

# Help us change the world, just don't expect a cookie

[theage.com.au/lifestyle/news-and-views/opinion/help-us-change-the-world-just-dont-expect-a-cookie-20170316-guz9lz.html](http://theage.com.au/lifestyle/news-and-views/opinion/help-us-change-the-world-just-dont-expect-a-cookie-20170316-guz9lz.html)

16/03/2017

March 16 2017 - 5:09PM

[Save](#)

[Print](#)

[License article](#)



- **Clementine Ford**

- 15 reading now

[Show comments](#)

Clementine Ford. *Photo: Simon Schluter*

It's no secret that boys and men are rewarded for speaking out about gender equality where girls and women are punished.

Male politicians declare themselves feminists because it looks good on their political resumes, while female politicians (most notably those on the right of the political divide) are careful to denounce the movement, understanding that their allegiance with it will not only be judged differently but used as further evidence that they're after "special treatment" or some other nonsense.

Business leaders don their white ribbons to protest men's violence against women and are rewarded with ceremonies and poxy titles. The women who generate actual awareness about the victims and survivors of gendered violence, on the other hand, are called liars, cheats and misandrists – and that's just the nice stuff.

Thinkpieces abound detailing the lessons men have learned by pretending to be women online (because just listening to us about our own experiences apparently wasn't convincing enough, so we needed a bunch of men to do some fieldwork and report back on their findings). Meanwhile, those of us who have to keep on living as women in both the online and offline worlds get to enjoy the myriad abuse that goes alongside that. Lucky us!



## Related Content

- [Excuse me, Mr Feminist, but don't block my way](#)
- [When men claim to be feminists just to abuse women](#)

So I was unsurprised when a [pro-feminist video](#) made by prefects from Sydney Boys High School for this year's International Women's Day amassed a significant number of shares in a very short period of time. Predictably, the video was accompanied by glowing language and ardent praise for the boys involved. Wasn't it fantastic that they were standing up for women like this?

Well, sure. It's better than the rape threats and abuse that schoolboys often seem to throw about the internet ... but is it really an amazing project deserving of heartfelt praise and gratitude? Prefects at Sydney Girls High [didn't seem to think so](#). In response, they wrote a blisteringly good letter critiquing the contradictory ways men and women are treated for speaking out on issues of gender inequality.

Advertisement

Predictably, they received a barrage of criticism for being such a bunch of radical feminazi killjoys, ugly bitches, just need a good root, can I speak to the man in charge, *feminism is caaaaaancer*.

Such a response is sadly familiar. As journalist Nina Funnell [outlines](#) in her piece about the response from Sydney Girls High prefects: "[Last year], female students at Sydney Girls allege they were hounded, harassed and threatened with rape [by students at Sydney Boys High, although it's not suggested these were the same boys in the recent video] after helping to organise a feminist bake-sale to raise awareness about the gender pay gap."

*A bake sale.*

So forgive me for not really caring all that much about the sudden "wokeness" of boys who categorically are not forced to suffer the same backlash that their female peers are just for speaking to their actual experiences.

When I shared the letter from the Sydney Girls prefects, the [comments on my Facebook page](#) were sadly predictable. Misandry, blah blah, need to reward good efforts, yawn, men can't do anything right, rhubarb rhubarb, you're a fat ugly c--- who needs to STFU. You know – just a typical day for a gal who talks feminism on the internet.

None of this is to say that men can't and shouldn't be vocal supporters of feminism, and I can understand the impulse to reward any efforts they appear to make. But it's a mistake to think that the only way their support can be encouraged is by handing out gold stars.

*Men can play an important role in dismantling gender oppression, but not if it requires being showered with praise.*

Men – including young men – are neither children nor animals, and treating them this way does little to change the deeper roots of inequality, which work in part by undermining women's contributions and over-emphasising the importance of men's. Men can play an important role in dismantling gender oppression, but it is not an action of support if it relies on them being showered with praise at the end of it.

Until we remove this impulse to reward basic decency, it will fundamentally never be an expression of equality because the act itself for men too easily becomes associated with the privilege of effusive acknowledgement.

If we establish the expectation that such actions deserve rewards (ironically perpetuating inequality in the process), where will the line be drawn? And how will the withdrawal of praise impact those who've come to expect it as compensation for their in-theory solidarity?

Instead of encouraging superficial actions, here are some things men can do if they genuinely wish to support the feminist goal of liberation.

## **1. Listen to us when we tell you about our experiences of womanhood**

This doesn't mean tell us that our experiences don't sound believable or that we must have interpreted them wrong or perhaps even did something to provoke or invite certain behaviours that are harmful to us. It means actually listen and accept what we're saying. And it also means engage with the work that women create on this subject.

Read books by female writers, watch movies about female protagonists (and ones with actual depth), listen to podcasts made by women, buy music written and recorded by women. Care about our stories and care that we are the ones to tell them. Women are entitled to be the witness bearers to our own lives – we don't need a right-on male ally to tell us what is and isn't up with our shit.

## **2. Challenge the men around you, even when you don't feel like it**

Don't do it for praise and don't only do it when girls and women are watching. Being an ally means not letting things slide when you're sequestered in the protected spaces your privilege gives you access to. It means calling out your mates on sexist jokes and demeaning attitudes, even when it feels awkward. Because otherwise, you're silently reinforcing to them that these attitudes are acceptable behind closed doors.

Women don't want to have to call this crap out all the time and bear the additional burden of being mocked for being "humourless" about how supposedly rubbish we are. Being an ally isn't just for when the parade is in town.

## **3. Accept that your opinion isn't always welcome and it certainly isn't always needed**

The feminist movement does not need you as a leader to ensure its survival. You don't get to dictate how it's run or tell women how they're doing it wrong or demand that your voice be heard just because you've finally decided to step up and be a part of the future. Women are not obliged to listen to you or validate your feels about how you're such a Good Guy.

And if your first instinct is to pack up your bat and ball and go home because you're not being appropriately kowtowed to, then you probably should leave. We have enough to deal with without adding your ego to the mix.

## **4. Commit to giving up your privilege**

Equality means a loss for those who experience privilege and power. It isn't just about talking a good game. Look around at the structures you exist in – your workplace, school, home life etc – and ask what you can do to help make your environments more egalitarian. You did not earn your gender privilege but you can definitely be a part of dismantling it.

## **5. Stop expecting praise for just showing up**

You don't get a medal just because you said somewhere that you think women are people. Congratulations – you're basically decent. Do we have to sit around and chat about it all day?

As my friend Jane says, if you want to have some cookies then you better learn how to bake.