

On Feminism: A How-to Guide for Dudes



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Last week, we saw high-level arguments over whether or not men can, or should, be feminists. The *New York Times* and *The Atlantic* published pieces on the topic after Charles Blow wrote an [op-ed](#) for the former discussing why all men should be feminists. *The Atlantic*'s Noah Berlatsky wrote [a piece](#) detailing how misogyny is harmful for anyone who dares show an ounce of "femininity," and specifically, how it also hurts men.

"But I don't think feminism is only about women's empowerment—or, at least, there have been other feminisms, too," he writes. And Jake Flanagin wrote another piece for the *New York Times* titled "[Is It Possible to Be a Male Feminist?](#)" which wound up quoting Berlatsky in its conclusion:

"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."

OK, male feminists. I see you. It is possible for you to exist. I appreciate you, even. I know some truly wonderful feminist men who fight for equality every day. But from where I'm standing, you are rare.

While male involvement in the movement is crucial, I get frustrated when I hear some men claim their feminism. Feminism takes work. *Active* work. It doesn't stop at a foggy notion that you believe in equality. Male feminism is

entirely possible, important, and *welcome*, but it needs to be born of an understanding of women's experiences. And when I say "women," I don't just mean privileged white women. I mean trans women, women of color, women with disabilities. Being a feminist means being anti-oppression: racism, homophobia, ableism, and classism are fought under its umbrella, too.

I don't have the power to bestow you with a feminist certification or membership card. There's no moral litmus test for feminism. But I would suggest that if you claim to be a feminist, you should be a practicing one. If you're a dude—by which I mostly mean a straight, cis dude—there are ways you can, certainly, be a feminist. If I can be so presumptuous, I've compiled a small list of ways you might join the diverse, intersectional, highly complicated and imperfect, yet loving, world of feminism:

1.) Read.

I'm not being facetious. Read everything by all of the internet's diverse feminists. Read stuff by feminists with disabilities, feminists of color, trans*, gay, bi, two-spirited, and lesbian feminists. If you're not sure what one of those terms entails, google it. Read stuff by white, straight, cis feminists, too. Read stuff by fat feminists and skinny feminists. Go back in time and read Simone de Beauvoir and bell hooks, and realize the back struggle of what you're getting involved with. Read everything. Understand why it's called feminism.

2.) Know that it's not about you

If a woman says she feels unsafe on the streets because she's scared of being sexually assaulted by a man, do not, for the love of all that is holy to you, stand up and shout about what a nice guy you are. This derails the conversation, and makes it about you, not her, while reinforcing inequality. There will be a time to talk. In the meantime, just shut up and let her finish her story. Because here's the glorious thing about learning it's not about you. Once you can accept that and realize what's being discussed is wider systemic oppression, *then* you can start to actually listen to those around you and learn from what they are saying. You can start to actually *care*.

As long as you're focused on yourself and whether you're offended when someone calls you more privileged than the next person, you're not doing any work. You're whining and contributing to the problem. Be quiet when others are talking, and share spaces.

3.) Be cognizant of the space you occupy

Once you've got some basic feminist theory down, you are ready to occupy feminist spaces, both online and IRL. But by occupy, I don't mean dominate. I mean show up and listen to what the women (and initiated dudes) have to say. Pretend you're the new guy at work and soak up the knowledge in the space before you pitch in. Don't march into a meeting of people trying to make change and take up all of the space with your voice and newfound wisdom.

There will come a time for sharing your feminist thoughts.

It's fucking *important* that men stand up as feminists. You just need to learn from others who have been part of these discussions *before* you join in with your voice. On that note, know and accept that some spaces are clearly marked as existing only for people of color, or only for LGBTQ++ people, or only for women. Don't be offended (it's not about you!). Because of systemic oppression against these groups, they will often want and need their own safe community spaces for discussion and for just *being* without facing questions. They have the right to do that. Don't worry about it. Celebrate the beauty of diverse communities coming together to make change, instead.

4.) Support women's viewpoints and stories

Though misogyny does hurt everyone, please don't pretend feminism isn't about women, first and foremost. Don't ignore the stats. In Canada, at least one in four women will be sexually assaulted at some point in her life. There are hundreds of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada whom the government entirely disregards. Of the

country's 100 top-paid CEOs, [four are women](#). And only [two of Canada's provinces and territories](#) have a government with 30 percent or more female representation, the UN-sanctioned level for “equitable” discussion.

If you think women are equal to you, support them publicly and help to promote their visibility. If you read a great feminist article online, share it. Encourage a political female friend to run for office. If you learn about a women's organization doing good work, see how you can get involved. If you can afford to donate to a feminist media source or other organization that needs it, do it. If you're in a position to hire people for work, make a point of hiring a woman—better yet, a queer woman, a woman of color, a trans woman, or a woman with a disability.

5.) Please, try not to be self-congratulatory

Fighting for social change isn't fun. You don't get a reward. But lots of people have been doing it for years anyway. So please respect that and try not to attend one feminist meeting or discussion and then start marching around, trumpeting about how you're such a great ally. Writer Jay Dodd puts it [like this](#):

“Self-proclaimed 'allies' terrify me... If a part of your claimed identity relies on a struggle you have no or little access to—I am given pause. However, if you are willing to take on the stigma of being the 'other,' willing to not be complacent in the reproduction of discrimination, willing to remove yourself from the center of the debate, I can hear you. Too many allies don't see this. It is easy to speak positively about marginalized groups, but as soon as you take credit or praise for it, only your success will be remembered.

“Equality is an ugly, difficult, and endless work... Allyship is not showing the world how good you are being, it is showing the world how backwards it is, and constantly producing counter-narratives that promote equality.”

Exactly this. You're not a martyr because you decided to behave with basic human decency, and if you act like you are, you'll just piss everybody off.

6.) Don't remain silent

I know I said “remain silent” before. Do that when other people are trying to teach you or share their struggles. If you hear a bunch of co-workers or teammates talking about a woman like she's nothing more than a series of holes, step in and say something. Shame them. Remind them that women are human. Speak up. Sometimes, you'll be the only one loudly correcting someone for saying a girl shouldn't have dressed so sluttily if she didn't want to be raped. Or the only one to call out a friend at a party for calling someone a “f*ggot,” while everyone else in earshot gives you sideeye for wrecking the mood. It's lonely work, but it's important. And if you can't attach actions like these to your ideology, yet still claim to be a feminist, you're being disingenuous.

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