

IS FEMINISM MEN'S WORK, TOO?

BY MANDY VAN DEVEN

During my five years as a community organizer at Girls for Gender Equality in Brooklyn, I was frequently asked to recommend a program for young men that could help them examine gender expectations and male privilege. Without hesitation, I would tell them about Brotherhood/Sister Sol.

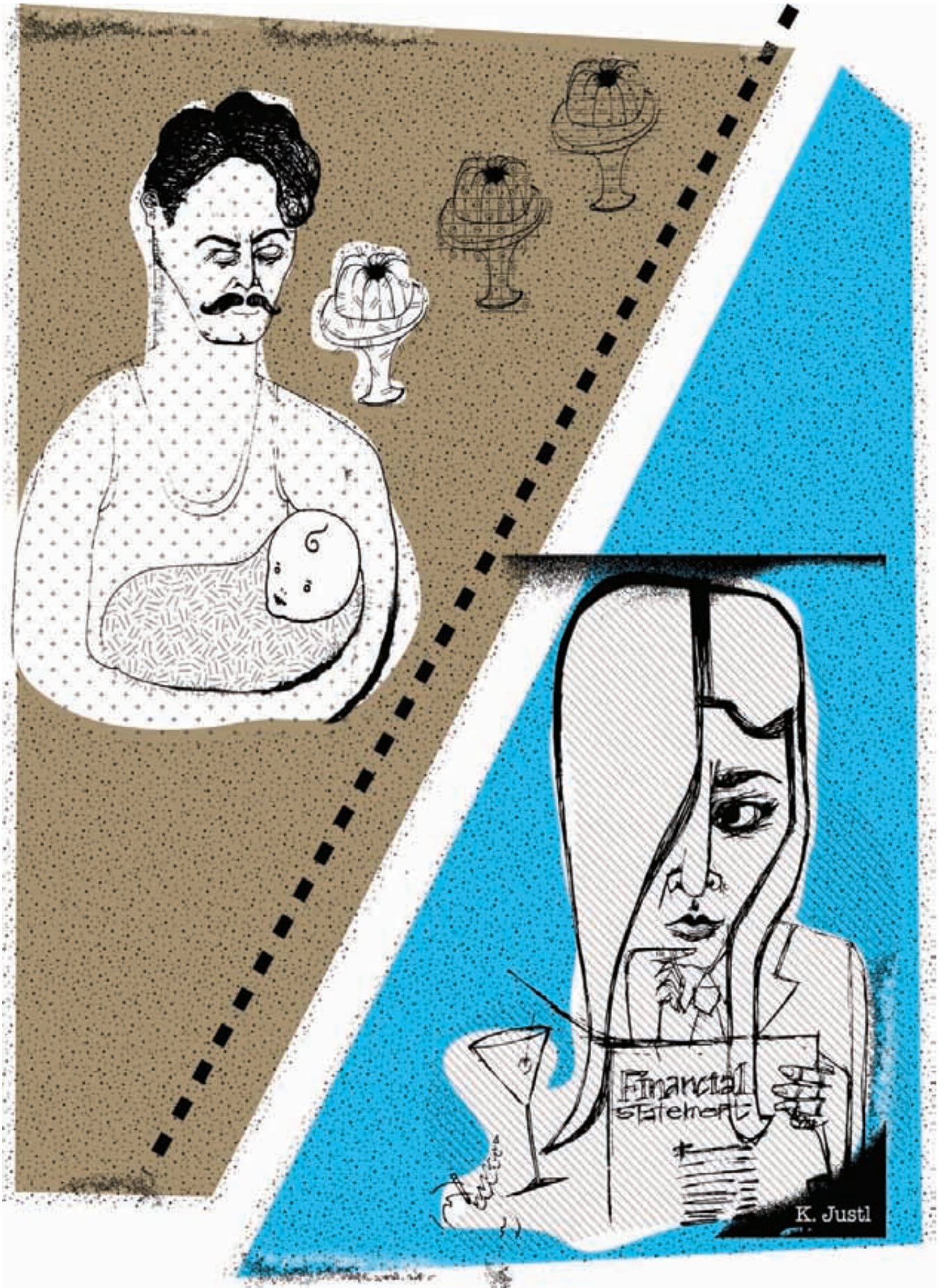
When I first met the organization's co-founders Khary Lazarre-White and Jason Warwin in New York, I was impressed with their organization's commitment to feminist principles. Lazarre-White explains why it is important for men to be involved in feminist work:

