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"Privatise everything, privatise the sea and the sky, privatise justice and the law, privatise the passing cloud, privatise the dream... and while you are at it, privatise your whore mothers."

- José Saramago

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Can men be feminists?

GAVIN THOMSON 21 September 2012

With men leading on women's issues, even when we win, we lose. Men shouldn't be the voices of feminism, but we can build and support the platforms from which women's voices call out, says Gavin Thomson.

To tell the truth, I was nervous. I'm an anxious person all year round, but this was worse than normal.

On my way to the [UK Feminista Summer School](#) last weekend – an event offering feminists the chance to “share skills, share ideas and prepare to organise with feminists across the UK”, I was nervous for a few different reasons.

Firstly, I was petrified I'd be the only man. Not as in the cliché. Not like I was having visions of becoming a human dartboard for their angry anger and [manhate](#). More like, not wanting to be the only person dressed in black at a “Let's wear white day”. I didn't want to be notable by my difference.

Also, I was scared about how me going, and the presence of men generally, would affect everyone else. Were any of the women coming expecting it to be a women-only space? And would my presence make anyone less comfortable or less likely to contribute? If my presence prevented a woman from attending, then that would be rather pointless. A woman attending a feminist event, such as this [UK Feminista](#) summer school, will always be more valuable than a man attending. They'll have more to say, be more energised to action, and it's more valuable for them to share their experiences.

Another fear was that, maybe as an introduction or a warm-up, attendees would be asked to share an [experience of sexism](#), and I wouldn't have much to contribute. “Hi everyone. I'm Gav and I'm a white hetero male, and navigating my way through each day is a [piece of piss](#) to be honest. Sorry. Got nothing to say here. But don't worry. I've read that [Caitlin Moran book](#) and I've bookmarked [Vagenda](#) so ladies, believe me, I *totally* get it”.

And then there was the bigger (and ever present) fear of saying something that people might take offence to. What if, when rambling away, I looked around the room to see aghast faces, and a stern arm pointing me toward the exit only to realise that I've said something sexist? Because I know I've been sexist before. Lots and lots and lots of times - the ways that I've unthinkingly spoken to, and about, women. The only thing preventing my future misogyny is if I question everything I absorb from the world around me.

In reading [different blogs](#) and speaking to friends, I often stumble upon a [new word](#) or phrase to describe aspects of [male control](#). What follows is a familiar pattern: I find out as much as possible about this sexist characteristic, I try to remember every relationship/conversation/thought I've had with women, I realise I've done it loads of times, try to work out why that is, and pack all of this with me for the next time I open my mouth.

Most recently, for example, I was introduced to the idea of '[mansplaining](#)', a term describing how some men tend to assume the women they're speaking to [are entirely ignorant](#) of the matter under discussion. Basically, not [respecting their intelligence](#) or life experience in the slightest.

I've mansplained so much that writing this now makes me wince. Even since learning that word – and thinking about it heaps – I've caught myself doing it once or twice (for example, watching news programmes with friends and continually contextualising all the stories. As if my friends can't do that for themselves. As if they haven't been paying attention to the programme, or to any news, ever. I don't know why I keep doing that). Sure, there is probably some kind of explanation for why it happens, and why it's so widespread –

public representations of women and societal norms have a big part to play. But it's still on me, and this possible explanation by no means absolves me or any other man.

In the run up to Summer School I was also nervous about the inevitable question: [can men be feminists](#)? I'm still wrestling with my answer to [this](#), but I'm aware that some feminists' favoured strategy is "Men, fuck off!" Don't get me wrong, this could be [the right strategy](#). But from a selfish point of view, I was scared it could get awkward for me and my brothers if such an approach was taken.

And this [question/contention](#) did come up during some of the workshops and talks. Some voices raised said "yes, of course feminism needs men" and it needs to "think about how we can involve them more". "It will be a stronger movement if we can incorporate more voices, and this must include men".

From a purely practical perspective, this makes sense. We men, as a gender, are holding almost all of the [money](#) and [power](#) and influence and property and [weapons](#) and TV channels and loads of other resources. If you want something to change, and can only have one group of people on your side, you can't go wrong with 'men'.

Other people said that the movement needs to be led, and led only, by women. The struggle against the oppressor must contain only the voices of the oppressed. Examples to support this argument include the [civil rights movement](#) in the US, and [ending Apartheid](#) in South Africa. In both cases, decisions were taken (rightly, history seems to have judged) to exclude white people from leadership and figurehead roles.

(Pals, we're straying quickly into [mansplaining territory](#) here, as I explain feminism to a (probable) readership of feminists. [My apologies all](#). This bit's necessary for the structure I started with. Obviously a mistake, but let's push on, shall we?)

