



men, masculinities and gender politics

[Home](#) | [Articles](#) | [Blog](#) | [Publish](#) | [Links](#) | [About us](#) | [Contact](#) | [Donate](#)
[Home](#) » [Articles](#) » [Activism & Politics](#)
 

## xyonline

- [My account](#)
- ▶ [Create content](#)
- [Recent posts](#)
- ▶ [Feed aggregator](#)
- ▶ [Administer](#)
- [Log out](#)

## Articles by category

- [Activism & Politics](#)
- [Fathering](#)
- [Growing up](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Men's & fathers' rights](#)
- [Miscellaneous](#)
- [Pornography](#)
- [Race, Ethnicity, Difference](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Sexualities](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Violence](#)
- [Work & Class](#)
- [Working with Boys and Men](#)

## Authors

- [Aaron Scott](#)
- [ABA Commission on Domestic Violence](#)
- [Acquire](#)
- [Alan Berkowitz](#)
- [Alan Greig](#)
- [Alan Wheatley](#)
- [Alankaar Sharma](#)
- [Alex Scott-Samuel](#)
- [Amanda Hess](#)
- [and Marchos Nascimento](#)
- [Andrew Daub](#)
- [Andrew Levack](#)
- [Antti Narhinen](#)
- [Aparna Basnyat](#)
- [Association for](#)

# Feminism 101: Helpful Hints for Dudes

  

Thu, 24 Mar 2011 - 15:46 | [Melissa McEwan](#) More articles about: [Activism & Politics](#)

Sometimes, and rather frequently in recent weeks, privileged men (here, generally meaning straight cis men) email me asking advice on how to interact with the women in their lives. I get questions on everything from how to be a feminist husband to how to navigate intimacy with a survivor of sexual assault, and so I'm starting a new series that offers Helpful Hints to privileged men who genuinely want advice about how to be a more feminist-friendly dude.

I'm starting with the most basic—and often the most problematic—interaction between men and women: The Conversation. Lots of guys *want* to learn more about deconstructing their privilege, but are pretty awful about obtaining that information without upsetting the women with whom they're conversing.

This, then, is a very rudimentary, but also very straightforward, primer for dudes who want to communicate more effectively with female partners, friends, relatives, and colleagues during good faith conversations about feminist issues:

1. Every woman is an expert on her own life and experiences.
2. No woman speaks for all women.
3. No woman speaks for all feminists.
4. Because of the way cultural dominance/privilege works, marginalized people are, by necessity and unavoidability, more knowledgeable about the lives of privileged people than the other way around. Immersion in a culture where *male* is treated as the Norm (and *female* a deviation of that Norm), and where masculinity is treated as aspirational (and femininity as undesirable), and where men's stories are considered the Stories Worth Telling, and where *manhood* and *mankind* are so easily used as synonymous with *personhood* and *humankind*, and where everything down to the human forms on street signs reinforce the idea of maleness as default humanness, inevitably makes women *de facto* more conversant in male privilege than men are in female marginalization. That's the practical reality of any kind of privilege—the dominant group can exist without knowing anything about marginalized group, but the marginalized group cannot safely or effectively exist without knowing something about the privileged group and its norms and values.
5. Which is not to say that men can't become fluent, with effort. But it is important to remember that it does take effort. Even though men's and women's lives can look so similar at first glance, it is shocking how very different they can actually be. (For example.)
6. A woman with intersectional marginalizations cannot wrench herself into

- Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
- AVSC International and International Planned Parenthood

parts. Asking a woman to set aside her race, or disability, or sexuality, or body size, or stature, or whatever, in order to discuss a "woman's issue," is to fail to understand that one's womanhood is inextricably linked to the other aspects of one's identity.

7. It is similarly unfair to ask a woman to leave aside her personal experience and discuss feminist issues in the abstract. You are discussing *the stuff of her life*. Asking her to "not make it personal" is to ask her to wrench her womanhood from her personhood.

8. You are not objective on women's issues because you're not a woman. Your perception is just as subjective as hers is, but for a different reason. Either we stand to be marginalized by privilege or stand to benefit from it. That's the reality of institutional bias; it compromises us all.

9. Don't play Devil's advocate. Seriously. Just don't.

10. Listen.

## Part II

[Trigger warning for objectification and dehumanization.]

Most blokes, whether they're trying to be more feminist-minded or not, don't consider themselves to be the sort of guy who disrespect women's agency, and yet there are still myriad ways in which men are socialized to express ownership of women.

Here, I'm going to explore three of the prominent ways in which male ownership of women is expressed (and visit some ways in which they can be avoided): Exceptionalism, Breach of Consent, and Failure to Respect Agency.