"It is essential for men to take an active role in the work to counteract sexism and misogyny because it is our responsibility. Sexism is not the problem of women—it is the problem of men," he believes. "It is personally important for me to do this work because I try to live my life by a moral and ethical compass, and I know that fighting sexism is a daily lived responsibility—from structural organizational work decisions, to personal relationships, to how one lives one's life."

Brotherhood/Sister Sol is committed to deconstructing sexism and misogyny, promoting sexual education and

responsibility and reducing gender bias as part of its youth development model. Further, it aims to empower black and Latino young women and men to develop into critical thinkers and community leaders. These men are probably not the faces that immediately spring to mind when one imagines what a feminist looks like, though perhaps they should be.

Men like Lazarre-White and Warwin may be rare. However, there have always been men who have supported women's greater participation in social and political spheres. With her recent book *Men and Feminism*, Shira Tarrant has penned an introductory tome explaining the relevance of feminism to men's lives. The book documents how men's promotion of women's full citizenship can be found throughout history. Tarrant, a professor at California State University-Long Beach, traces such support back as far as the philosophical work of Plato's *The Republic* and Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Women*. And while her application of the label "feminist" may be anachronistic, her point that male support of women's subjugation has never been universal is well taken.



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And yet the idea of a male feminist as either mythic or oxymoronic persists today. The reasoning seems to be that since feminism is a struggle about *women* gaining rights, there is no legitimate role for men in that struggle.

However, Rick Taylor, a professor of English and women's studies at East Carolina University, offers proof that men



Khary Lazarre-White co-founded New York's Brotherhood/Sisterhood Sol.

have an important role to play. He shared his thoughts on why it is too simplistic for men to say they are feminists because they care about women's issues.

"Feminism is an important part of my identity and belief system. It informs my professional life, my home life, my sense of spirituality, and my sense of my own past," he explains. "It's a response to the terrible damage done by gender oppression and continued inequality, and an expression of the urge within towards liberation and freedom of self-expression."

Feminist theorists such as bell hooks, Alice Jardin, Aaronette M. White and Rubaiyat Hossain have written about the many ways feminism benefits men in addition to women. Those benefits include increased societal acceptance of people who do not conform to rigid gender binaries, prioritizing fatherhood in the lives of children and decreasing the emotional stress of being the sole or primary financial provider for one's family—which, in turn, can positively affect mental and physical health.

Today, an increasing number of feminist men are speaking for themselves about why and how they support gender

equality. One of them is John Savel, an education professional in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who spoke about gender conditioning. "I have serious anxiety issues," he explains, "and I have been wondering if part of that has to do with the pressure I have [to be traditionally masculine] and my failure to act that way."

As Savel demonstrates, feminism makes visible the ways gender expectations shape our experiences and opportunities. In contrast to the notion that feminist men are either "whipped" or else pretending to support women's rights in order to get laid, many men are strong allies in the gender equity movement. Modern-day activists like Martin Dufresne of Montreal Men Against Sexism and anti-porn activist Robert Jensen are furthering a male feminist agenda and using their own experiences and perspectives to convince other men that feminism supports people of all gender identities.

Although Montreal Men Against Sexism (1979–2003) is no longer active, during its heyday the group worked to discredit the emerging anti-feminist "men's rights" groups in Quebec. Former director Dufresne says, "I may be an incurable optimist, but I really think patriarchy has become unstable and is in the process of being brought down. I consider myself lucky to live at this time and be part of this process, along with my feminist friends whose political intelligence constantly awes me."

The Coexist Initiative (Kenya), Men for Change (Canada), Samyak (India) and the Men's Resource Centre of Saskatoon also work to move feminism forward around the globe. But the challenge of undoing institutionalized male privilege is complicated, and because institutional privilege is largely invisible to those who have it, men must be rigorous in their attempts at self-reflection.

