

What are men to do in the age of Trump?

 [theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/03/men-womens-march-feminism-donald-trump](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/03/men-womens-march-feminism-donald-trump)

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“Men: Time to Listen”. So read a sign on the National Mall in Washington during the Women’s March protesting against [Donald Trump](#) the day after his inauguration.

Now that the women’s movement has become the spearhead of resistance to the Trump administration, a pressing question has emerged for half the population: what role, if any, are men to play in the crisis of gender politics that is inevitable over the course of the next four years?

The situation has, in one sense, simplified enormously. The elaborate labyrinths of identity politics have crumbled and left behind basic questions of fundamental human decency. Trump’s actions as president, more than his demeaning behavior on the campaign trail, are deliberately keeping women from power and [attacking programs](#) that promote their health, both in the US and globally. Feminism as humanism – the very basic idea that women are people – is now under threat. Any man who claims to possess a shared sense of humanity with women must stand with them.

The evidence has become too glaringly obvious. Who could embody more perfectly “rape culture” than a man who was elected president of the United States while boasting about sexual predation? What more proof do you need that women face structural disadvantages in their work lives than Hillary Clinton winning the popular vote by nearly 3 million votes and still losing?

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But Trump represents far more than a setback for women. He also represents the failure of men to deal with their own questions of gender.

Trump is new. He is not like the straight white males who came before him in the office of the presidency. He is a parody, a simulacrum of masculinity conjured by self-loathing and self-aggrandizement, a reflection of the tormented, contradictory state of contemporary men, [the Red Pill made flesh](#).

Trump represents not masculinity in triumph, but masculinity in decadence.

Two contradictory processes are at work. One is the rise of women to dominance of the middle class; the other is the intractable continuation of male power at the top. Since 2000, women have increased their workplace participation in most countries in the world. Across the OECD, the pay gap declined significantly between 2000 and 2011. In the United States, the number of households led by women has been increasing since the 60s and currently [stands at around 40%](#).

At the same time, women are kept from the top positions. There are any number of ways to register this fact, from a comparison of the salaries of male and female movie stars, to the number of women who are full professors, to the

scandalously few women who are equity partners in law firms.

These two contradictory trends create a world in which the relationship between gender and power is increasingly nonsensical. Masculinity remains emblematic of potency while it becomes, in daily experience, a condition of failure. In an essay for the Atlantic magazine two years ago, I described this turbulent contradiction as the “[hollow patriarchy](#)”. I can think of no purer icon of hollow patriarchy than Donald Trump.

The hollowing out of the patriarchy is set to increase. Trump has the most male cabinet since Reagan, and the decline of men in the middle class is going to continue no matter what that cabinet says or does. Two weeks after the election, Otto, the self-driving truck service recently purchased by Uber, successfully delivered 50,000 cans of Budweiser. Three and a half million truck drivers are currently employed in the US, an overwhelmingly male cohort. A few weeks after that momentous journey, women became, for the first time, the majority of students enrolled in American law schools. They now dominate post-secondary education. Men are not willing to take jobs that are not traditionally masculine. [Women](#) continue to enter men’s fields.

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Trump has emerged as a parody of masculinity and feminism is set back at the moment when the traditional male role of provider is about to vanish. This contradictory process is far from unprecedented. During the Reagan-Bush years, the pay gap closed from 64 cents to 77 cents, a time in gender politics that Susan Faludi famously described as a “backlash”.

[Feminism](#) as we have known it since the second world war is insufficient to fight Trump because Trump does not simply represent the traditional patriarchy, against which women can oppose their own collective interests. His misogyny is not of that sort. The Republicans were offered more or less a complete array of traditionally patriarchal figures during the primaries. Jeb was old dad. Rubio was young dad. The Republicans rejected them all for a man who possesses not a single traditional masculine virtue, a man who cannot even tie a tie without taping it together at the back.

We have reached the point where the old struggles, both intellectual and political, simply will not do any more. The incompleteness of the way we talk about gender is original and terminal. It is the inevitable result of thinking through gender by beginning and ending with the position of women.

Saying we need men’s liberation is of course absurd – look at Trump’s cabinet. But men are literally choosing not to be providers rather than to take on women’s work. This is disastrous for them, for women and for the wider economy. We cannot shape men until we have some kind of critical understanding of the mechanisms of masculinity. And simply put, we do not have that understanding. The first graduate program devoted to masculinity studies in the US began in 2015.

There have been calls for men to join in the feminist movement from its beginning, with two main difficulties: the first is that feminism is inherently about women. And so feminism’s message to men has always been pretty simple: behave better to women. [Gender](#) studies about masculinity are more or less completely subsumed in the question of men’s relationships to women, rather than to themselves or each other. The men at the women’s march were defined by their relationships to women, too. They were there as fathers, husbands, sons. That’s not enough.

The other problem is that men do not talk explicitly about their own gender. Or rather they do talk about gender, but almost entirely under the cover of talking about sports and clothes. Traditional masculinity has been silent of the subject of itself because it assumed its dominance as an inalienable fact. Patriarchal masculinity believed itself to be an authentic norm; femininity was variable performance.

Trump makes that attitude no longer feasible. He enacts his masculinity as a game of signs. His manliness is flamboyant and histrionic. Every man will be inundated for at least four years with masculinity as a performance. There will be no hiding from the artificiality.

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In that way, Trump represents an opportunity as well as a catastrophe. The single most shocking fact of the outcome of the 2016 election was just how little gender mattered to voters: 53% of white women voted for Trump and 63% of white men. Trump took 33% of the male Latino vote and 26% of the female Latino vote.

Those facts, in themselves, reveal how far the way we talk about gender has deviated from its reality in American life. During a campaign stop for Hillary Clinton early in 2016, Madeleine Albright declared: “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other!” – a line that has appeared on Starbucks cups. Forty-two percent of American women felt otherwise, as did 62% of non-college educated women.

The sign I saw at the Women’s March – “Men: Time to Listen” – was held up, somewhat inevitably, by a man. We need to listen. We need to listen to women. We need to listen to ourselves as well. I couldn’t help thinking that there should have been a Men’s March against Trump; he represents our failure after all. But who would organize it?

Gloria Steinem famously declared that women’s liberation will be men’s liberation, too. Trump has clarified that the opposite – women’s bondage, men’s bondage – is also true. It is men who need to say “this is not us.” But then we would have to think about who we are.

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