

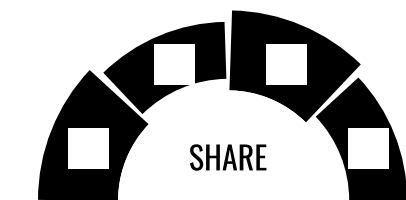
©2016 PrimeMind Inc.

A LETTER TO ASPIRING (MALE) FEMINISTS

A gender theorist shares how men can fight
sexism and support gender equality

BY TAL PERETZ | MAY 02, 2016

// IDENTITY //



LEARNING

RELATIONSHIPS

GENDER

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS

I had never heard the word feminism until my first semester of college. I signed up for a required class with gender studies professor Marla Jaksch, and that's when my life began making sense in a way it never had. Learning about feminism didn't just illuminate sexism, it explained television and bullying and sports and economics and my family and countless other things I'd been uncomfortable or confused about.

This was my first lesson in feminism: Using a feminist lens to analyze and understand your life is one of the most powerful things you can do. This is what led me to realize that sexual violence and domestic abuse; inequality in pay, education, and politics; biased media representation; gender stereotypes; and beauty norms aren't women's issues, they are social issues that shape everyone's life. Understanding how men are gendered beings —yes, including you—can be transformational.¹

Having
privilege

When I saw how gender inequality
is implicated in every part of my

¹ What
follows
is from

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS

how gender inequality impacts your life, because instead of putting you at risk, it benefits you

me. Thankfully, feminist analysis also had an answer for that: male privilege. **This was my second lesson: having privilege means you usually don't see how gender inequality impacts your life, because instead of putting you at risk, it benefits you.**

Recognizing your privilege is the crucial first step in becoming an ally (a member of a privileged social group who supports marginalized people's liberation

efforts). Receiving privilege doesn't make you a bad person, but it does shape your life and affect your work. At your best, you can use privilege to help people who don't benefit from it. At your worst, you can use privilege in ways that harm the people you are trying to help. When this happens (and it will happen—everyone makes mistakes), be open to hearing critiques, try to fix what you can, learn from your mistakes, and try to do better next time.

After my initial class with Jaksch, I attended a feminist theory class with Professor Brian Jara. For me, having a class taught by a man was important. It showed me there was a place for me in the feminist movement if I held myself accountable. Jara pulled me aside after class

nt the experien ces of trans* and nonbina ry pro-fem inists; it also does not detail the many ways that the current gender order hurts men or the many genders d ways that men hurt each other

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS

To be fair, he said it much more compassionately. The important thing, though, was that he made it clear that this space was not about me. He reminded me that anytime I am speaking, someone else in the class (most likely a woman) is not speaking.

Lesson three, then, is to be aware of your communication behaviors. Interrupting women, overpowering them using the volume or tone of your voice, taking up more than your share of speaking time, questioning or doubting women's statements about their own life experiences, speaking for women who haven't asked you to, taking credit for women's ideas,² and **mansplaining** all reinforce sexism, silence women, and make you a bad ally. Tell people around you, especially but not only women, that this is something you're working on and, if they are willing (because it is extra work you are asking them to do, and it is not their job), to please let you know when they notice such things.

Lesson four was to take it slow. I was so excited by my newfound way of being a better person that I wanted to solve every aspect of sexism all at once, on my first day in Jara's class. Here's the thing, though: If sexism could

² Some of these ideas are mine, but a lot of them I've learned from women. I'm writing this article because you might hear these things better coming

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS



**Suffrage parade
in New York City
May 6, 1912**

PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKI COMMONS

ve of my
male
privileg
e. Good
articles
by
women
about
how to
be a
male
feminist
are [here](#)
and
[here](#).

An important feminist sociological concept called standpoint theory explains that who you are in society (man, woman, trans*, genderqueer, black, Latina, Native American, white, wealthy, working class, etc.) shapes your social experiences and how people treat you, and this in turn shapes how you see the world. This explains why in the United States most white people think of police as safe, helpful, and trustworthy, while most black people see police as corrupt, suspect, and dangerous. Whites' and blacks' views of police are different because their communities have been treated differently by police over time.³ Standpoint theory also explains why a lot of men struggle to understand and to believe women's experiences around gender: If you do

³ The
oppressi
on of
women,
racial

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS

reality since you were eight years old, it can be hard to believe that this is the lived-reality for other people.

