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My 'crisis of masculinity' and how feminism set me free

When I realised that gender was made up I stopped worrying about what "being a man" meant.

By [Samuel C L Jones](#) ^[1] Published 20 May 2013 14:18

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It's time to stop letting our masculinity be defined by dated ideas. Photo: Getty images

I remember vividly when I first decided that I was a feminist.

I was watching a production of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* directed by my sister in a small basement theatre in



Edinburgh. I came face to face with the fact that women around the world remained victims of mistreatment and abuse. The wounds depicted were both emotional and physical. We heard heartbreaking, personal stories; a rape survivor in Bosnia, an American teenager humiliated for being "frigid". They all served to make it clear that the journey to equality between the sexes was still far from complete. I was deeply moved, and decided that I could no longer permit such injustice. From that day onwards, I was a feminist.

However, this was merely the beginning of the story. After digging a little deeper into what

feminism meant I was opened up to the idea that your gender is not only different from your sex but is also a complex and ever-evolving performance of numerous different ideas and pressures - often we spend a lot of time playing our gender role because that is what is expected of us. Maleness, I began to realise, was nonsense. If I didn't want to be that, I had absolutely no obligation to be. I was free to choose my identity based on what I actually identified with. It was a profoundly liberating, revelatory and life-changing realisation.

I'm lucky; I've been surrounded by remarkable women from an early age. My grandmother, who successfully ran two shops despite the bricks thrown through the window and "Pakis Out" graffiti common on the south London council estate where she lived, or my mother who, having been kicked out of Uganda by Idi Amin in the early Seventies, learned English from scratch while running a household at the age of 11 and is now managing director of a major healthcare consultancy. The women in my family are truly something to behold. There's a financial analyst, a management consultant, an actuary, a New York ad exec and, in laughably stereotypical fashion, a multitude of doctors. They're not perfect, but they're as close to super women as I've ever seen.

This is not to say that society has afforded them the respect they deserve. Between them they could compile a litany of stomach-churning anecdotes detailing the relentless day-to-day misogyny they face- being ignored or patronised in meetings, the casual harassment, the "sweeties", the "darlings", the "honeys". Some have been threatened, some have been groped and if they have complained about such behavior they have been accused of "making trouble".

So when I embraced feminism a lot of the ideas about what women could and should be allowed to do didn't seem that foreign. However, I was also amazed to find answers to my sense of being uncomfortable in my own, male skin. Until fairly recently, I was caught in a bind about what "being a man" looked like. I've never felt comfortable in predominantly masculine environments, as they often seemed to just be an exercise in competition to be the most horrible - at school I would be repulsed by jokes about rape and violence and yet I would do little to intervene, so compelling was my adolescent fear of public rebuke. Not that this kind of attitude ends at the school gates - the other day I was in the barbers, and while my guy was snipping away I noticed that there was a women's tennis match on the TV by his equipment. "Are you into tennis?" I asked. "No," he laughed, "but I like watching their tits bounce up and down". I hate that that's what men are like, or feel obligated to be like, with each other. And I know I am not at all unique in this.

We men are still letting ourselves be bound by arbitrary and utterly ridiculous ideas about what a man is supposed to be, and I don't just mean that which manifests itself as violence or systemic oppression. It's also in the silly, day-to-day stuff: I have very close friends whose commitment to equal rights and representation amongst the genders I could hardly fault, and yet they still would be resistant, due mostly to the hot pink font on the DVD cover, to watching *Bridesmaids*. NB chaps: you're sorely missing out. Similarly, I'm met with howls of derision if I order so-called "girly" drinks in pubs, even though everyone knows how unequivocally delicious they are. As far as I'm concerned, if we're still gendering drinks, feminism isn't finished.

I come not with a punitive, po-faced "if you're not angry you're not paying attention" ire. Instead, I offer an olive branch to my fellow confused, indignant sort-of-men; those simultaneously outraged and pressurized by the swirling cocktail of laddism, Lynx adverts and pornographised culture to which we are constantly subjected; bored and annoyed by the expectations society holds for you and unhappy with the dominance of barbarous hyper-masculinity in all realms of life. To you I say - once you realise that the lines in the sand

between "manly" and "girly" can be so easily washed away, it becomes much easier to reject these expectations. This is one of the most amazing things about the creation of an equal society- woman, man, however you define yourself, we all stand to benefit.

But there is a catch to all of this. I know from my experience that understanding how malleable the barriers between the genders are made me even more painfully aware of the many persecutions and restrictions that women face. For example - does the current dominance of men in all major economic and social spheres make sense once you realise that gender is constructed? Similarly, if we don't have to tolerate the expectations put upon us as men, why should women have to put up with similar and often far more belligerent pressure? As far as I'm concerned you are obligated to pay your newfound empowerment forward. There is a fight to build a fairer world going on. Now go grab yourself a peachtini and join me on the front lines.

If it is anything like mine, your journey as a male feminist will not be easy - your decision is unlikely to lead to anything other than at best mockery and at worst anger amongst many of your peers. Let these reactions serve to increase your empathy for women who face this kind of social isolation on a daily basis when they publicly question their place in society. Meanwhile, a whole heap of your favourite boyhood films will be ruined once you notice their lazy and offensive representation of both male and female characters - (the third Indiana Jones movie being a notable personal example - there's a slightly troubling scene in which the eponymous hero basically forces himself upon a Nazi seductress which I, dulled by nostalgia, had refused to acknowledge until my girlfriend pointed it out). Also, at some point you're likely to smack face first into the unforgiving, Kubrickian monolith that is your own privilege. You'll have to confront how appallingly wrong you were about a lot of things - from rape to employment discrimination to equal pay. Any feminist meetings you attend, although you will often be warmly welcomed (from my experience women are much better at being the bigger person politically), will be long, inconclusive and jargon-drenched. Such is the nature of attempting to build a consensus for change. Many of these meetings will be women-only spaces, which you will initially be indignant about until you grow up. Oh and, spoiler alert, patriarchy is a thing. And it's dreadful, and you might be a part of it, consciously or unconsciously.

But as [Diane Abbott](#) [2] and [others](#) [3] have noted this week - we do need to talk about masculinity, or indeed the myth of it. There is a generation of young men out there who are sick of being told to "man up", who tire of the patronising way that they are treated by the advertising industry and who hate the fear of being ostracised from many of their peers if they don't participate in "banter" or acquiesce to social pressures to objectify women. Those for whom "being a man" is a daily burden - there's more of them than you think. We can show these men that there is a community of people out there who will accept them for who they are. To me, this is as powerful an example of the life-changing potential of feminism as you could think of.

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