

## Men! Feminism needs you! (Not your privilege...)

Anne Onne dispenses some advice for men commenting on feminist websites and blogs



Entering a feminist space - whether that be commenting on a blog or attending a meeting - can pose some unique problems for men.

This isn't about any one male (or occasionally female) commenter, or incident, because these issues aren't brought up by one person and then forgotten. It hasn't come up so often at The F-Word before, but I've seen the same issues and attitudes at other feminist forums, and I'm sure more experienced feminists have been dealing with them since time immemorial.

This article is inspired partly by the very useful post over at Feministe about [how to be a feminist boyfriend](#) (highly recommended reading) which has [previously been mentioned](#) at The F-Word.

The question I want to answer is how to be a pro-feminist commenter, particularly if you're not the minority addressed. I want to say to male readers, first of all, that I do know what it is like to comment at a community, both as a member of the oppressed, and an oppressor. This is as much drawn from my experiences of finding my feet in discussions where I have privilege ([white](#) privilege, [cisgender](#) privilege, [heterosexual](#) privilege, [thin](#) privilege, [able-bodied](#) privilege and [more](#)) as it is from those where I do not. I have been both sides, as have most feminists. I know what it's like to feel like people are attacking you, when they're attacking a social structure, and people like you, as a group. It's not nice, but it's not personal (more on that later).

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***Sarcasm and satire aren't always easy to get across, so it's probably safer not to start flinging around gendered insults***

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The first thing we want to start with is basic courtesy. This one's important for commenters of all genders. Every community has a different threshold of what language is considered acceptable, and lurking for a while can give a good indication of what works in a particular area. Feminist sites are usually frank about anatomical terms (appropriately used) and even slang, but considering the pejorative appropriation of many of them, it pays to be on the safe side, especially if you are a male commenter.

There's just something more suspicious if someone presenting as male uses certain words, even if we as women try to reclaim them (words like 'cunt' come to mind, but there are others). This is because these

words are used in the rest of the world and internet as a means of silencing, insulting and intimidating women, often - but not always - by men. Sarcasm and satire aren't always easy to get across, so it's probably safer not to start flinging around gendered insults.

A male commenter who has built up a rapport in a community may be able to convey satire, but your average, fairly new commenter could easily be mistaken for a troll if they start bandying around gendered slurs such as 'slut' or 'whore'. It's simply not acceptable on a feminist site. Melissa at [Shakesville](#) has some excellent [feminism 101 posts](#), and her [slurs](#) posts are particularly relevant here. Also, whilst we're at it, no racial slurs or stereotypes, no anti-trans, homophobic, ableist comments (such as "that's so lame!") or any other jokes at the expense of a minority. You want to joke about yourself, fair enough. Don't assume we'll laugh if you [joke about us](#).

Also, if you want to be taken seriously as an ally, or as someone starting on the road to feminism, don't accuse people of being too sensitive, which often equates to realising something you didn't. There's no excuse for saying you are supportive, but when it comes down to it, disagreeing with everything, doubting or ignoring people's experiences whenever they diverge from yours. Maybe it doesn't affect you. Maybe you're so used to it, it doesn't bother you. But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. I'll use an example that occurred to me last night, as I was having dinner. I had switched the TV on, and happened to come across Eastenders. The scene was a party, and a clearly drunk Chelsea (an outgoing young black woman in her 20s) was dancing and enjoying herself with some men. So far so good. But wait, the mood changes, and suddenly the setting became one of menace. Chelsea was surrounded by strange men, somewhat inebriated, and wanted to get out, but couldn't. The implication was that she was not consenting, and that rape could have eventually occurred. She was in some distress. To you, as a male commenter, this would just be an unsavoury scene in a TV series.



How did I experience it? My heart was racing, and I felt sick, as if it had happened in front of me. More than just the usual physiological empathy people seem to feel with a book or film. I had to stop what I was doing because my hands were shaking. And you know what, this wasn't a trigger for me, because I haven't been raped, or in anywhere near the same position. I don't empathise with the character generally and we don't have anything in common. Apart from the reality of how society treats women, and the reality that rape may well be something we experience in our lives, maybe more than once. The knowledge that we may be so close to an experience like this, and that I am relying on pure luck to prevent men doing something like that to me makes me sick. I feel sick thinking about it even now. Every time I read a comment about racism and homophobia, I remind myself of the visceral fear I feel when a strange man leers at me on the street.

