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Men who want to lead the fight for women's rights

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When male-identifying student James Ritchie resigned from his position as the University of Tasmania's Women's Officer last week, he did so in the [most petulant way possible](#).

After first making comments about the oppression of Muslim women (note: minimising the very real concerns of Australian women by comparing them to other "more" oppressed women, is probably not the best way to convince us that you care about the issues we face), Ritchie lashed out at the "bitterness" and lack of "mature and rational debate" exhibited by his critics.

In other words, he did what society has always done: dismiss women as too emotional and irrational to be taken seriously. Ritchie clearly feels he has been unfairly driven from his position. What he fails to appreciate is that, in a society where most leadership positions are still held by men, he was not only taking one that could and should be filled by a woman, he was doing so in a role that was specifically designed to counteract male privilege and help women navigate the male-centred environment in which they live.

That a privileged white male, a member of the Young Liberals no less, can be elected to a position designed to create a safe space for marginalised women is a testament to [how far off track](#) the drive to engage men in feminism has become.

Yes, it is important to have male allies. Yes, they can even call themselves feminists if they so desire. No, they must not be in leadership positions.

Feminism cannot and will not challenge our male dominated society by imitating it.

In the effort of so many women to attract men to feminism, we are unintentionally replicating the structures of our own oppression. The world at large privileges male voices. At every turn, we are conditioned to believe men are more rational, more objective, more powerful; that men should lead and women should follow.

Feminists cannot hope to challenge this perception if we allow men to drown out our voices in our own movement. This, sadly, is the inevitable consequence of so many initiatives that attempt to engage men, such as [Male Champions of Change](#) and [He4She](#). As well as rewarding men simply for acknowledging that human rights apply to women, they also perpetuate the centring of male voices.

Too often male allies will claim that, because they believe in 'equality', they should be afforded as much say as women within feminist circles. That if feminism is about equality then it should give equal space to male voices and perspectives.

Last year, Charles Clymer, a self-identified male feminist who used to run the Facebook page 'Equality for Women', was given a [Good Guy Award](#) by the National Women's Political Caucus in the US. When some women who had been ridiculed and banned from his page objected, he, like James Ritchie, also lashed out.

One woman who had warned moderators on his page that, "male authority over women is male privilege," was told that [she had "idiot privilege."](#) and that having a vagina did not give her "magic powers of perception". Maybe not, but being a woman certainly gives her more insight into the challenges women face. Including how it feels to be silenced and overshadowed by men.

Tellingly, Clymer's answer to male privilege appears to be more male privilege. "To say that men can't be feminist leaders is eliminating half our potential talent in this movement but also losing an opportunity to attract more men into the fight for women's rights," he said in an [interview with the Huffington Post](#). "Sadly, many men need to see other men in feminism to feel comfortable."

Let's be clear about this. If attracting men means centring male voices, then this is not feminism but just another space where men can – and will – exert authority.

"With Equality for Women, I want to provide a safe space for persons of all genders (who believe in women's rights) to encourage each other in their activism," Clymer continued.

But this is the very problem – to counteract the wider culture that already gives far more space to men, feminist spaces must not only give the bulk of theirs to women but they must be safe for women. When we focus only on achieving 'equality' by giving everyone an equal say, we deny that our social and political system does not treat everyone equally.

This isn't just true for women's rights. Anti-racism, for instance, suffers when post-racial fantasies about colour blindness overshadow discussions about the very real discrimination people of colour face.

"Because we are all equal," the popular thinking goes, "then any mention of race is in itself racist." The consequence is that white people – the most privileged racial group in our society – come to regard initiatives such as Equal Opportunity and work quotas, not as the vital attempts to level the playing field that they really are, but as [unfair discrimination](#) designed to rob white people of their rightful place.

Like racism, women's oppression is not an accident. It is the intended result of deliberate policies and systems designed to privilege (mostly white) men. Regardless of whether they believe women deserve better and whether they identify as feminists or not, men have a privilege in society that women do not share and to permit this privilege to be extended to the point where they take over the very movement designed to eliminate this privilege is setting us up for failure in [the most ironic way possible](#).

Like many men, James Ritchie may well be sympathetic to women's issues. But sympathy is not enough. Only women can know what it means to navigate the world as a woman. A world where women are routinely killed by their partners while society barely bats an eye, where we are relentlessly expected to modify our behaviour to stave off sexual assault, and where an unsuccessful pregnancy can [land us in jail](#).

Men can help us but only women can lead the movement that will eventually take us out of the wilderness of this oppression. Anything else is just more of the same.

This story was found at: <http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/men-who-want-to-lead-the-fight-for-womens-rights-20150414-1mkhf4.html>