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The problem with men participating in feminism? There is no risk – but plenty of glory

From Reclaim the Night to abortion politics, men's participation in feminist spaces too frequently comes with no real cost.

By Sarah Ditum

I didn't go on my local Reclaim the Night march last year. I wanted to, but then I looked at the event page on Facebook and saw how many of those planning to go were men, and I thought: who, exactly, do these guys think they're reclaiming the night *from*? Reclaim the Night started in the UK in 1977 as a specific response to male violence and institutional disregard for women's lives and freedoms. In Leeds, the indolent Ripper investigation had allowed Peter Sutcliffe to go on killing for years. The police, it appeared, simply didn't care enough about the lives of prostituted women to mount a proper manhunt, and it was only when Sutcliffe murdered a student that they took action. That action was to tell women to stay at home after dark.

The message from the police was clear: the streets at night belonged to men, and any woman who expected to stay unbutchered had better stick to her allotted hours of public life. RtN was the feminist response: women with banners high and torches lit, striding through their cities,

declaring that they would not let male violence keep them safely in their domestic place, declaring that they would not be made to be afraid. Now many marches, including my local one, explicitly welcome men.

I saw the pictures from the march that I'd decided not to join. There, front and centre, was a smiling man, bravely staking his claim to exist in public in a world that had never told him to do anything else. He'd never had the hand up his skirt in a nightclub, the catcall or the dog bark. His presence was meaningless, and worse, it made the whole march meaningless: what could really have been "reclaimed" by women if a man had led them? I am not particularly interested in arguing about whether men can be feminists. I am much more concerned by the kinds of feminism that men seem to feel drawn towards: it is, in so many cases, the kind that costs them nothing.

Going on a march and shining your right-on credentials entails no danger and no loss for a man. In fact, the "glass elevator" effect (whereby men are promoted within female-dominated environments simply *because they are male* and so perceived to be more competent) means that men often enjoy an unearned escalation in their own importance when they join such protests. I have lost count of the number of times I've heard about vigils or marches where women, having done all the tedious admin to make the event happen, have seen the press magnetically drawn towards a man who just happened to show up on the day. Men, who somehow couldn't get excited about printing leaflets or liaising with police, suddenly had boundless enthusiasm for the cause as soon as a camera appeared.

Feminism is a redistributive project. It entails, ultimately, men giving up the power they hold over women. But understandably, many men would rather not surrender power – cannot even comprehend that there is any injustice in the power they bear simply on account of their possession of a penis. Yet those men would still like to be "feminists", because we live in an absurd world where, rather than see feminism as a political movement, we see it as a badge worn in evidence of individual niceness. (I once gave a talk in which I suggested that feminism was a matter of action rather than identity. "But I can be a feminist even if I don't do anything!" choked an affronted audience member. "I am a good person!" As if "feminist" were just another word for "good person".)

And so men find ways to claim "feminism" at no hazard to themselves. It is easy for a man to support abortion access under the current paternalistic laws, because it doesn't mean giving up any great degree of control, and it does ensure that women are (bluntly) more fuckable, by ameliorating the reproductive consequences of the fuck. It is easy too for a man to endorse a "sex-positive" feminism that enshrines his right to use pornography and prostituted women, because this is a kind of "feminism" that will cause him no annoyance whatsoever. He still gets off. He never has to question the ethics of obtaining his orgasm through supremacy over women.

Everything continues to revolve around his penis, and he can call it women's liberation.

So too for the men who support the no-platforming of women such as Germaine Greer, Julie Bindel and Kate Smurthwaite on the grounds that the words they speak or have spoken can somehow produce violence against sex workers or transwomen. The fact that rape, murder and assault are overwhelmingly – almost exclusively – perpetrated by men is conveniently ignored here. It is punters and pimps, not supporters of the Nordic model, who harm women in prostitution. It is men, not gender critical feminists, who commit transphobic assaults. But why acknowledge the violence done by men when you could pin responsibility on a woman and concentrate on telling her to STFU?

A man whose “feminism” involves silencing women has lost precisely nothing. By criticising female behaviour rather than male violence, he naturalises male violence: that is treated as an inevitability, to which women’s boundaries and women’s beliefs must bend. In this way, male supremacy is reinscribed into the political script, and men’s position as the dominant sex class stands unchallenged.

Men who want to be feminists should expect to be uncomfortable. They should feel the hot shame of realising that their power and position have been taken at the expense of women. They should know the inconvenience of not being able to indulge their sexual pleasures, because they have learned that women’s pleasure matters too, and they can no longer guiltlessly enjoy an orgasm beaten out upon a minimally resistant female body. And if they feel no shame, no inconvenience, no loss at all? Then what they are doing is not feminism. It is just patriarchy all over again.



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