### Exceptionalism.

Some expressions of ownership are insidious, subtle but dangerous: Exceptionalism, which is singling out one woman as an exception to the rule—that is, saying she defies the stereotypes of womanhood—is a less obvious but no less pernicious expression of ownership.

A man who expresses exceptionalism about his mother, his sister, his wife, his girlfriend, his female friend(s)—"My [woman/women] aren't like those *other* women!"—is implicitly marking territory around women related to him, the boundary marked by women he is willing to see as individuals, and all other women, who are stripped of their individual humanity to be regarded as a monolith.

It can be difficult for men to accept that exceptionalism, which is often intended as a compliment (and frequently received as such!—because women are socialized to hate women just as much as men are), is, in fact, a profoundly damaging anti-feminist practice. But the flipside of "complimenting" individual women by detaching them from womankind is turning the vast majority of women into an indistinguishable horde with universally contemptible traits.

Exceptionalizing a woman can also, in the long term, serve to undermine her sense of self, as it obliquely encourages her, in a bid to retain her value as an Exceptional Woman, to reject any part of herself that might be seen as

stereotypical of women. Even if not so intended, exceptionalism thus becomes a form of control, tacitly encouraging a woman to futilely try to wrench her personhood from her womanhood, which is impossible and thus ultimately breeds self-loathing and/or contempt for the man who exceptionalizes her.

If you find yourself thinking, "This woman is not like other women," consider how much your understanding of "other women" comes from intimate knowledge of multitudinous individual woman vs. cultural narratives about women as a whole. Consider as well whether meeting one woman who bucks those narratives might suggest, in fact, not that she is one in (literally) three billion, but instead that women are more individual than is routinely suggested in vast and diverse ways throughout our culture.

It doesn't undermine the specialness of a woman to regard her as a unique person well-suited to your personality and preferences and idiosyncrasies, as opposed to an Exceptional Woman. Indeed, it is more special to be regarded as a cool woman in a world *full* of cool women than it is the only cool woman on the planet.

### **Breach of Consent.**

Some of the expressions of ownership are more obvious: Breach of consent is clearly an indication of someone who fails to respect the bodily autonomy of another individual. Generally, we associate breach of consent with sexual violence, but consent is something that ought to be respected in all interactions with another person.

We should always be mindful of the access we've been granted by another person: Just because we can find someone's home address, for example, doesn't mean we can assume consent to show up at his house uninvited.

There are a variety of circumstances in which women's right of consent is routinely ignored, the most ubiquitous of which is casually touching a woman without her consent, as if her body is public property.

Generally, we collectively recognize the groping and grabbing that happens with alarming frequency on public transportation, for example, as problematic—but many of the men who rightfully disdain this behavior nonetheless engage in casual touching without consent in other contexts.

We euphemize nonconsensual but nonviolent touching as "making a pass" or even, simply, "being friendly." But it is not friendly; it is entitled.

This tends to be a point of contention for straight/bisexual men who can't imagine how it's possible to meet, date, flirt with, and eventually become sexually intimate with a woman without ever touching her without her consent. The worry tends to be expressed as, "It won't be sexy or smooth if I ask," but that's not true. Asking a woman, "May I take your arm?" or "May I kiss you?" is actually quite likely to be considered both sexy and smooth, with the additional bonus of being respectful.

What's decidedly *not* sexy and smooth, however, is making a woman feel uncomfortable, or even triggering her, if she's a trauma survivor, by touching her without her consent.

Communication about consent and boundaries does not have to be stilted and

awkward. It just takes practice. In a moment when you think, "I want to touch her; I think she wants me to touch her; I'm going to go ahead and touch her and see what happens," instead of guessing what she wants, and instead of communicating what you want *by doing it*, try looking deep into her eyes and saying aloud, "I want to touch you; would that be all right?" If it is, asking isn't going to change her mind.

But not asking just might.

*Asking*, and really listening to the answer, is a key part of treating a woman as your equal and respecting her individual humanity and autonomy. Or: *Treating her as though she owns herself.*

#### **Failure to Respect Agency.**

Men's socialization includes strong disincentives against asking and listening, and strong incentives to reflexively prioritize their own judgment and perspective, which many narratives in our culture exist to (wrongly) assure them is Objective Truth. That is one of the grandest lies that privilege tells any of us—*your perspective as a person of privilege is not subjective; you are better capable of assessing truth than anyone compromised by their marginalization.*

But, as I said in **Part One**, institutional bias compromises all of us, whether we stand to benefit from or be marginalized by it.