For example, let's say a particular campaign on women's rights was spearheaded by a man (for the sake of argument, let's call him Gav). Gav visits Downing Street to have a sit-down chat with David C, about the issue and how he wants it fixed. If he doesn't convince David C, that's obviously a problem and our campaign has stalled. But if he does convince him, that presents another problem – it's a tediously familiar image of men making decisions about women. If Gav is successful, David C might want to speak to Gav again, about other issues, preventing a woman from getting a meeting with him. Gav's success might have planted the idea with male politicians that men can be consulted on women's rights. If these politicians already feel more comfortable with men than women, David C might ask more lads to come round and chat about [childcare provisions](#), or the [various-pronged attacks](#) on working mothers. Regardless of how the meeting went, it's unlikely that Gav and his campaign increased the chances of more women getting into Downing St. In other words, with men leading on women's issues, even when we win, we might lose. There's a real danger we're confirming or strengthening existing prejudices. It's the continuation and reinforcement of patriarchy under the guise of resistance. Men who like campaigning or chatting to Prime Ministers, or chatting to anyone at all, need to keep this in mind.

Most women I spoke to at the Summer School used the same word to describe the role of men in feminism: "supporting". In other words, we definitely shouldn't be the voices, but we can build and support the platforms (literally and digitally) from which women's voices call out.



Pussy Riot protesters outside the Russian Embassy, London

This fits the theory of how change happens outlined above – that only women should be in the foreground of the movement - but also gives a nod to the need for men to think critically. While feminism is a belief in gender equality, “pro feminist” might indicate that, on top of holding that belief, you’re also undergoing a process of critical thinking. Trying to change how your brain has been wired by growing up in a society that favours who you are over who other people are.

Obviously I don’t need to recap why it’s obvious many men aren’t doing this, but here’s some [hyperlinks](#) of [horrid men](#) being [appalling humans](#) anyway.

It was pointed out to me by some that many women are prone to misogynistic remarks, and they also need to undergo a process of analysis alongside joining the fight for equality. True. But the fact remains that men have no idea what it’s like to live as a woman, any woman. The fact that I wouldn’t be able to share an instance of sexism (see anxiety notes, above) is really crucial. I’ll never know what that’s like – to feel that I’m constantly [targeted on the street](#) or to feel my right to govern my own body [being threatened](#). And while not knowing this may present me with an awkward situation during an icebreaker in a workshop, it also probably means I shouldn’t speak much during the rest of the workshop. I never have to experience the threats of patriarchy, so I’ll always be in a [process of listening and learning](#).

There is a common misconception among men ‘of the left’ that they’re feminists because they understand how the system we live in relentlessly and [unavoidably punishes women](#). That this [understanding](#), this [critique of capitalism](#), makes them a feminist. This is simply not true, and we need to challenge it. Unless you’re questioning your assumptions toward women, in both public and private spheres, your self-appointed feminist credentials are probably unfounded. Some of the most hateful misogynistic behaviour we’ve seen has come from men with solid lefty credentials (Arise [comrade Galloway](#)...). As a man, your feminist can’t come as a ‘Eureka’ moment when you’re reading [an explanation of structural inequalities](#). It has to come every day, in every interaction.

I’m scared of being George Galloway, basically. That’s what all this is about. I’m scared of being one of those guys, who we recognise as being left-wing and unjustifiably assume that they’re equal and fair to people of all genders in their day-to-day life. At some point, the guy reveals himself to hold repugnant views, and people can’t work out how someone can be both a socialist and a sexist. Obviously, [Galloway](#) wasn’t [strutting](#) around anti-war marches thinking to himself, “This is great. I’m a sexist, but I’m doing a damn good job of keeping it to myself”. Of course he wasn’t. He identifies with the fight for women’s rights. And how can I be sure that level of delusion doesn’t apply to me? That’s not a rhetorical question, let me know if you’ve got an answer.

During a wide-ranging discussion on building a diverse feminist movement at the Summer School, a participant asked the panel how men could be integrated. [Ines Smyth](#), a Gender Advisor at Oxfam, made three points. That, firstly, she had worked on *her* feminism and perhaps it’s up to men to integrate themselves into the movement, not the movement to integrate into men. Also, that we always have to recognise and remember the [huge value of women-only spaces](#). And finally, that given the suffocating constraints on feminist causes, there is limited time and money to share around and we need to be careful who we share it with. Perhaps the implication was, ‘Let’s not share these with men’.

This might be a rather pointless discussion anyway. At a workshop on ‘Engaging men in feminist voices’, a range of women [recounted the negative](#) responses of their friends, boyfriends and brothers to the word “feminist”. Is it worth talking about engaging men in a movement when they recoil from the word itself?

Ines is right. The inclusion and safety of all women should be the guiding principle of the feminist movement. If this means men need to go off and think of new ways to stop each other objectifying and undermining women (maybe even without the banner of ‘feminism’, given its apparent toxicity to men), then [we might all benefit](#).

This article is part of series of articles from the UK Feminista Summer School 2012. Read the others: [The issues that divide: building a diverse feminist movement](#), [State feminism: co-opting women's voices](#) and [Everyday feminism](#)

[vs everyday sexism.](#)



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