

Book Review

Women Can't Hear What Men Don't Say:

Destroying Myths, Creating Love

(Warren Farrell, Finch Publishing, Sydney, 2001)

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I approached this book with some degree of wariness, as I had read Warren Farrell's previous books, including *The Myth of Male Power*. It needs to be said at the outset that male power is not a myth but a reality that has devastating consequences in the lives of many women.

The fundamental fallacy that underlies all of Farrell's work is the idea that reporting what men feel constitutes some sort of social analysis of gendered power. It does not. If men *feel* disempowered, it is either because of the price men pay for the power they have or because of the power that other men have over them. It is not, as Farrell claims, the result of women's power over men.

So with a subtitle in his new book of 'destroying myths', I was sceptical. However, I had been told that his new book was not a backlash against women. It was rather about how to improve communication between men and women by giving and receiving criticism in a constructive way. Part I of Farrell's new book is about how to improve communication and about how to help men express their feelings. Men do have difficulty expressing their feelings and this has many negative consequences for themselves and their relationships with women, children and other men. Improving communication between women and men is important. However, Farrell holds women

equally responsible for men's emotional inexpressiveness. He does not recognise the widely noted sources of men's difficulty in expressing feelings, such as homophobia, fear of femininity, competitiveness with other men and as a strategy of maintaining their power and privilege.

Relationships between women and men that are based on equality rather than hierarchy have the highest levels of intimacy and the best levels of communication between partners. Communication techniques that do not address the issue of power in relationships and that validate men's feelings as representing a 'truth' about gender are not likely to 'create love', as the second part of Farrell's subtitle suggests. Yes, it is important that men are connected to their experiences and their feelings. But it is also important that men learn how to see their experiences as part of a larger whole. It is important that men critically reflect on their experiences and their feelings and come to understand what women are also saying about men.

A more apt title for Farrell's new book might have been: *Some Men Still Can't Hear What Women Are Saying*. The traditional male viewpoint that Farrell articulates, and encourages other men to become more outspoken about, excludes any consideration of the perspective of women. Women's experiences in general, and

Book Review

feminist perspectives in particular, are dismissed and invalidated. And this is where we come to those parts of the book that are of most concern to me.

Part II of Farrell's book addresses the claim that the feminists have created myths about men's involvement in household work and about their greater propensity for violence in relationships. It is important to note that Farrell's advocacy for gentle and constructive criticism are passed over here as he engages in fierce criticism of women's accounts about men's domestic work and men's violence.

Farrell argues that the well recognised and documented 'second shift', which is the acknowledged fact that women undertake most of the household work and childcare (even when they are working full time in the paid labour force), is a myth. He argues that men are doing more than their fair share when the 'male second shift' is taken into account. Farrell's male second shift includes: assembly, car buying, computer buying; purchasing the Christmas tree, dead animal disposal, squishing spiders, purchasing guns and weapons, programming the video-recorder, reading the business and financial pages and sandbagging in the event of a storm. There is no research to indicate whether men do most of the activities that Farrell lists and even if there was, most of these activities are not undertaken on a daily basis.

To suggest that men's involvement in some or many of these activities counter-balances the inequality in house cleaning, laundry, meal preparation, grocery shopping, child care and the general management of domestic life is spurious. Studies carried out in Australian in the last fifteen years consistently demonstrate men's lack of involvement in family work compared with

women, even when paid work hours are equal. A study of dual-income families in 1999, reported that 82 per cent of mothers had overall responsibility for children. Another Australian study published in 1997 showed that women in full-time paid employment completed over 65 per cent of the household's unpaid labour. This is not counting the invisible work of thinking about and planning meals, etcetera. Thus, men's relative lack of involvement in family work is documented in numerous studies. It is not a myth.

The second so-called myth that Farrell sets out to challenge is that most of the perpetrators of violence are men. Farrell argues that women are equally or more likely to assault their husbands than men are to assault their wives. Farrell cites studies that supposedly demonstrate that women are more likely to initiate violence and more likely to inflict severe violence. Almost all of the studies that



Farrell cites use a self-reporting scale called the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). This form of measuring violence in the family has been discredited in almost all scholarly research into family violence. It has a number of fundamental flaws. Firstly, it omits a number of forms of violence, including rape and sexual assault; choking, suffocating, scratching, stalking and murder. Secondly, it excludes the events precipitating the violence. It does not indicate whether women's violence was in self defence. Most incidents of violence against men are a result of women taking defensive action after being attacked by a male partner. Thirdly, it does not address the social, economic and emotional context in which the violence is embedded. Men and women are treated as having equal power when they do not. Women's violence against men is rarely characterised by the kind of chronic intimidation that characterises the battering of women. This is not to deny that some men are victims of women's violence

but to suggest that the extent of the problem is equal to the problem of men's violence against women flies in the face of a vast amount of research to the contrary and the experiences of those who work in the area of family violence.

Part III of Farrell's book is focused on what Farrell calls 'man bashing' and what he regards as the bias of institutions against men. Farrell argues that most institutions interpret gender issues from either a feminist or female perspective. This is the result, he says of 'the lace curtain'. Whereas the 'iron curtain' shut out ideas that were a threat to communism, supposedly, 'the lace curtain shuts out opinions considered a threat to feminism' (p.233). Examples of arguments he cites in support of this are the previously mentioned refusal to acknowledge men as equal victims of domestic violence and the refusal to acknowledge 'men's second shift'.

Farrell argues that 'it has become as hard for men to have their issues heard in industrialised countries as it was for capitalists to have their issues heard in the Soviet Union between 1917 and the advent of glasnost' (p. 233). Men supposedly 'do not speak up, organise or publicise, so biases against women are eliminated and biases against men remain' (p. 243). So feminist women are seen as having equivalent power to Soviet bureaucrats under Communism.

One of the strategies that dominant groups have historically used to hold on to social power is to deny that they have power. Farrell's new book is not about 'destroying myths and creating love', it is about creating myths and limiting the capacity to love. An African-American feminist, bell hooks, once said that only when men repudiate 'the will to dominate' will they be able to experience love and intimacy. If we believe Farrell's myths, we will move further away from that possibility.

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