From the White Ribbon Campaign (Canada) to Men Can Stop Rape (U.S.), to Program H (Brazil), anti-violence work is perhaps that most common form of male feminist activism. Perhaps the most oft-cited example of male feminism since its inception in 1991, on the second anniversary of The Montreal Massacre, the White Ribbon Campaign has become the largest male-led effort worldwide to educate boys and men about gender violence. In Canada, the organization coordinates an annual national public awareness campaign that begins on the International Day for the Eradication of Violence Against Women (November 26) and ends twelve days later on Canada's National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women (December 6) while supporting locally organized events throughout the year.

Physical and sexual violence has prompted many feminist men to lead violence prevention work around the world, particularly with other men. By modelling anti-sexist behaviour,

Khary Lazarre-White and Jason Warwin's efforts to develop feminist practices for boys and men are part of a growing movement driven by a desire to create a pro-feminist generation of men.

men teach each other to see the ways one's gender is socially constructed and works to shape one's thoughts, actions and sense of entitlement.

Taylor explains: "I would guess that men who grow up in abusive or alcoholic environments tend either to reproduce them as adults or fight against them." For many men, the choice is the latter.

As Australian sociologist Michael Flood writes in "Engaging Men in Ending Men's Violence against Women," including boys and men in feminist advocacy *does* make a difference. But the task of enacting social change is at times fraught with complications, especially if men's strategies to combat sexism do not involve analyzing and disassembling their own power, empowering women, or both.

For example, anti-violence programs run by men for men can unexpectedly reinforce men's position of social authority and undermine the legitimacy of women's voices by subtly conveying through the structure of the program that violence against women is unacceptable only because another man says it is.

Swedish artist Gabriel Bohm Calles explains: "It's what other men think that counts. And the pressure men live under in their lives mostly comes from other men."

What Calles is saying is that it is possible to shift the dialogue without changing the underlying power dynamic. Therefore, an ideal program model is one co-facilitated by men *and* women in order to model the type of egalitarian behaviour one wishes to promote.

This dynamic was addressed by Flood, who told delegates at the Australian Women Speak: Inaugural National Women's Conference in 2001 that "responses to men's involvement in gender issues are themselves shaped by patriarchal privilege."

First, Flood noted, men's groups often receive greater media attention and interest compared to similar groups of women. "This is partly the result of the former's novelty," he told the conference, "but it is also a function of the status and cultural legitimacy granted to men's voices in general."

Flood went on to say that "men acting for gender justice receive praise and credit [especially from women] which is often out of proportion to their efforts." In other words, "any positive action by men may be seen as gratifying in the face

of other men's apathy about and complicity in sexism." Flood also noted that men are able to draw on institutional privilege to attract levels of support and funding rarely granted to women. "This can of course be turned to strategic advantage," he concluded.

The danger in invoking that privilege, of course, is that it may marginalize women's voices in their own movement, inadvertently reinforcing patriarchal values. Ignoring these issues also prevents male feminists from acknowledging any benefits they receive from institutional sexism. Many women have called men to task for enacting their male privilege, only to hear a defensive denial in response. This isn't necessarily a response specific to men; it is a response that arises in *all* people with privilege. White anti-racist activists also fail, at times, to recognize their privilege, even when people of colour point out ways in which they hold on to their power.

Possessing privilege means one has the ability to choose not to be aware of that privilege when it isn't convenient. In a time when one feels defensive, the best initial response is to listen, listen and then listen some more.

"The most difficult challenge, and one that I had to confront very early, was the assumption that by privilege of being male I had something interesting to say," offers Ashvin Kini, a graduate student of literature at UC-San Diego and writer for the *Feminist Review* blog. "I needed to learn to shut up, sit back and LISTEN. While I wholeheartedly believe that men should identify as feminist, that means being able to recognize our need to listen and reflect."

Kini concludes, "I may identify as feminist, but I do not always have the right to offer my opinion on feminist issues."