This lie of objectivity causes many privileged people to disregard the value of asking and listening. Instead, sure of their own flawless capacity for discerning Objective Truth, they substitute their own assumptions for concrete knowledge of a marginalized person's opinions, experience, intentions, etc.

Thus, a man who does not ask his wife, for example, what she wants, what she needs, what she believes, what she is thinking, what she is feeling, but instead merely assumes what she wants, needs, believes, thinks, and feels, is robbing her of her autonomy.

Straight/bisexual men who engage in presumptive behavior will frequently find themselves in vicious fights with female partners, unable to understand what they view as their partner's disproportional fury over a simple misunderstanding. But it is not a simple misunderstanding to substitute your (erroneous, or even correct) assumptions for a good-faith acquisition of your partner's actual thoughts and desires. It is an implicit assertion that you know better and/or that don't respect your partner as an equal, self-governed, rights-bearing individual human.

To substitute your own assumptions for straightforward communication is to subvert her agency. And that is a very serious offense.

An offense which can only but easily be avoided by asking and listening, and then respecting what you hear.

Another grave breach of agency, which is related to the failure to acknowledge consent, boundaries, and autonomy, is telling a woman how to behave. One of the most common complaints among feminist women regarding failures to respect their agency is being told to smile.

(Or cheer up. Or be happy. Or some variation on that theme.)

Exhorting a woman to "Smile!" on demand simultaneously suggests ownership—that her existence is only to please you, to do what you want—and robs her entirely of agency. A woman who is not smiling has, *as does every human being*, reason to not be smiling. To bark a command, no matter how "charming," that she should ignore her own life experience and emotions in order to please like a performing pony, is just an absolute clusterfuck of contempt for agency by someone who, *intentionally or not*, positions himself as her master.

\* \* \*

I frequently invoke the phrase "My rights end where yours begin" when discussing social justice and civil rights, particularly surrounding issues of choice—reproductive, marriage, or otherwise.

It is a simple phrase to remind myself that my rights extend only as far as they encroach on someone else's. I have a right, for example, to be an atheist; I do not have the right to force anyone else to share my belief. (Not that I would.)

It's a good guiding principle for progressives. (And ought to be for conservatives, but that's a whole other post.)

Similarly, "My agency ends where yours begins" is a good guiding principle for interactions with other people. That means I treat my partner as an individual—which is not to say I don't acknowledge his socialization as a man, but he is *I*ain first, man second.

It also means I respect his humanity, his dignity, and his right to consent at all times. We've been together almost 10 years, and we have a well-practiced shorthand, as all couples do. But shorthand is not a synonym for "implicit consent." There is no such thing. Our communication has been streamlined over time, but consent is always explicit, the right to say no is always respected, and there is never, ever any cajoling or coercion. Respecting each other's agency means respecting boundaries, and not pressuring one another to move those boundaries.

(As an aside, although the above sounds like I'm referring exclusively to sex, I am referring to any issue on which a partner might be inclined to badger another beyond the drawing of a firm boundary—whether it's spending money, having a child, getting a picture taken, or anything else.)

Finally, "My agency ends where yours begins" means I don't assume that I know more or better about my partner and his wants/needs than he does, and I don't believe I have ownership of his body, thoughts, or emotions.

And it begins with this thought: He is my equal.

## Being an Atheist Doesn't Make You Enlightened

Posted by Melissa McEwan at [Friday, February 18, 2011](#)

[Trigger warning for misogyny, misogynistic slurs, sexual assault.]

Things of which I am bone-achingly tired: Atheist men\* who go around talking ignorant shit about what religion (especially Islam) "does to" women, making universal pronouncements that draw no distinctions between imposed religiosity and chosen religiosity, treating women as a monolith and collectively robbing

them of their individual agency (much like imposed religiosity does, ahem), and then acting like that garbage is evidence of fucking enlightenment.

Because of some of the commentary I've read surrounding the world protests, and [Lara Logan's sexual assault](#), this has been on my mind for the past few days, anyway. So when Shaker N forwarded me [this thread](#) at the Good Atheist, in which the male author starts out a post by declaring, "Canadians are a bunch of sobbing vaginas (I say this being an actual citizen of the country)," and the thread actually *debates* whether that's sexist (!), and when I saw [these two threads](#) at Pharyngula (doctor, [heal thyself](#)), my slow boil boiled right the fuck over.

Yes, it's a real mystery why there aren't more women involved with movement atheism.

Now, personally, I'm not interested in movement atheism for [other reasons](#), anyway, but even were I inclined to evangelize a lack of belief, I would have no interest in associating myself with people who are not merely sexist and inordinately fond of using rape analogies/jokes ([for example](#)) to criticize religion, but are also insufferable sanctimonious mansplainers, whom I find every last bit as intolerable to listen to, read, or be around as I do the most strident evangelicals, who have exactly as much respect for me as a woman.

