says that misogyny is the "tendency to dismiss and deride femaleness and femininity." In part, this involves deriding and devaluing women, but it also means devaluing any expression of femininity, no matter the gender of the person in question. For example, misogyny means that people see bosses or those with hugely successful careers as being more important than those who stay home and care for their kids, because caring for kids is seen as feminine. Empowerment feminism tends to argue that women should be able to do anything that men can do. But there have also been versions of feminism that argue that what men do isn't necessarily so great; that maybe, instead of leaning in to be the man, we should try to see if we can get to a place where no one has to be the man at all.

So one thing feminism is about, and has been about, is questioning what it is to be a man, which obviously affects men pretty directly. Women are the main victims of misogyny, because women are inescapably associated with femininity. But other people can suffer, too. Gay men, for example, are stereotypically seen as feminine, weak, frivolous, and helpless: "A pansy has no iron in his bones," to quote the author Raymond Chandler in one of his more [misogynistic and homophobic](#) moments. Similarly, femininity is often seen as fake or inauthentic—a trope that is especially damaging for trans women and men, whose gender identities are often seen as unmanly, false, fake, or performed.

Nor do straight men escape criticism. Heterosexual guys get many advantages from misogyny; they're perceived as the least feminine kind of person, and as a result, they are seen as the most valuable and worthy of respect. But that position is always precarious, always

threatened by the creeping threat of femininity. As just one iconic example, in *Sixteen Candles*, the high school hierarchy is enforced through rampant misogyny against men. The geeks are constantly called "faggots" and pushed around by burlier, manlier jocks. Meanwhile, the character Long Duk Dong—a vicious Chinese stereotype—is “comically” paired with a larger, stronger woman to emphasize his ridiculous unmanliness. Men who are not white, who don't play sports, who are interested in video games, or who, like me, do a lot of child care—if they can be construed as feminine in any way, they become targets of ridicule and, sometimes, violence.

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## Misogyny is a cage for everyone—as long as women aren't free, men won't be, either.

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It may seem like these stereotypes protect certain kinds of people from misogyny—like straight, white jocks, for example. But that's not really true, either. No man is perfectly, ideally masculine, which means anyone could be considered too feminine. As I [said](#) last week, Elliot Rodger seemed to be very aware of this threat; he felt like his status as a man was damaged because the women he felt he deserved weren't sleeping with him. His turn to violence was an extreme and horrible reaction—but not exactly unique. The fear of being feminized can lead to violence in many situations. For example, in her book *Women and War*, Jean Bethke Elshtain talks about how this threat of being considered womanly or unmanly is used as a lever during wartime; internalized misogyny and fear of being singled out pushes men to fight—and die—“like men.”

This is also why misogyny is so devastating for male rape victims. Maite Vermeulen has a [painful](#) discussion of the way in which sexual violence against men in wartime is seen as especially shameful—it's framed as a fall from manliness. Misogyny makes the victims ashamed of the violence done to them; vulnerability, rather than assault, becomes the crime. That's rape culture, and it protects all perpetrators of sexual violence, from Steubenville to Penn State, no matter whether that violence is targeted at women or men, girls or boys.

Misogyny, then, is a way to manipulate, shame, and control people, marginalizing not just women, but men, too. And that's why men should be feminists. It's true that sometimes male feminists, myself not excluded, imagine we're brave allies, altruistically saving women by standing up for them. But dreams about men saving women are just another version of misogyny—and, in this case in particular, totally backwards. Misogyny is a cage for everyone. When I call myself a male feminist, I'm not doing it because I think I'm going to save women. I'm doing it because I think it's important for men to acknowledge that as long as women aren't free, men won't be either.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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