

*"Men can find common cause with feminist women."*

## Men Should Support Feminism

R. W. Connell

R. W. Connell is a sociology professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the author of the books *Gender and Power* and *Schools and Social Justice*. In the following viewpoint he describes how pro-feminist men have worked to improve women's status. Connell believes that by making changes in their personal and professional lives, men can further the women's movement and improve their own lives.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why are many men uncomfortable with the thought of supporting feminism, in the author's opinion?
2. What steps have a small number of men taken to escape conventional masculinity, according to Connell? What results does he see from these steps?
3. What steps does the author suggest men take to help end women's oppression?

R. W. Connell, "Men and the Women's Movement," *Social Policy*, Summer 1993, published by Social Policy Corporation, New York, NY 10036. Copyright ©1993 by Social Policy Corporation. Reprinted by permission.

What place should men have in feminist politics? Given the record of men's violence against women, abusive attitudes and speech, relentless sexism in high culture and the mass media, it's not hard to justify the notion that men have no place at all in the women's movement.

Yet, while we undeniably live in a sexist culture, men are far from monolithic in support of its sexism. There are significant resources among men that can be tapped for the resistance. Some men want to support feminism, and some men—not always the same ones—have been useful to feminism [for instance, in passing anti-discrimination laws, introducing women's studies programs in universities, and so on]. Yet after a generation of continuous feminist mobilizing, men's support is erratic, contradictory, and mostly small-scale. Why, and what can be done about it?

### Men and Anti-Sexist Politics

Anti-sexist politics for men is difficult at a personal level. Feminism [especially feminism concerned with violence] often reads to men as an accusation. If the accusation is accepted, the result is sometimes a paralyzing guilt. For sympathetic men, the encounter with feminism can easily be more disabling than energizing.

Nonetheless, some men do get energized—such as those who have gone to work with abusive men to reduce domestic violence. But for others, the encounter leads to a turn inward, in which men focus on reconstructing their own personalities and lose their impulse to reform social relations. There is a small but steady flow out of politics into therapy. . . .

In the 1970s, some men's "consciousness-raising" groups began in the United States and in Britain. Anti-sexist politics among men thrived for some years, declined in the 1980s, but still persists today. Left-wing men in Britain produced a lively and intelligent magazine called *Achilles Heel*, pooling anti-sexist men's experience, and discussing principles. The most impressive movement has been in Canada, in the wake of the Montreal killings of 1989 [in which a man massacred fourteen female students at the University of Montreal]. The "White Ribbon" movement about violence against women, which saw men campaigning alongside feminists, gained widespread support and had a considerable impact on mass media and conventional politics.

Since patriarchy works in "private" life as much as in public affairs, households and sexual relations also form a political arena. Some men have been part of the reconstruction of domestic life: sharing childcare, cleaning and cooking, and decisionmaking. Among some groups of young people this is now common sense: a claim to precedence by men just because they are men would appear grotesque.

A few men have embraced feminism at a deeper emotional level, and have attempted to reconstruct their personality in toto to escape conventional masculinity. This has elicited a variety of responses—becoming noncompetitive, taking a variety rather than dominating position in conversations, engaging only in nonpenetrative sex, refusing careers and power in organizations. But the numbers trying in these ways to exit from mainstream masculinities are small, and it is difficult to see this approach becoming widely popular. Its emotional costs (at least in the short term) are high; it attracts ridicule from more conservative men and may not be attractive to women either.

### A New Gender Order

It does not require a complete demolition of hegemonic masculinity to democratize gender relations. The many forms of patriarchal ideology point to many ways of contesting it—in sexual life, in mass media, in the workplace, in formal politics, in conversation, in raising children. If conventional gender is, as sociologists call it, an "accomplishment"—something made by the way we conduct ourselves—then we can certainly accomplish something better.

This is happening in a number of settings where gay or straight men have worked productively with feminist women. Green politics, where there is a strong feminist presence, is perhaps the most obvious case. Similarly, in certain university departments, men have supported setting up and staffing feminist courses. In certain unions, men have allied themselves with militant women to break the traditions of exclusion and male dominance, and have worked for the needs of women workers—equal pay, work-based childcare, freedom from sexual harassment, and other issues.

---

### How Feminism Benefits Men

---

I strongly suspect that feminism has done fathers and sons a favor. With its emphasis on individualism rather than stereotypes, on communication rather than hierarchy, on self fulfillment rather than role fulfillment, feminism probably has made it easier for fathers and sons to detoxify their relationships, to purge away the Oedipal competitiveness that can foul the springs of generational affection. In that respect, anyway, feminism may make my relationship with Garner (my son) more easygoing and empathetic.

James H. Andrews, *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 21, 1990.

---

In such work, men can find common cause with feminist women without falling into the "me-too" mold as the Men's

Auxiliary To Feminism. What is required is not a yen for self-immolation, but, quite simply, a commitment to social justice. Under our current social arrangements women are, as a group, massively disadvantaged; and men as moral and political agents ought to be involved in changing that.

There are many ways men can do this. Share the care of young children equally, and change working hours to make this possible. Work to put women into office—until at least 50 percent of decision-making positions are held by women. Confront misogyny and homophobia in workplaces and media. Work for pay equity and women's employment rights, until women's earnings are equal to men's. Support the redistribution of wealth, and universal social security and health care. Talk among men to make domestic violence, gay bashing, and sexual assault discreditable. Organize political and monetary support for battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, domestic violence intervention. Change curricula in schools and colleges to include women's ideas and experiences, and to open up issues about men.

These are political strategies that can operate on a large scale, although they are based on particular workplaces, neighborhoods, and other settings. They offer a way past the general interest that men have in defending patriarchy by building on the specific interests particular groups of men share with women—as parents needing childcare, workers needing improved conditions, lesbians and gays fighting discrimination, for example. I find these strategies hopeful, not least because they offer some dignity to men involved in the highly undignified task of dismantling their own privileges.