I outgrew a willingness to tolerate the dismissive condescension of men like that in order to be part of a group about a decade ago.

(See also: [Why I stopped going to church even before I identified as an atheist.](#))

If you can't find a way to respect and listen to women, then don't be surprised when very few of them want to be a part of your movement.

And, for the record, if you want to show a willingness to engage with women in good faith, a decent start is not appropriating the burka to use as your flippant symbol, whether you're talking about religious states who legislate laws about women's bodies and choices, or admonishing Western feminists (some of whom, as an aside, are both Western *and* Muslim!) that they've got nothing to complain about since they're not forced to wear them. Especially if you've never actually spoken to a woman wearing one, or who has ever worn one.

And here's another tip: Rape is not your casual metaphor.

Being an atheist doesn't axiomatically make you enlightened. It doesn't magically erase all the cultural narratives that are strongly associated with religion, and particularly Christianity in the US—the imperialism, the colonialism, the xenophobia, the racism, the homophobia, the transphobia, and the male privilege. (Just for a start.) You've still got to do the hard work of examining your privilege and figuring out how to be a meaningful and effective ally.

If you're interested, [here](#) are [some](#) Helpful Hints to get you started.

-----

\* This is not to suggest all atheist men do this, or that no atheist women do. I'm referring to a specific but very large and very vocal subset of men in movement atheism. If you are an atheist man who doesn't do this, awesome. If the shoe

doesn't fit, don't wear it.

### Feminism 101: Helpful Hints for Dudes, Part 3

Posted by Guest Blogger at [Wednesday, March 02, 2011](#)

by Shaker **Time-Machine**, a feminist, fat acceptance advocate, ginormous Doctor Who fan, film student, and terribly busy intern living in LA and trying feverishly to graduate.

[Trigger warning for rape culture and discussions of rape jokes. This post originally appeared in similar form [as a comment](#) at Shakesville.]

*Following is a primer for men who are interested in learning more about the practical effects of rape humor. Most of the information in this piece is, as always, generally applicable, but this has been written to be most accessible for men in keeping with [the objective of the series](#). Additionally, this post in particular is addressed to men, not because women don't rape and women don't make/laugh at rape jokes and not because men can't be raped, but because, by nature of the existing gender disparity, men are in a unique position to be taken seriously when they raise objections to casual language and humor regarding rape. Men are also in a unique position to prove to rapists and douchebags that not all men rape or take rape lightly by being able to embody living proof of that fact.*

To all those men who don't think the rape jokes are a problem:

I get it—you're a decent guy. I can even believe it. You've never raped anybody. You would NEVER rape anybody. You're upset that all these feminists are trying to accuse you of doing something, or connect you to doing something, that, as far as you're concerned, you've never done and would never condone.

And they've told you about triggers, and PTSD, and how one in six women is a survivor, and you get it. You do. But you can't let every time someone gets all upset get in the way of you having a good time, right? Especially when it doesn't *mean anything*. Rape jokes have never made YOU go out and rape someone. They never would; they never could. You just don't see how it matters.

I'm going to tell you how it *does* matter. And I tell you this because I genuinely believe you mean it when you say you don't want to hurt anybody, and that it's important to you to do your best to be a decent and good person, and that you don't see the harm. And I genuinely believe you when you say you would never associate with a rapist and you think rape really is a very bad thing.

Here is why I refuse to take rape jokes sitting down...

Because [6% of college-aged men](#), slightly over 1 in 20, will *admit* to raping someone in anonymous surveys, as long as the word "rape" isn't used in the description of the act—and that's the conservative estimate. Other sources [double that number](#) (pdf).

A lot of people accuse feminists of thinking that all men are rapists. That's not true. But do you know who think all men are rapists?

Rapists do.



They really do. In psychological study, the profiling, the studies, it comes out again and again.

Virtually all rapists genuinely believe that *all men rape*, and other men just keep it hushed up better. And more, these people who really are rapists are constantly *reaffirmed* in their belief about the rest of mankind being rapists like them *by things like rape jokes*, that *dismiss and normalize the idea of rape*.

If one in twenty guys (or more) is a real and true *rapist*, and you have any amount of social activity with other guys like yourself, then it is almost a statistical certainty that one time hanging out with friends and their friends, playing Halo with a bunch of guys online, in a WoW guild, in a pick-up game of basketball, at a bar, or elsewhere, *you were talking to a rapist*. Not your fault. You can't tell a rapist apart any better than anyone else can. It's not like they announce themselves.

