

Ben Brown: Why we all need to be advocates for gender equality

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October 29 2018 By Ben Brown

Last week, Ben Brown and Hester MacKinnon attended the Spirit of Tasmania Charity Luncheon to discuss the importance of promoting gender equality and highlight the need for all of us to be active bystanders. This is Ben's speech.



Good afternoon, everyone. It's an honour to be standing here today, and I would very much like to thank the Spirit of Tasmania and Our Watch for giving me the opportunity to speak on a topic that I am very passionate about.

Why am I here?

A few of you may be asking that question.

I'm just a footballer, after all. I'm not an expert in domestic violence.

So why am I standing here today?

But that's just it. We are all here for a reason. Let's not beat around the bush - I have this platform because I'm a footballer. But I'm hoping to speak to you today as a fellow human being, as a man, a husband, and a soon-to-be-father.

Everyone in this room has the great privilege of being here today; and it's not just because of our drive to end gender inequality and prevent violence against women and their families. Many of us are considered leaders in our field, and are often lauded for our career achievements. But I don't think anyone here would say that that their career is all that defines who they are as a person. So let's put the stereotypes away and have a discussion human being to human being.

I am here because I don't believe we have achieved gender equality in this country, which is having a negative effect not only on women and children, but on everyone.

I am here because I think it is unfair that I wouldn't have the option to play AFL football as a full-time job if I were a woman.

I am here because I am deeply troubled and concerned about the rates of domestic violence occurring in our country.

And I am here because I believe that all of us here have the ability to make a real difference, a true impact, in this space.

Patty has shown you a couple of videos earlier - as a man, these can be quite confronting to watch. Is the stereotypical man violent? Are men to blame for these damning statistics? We have all seen the news articles and the TV ads proclaiming that as men, we need to do more. That violence against women is a national problem meriting a response.

The way I see it, we can respond in three ways to the premise that men need to do more.

The first response is to say "I'm not the problem" - with this reaction, we are questioning why it is that men as a group are being singled out - we know the statistics, but we also know that we aren't a threat to our families, to our loved ones, to our partners and our children. This type of argument follows that 'men' are unfairly blamed by the media - after all, we say to ourselves, it's surely the actions of a few that are the real problem here. 'I'm not the problem'.

Which brings me to the second response - and it often follows on from the first - that is, "they're the problem". And it is exactly what I've just described. We call it the 'monster myth' - that is, we think that these men who commit these atrocities within the home - the perpetrators of family violence - are 'monsters', the 'other'.

You would have seen words like this in headlines splashed across front pages after a tragic family violence case. We distance ourselves from these people as much as we possibly can. Why should a few terrible people change the way I live my life? I'm not the problem - they're the problem.

The difficulty here can be working out why these responses could be problematic. On face value, parts of them ring true - there are many men in the world who never commit an act of family violence. But, at the crux of it, these responses are about shifting the blame for family violence. These responses ignore the true drivers of family violence, which Patty spoke about earlier, and only act to stagnate cultural change.

Which brings me to the third response, and the response that we are advocating for here today. We need to accept the fact that men DO need to do more to actively advocate for gender equality. And, for that matter, that we all need to do more in this space.

True, not all men are the direct perpetrators of family violence - but it is not our honour and our reputation as 'good people' or 'good men' that is the thing that is truly at risk here - it is, in fact, the responsibility of all of us to stand up for an equal society - for women and

children whose lives are being permanently affected - or ended - by structural inequality or family violence, or both.

The next question to ask here is 'how?' - and it's a big one! Being an active bystander is not always an easy thing. The first step is to think about what you value, and deciding that this is a worthwhile cause to support. And we're all here today, which is an awesome start!

Patty and John have already spoken about the drivers of gender inequality and the ways in which these drivers ultimately lead to the increased prevalence of domestic violence in our society - so I'm going to assume that we all understand the gravity of the situation we're faced with here, and why it is important that we try to make change in our lives. It's so important that we figure out the 'why' first and foremost and keep it front of mind, because if we understand 'why', we will be a more resilient active bystander.