For male feminists, maintaining an awareness of their own privilege in order to vigilantly disassemble male dominance is crucial. It is not enough to talk the talk; one must also incorporate principles of equality into one's daily life. This means not only treating individual women with respect (for example, sharing household and child care responsibilities, encouraging women's financial independence and economic success) and refusing to be complicit when other men demonstrate sexist behaviour, but also taking steps to shift societal dynamics that benefit men as a group (such as raising awareness about the links between dominant constructions of masculinity and gender-based violence, promoting reproductive justice policies and

As more men enter traditionally pink-collar professions such as nursing and primary school education, rigid standards of masculinity are slowly changing.

rejecting unearned authority).

Confronting male privilege requires an intersectional analysis of oppression that includes class, race, sexuality, geographic location and gender identity. And it means recognizing that while individual power varies, in most places around the world men receive institutional benefits and power to the detriment of women.

Being accountable for the deconstruction of male privilege means men should find creative ways to undermine and disassemble patriarchy, instead of pulling the rug out from under women. This might take the form of organizations run by men rejecting unearned benefits for their involvement in gender equity work and steering media and potential financial supporters toward like-minded organizations run by women. It can mean men use the remuneration of their privilege to tap into male-dominated resources that are less accessible to women. It means taking steps to build a dialogue and a strategy that support and centralize women's needs, strengths and abilities to make self-determined choices.

Filmmaker Byron Hurt does this in *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, a documentary that explores "masculinity, sexism, violence and homophobia in today's hip hop culture." Instead of blaming an amorphous "hip hop culture" for women's degradation, Hurt turns the lens to focus squarely on the part men play in creating a limited conception of black masculinity that imprisons both men and women. He does this by featuring interviews with men and women, putting the onus for developing solutions on men.

In March 2009, the Global Symposium on Engaging Men & Boys in Achieving Gender Equality took place in Rio de Janeiro. The first worldwide gathering of its kind, the conference brought together 450 participants from 80 countries and organizations including Brazil's Promundo Institute and Instituto Papai, Canada's White Ribbon Campaign, the United States' Save the Children and several coalition organizations like MenEngage Global Alliance and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The four-day exploration of men and feminism ended with a declaration that includes a call to action for men and boys to support the feminism worldwide.

The declaration states, in part: "We are here because we

know that the time when women stood alone in speaking out against discrimination and violence ... is coming to an end. We are gathering not simply to celebrate our first successes, but, with all the strength we possess, to appeal to parents, teachers, and coaches, to the media and businesses, to our governments, NGOs, religious institutions and the United Nations, to mobilize the political will and economic resources required to increase the scale and impact of work with men and boys to promote gender equality."

The men who organized the Global Symposium on Engaging Men & Boys in Achieving Gender Equality are taking male feminism to the next level. They are attempting to move beyond smaller, short-term interventions toward long-term, large-scale change. The conference yielded a plan of action for individuals, governments, community-based organizations, media and entertainment professionals, donors and private sector workers to incorporate feminism into their lives and work.

On an individual level, more men are taking classes or majoring in women's studies than ever before. We are beginning to see new models of masculinity in "bromance" films, a sign that men are becoming increasingly aware of themselves as gendered. As more men enter traditionally pink-collar professions such as nursing and primary school education, rigid standards of masculinity are slowly changing, binary gender roles are challenged and new models of what author Shira Tarrant calls "anti-racist, class-conscious, pro-queer, feminist manhood" are created.

Gender inequality is a historic inheritance that an increasing number of men are disavowing. Men's involvement in the women's rights movement can help create better, more equitable models for future generations of boys and girls. Full social, political and economic equality may still be a long way away, but the movement is more effective working in concert with male feminist allies.

As Lazarre-White puts it, "The issues of gender inequity, of structural sexism, of misogyny and the objectifying of women as commerce and property—these issues will not be deconstructed merely by women talking with girls. Men must take responsibility as well for this work. And we should not be commended for it. It is what evolved, ethical, moral men should be expected to do." ❀



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awareness of issues as they affect women; to promote the
strength, wisdom and creativity of women; to broaden the bound-
aries of feminism to include building coalitions and support among
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