Standpoint theory is also why lesson five is important. Men are treated so differently from women in our society that it can be difficult to see the world from their perspective, their standpoint—and that makes it difficult to understand how to be an effective and accountable antisexist man. **Lesson five, then, is to listen to women.** Listening means believing women and respecting that their reality is just as valid as yours. (So don't call women crazy, or emotional, or PMS-ing. Just don't, ever. And don't let others do it. The reason for this kind of language is almost always to avoid actually listening to women.) Seek out places to hear women talking about their experiences; Take Back the Night, The Vagina Monologues, YouTube channels, and blogs are good places to start.

ons are
not
separate
issues.
The
concept
of
intersect
ional-it
y
explains
that
social
categori
es such
as race,
class,
gender,
and
sexualit
y
overlap
and
interact
in
shaping
society
and
individu
al lives.

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS



Night march on Kadena Air Base, Japan May 1, 2015

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SENIOR AIRMAN OMARI BERNARD. PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKI

COMMONS.

Listening to women is especially important in sexual and romantic relationships. In your dating life ask verbally, specifically, and directly when you want to engage in any kind of physical touch, even kissing (yeah, it sounded weird to me at first too, but the grateful responses I've received have me convinced). Outside of dating, you can also build trust by telling the people you care about that if they have had any nonconsensual sexual experiences, you will be there to listen and support them. If you become a person who women are willing to talk to openly, at some point you'll feel like all your female friends are coming to you with their stories of violence and harassment. This is an honor, but it is also depressing. Remember, it's not about you.

Lesson six: Remember you are not alone. The history of men advocating for women's rights goes back at least

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS

about feminism and gender equality. They'll listen to you, and you'll feel more connected. If you can, get some friends together and make a formal or informal men's group, where you can help each other work on your own personal change while also working externally on social change.⁴

I joined a group called Men Against Violence, worked with the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, and volunteered at a local domestic violence shelter. It wasn't always easy; I wasn't always welcome. **Which brings me to lesson seven: Some women will not want to have you around. That is their right.** They are dealing with sexism every day, and you may remind them of someone who traumatized them. They are healing, and your job is to make that easier for them however you can.

I still make mistakes and try to learn from them. In that respect, it's best to think of "ally" as a verb, not a noun. You have to return your ally card each night and earn it back the next day. It never stops, and as the saying goes, "It never gets easier, you just get better."

That leads to the final lesson: Don't declare yourself an ally. Show it in your actions, and let others decide what

⁴ I regularly post how-to guides of anti-sexist projects a small group of men can accomplish on masculinities
101.com

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS

antiviolence activism for more than a decade. He is a professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at Auburn University, and is the author of "Some Men: Male Allies and the Movement to End Violence Against Women" (Oxford University Press), co-written with Michael Messner and Max Greenberg.

LIKE WHAT YOU' RE
READING?
SUBSCRIBE TO OUR
NEWSLETTER.

SUBSCRIBE

READ MORE

Choose tags to explore the intersection of topics on PrimeMind.

GENDER

RACE

ADDICTION

DEPRESSION

MEDIA

BIOLOGY

CONSCIOUSNESS

PLAY

SEX

CONFLICT

CELEBRITY

MUSIC

SCARCITY

CRIME

RELATIONSHIPS

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS

SPIRITUALITY

 REFRESH TAGS

MY CONFLICT AS A
POP STAR WITH A
SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

By Liz Nistico

MUSIC

CELEBRITY

THE RAMONES AND
RAP: A SHARED
HISTORY

By Steven Lee

Beeber

MUSIC

SCARCITY

MEXICO'S GOTH
CULTURE: A HAVEN
AMID THE CHAOS

By Scarlett

Lindeman

MUSIC

CONFLICT

FOLLOW US

ABOUT US // TERMS OF USE // PRIVACY POLICY // CONTACT US

NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY

MIND

SEX

IDENTITY

TRANSITIONS