My own journey is still very much in progress - and I'm definitely not a perfect advocate! When I first heard about the concept of being an active bystander, it actually scared me a bit. I'm an introverted person by nature, and I thought that being an active bystander meant being an outgoing guy armed with an array of knowledge, ready to jump in to a sexist or disrespectful conversation at any time, no matter the audience.

I didn't identify with the style of activism that I envisioned - but I knew that I wanted to do something, because I knew that some of the things I was seeing and hearing around me in my life were things that I couldn't agree with or condone through my lack of action.

It was too important to me and my set of values for me to continue to do nothing when these situations arose. For me, it was about working out my own style of activism and looking to develop and evolve it over time.

Early doors, my activism meant not laughing along when I heard a disrespectful comment. It also meant asking my wife and other women around me for help and guidance, being open to learning about their experiences of life, and how they differed from my own, and beginning to question the societal norms around me. And it actually felt really good to have my actions more closely align with my beliefs, and to feel myself beginning to notice more often the problematic aspects of our shared experience of life.

I am also a big believer that practice makes perfect in these kinds of scenarios. To give you a quick example, we've had a lot of North Melbourne fans come up to Hester and I recently to say how much they hope that our unborn (and, as yet, gender-less) child is a boy - because, if it were, the Club would have draft rights to him when he was old enough to play in the AFL.

Put simply, if our child is a boy, people will supposedly be celebrating and, if it is a girl, they will be disappointed. What a way to be welcomed into the world!

Hester and I got quite used to hearing this comment over the duration of the pregnancy and, as such, we developed our methods of responding to it. Some of you may know that, in 2019, North Melbourne will debut its own AFL Women's team. Thus, technically, our child

will have the potential to be drafted to the AFL regardless of its sex at birth. Our standard response became to point this fact out to fans in a light-hearted manner - "well, we've got our own AFLW team now too! So either way, we might have a Roos player in the future!"

This is why we didn't think much of it at the time when Hester was asked on the Brownlow Medal red carpet at the end of the year, on Channel 7's coverage, whether the baby could be a future 'Father-Son' for North Melbourne - and she responded just as we had many times before, reminding the host that we had an AFL Women's team too.

In the aftermath, however, Hester was flooded with responses from people who had watched the telecast, and who shared their appreciation for her comments, and how much it meant to them.

Importantly, this wasn't a comment that was designed to be abrupt or to attack the commenter. Being an active bystander is about finding your own way to make an impact - it doesn't have to be difficult. And it was months of trialing different responses and gauging their effectiveness that led to Hester's moment of success on the red carpet. Trial, error and reflection is a big part of learning to be an effective advocate.

And we must keep in mind throughout that this is a process of personal growth - we're not going to get it right first time, every time. But it doesn't mean that we should give up. That we are trying our best to uphold our values is the important thing - particularly when we are aware that there is so much at stake.

Many of you will know first hand how much babies and small children are sponges (Hester and I are about to find that out ourselves, of course) - they will follow and copy everything that those around them do - that's why we have to be careful with what we say and do around kids. But people often underestimate the impact they have on those around them in their adult communities - we are still kids at heart, after all - and I know that I often look to others for behavioral guidance in certain situations - I think most people do!

That's why it's so important that we reflect on the decisions we make in these kinds of scenarios - because other people are like you. They are looking to others for guidance in their behaviours, they like to fit in with the crowd and sometimes feel comfortable copying or taking certain elements from the behaviours of others. We are social beings, after all - we crave connection.

The more we can connect in a way that is inclusive and respectful, the more others will come along for the ride. We do have the power to have an impact in our own way. That is why we are here today.

I will continue to try to improve, to learn, to listen to the women in my life, and to try to become a more effective active bystander - and my hope is that we will all take this journey together. The more supporters and advocates we have, the easier it will become over time for us to have a real impact, and to begin to change the story for women and their children.

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