

the *f* word *blog*

CONTEMPORARY UK FEMINISM

On power, voice, and male feminists

by Linnea Dunne // 23 September 2013, 13:00



"The best thing a man can do when a woman is speaking is shut up and listen," says Dad Who Writes in a recent blog post explaining why, in his words, he is not a feminist, continuing: "And if you call yourself a feminist and a woman gives you a slap for it, button your lip and take it like a man."

Dad Who Writes, or Gabriel, bases his argument on a power analysis, which, at first glance, is quite convincing. "A feminist may well be an 'advocate of women's rights' but advocacy without an analysis of the power relations between the advocate and those that the advocate intercedes on behalf of risks becoming patronised at best and fatally compromised at worst." Very well - let's not speak for those whose shoes we've never walked in.

The dad blogger then moves on to an analogy with international relations, where male feminists become Western nations providing aid to former colonies in the developing world and women, thus, become said developing nations, his point being that it's all based on a 'we are going to save you' and 'we know best' attitude, while, really, the Western world still owns the oil fields, if you like. "If feminism is anything, it's disruptive of the established order. Let the established order speak for feminism and it's game over," writes Gabriel, concluding: "If you speak on behalf of the voiceless, you continue to deny them a voice."

The oil thing perhaps isn't that far-fetched: in a way, men - or, white middle- and upper-class men, I should say - still very much rule the world. But it's a bit of a leap to compare male feminists to aid-giving, oil-owning former empires. Actually, you need to make quite a handful of massively puzzling leaps in order to make sense of that argument.

"If you are a man and you call yourself a feminist, you're colonising a place you have no right to," writes Gabriel. But joining the feminist movement is not the same as colonising it: you can subscribe to all its ideals and goals without in any way suggesting that you know better - in fact, joining forces to proactively work towards those very goals seems like the opposite of know-it-allism.

Moreover, in order for the international relations analogy to add up, you, as a man, would need to view yourself as some sort of spokesman of patriarchy; unless you are a representative of the established order, saying that it mustn't speak on behalf of feminism is, well, completely and utterly irrelevant at best. We may all be entangled in the structures of patriarchy, but it's highly questionable whether each and every man can be seen as possessing the same amount of power over the future of it as a Western nation does in regards to international relations.

Dad Who Writes is not a feminist, because he doesn't want to deny women a voice. But nowhere have I ever read

about feminism as a movement through which one must shout across one's allies, denying fellow advocates a voice. If this is Gabriel's reason for refusing to call himself a feminist, I'm at a loss. To use a tired but forceful analogy: I'm pretty convinced this same logic wouldn't prevent the blogger from identifying as anti-racist, would it?

If you don't like the idea of equality, by all means, don't call yourself a feminist. But don't use intellectual arrogance to try to dress it up as noble decency. Let's be straight about this: feminism has a bad enough rap as it is, and the last thing it needs is for more people to distance themselves from the label. If anything smells of patronising former empire style behaviour, it's telling the girls that they're doing a grand job and to keep on marching - while you sit back, acknowledging your male privilege, and watch.

Image, by Flickr user [Toban B.](#), is of two men at a Take Back The Night March in London, Ontario, Canada. They are holding a large sign saying "Men Against Violence Towards Women". Used under a Creative Commons License.

[Permalink](#)

comments from you

[Laura](#) // Posted 23 September 2013 at [15:34](#)

Interesting perspective! But I completely disagree with your final paragraph's analysis of Dad Who Writes' decision not to take the label "feminist".

For me, a man calling himself a feminist is much more likely to be displaying arrogance than a man who decides not to, yet is supportive of feminism. The latter has recognised that women must be foregrounded in feminism and that men must take their lead from women in order to tackle sexism - it's not about him or his identity. The former may well have done this too, but personally I think it can be presumptuous for a man to call himself a feminist - he needs to show that he's earned it.

Male feminists tend to get handed a whole bunch of cookies for being such enlightened "brave" men, getting credit and praise that is rarely handed out to female feminists. I'd much rather a man eschew all that and just do what he can to tackle sexist attitudes and behaviour in his male peers - he doesn't need the label to do so. (And don't get me started on male "feminists" who think it's appropriate for them to lead feminist groups and activism...)

I actually don't really care whether a man calls himself a feminist or not - it's great when a guy is supportive of feminism regardless - but I felt Dad needed a bit of defending!

[Becky](#) // Posted 23 September 2013 at [16:20](#)

I think this is quite an interesting interpretation of the blog post - but I'm not sure I agree with it all. I think that the main point being made was that, given the inequality of power in society as a whole, men's voices can easily get listened to more than women's - as 'Dad Who Writes' says, the man might not set out to speak for/instead of women but "whether the man means to or not he is." He does, in his defence, make it quite clear that he agrees with the ideals of feminism, but by aligning himself with the movement he could end up inadvertently silencing the voices of the women by "speaking for them." I think it's a pretty difficult situation, but I can see your point :)

[The Black Heart](#) // Posted 23 September 2013 at [17:49](#)

I personally identify myself as a man and a feminist ever since my daughter was born. As such professionally, I don't place myself in the middle, because I do believe that jumping in does disempower. That something you learn as a black professional. My white allies can work behind the scene, but never speak for me in a public forum.

As recent as last week a classmate (Divinity School) of mine told me about how her ideas were discounted and not valued by the guys in her group. I let her know I believed what they did was wrong and I offered to speak to them if she was uncomfortable addressing it. The validation along with the support meant the world to her.

[Elisa](#) // Posted 24 September 2013 at [16:32](#)

I agree with Laura. I've also found that it's genuinely risky to ask men to do anything on behalf of feminism other than not oppress women. Seriously: if you believe women are oppressed and you want to change that, stop oppressing women yourself. This suggestion tends to cut through the chaff quite quickly: fauxminists will deny any personal complicity, all the oppression is done 'out there' somewhere, by faceless 'systems' and 'structures', never by people, or at least, never by people like them. But anyway, it's risky to ask more than that because lots of the women who need feminism most will not be able to participate as fully if men are also participating (as opposed to doing what they can to facilitate, where requested to do so). After all, women are socialised into letting men talk over us, apologising for our speech, accommodating male 'needs' before our own, seeking male approval: hardly things that are conducive to hearty activism against male dominance. Then many women are very legitimately afraid of men and male involvement is likely to close them out. Then many women are also very legitimately angry at men and male involvement is likely to alienate them too, especially as these men are likely, as Laura says, to get a load of cookies for their involvement, and the cookies are likely to go to their head. That's another reason male involvement is risky: I've never seen men be given no holds barred access to feminism without that feminism becoming all about the men: addressing their problematic behaviour, educating them, getting pissed off at them... It's just easier if they're not there.

The idea that this is somehow a 'copout' underestimates how big a task changing oppressive male behaviour is and denies how pervasive such behaviour is.

<http://sexandsocialism.tumblr.com/post/57654011917/what-feminism-needs-from-men>

Elizabeth Pickett // Posted 24 September 2013 at [18:14](#)

<http://feministcurrent.com/7988/how-to-be-a-male-feminist-ally/>