

# Men can be feminists but it's actually really hard work

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## Feminism is for everybody because sexism hurts everybody, but lots of men are comfortable with the status quo

Topics: [Feminism](#), [men](#), [Gender](#), [women](#), [Sexism](#), [Patriarchy](#), [New York Times](#), [toxic masculinity](#), [male sexual entitlement](#), [Violence Against Women](#), [Sexual assault](#), [Rape](#), [male survivors of sexual assault](#), [Life News](#), [News](#), [Politics News](#)

The Betteridge law of headlines states that “any headline which ends in a question mark can be answered by the word *no*,” but a Monday piece in the [New York Times](#) may be the rare exception. “Is it possible to be a male feminist?” asks writer (and self-described male feminist) Jake Flanagin. The answer to this question is yes. Possibly even, “Yes of course come on seriously?”

It's a fine enough question for a journalist to ask (think piece glass houses, etc.), but Flanagin's decision to focus on Hugo Schwyzer — who was given several platforms to write about men and feminism while he spent his spare time [attacking the personal, academic and professional lives of black feminists and other feminists of color](#) — is an odd one. As Jamil Smith [noted on Twitter](#), if you want to have a conversation about men and feminism, why not talk to male feminists? Smith's point, I think, is to raise the issue of why we seem to have a lot of pieces questioning whether men can be feminists and very few that explore what happens after you answer that question in the affirmative. Aren't we even a little bit curious?

The most compelling part of the Times piece comes in the very last paragraph, when writer Noah Berlatsky discusses the work that being a male feminist actually requires. “It's true that sometimes male feminists, myself not excluded, imagine we're brave allies, altruistically saving women by standing up for them,” Berlatsky observes. “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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Berlatsky gets to something important about the nature of justice — that it's a radically intertwined project. Contrary to the tired trope about “mothers, wives and daughters” that generally gets thrown around in arguments about why men should care about women's rights, men should be feminists because the lives of the women and girls they have never met and will never meet matter. Particularly in a culture that does not encourage men to cultivate or express empathy, this thing of giving a basic shit about people you don't know is itself a kind of radical act. But Berlatsky's point that “misogyny is a cage for everyone” also captures another reason that I think men can and should identify as feminists. Because of course men should be outraged at the violence experienced by women and girls and the systems that dehumanize them, but framing men's relationship to feminism exclusively as men's relationship to women's status in the world erases the fact that men are also harmed by patriarchy, toxic masculinity and entrenched cultural and institutional sexism.

The scale is always going to be different, of course. I'd never try to argue otherwise. Cultural norms that hold women as mothers and caregivers above all else mean that women get paid less than their male colleagues for the same work, and that women disproportionately put their personal and career ambitions on hold in order to care

for children and others. But these same norms also leave men questioning their masculinity or doubting their self-worth if they want to stay home with their children. These things aren't the same, but they both matter.

The same could be said about dominant narratives around sexual assault. Women and girls make up the majority of victims of sexual violence, but a culture that straight up says that [teenage boys can't be raped](#) makes it almost impossible for male survivors to come forward. Destructive ideas about sexual male entitlement are at the heart of rape culture and the reason that so many women and girls are victimized in their lifetimes, but they also feed into this idea that men always want sex, which makes men who have been victims of rape question whether or not what happened to them even counts as a crime. It took a really, really long time for this to even [become a crime](#). These same norms also encourage men to have really warped relationships to desire and sexual satisfaction. This stuff hurts women the most because of the violence it engenders, but it hurts men, too.

There are plenty of important questions to ask about how men can be feminists without making themselves the center of the movement. About the work of listening and boosting versus erasing and derailing. About how men get lots of applause and accolades for doing very basic things — like not violently abusing women. About how many men don't identify as feminists because they are deeply invested in upholding the systems — like patriarchy and white supremacy — that benefit them. And Berlatsky's point about the line between the male savior complex and being a legitimate force for positive social change is well made. But we can have all of these conversations while acknowledging that men who identify as feminists aren't just cheerleading for women — they're fighting systems that tell them that being a good listener makes them a pussy, or that they shouldn't share their emotions, or that straight men can't have intimate friendships with other men, or that rape in prison is hilarious.

Feminism's relevance to everyone has been [articulated and re-articulated throughout the history of the movement](#) and I was reminded of this again over the weekend when I read an interview with actress Mackenzie Davis, who said she couldn't understand why "feminism" feels like such a scary word to some people.

"Feminism is rooted in racial rights and gender rights, and all of those things intersect, and to say that that's not something you can stand behind — it confuses me," she told the [Times](#). "I think it's a really great word."

So do plenty of men.

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