If you don't have to worry about something happening to you, if you haven't been brought up to fear it - with good reason, because it does happen. You will never know what it is like. Kampire at All Girl Army [gets it spot on](#): "Privilege is starting a race with the best car and not even knowing it."

You won't truly know what it feels like to be in someone else's shoes, so your opinions on their experiences are by definition secondary. When we talk about our experiences, and try to put to right crimes against women is [not oppressing men](#). Read male feminists and talk to them about the balance they have found in feminism and the [struggles they face](#). Just like there is no one female feminist answer, and feminist women can learn from each other's experience, budding male feminists, and even those who think they know it all, can learn from each other. Don't consider it patronising if people with more experience try and impart that understanding.

Sure, you may nod your head and realise that it's awful, but you won't see and feel the things we do. That is why you have to try and listen. [Believe in](#) the reality of male privilege.

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***Shift the paradigm - something should have to prove it's not misogynist instead of you assuming it's perfectly acceptable unless it's bad enough to offend you as a man***

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When lots of feminists talk about an issue, clearly it's not the delusions of one person. If someone says something is offensive, you don't have to believe them. Nobody's going to force you. We can't and, to be honest, one person's opinion doesn't really affect us. But you should understand that we're not making this up to be funny. They aren't looking for [things to get angry about](#). It's very likely that as a privileged person, you don't need to deal with this, so it doesn't affect you. Privilege means having less crap to deal with, and if you're not sure how privilege factors into something, assume that you don't know enough, and therefore can't rule it out.

Shift the paradigm - something should have to prove it's not misogynist instead of you assuming it's perfectly acceptable unless it's bad enough to offend you as a man. I mean, how bad would something have to be to offend someone who is privileged to begin with?

This said, there is a role for allies in our movement. We can't do everything ourselves. We can't be present every time a misogynist opens his mouth, and not everybody listens to feminists. In fact, misogynists are surprisingly good at shrugging off feminist critique. Sometimes the woman in the situation won't have the privilege of being able to stand up for herself. Zuska illustrated this amply, in a [post](#) about an incident where a male colleague witnessed a distinguished visitor flat out ignore a female colleague.

As a man, if you don't want to be a misogynist, it's as important you stand up for equality as it is for women to defend ourselves. Remember that old chestnut "all evil needs to triumph is for good to do nothing"? Well, here's your chance. As an ally it's essential that you get your hands dirty. This may be just directing new commenters to feminism 101, or fielding really basic questions, but it's a start.

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***You don't get to pledge allegiance as an ally and then walk off and pretend that's good enough. Being a feminist and a decent person is more than just fulfilling some really low standards***

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It has been pointed out time and time again that [women's issues are men's issues](#). No way around that. Make it your problem. Anything else is short of feminist. It's irrelevant if you say you want to deal with privilege, if when it comes to it, you want to keep the fuzzy cocoon of not having to care. Privilege and misogyny affect every man, not just the [rapists and murderers](#) of the world. It affects you, too. You can, by all means, have nothing to do with feminism if you like, and assert that it's [nothing for men to worry about](#). But then functionally, you're not feminist. You don't really care. You don't put your money where your mouth is. You don't get to pledge allegiance as an ally and then walk off and pretend that's good enough. Being a feminist and a decent person is more than just fulfilling some [really low standards](#); it's striving to constantly be a better person to those around you, aware of how society hinders you at every turn. Yes, you'll make mistakes, and with time and work you'll earn respect for every rectification you make.

It is difficult to find your place as a privileged person, because there will be times when members of a minority need space away from the privileged majority, to try and examine their own lives, heal their wounds and make their alliances. They are excluded from your mainstream life in ways you can never realise, and this is their chance to feel like they are safe and valued for a change. As such, your role in their spaces will always be auxiliary. This means that you should always think carefully about how you post in

their spaces, and interact in their settings. As a privileged person, you get used to giving your opinion and expecting it to be accepted. Me too, for that matter.

But here, your experiences usually aren't relevant, and they are always secondary to that of women who deal with this every day. You experience things from the oppressor's side. Even if you don't feel like you're an oppressor and aren't directly oppressing any women. You're benefiting from the near invisible advantages that you get as a man. You experience the world differently, and we're not talking about your world. We're talking about ours.