But, here's the thing. It's very likely that in some of these interactions with these guys, at some point or another, someone told a rape joke. You, decent guy that you are, understood that they didn't *mean it*, and it was just a joke. And so you laughed.

Or maybe you didn't laugh. Maybe it just wasn't a very funny joke. So maybe you just didn't say anything at all.

And, decent guy who would never condone rape, who would step in and stop rape if he saw it, who understands that rape is awful and wrong and bad, when you laughed? When you were silent?

That rapist who was in the group with you, that rapist *thought that you were on his side*. That rapist *knew* that you were a rapist like him. And he felt validated, and he felt he was among his comrades.

You. The rapist's comrade.

And if that doesn't make you feel sick to your stomach, if that doesn't make you want to throw up, if that doesn't disturb you or bother you or make you feel like maybe you should at least *consider* not participating in that kind of humor anymore, not abiding it in your presence, not greeting it with silence...

Well, maybe you aren't as opposed to rapists as you claim.

-----

**Note:** A quick and simple rule for language and behavior if you want to be a decent person: Ask yourself, who is more likely to be made to feel comfortable around me based on whatever I'm about to say/do? Rape survivors? Or rapists? Who is more likely to be made to feel uncomfortable? If you're doing something that is more likely to make rapists feel comfortable and/or rape survivors feel uncomfortable, then don't do it!

## Feminism 101: Helpful Hints for Dudes, Part 4

Posted by Melissa McEwan at [Thursday, March 10, 2011](#)

*Following is a primer for men who are interested in learning more about how to be an effective ally in rape prevention. Most of the information in this piece is,*



*as always, generally applicable, but this has been addressed to men in keeping with **the objective of the series**.*

[Trigger warning for rape culture.]

Anyone, anywhere, of any age, any gender, has the absolute right to do anything, be anyplace, with anyone, walk down any street, any time of day or night, in any style of dress or state of undress, in any capacity, and not be raped.

If you feel inclined to protest or qualify that statement, you're engaging in rape apology.

Everyone has the absolute right to not be raped, irrespective of the circumstances. Even if they're doing something dangerous. Even if they're doing something illegal. Even if they've hurt another person themselves. Even if rape was a known possible consequence of their actions.

If you can't agree that everyone, and anyone, has the absolute right not to be raped, without qualifying it, without comparing a woman's exposed flesh to **unprotected valuables**, without wondering about the details of specific rapes, without auditing victims' choices, without asking if a victim was "**looking to get laid**," without insisting that you worry agreement with such a universal statement will make women careless (as if only women get raped; as if women's vigilance is effective rape prevention), without proposing hypotheticals, without playing devil's advocate, without *feeling obliged to try to find some exception to that rule*, you can't be an effective ally in the fight against sexual violence.

Everyone has the absolute right to not be raped.

To suggest otherwise is to suggest that a rape survivor, or *some rape survivors*, have some direct and personal\* responsibility for their own trauma.

The direct and personal\* responsibility for rape lies exclusively with rapists.

If you feel obliged to try to find some exception to that rule, you can't be an effective ally.

At least not to survivors.

-----

\* As opposed to the role **we all have the capacity to play**, and necessarily will if we don't examine **our socialization**, in perpetuating the rape culture.

## **Feminism 101: Helpful Hints for Dudes, Part 5**

Posted by Melissa McEwan at **Thursday, March 17, 2011**

*Following is a primer for men who are genuinely interested in learning about how to be a more feminist-friendly dude. Most of the information in this piece is, as always, generally applicable in terms of being decent to the people around you, but this has been written to be most accessible for men in keeping with **the objective of the series**, which is responding to commonly emailed questions from privileged men (here, generally meaning straight cis men) seeking advice on how to interact with the women in their lives.*

[Trigger warning for misogyny; sexual violence; silencing.]

After

### Part One

in this series ran, which recommended against playing Devil's Advocate, I received a number of emails from men who couldn't understand what the harm was in playing Devil's Advocate on feminist issues with women they care about, even if it upsets those women. Because, hey, shouldn't feminists be willing to have those fights?

I figured I should write a piece about how obliging women to play along with misogynist games can be incredibly alienating and, ultimately, a grave breach of trust, but I've already written one.

So, as part of this series, here's a re-run of "The Terrible Bargain We Have Regretfully Struck," which was originally posted

in August 2009

.

-----

Despite feminists' reputation, and contra my own individual reputation cultivated over almost seven years of public opinion-making, I am not a man-hater.

