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## Why Men Can Be Good for Feminism

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Feminism is a dirty word. It conjures images of whiny, bitchy women with sanctimonious complaints about men. And the men who call themselves “feminist”? If they aren’t simply whipped, then supposedly it’s a label they invoke as a cheap ploy at getting laid. Or so the story goes.

But that’s an old version of the story of feminism, and like so many of us, I’m convinced we’re in the midst of change.

That said, recent media maneuvers and blogosphere blowups have put this confidence to the test. For those outside the feminist bubble, here is the nutshell version: Eliot Spitzer recently [announced](#) <sup>[3]</sup> to Chris Hayes on MSNBC that he is a feminist — an identification few major politicians would make. Despite his record of championing reproductive rights, challenging workplace discrimination, and advocating women’s healthcare, given Spitzer’s record of hiring prostitutes, the [reaction on Twitter](#) <sup>[4]</sup> was swift.

Another [self-identified feminist man](#) <sup>[5]</sup> with a history of confused intent and mental illness recently hijacked an [extraordinary amount of attention](#) <sup>[6]</sup>. Hugo Schwyzer, a community college instructor with training in Scottish history, was assigned to teach courses in gender studies, pornography or feminism, which some argue were not his areas of expertise. Internet sites such as Jezebel and xoJane published his work, but graphic sexual discussion always garners copious page views, so that’s no surprise. The conflict he hath wrought, however, has created a feminist tempest in a digital teapot.

The divisiveness and sheer exhaustion that emerged from the Schwyzer mess is both personally and politically painful to witness. Instead of burning out on conflict, however, there are plenty of opportunities to redirect attention to constructive solutions and positive perspectives on men’s roles in working for gender justice.

Can men be feminists? Absolutely. As I write in my book [Men and Feminism](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, feminists are committed to addressing problems that happen every day. Some of these are issues that take place behind the privacy of closed doors; others are matters that confront us in the public arena. These problems include things like domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, racism, homophobia, unequal pay, job segregation, sexual objectification, restrictions on reproductive choices, and unattainable standards of gender, beauty, and behavior.

The examples of men doing this work are many and growing. [Men for Women's Choice](#) [8] supports reproductive rights. [Voice Male Magazine](#) [9] and [Masculinity U](#) [10] encourage [rethinking stereotypes](#) [11] about masculinity and feminism. There is the awesome collection of [men speaking out](#) [12] against street harassment. Award-winning filmmaker Byron Hurt's [documentary](#) [13] about hip-hop continues to inform. Tom Keith's recent video [The Bro Code](#) [14] investigates the toxic mix of men and sexist media. Filming is underway for Jennifer Siebel Newsom's new film on masculinity, [The Mask You Live In](#) [15]. Every day, it seems, more men are getting on board with creating constructive solutions and positive change.

On an individual level, feminism makes room for each of us to explore who we are, separate from gender constraints. Too often, the social rules and regulations for men and women are restrictive. They don't really describe us well. Feminism questions rigid binary categories of masculinity and femininity, looks at the political consequences of assumptions about gender, and helps us search for better models and greater freedom.

Guys have lots of opportunities to get involved with everyday practices like engaged parenting, pay equity and consensual sex. Changing diapers might not seem like a political act, but it definitely has political meaning. There's certainly nothing wrong with doing domestic, caring work. In fact, feminism is about the right to freely choose our life activities. But if women are doing the majority of the housework and caring for the babies, it means they're doing these unpaid jobs *in addition* to other paid work or it means they're *not* doing something else (like earning money, writing the great novel, etc.).

Warren Farrell, an expert on men's issues, explains that trying to change women's roles ultimately gets stalled if men's roles don't also change. "For example," Farrell writes, "moms can't break glass ceilings unless dads are caring for the children." (Farrell was formerly a board member of the National Organization for Women, yet today he argues that men are the victims of discrimination by women and feminism.)

While working on the second edition of [Men Speak Out: Views on Gender, Sex, and Power](#) [16], I talked with men across the country who are concerned about masculinity, identity, sexuality, violence, and equity. In this anthology, writer and ex-convict A. Razor takes us inside the Marin County Jail as he waits for transfer to San Quentin Prison. Facing a possible life sentence for a third-strike felony, Razor joins a therapy group focused on ending male violence against women. Razor struggles to face his personal accountability as an abuser while he figures out how to make a radical change to stop his part in the cycle of abuse.

Athlete (and now educator) Nathan Einschlag recounts his life-changing and heartbreaking experience playing college basketball at a school filled with privileged—and in many ways protected—young students. Growing up in the immigrant neighborhood of Jackson Heights in Queens, New York, Einschlag saw things that the guys on his team "only read about in magazines, or saw on TV." In college, Einschlag is surrounded by teammates who think that heavy drinking and sexual conquest prove their ability to be a guy and play the game. Einschlag bravely faces a difficult choice: to play college basketball and go along with the expected standards of masculine behavior, or stay true to himself and possibly leave the team behind. In doing so—and in writing about it publicly—Einschlag lets other guys coming up know that they are not alone in facing ethical decisions, and that being a "real man" can mean both rejecting sexism and bench pressing 225.

Do these men call themselves feminist? Some do, but not all. What matters more is that these men—and so many others—are powerful role models. Their words and their actions provide constructive ideas and positive avenues for change.

I realize that some people still take issue based on the misunderstanding that feminism is

about women waging war against men. But before we go down that route, here's the thing: Gender-based inequality works to the advantage of men *as a group* and works to the disadvantage of women *as a group*. That doesn't mean all men have advantage or that none of the women do. These things are complicated, but I trust that we are a generally smart bunch. And to that end, together, we can create a much, much better world for everyone.

As the recent online examples have demonstrated, we all have ways in which our personal lives don't always sync up perfectly with our politics and our ideals. As humans we are often inconsistent and sometimes downright flawed.

I invite all of us to join in a delightfully imperfect feminist movement that keeps its eyes on the prize while valuing the process. This process can be as messy and as well-intentioned as human beings themselves. This invitation is for each of us, whether woman or man, transgender or genderqueer. It is crucial that we start talking with each other across various communities about masculinity and femininity, about gender politics, and about sexuality, race and class. We have a lot of work to do. See you in the classrooms, in the boardrooms, and on the streets.

*This article draws from Shira Tarrant's books Men and Feminism (Seal Press) and Men Speak Out: Views on Gender, Sex, and Power (Routledge, second edition).*

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