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***If you don't interrupt the boys' club mentality, where you are willing to first defend other men, without examining whether they may be responsible for inflicting harm, you are perpetuating it and defending misogyny***

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How to apply this when commenting on a feminist blog? Think about each comment before you send it. Is it adding something to the conversation? Is it really relevant? Be honest with yourself. If you're really writing about something else, hit the backspace. A thread about rape is not the place to talk about false convictions. Not with a 6% conviction rate. A thread about street harassment is not the place to talk about genuine friendliness. These are not relevant. Women get more latitude than you to discuss tangents, because they're never going to derail to such an extent with the 'what about the men' argument. Unlike you, it's not in their interests to.

That's another thing. If you want to be an ally, you have to stop focusing on people just like you. You have to realise that some people just like you will do very bad things, and many people like you will do all manner of small but significant things that harm women (and other people, but we're focusing on feminism here). If you don't interrupt the boys' club mentality, where you are willing to first defend other men, without examining whether they may be responsible for inflicting harm, you are perpetuating it and defending misogyny. Also, do not derail the topic to defend the poor men who are innocent, when the topic is not about innocent men who don't perpetrate whatever crime against women. We're not talking about innocent men, and you don't need to remind us every five minutes that they do exist, particularly when we need to worry about all the men who do harm women. Men who walk free and make us fear for our lives. I cannot emphasise this enough. Talk about innocent men has no place in a thread about men responsible for misogyny.

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***Feminists do not hate you if they tell you to go to Feminism 101. They may have come across comments like yours many times before and if they are kind enough to reply at all, or give you a link, listen and read***

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The problem is, as a privileged group which isn't used to hostility, it feels as if any criticism is personal. That anything directed at men means that we are criticising all men, no matter how wonderful they are. We are not, and every time you think this is the case, check yourself. Feminists have brothers, fathers, boyfriends and male friends and are sometimes even men. We know perfectly well that not all men are responsible for a problem. But we also know that if men don't own their role in this, things won't get better. In order to unravel privilege, you have to admit you have it, and admit that people may have a very real reason to fear people like you. Yes, it sucks that if you walk up to a strange woman in a deserted street, or are stuck in an empty lift with her, she will be nervous. But imagine what it's like for her. Far worse.

Are feminists and women likely to disagree with your opinion? If this is something that affects women a lot more than you, and you know they're going to disagree, why assume that you must be right? You don't have to change your opinion just because you think we're likely to disagree, but it would be a good time to refer to either [Tekanji's](#) or [Yakette's](#) privilege [checklists](#). There are plenty of checklists, and I'm linking to more than one because they are all worth reading. These explain how privilege might affect how you interact with women on their spaces, though are useful for all kinds of privilege. Bookmark these pages. Every time you are told to 'check your privilege', read over one of them. These links are not being included to insult you. Feminists do not hate you if they tell you to go to [Feminism 101](#). They may have come across comments like yours many times before and if they are kind enough to reply at all, or give you a link, listen and read. They could just as easily have called [bingo](#) and continued the conversation you interrupted. If you want to differentiate yourself from the [many privileged men](#) that feminists have to put up with, read and listen. Take advice on board. To us, the only thing that differentiates a troll and a new male commenter is his willingness to listen when a point has been made.



Another important thing to remember is that there is a right place to ask questions, and a wrong one. A post about women's experiences is the wrong place to post questions, or disagree with feminism and start derailing things. The blog [Feminism 101](#) is an excellent resource, where people are encouraged to comment on any post, no matter how old. I sincerely encourage anybody new to feminism to read it, particularly male readers. But before you post any questions, read the [FAQ section](#). There is an incredibly high probability that your question would have come up before, and nobody likes answering the same question a thousand times if the answer is

already there. The first sign you can give feminists that you are an ally, and trying to understand feminists, is reading what they have already said. If someone insists that they have answered a question, read again. If they give you links, read, don't expect it to be chewed up and fed to you. Also, Google is your best friend. I'm repeating this, because it's important.

I'll also paraphrase and flesh out the most useful piece of advice I ever read, when I made the effort to research white privilege: don't expect the minority to trust you. Trust is earned, and you're just another commenter who they can't tell apart from any other commenter. You're entering someone else's space, where different rules apply. You get to have the rest of the world for people to assume you're a wonderful person. Here, you're just another one of 'them', and given the track record of 'them', it's up to you to listen, learn and prove that you're being thoughtful and honestly trying to examine your privilege.

And the usual disclaimer: I don't hate men. I don't think men can't comment on feminist sites, even if they have a lot to learn about feminism and make every point on the bingo card. This post will probably read as harsh to some male commenters and readers, but if you compare this to a lot of feminist sites, it really isn't.

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