

# What is the role of men in ending patriarchy?

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In gender politics recently there has been a 'turn to men': an increasingly visible emphasis on the role of men in building gender equality. What then is the role of men in ending systemic gender inequalities? I will start with "Engaging Men 101" – with some self-evident points, some basic truths, about men, patriarchy and feminism. After these, I will move to some harder questions.

## Engaging Men 101

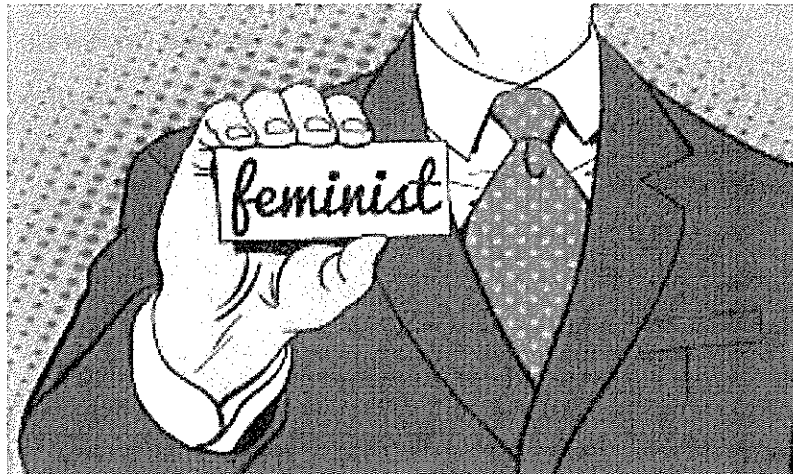
To end patriarchy, to achieve gender equality, *men will have to change*. Putting this in another way, *we will have to engage men*. Above all, we will have to involve men because gender inequalities are sustained in large part *by men* – by men's attitudes, behaviours, identities, and relations. *Patriarchy is about men* – about male privilege, about men's practices and relations, with women and perhaps more so with other men.

Men are members of a privileged group, and we receive various benefits and dividends whether or not we want to. We have an ethical responsibility, a political responsibility, to challenge and undermine this privilege, to change our own sexism and to challenge other men's. To put this proposition far too simply, *men are part of the problem, and men are part of the solution*.

If that is "Engaging Men 101", let's now move to

## "Engaging Men 102"

As context, beginning perhaps in the mid-1990s, there has been a significant increase in attention to men's roles in building gender equality. This includes an increase in programming focused on men, across such fields as violence against women, HIV/AIDS, and sexual and reproductive health, a series of international commitments by the UN and other bodies regarding the need to work



with men, media discourses of male feminism and high-profile, men-focused campaigns such as HeForShe and the White Ribbon Campaign.

I am heartened to see this turn to men. It is a feminist achievement, embodying the fundamental insight that men, as members of the group privileged by systemic gender inequalities, must take personal and collective action to end them (Flood 2017).

At the same time, there are significant risks in this focus on men's roles in gender equality, as I and others have discussed (Flood 2015, Pease 2008).

## Engaging Men 102

If engaging men is going to make real progress, then some conditions have to be met.

(1) This work must be feminist. First, this work must be feminist – and I mean, strongly, robustly feminist. Some efforts to involve men are based in small-l liberal, individualistic, corporate feminism. This is 'lean-in' feminism, where the goal is to get more women – largely, economically privileged women – into the same positions of power as privileged men.

It is not socialist feminism, raising questions about unfair economic structures. It is not radical feminism, tackling men's control of women's bodies and sexuality. It is not intersectional feminism, addressing the intersections between gender inequalities and other forms of

social injustice.

Efforts to engage men must be squarely focused on the *structural, material, and institutional dimensions of gender inequality, the ways in which men and masculinities are implicated in these, and thus the need for their transformation*.

In short, this work must be *robustly* feminist.

(2) We must challenge men and address male privilege, not only female disadvantage.