If I played by misogynists' rules, specifically the one that dictates it only takes one woman doing one Mean or Duplicitous or Disrespectful or Unlawful or otherwise Bad Thing to justify hatred of all women, I would have plenty of justification for hating men, if I were inclined to do that sort of thing.

Most of my threatening hate mail comes from men. The most unrelentingly trouble-making trolls have always been men. I've been cat-called and cow-called from moving vehicles countless times, and subjected to other forms of street harassment, and sexually harassed at work, always by men. I have been sexually assaulted—if one includes rape, attempted rape, unsolicited touching of breasts, buttocks, and/or genitals, nonconsensual frottage on public transportation, and flashing—by dozens of people during my lifetime, some known to me, some strangers, all men.

But I don't hate men, because I play by different rules. In fact, there are men in this world whom I love quite a lot.

There are also individual men in this world I would say I probably hate, or something close, men who I hold in unfathomable contempt, but it is not because they are men.

No, I don't hate men.

It would, however, be fair to say that I don't easily trust them.

My mistrust is not, as one might expect, primarily a result of the violent acts done on my body, nor the vicious humiliations done to my dignity. It is, instead, born of the multitude of mundane betrayals that mark my every relationship with a man—the casual rape joke, the use of a female slur, the careless demonization of the feminine in everyday conversation, the accusations of overreaction, the eyerolling and exasperated sighs in response to polite requests to please not use misogynist epithets in my presence or to please use non-gendered language ("humankind").

There are the insidious assumptions guiding our interactions—the supposition that I will regard being exceptionalized as a compliment ("you're not like those *other* women"), and the presumption that I am an ally against *certain kinds* of women. *Surely, we're all in agreement that Britney Spears is a dirty slut who deserves nothing but a steady stream of misogynist vitriol whenever her name is mentioned, right? Always the subtle pressure to abandon my principles to trash this woman or that woman, as if I'll never twig to the reality that there's always a justification for unleashing the misogyny, for hating a woman in ways reserved only for women. I am exhorted to join in the cruel revelry, and when I refuse, suddenly the target is on my back. And so it goes.*

There are the jokes about women, about wives, about mothers, about raising daughters, about female bosses. They are told in my presence by men who are meant to care about me, just to get a rise out of me, as though I am meant to find funny a reminder of my second-class status. I am meant to ignore that this is a bullying tactic, that the men telling these jokes derive their amusement specifically from knowing they upset me, piss me off, hurt me. They tell them and I can laugh, and they can thus feel superior, or I can *not* laugh, and they can thus feel superior. Heads they win, tails I lose. I am used as a prop in an ongoing game of patriarchal posturing, and then I am meant to believe it is true when some of the men who enjoy this sport, in which I am their pawn, tell me, "I love you." *I love you, my daughter. I love you, my niece. I love you, my friend.* I am meant to trust these words.

There are the occasions that men—intellectual men, clever men, engaged men—insist on playing devil's advocate, desirous of a debate on some aspect of feminist theory or reproductive rights or some other subject generally filed under the heading: Women's Issues. These intellectual, clever, engaged men want to endlessly probe my argument for weaknesses, want to wrestle over

details, want to argue just for fun—and they wonder, these intellectual, clever, engaged men, why my voice keeps raising and why my face is flushed and why, after an hour of fighting my corner, hot tears burn the corners of my eyes. *Why do you have to take this stuff so personally?* ask the intellectual, clever, and engaged men, who have never considered that the content of the abstract exercise that's so much fun for them is the stuff of *my life*.

There is the perplexity at my fury that my life experience is not considered more relevant than the opinionated pronouncements of men who make a pastime of informal observation, like womanhood is an exotic locale which provides magnificent fodder for the amateur ethnographer. And there is the haughty dismissal of my assertion that being on the outside looking in doesn't make one more *objective*; it merely provides a different *perspective*.

There are the persistent, tiresome pronouncements of similitude between men's and women's experiences, the belligerent insistence that handsome men are objectified by women, too! that women pinch men's butts sometimes, too! that men are expected to look a certain way at work, too! that women rape, too! and other equivalencies that conveniently and stupidly ignore institutional inequities that mean X rarely equals Y. And there are the long-suffering groans that meet any attempt to contextualize sexism and refute the idea that such indignities, though grim they all may be, are not necessarily equally oppressive.

There are the stereotypes—oh, the abundant stereotypes!—about women, not *me*, of course, but *other* women, those women with their bad driving and their relentless shopping habits and their PMS and their disgusting vanity and their inability to stop talking and their disinterest in Important Things and their trying to trap men and their getting pregnant on purpose and their false rape accusations and their being *bitches sluts whores cunts*... And I am expected to nod in agreement, and I am nudged and admonished to agree. I am expected to say these things are not true of me, but are true of women (am I seceding from the union?); I am expected to put my stamp of token approval on the stereotypes. *Yes, it's true. Between you and me, it's all true.* That's what is wanted from me. Abdication of my principles and pride, in service to a patriarchal system that will only use my collusion to further subjugate me. This is a thing that is asked of me by men who purport to care for me.

