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Independent gender consultant, feminist, writer, activist

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea?: A Feminist Argument for Engaging Men in Gender Equality

Posted: 01/12/2015 14:34 GMT | Updated: 01/12/2015 14:59 GMT

I seem to spend a lot of time talking and writing about men these days. Which is perhaps a little weird for a longtime feminist. And I sometimes think I can never get it right.

I recently did a [Tedx](#) talk entitled 'Why feminism needs men and why men need feminism'. Controversial perhaps, but certainly not anti-men. I knew about online trolling, but I wasn't expecting such a barrage of misogyny and plain misinterpretation of what I had said.

Then there are some of my feminist friends, who are much more intelligent than the trolls and much more polite, but who basically think that engaging with men is a waste of time.

I have spent most of my life working on women's and girls' rights and I continue to argue strongly against the violence, discrimination and abuse that are still all too common.

But in the last few years I have become increasingly convinced that unless we as feminists engage with men and boys, things will only change so far - and they may even go backwards. Which is why I wrote my book [Feminism and Men](#). And why I have been working with people in organisations, groups and campaigns that are trying to involve men in work on gender equality. For example, the [White Ribbon](#) campaign of men against violence against women, [Instituto Promundo](#), which began by working with young men in Brazilian favelas and continues to work on social norms in many parts of the world, [Sonke Gender Justice](#), which works against violence and for a more equal society for all in South Africa, and the [MenCare campaign](#) that aims to get more men involved in the home.

It seems to me that there are five main obstacles to working with men on gender equality.

1. In many if not most countries and contexts, gender equality is still seen as a 'women's issue'.
2. Some women's organisations see engaging men in gender equality as a distraction from the task of empowering women.
3. There is still pressure on men to conform to traditional gender norms about what it means to 'be a man'.
4. This makes many men apathetic or resistant to change, and some men's rights activists or organisations actively hostile to women.
5. Finally, there is a risk that work with men and boys takes over from work with women and girls - particularly in an age of austerity.

I am also quite clear that the positive benefits of involving men in work on gender equality hugely outweigh any downsides. But the work needs to be done with care. First, and most importantly, those working with men need to build alliances with women's organisations and groups. Second, the work needs to start early, by challenging gender stereotypes in school. Third, it is important to highlight the benefits of gender equality for men (not least of which are better health and potentially a happier life), and be sure to take account of their diversity, as well as addressing the real problems that some men experience. And finally, we need to focus on 'opportunity moments' in men's lives - such as fatherhood - which is why I thought it was important to be involved in co-authoring the very first [State of the World's Fathers report](#).

I sense a sea change even in the past year. While they are still a minority, there are now men all over the world who are joining women to call for gender justice. They might be men in India protesting against rape, or those in South Africa marching against for gender equality and against xenophobia, or men in Brazil campaigning for the legalization of abortion. And the crucial fact is that they are all standing alongside

women.

A year ago this month I was in Delhi, India, attending a conference on gender justice. Anyone who works on gender will know that men are normally a tiny minority at any gender meeting, workshop or conference. But this time was different. Two thirds of the 1,200 delegates from 92 countries were men. And the other third were either women from women's rights organisations, or transgender.

The Delhi conference was organised by the [Centre for Health and Social Justice](#) on behalf of [MenEngage](#), which is a network of almost 700 organisations around the world that works to engage men and boys in gender equality. Many of them are women's organisations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) or the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF).

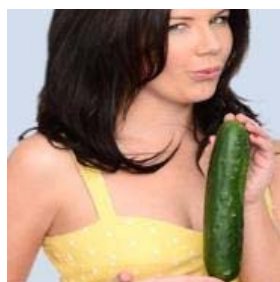
The United Nations estimates that it will take 80 years to achieve gender equality. I think that is far too long. Building these kind of alliances between men and women is will contribute to bringing about real change. It will take time, patience, respect - and resources. It is important that it does not mean women and girls losing precious spaces or support, but gaining allies. It will enable both men and women to live their lives to the fullest. And it is only way forward. As is so often the case, we in the rich world have much to learn here from the Global South. There is an African proverb that sums this up beautifully: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together'.

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