Second, this work must challenge men. It must address male privilege. Patriarchy is as much a story of *male advantage* as it is a story of female disadvantage. Male privilege is personal and everyday, as well as structural.

Many men *do* sexism in our everyday lives, myself included.

And whether men want to or not, we benefit from male privilege. So, work with men should address privilege. But some of the work to engage men in gender equality spends too much time appeasing and reassuring men. We shouldn't give men a cookie just for being decent human beings.

(3) We must involve men in personal and social change.

Third, we have to involve men in processes of personal and social change. Men must critically examine our own lives. We must tackle our own complicity in wider systems and cultures of sexism. If men are to claim support for

feminism, we must *practise feminism*.

There is lots more I could say here about what it means for men to develop an anti-patriarchal practice, the mistakes that are easy to make, and so on (Flood 2011), but I want to move on.

We have to *mobilise* men. Much of the 'men' work asks far too little of men: wear a ribbon, click on a pledge. That's not much of a to-do list. What about, speak up about sexual harassment? Lobby for paid parental leave? Smash the patriarchy? So, men have to put our own houses in order. And, take public, social action, in groups, networks, campaigns, and movements.

*We need male activists. Advocates. Trouble-makers.*

Okay, that's Engaging Men 102. Let's move now to the "Engaging Men Masterclass".

words we speak, inevitably we are forced to adopt particular feminist positions. And that means choosing some feminist positions over others. It means saying that some feminists are *wrong*.

So, we must be prepared to defend the particular feminisms we adopt, acknowledge the circumstances which shape that adoption, and try to engage respectfully across feminisms.

(2) Non-feminist and anti-feminist women

In committing ourselves to feminism, profeminist men seek to act as allies for women. But what should profeminist men do when women speak or act in non-feminist ways? When women defend patriarchal inequalities? When women prefer their husbands to be dominant in relationships? When a

we take intersectionality seriously, that also means *recognising hierarchies and inequalities among men themselves*.

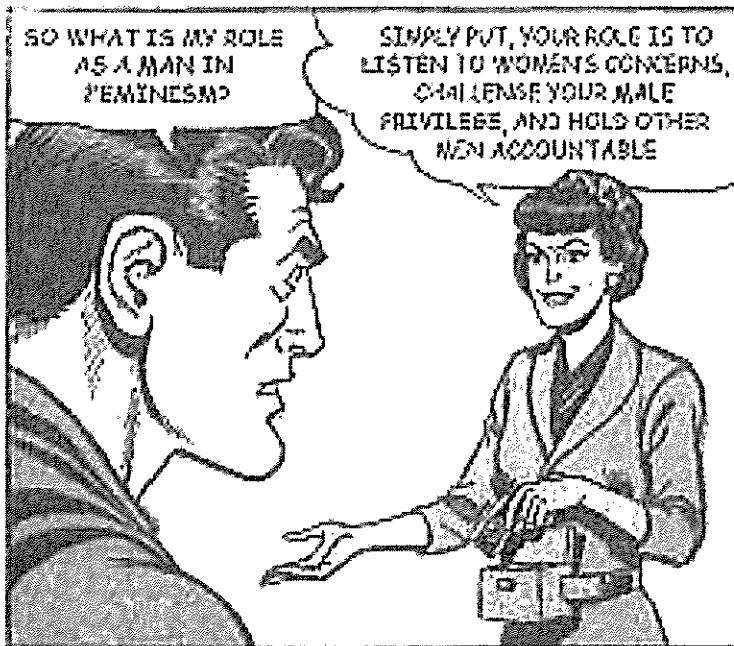
Some men are disadvantaged or oppressed. They face real social, economic, or political marginalisation and disempowerment. Not because they are men, but because of their positions in other forms of social injustice. So, the challenge here is to find ways to address the intersectional disadvantages some men face, while not losing sight of men's power as a gender.

