

When men claim to be feminists just to abuse women

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Most of us would like to think the consequences of educating men about feminism will always be positive. But for some men, getting involved in the movement is just another opportunity for them to abuse women with impunity.

It's something Angela* knows all too well.



Using feminism to gaslight women is a new twist on an old problem. *Photo: Stocksy*

Angela dreads International Women's Day (which was last week, in case you missed it). Every year she knows she'll see her ex-husband's name all over social media, as he proudly shares and comments on articles about men's violence against women. He posts about how disgusted he is by violent men, and enthusiastically interacts with feminists online.

Angela knows another side of him. While they were married, he was manipulative and abusive.

"He never actually hit me," she says, "but I was scared of him, and he knew it."

Angela was sexually abused as a child. When she told her then husband about the abuse, he was initially very kind and supportive.

"We talked for hours and I was so overwhelmed by all the memories and feelings, I just couldn't cope. So I started drinking and I kept going until I passed out.

"I woke up to find him raping me."

Angela says it took her a long time to think clearly about that night. She was suffering the long-term effects of childhood abuse; he used her trauma and his sympathetic response to convince her that the rape was just a "mistake". He told her their only problem was that she was too damaged to forgive him or love him properly, and she believed him.

"He did a few therapy sessions, then he told me he had really changed and all we needed was for me to get over my trauma. He said he'd be patient because he'd learned so much about feminism and men's violence that he understood why it might take time.

"Then he'd do something else to hurt me, tell me it was because he was struggling with my inability to be close to him, and suggest I go back to my therapist so we could be happy together."

Gaslighting is a form of emotional abuse where an abuser uses tricks and deceit to make their victim doubt their own memories, perception and sanity. It's always toxic, but gaslighting by feminism is a staggering new twist on an old practice.

Angela hasn't seen her ex-husband for many years now, something she is very grateful for. But she still sometimes sees him online.

"He follows lots of strong, activist women. He says the same things to them he used to say to me, and women I really admire think he's great. I know everyone will say I should just block him, but it would be horrible knowing it's still happening and constantly wondering if he's the ghost voice in a thread I'm on."

Gaslighting is always toxic, but Angela's experience was particularly bad. She genuinely needed help to deal with the child abuse she suffered. It takes tremendous courage to take that step, and even more to stick with it. But every time she went back she was proving her ex-husband's point: she was in therapy because she was, in his words, "broken". If she stopped going he would remind her of how patient he was being and gently tell her that she needed to go back and do more work.

Her efforts to heal herself became a tool for him to perpetuate his abuse.

As sex and relationship therapist Cyndi Darnell told Fairfax, "The stigma associated with therapy implies that it shows an illness or something wrong, rather than being a positive step towards strengthening yourself. It's always a red flag when someone uses the therapeutic process as proof that only one person in a relationship has a problem."

His active role in the online world and the validation given to him by the women he interacted with reinforced the gaslighting. Not only was he, as he constantly told her, a changed man, now well-adjusted and self-aware (as verified by his therapist), he was also a proven Good Guy™. How could she say he was treating her badly when everyone knows that he's strongly supportive of women and vehemently disgusted by men who abuse them?

It's likely however, that the women he was interacting with were less impressed by him than it appeared to Angela. The signs of a bogus male ally are much easier to spot than they think, but when those signs are only recognised and not spoken, men like Angela's ex-husband can continue to use feminism as another tool to gaslight the women they abuse.

It's a scary prospect. We want men to gain a better understanding of the dangers and discrimination women face. We want them to talk about it, and it's important that genuine allies take on the work of helping other men better understand the issues.

We don't need men to lead feminism, but we do need them to believe and support the women who lead it. And we can't treat every male ally with suspicion just because we know that a very few of them lurk, like Angela's ex-husband, on the underbelly of feminism, using it as a tool to fuel their abuses.

We can, however, get better at telling our male allies that allyship is about how you live, not what you say. If you do things to your female partners, colleagues or family members that you proudly condemn in other men, you are not part of the solution. You're the problem.

I want all the women like Angela, to know this: you are not the problem. If your partner hurts you and tells you it's your fault, he is lying to you. If he uses your feelings as an excuse for his behaviour, he is lying to you. If he tells you that you can't make him happy because you're too "crazy" to be able to love properly, he's lying to you.

The responsibility for abuse always lies with the abuser, never with the abused.

Signs of a fraudulent male ally

- They share well-known feminist work to prove they've read it, but never search out other work by women in a genuine attempt to better understand the issues.
- They take advantage of the fact that men's voices are given more weight than women's to boost their credibility.
- They resent women who refuse to recognise them as feminism experts.
- They get angry when their own sexism is pointed out.
- They expect women to alter feminist spaces to fit them, instead of altering themselves to fit feminist spaces.
- They rephrase women's writing to present it as their own thoughts, without giving full credit to women's work.
- They think they have something more important to say about feminism than anything women have already said.
- They explain feminism to women, rather than to other men.
- Constant demands for a cookie (extra points for a celebrity feminist cookie!)
- They talk over women who call out sexism rather than supporting them, because they have to be the hero.
- They'll be more upset that this article could hurt male allies than that men are using feminism to damage women.

*not her real name

For help or information regarding domestic violence, call the Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service 1800 737 732 or go to 1800respect.org.au.