There is the unwillingness to listen, a ferociously stubborn *not getting it* on so many things, so many important things. And the obdurate refusal to believe, to internalize, that my outrage is not manufactured and my injure not make-believe—an inflexible rejection of the possibility that my pain is authentic, in favor of the consolatory belief that I am angry because I'm a feminist (rather than the truth: that I'm a feminist because I'm angry).

And there is the denial about engaging in misogyny, even when it's evident, even when it's pointed out gently, softly, indulgently, carefully, with goodwill and the presumption that it was not intentional. There is the firm, fixed, unyielding denial—because it is better and easier to imply that I'm stupid or crazy, that I have imagined being insulted by someone about whom I care (just for the fun of it!), than it is to just admit a bloody mistake. Rather I am implied to be a hysteric than to say, simply, *I'm sorry*.

Not every man does all of these things, or even most of them, and certainly not all the time. But it only takes one, randomly and occasionally, exploding in a

shower of cartoon stars like an unexpected punch in the nose, to send me staggering sideways, wondering what just happened.

*Well. I certainly didn't see that coming...*

These things, they are not the habits of deliberately, connivingly cruel men. They are, in fact, the habits of the men in this world I love quite a lot.

All of whom have given me reason to mistrust them, to use my distrust as a self-protection mechanism, as an essential tool to get through every day, because I never know when I might next get knocked off-kilter with something that puts me in the position, once again, of choosing between my dignity and the serenity of our relationship.

*Swallow shit, or ruin the entire afternoon?*

It can come out of nowhere, and usually does. Which leaves me mistrustful by both necessity and design. Not fearful; just resigned—and on my guard. More vulnerability than that allows for the possibility of wounds that do not heal. Wounds to our relationship, the sort of irreparable damage that leaves one unable to look in the eye someone that you loved once upon a time.

This, then, is the terrible bargain we have regretfully struck: Men are allowed the easy comfort of their unexamined privilege, but my regard will always be shot through with a steely, anxious bolt of caution.

A shitty bargain all around, really. But there it is.

There are men who will read this post and think, huffily, dismissively, that a person of color could write a post very much like this one about white people, about me. That's absolutely right. So could a lesbian, a gay man, a bisexual, an asexual. So could a trans or intersex person (which hardly makes a comprehensive list). I'm okay with that. I don't feel hated. I feel mistrusted—and I understand it; I respect it. It means, for me, I must be vigilant, must make myself trustworthy. Every day.

I hope those men will hear me when I say, again, I do not hate you. I mistrust you. You can tell yourselves that's a problem with me, some inherent flaw, some evidence that I am fucked up and broken and weird; you can choose to believe that the women in your lives are nothing like me.

Or you can be vigilant, can make yourselves trustworthy. Every day.

Just in case they're more like me than you think.

## **Feminism 101: Helpful Hints for Dudes, Part 6**

*Following is a primer for men who are genuinely interested in learning about how to be a more feminist-friendly dude. Most of the information in this piece is, as always, generally applicable in terms of being decent to the people around you, but this has been written to be most accessible for men in keeping with **the objective of the series**, which is responding to commonly emailed questions from privileged men (here, generally meaning straight cis men) seeking advice on how to interact with the women in their lives.*

In the wake of **the Elevator Incident**, and throughout all the ensuing discussion,

and in many of the emails I received in response to my post, there ran a thread of desperate concern, tinged with the usual belligerent exasperation, about how (straight) men are ever supposed to figure out how to interact with women in a way that won't be regarded as rude, sexist, and/or creepy.

Many people who have weighed in at various feminist, atheist, skeptic, and/or scientific blogs have taken up the challenge of addressing those concerns, with recommendations on how to approach women, guidelines for conferences, and prescriptions for social or institutional change. I'm not inclined to replicate those efforts.

I will, however, take a moment to answer a question that I feel was being asked implicitly in many of these discussions, and was asked explicitly of me by a male emailer, writing to me to express his frustrations on this subject: "What is it exactly that you want men to do?"

I want men to be nice to women.

Here, I will not insert any caveats about how what I really want is for all people to be nice to each other, or that I acknowledge that there are men who are nice to women, or women who are not nice to men, or whatever acquiescence would allegedly inoculate me against the accusation that I am a shrill, horrible cunt. The demands of chronic obfuscators have nothing to do with the question that was asked of me, which I intend to answer without indulging tangents and distractions.