There are other key challenges, ones I will not cover here: How to tackle powerful sources of patriarchal ideology and practice, such as the global pornography industry; How to link anti-patriarchal work with other forms of social justice advocacy; How to respond to, and prevent, anti-feminist backlash and resistance; How to fund and support this work; Whether, and how, to work with patriarchal and neoliberal institutions and governments?

### The biggest challenge: How to get men on board

We need to build an anti-patriarchal movement. And part of this requires engaging and mobilising *men*. This is perhaps the biggest challenge of this work.

I want to finish on a really key question: *How do we get men on board? How do we generate support and action from larger numbers of men? And without diluting feminism?* Feminism in popular culture already risks being de-politicised, co-opted, and de-fanged (Murphy 2016). I have been writing about how to make the case to men, how to build men's support for ending violence against women and building gender equality. So, here are some key strategies.



### Harder issues and trickier questions

For men who seek to support feminism, and for feminist work with men, there are some harder issues.

(1) Which feminism?

First, we all may agree that men must support feminism. But, *which* feminism? There is significant diversity, indeed, blunt disagreement, among different strands or forms of feminism.

Profeminist men have to make decisions about which feminist theory or politics to advocate. Profeminist men should offer broad support for *all* feminisms, and should in general avoid publicly attacking particular feminisms.

But in the campaigns and the

girlfriend asks you to play out a rape fantasy with her?

I have three tentative answers here. (a) Recognise that women, like men, are implicated in patriarchy and socialised in patriarchal gender norms, and thus that women too may act or speak in ways which affirm sexism. (b) Recognise – and this is controversial – that (individual) people are not necessarily the best judges of their own experiences or needs. (c) And, above all, continue to make ethical and political choices – about how *you* think you should treat others.

(3) Getting intersectional

Third, feminism these days is premised on intersectionality, the recognition that gender intersects with other forms of social difference and social inequality. If

### Personalise the issue.

Show men how sexism and patriarchy affect the women and girls they know, and how they affect them directly. Invite men into the realities of women's lives, whether that is living with routine sexual harassment, or poorer opportunities at work, or slut-shaming, or something else. But move men beyond this to a concern for *all* women.

### Appeal to values and principles.

Appeal to men's sense of fairness or justice or ethics. Working to end gender inequalities is the right thing to do. **Show that men will benefit.**

Tell men that they will benefit from moving away from traditional, narrow, notions of masculinity, which stifle and harm them (and oppress women).

Hold out the carrot of better sexual and intimate relationships with women (and men) and deeper friendships with women and other men.

#### **Start where men are.**

Start with men's existing understandings. Meet men where they are. *But don't leave them there.*

#### **Build on strengths.**

Build on men's existing commitments to and involvements in gender equality. Start with the positive, with what you can find of men's equitable and respectful practices and relations. But avoid a naïve emphasis on how most men are not part of the problem (“#NotAllMen!”) and continue to centre a robust feminist critique.

#### **Popularise feminism**

Use the F-word, claiming feminism and asserting its value, rather than responding to anti-feminist stigma by giving up and abandoning the label that defines this politics.

#### **Provide knowledge and skills in action.**

Not only do we have to get men in the door, but we have to equip with them with skills in what to do: how to challenge sexism, what to say when someone makes a rape joke, what to do when your mate is texting his girlfriend 40 times a day to check on her.

#### **Provide opportunities and invitations for involvement.**

Find ways to reach men: through their personal and professional networks, in the places where men gather, and so on.

#### **Build communities of support.**

Communities of support are vital to men's ability to sustain a personal commitment to and involvement in anti-patriarchal work. I'm thinking of informal friendship groups and formal organisations and networks.

#### **Finally...**

Feminism is not *about* men or *for* men. And men will always have a difficult, delicate relationship with feminism. When men take part in efforts to end patriarchy, this is *ally politics*, and ally politics is tricky. But it is also crucial. Let's do what we can to involve men in the work of building a world of gender justice.

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