The question that was asked of me is this: *What is it exactly that you want men to do?*

More precisely, I was asked what it is that I want (straight) men to do, so that they might avoid being charged with rudeness, misogyny, or creepiness. Implicit in the question is the charge that there is no answer, the assertion that there is no way that (straight) men can publicly interact with women in a way that will not be *negatively construed*.

Especially by women who are hysterical. Women who are psychos. Women who are over-reactionary. Women who are man-haters. Women who think all men are perverts. Women who are looking for things to get mad about. *Feminists*.

But, of course, there is an answer. Men can be nice to women.

There are, surely, people who will read that and snort derisively and feel compelled to make arguments about how "nice" is a relative term and is thus meaningless, in terms of trying to help a man know how to interact with a woman.

And, just as surely, people like myself, who are not invested in the idea that (straight) men can't *possibly* know how to interact with women without a high risk of offending them, will call bullshit in retort.

You see, one thing I have observed over and over (and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over, and over some more) during my thirty-seven years on this rock, is that there are men who treat women like people, and men who treat women like not-men.

Men who treat women like people—that is to say, in the same way they treat

other men—generally tend to have no problem being nice to women. They are pleasant in their interactions with women; they are respectful during their interactions with women; they hold friendly and engaging and fun and challenging and sometimes contentious conversations with women; if they are straight men, they acknowledge appropriate boundaries in terms of romantic behavior (i.e. they don't treat a work environment like it's a singles bar just because a female person is in it); they don't ogle or grope women; they regard women as their equals, and are capable of acknowledging women's different experiences from their own without using that as the basis for treating women like a different species.

Men who treat women like people treat them as *individual people*, who are deserving of their decency unless and until an individual woman gives them a reason to be guarded, or avoidant, or angry, or whatever—in which case, those feelings are directed at the individual woman who piqued their ire, not at "women."

They are, in short, nice.

On the other hand, there are men who treat women like not-men. Women are regarded as a separate class of human altogether (or, in some cases, non-human), a monolithic variation which exists not in complement to men, but in service to them. Men who treat women like not-men, if they are straight, view women as the sex class, and ergo do not draw any delineation between spheres of work and play, but view a woman in a professional space as an interloper, whose purpose as a sexual object and potential sex partner supersedes her role as a working person in her chosen vocation.

Men who treat women like not-men have problems viewing women just as co-workers, as bosses, as friends, as teachers, as equals, because they see them as humans with a (sex/reproductive) service role, which is not how they see other men.

And because they see women as fundamentally different from men, they imagine that there must be a whole set of unique rules to interacting with women. They cannot conceive that there is, simply, a set of rules to engage all other humans politely and respectfully and productively—and that the boundary between "man" and "woman" is not nearly as important as the boundary between, say, "work" and "speed-dating event."

(Which is not to say it's inherently awful or wrong to meet someone at work. There is a difference—and a not remotely difficult to discern difference, at that—between happening to meet someone at work in whom you become romantically interested, and treating the women who share your place of employment as a captive audience for your random sexual overtures.)

Men who treat women like not-men are incapable of acknowledging women's different experiences from their own without using that as the basis for treating women like a different species. They use any woman's failure to please as a strike against the entirety of womankind, and they annihilate the individuality of a woman beneath the crushing weight of their own biases about women, and then accuse women of being all the same.

They treat a woman's *personhood* and her *womanhood* as **mutually exclusive constructs**, while treating *manhood* and *personhood* as synonymous, and then



they wonder how it is that women can complain of different treatment, of *lesser* treatment.

They are, in short, not nice.

There's nothing decent or kind about treating women as though they are alien beings whose primary use is in service to your needs. Unless, of course, a woman is not attractive to you, in which case she has no use at all.

It isn't just terrible men who treat women this way. It's lots and lots and lots of men, who consider themselves to be decent and kind, and who are hardly considered monsters by the women who know them. I'm sure the man who asked me what it is, exactly, I'd like men to do is not an awful fellow. He's probably just a guy who's been told his whole life that it's okay to treat women *differently* and never questioned if maybe that wasn't actually the best thing to do, if you really do fancy yourself an egalitarian sort of bloke.

And thus is my advice to him, and to all the men who are wondering what it is they're supposed to do to make us bitches happy: Be nice.

If you really think about it, and if you're really honest with yourself, you know what that means.

**Shut Up!**

*Reprinted with permission from the blog [Shakesville](#).*

Compilation © XYonline.net. All rights reserved. Used with permission. Site by [David Houlder](#)