

Clementine Ford: There Was Something Different About International Men's Day This Year

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In a few months time, we'll be waking up to celebrate another annual International Women's Day.

As we know, every year when March 8 rolls around comment sections and talkback radio hours are filled with the outraged bleating of aggrieved men wanting to know why we need to have a day to celebrate bloody *women* when a) the world is clearly sexist against men and b) what about International Men's Day, hmmm? When the bloody hell is *that*? #checkmate #toptrumps #impeachthatguyalready

But whoops! We DO have an International Men's Day, you guys! And as we have told you *repeatedly*, it's on November 19. Which was, you know, yesterday.



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What I Want To Teach My Boy About Toxic Masculinity

You may not have noticed though, because it seems the most chatter about International Men's Day happens on International Women's Day. I'd wager not a lot of morning teas were held yesterday, maybe because a lot of dudes still seem to expect women to organise everything for them. I *did* see some posters being circulated that included a lot of false information and dubious statistics, but no cupcakes. What a shame.

Joking aside, there was something different about International Men's Day this year and it signifies a hugely positive shift in society and the increased willingness of people to have confronting conversations about patriarchy, masculinity and the dismantling of the first to benefit the second. Instead of the usual jokes and withering commentary (in which I have freely and enthusiastically participated in the past, the target of those jokes of course being men who think IWD stands for Imps, Witches and Demons), there were heartfelt posts and tweets about how patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy impact the lives of men everywhere.

Nayuka Gorrie tweeted, "This #InternationalMensDay I'm thinking about Kumanjayi Walker, Mulrunji Doomadgee, Tane Chatfield, Wayne Morrison, Shaun Coolwell, LV, Mr Ward, TJ Hickey and so many more of our sons, brothers, cousins, uncles, grandfathers."

Laurie Penny added her thoughts: "Patriarchy hurts everyone. Emotional pain is not a competition. Everybody's trauma matters. Feminism isn't to blame for the way men and boys suffer in this society. Toxic masculinity is killing the world. We get through this together, or not at all."

The Australian actor Bob Morley wrote, "Phrases like: 'Man up, take it like a man' only perpetuate the attitude that it is not ok to express emotions. 'Man-pain' belittles those feelings. Roughly 70% of suicides are male. Maybe it's time to reconsider what masculinity is. #InternationalMensDay. Be well, be kind."

Across all my social media feeds, I saw an encouraging number of people broaching discussions about toxic expectations on masculinity and how these lead to some of the more serious problems outlined by International Men's Day -- which, among other things, includes poor mental health, high rates of suicide and how men are impacted by homophobia and transphobia.

The insistence that men be stoic and 'man up' in the face of mental trauma and anguish is an overwhelming factor in their reluctance to seek help for distress. High suicide rates among men are not caused by women's liberation, but by masculinity's failure to divest itself of the belief that 'real men' just 'get on with things'. Men are less likely to seek help from health professionals for mental distress or depression, in part because boys are still socialised to believe that crying makes them weak and is a uniquely feminine (bad!) trait.



NEXT STORY

Clementine Ford: For Pete's Sake, Let Your Boys Drink Pink Milk

Trans and queer men are also traditionally ignored by many of the men's rights activists who want to co-opt International Men's Day as some kind of attack on women. If you want to address poor rates of mental health in men, you cannot ignore the impact of transphobia and homophobia, particularly on men of colour. Indeed, it was heartening to see numerous comments made on IMD this year that addressed the importance of dismantling oppressive systems for these men in particular.

In fact, by my estimation there was far less cynicism towards IMD this year and far more genuine, earnest observations about the kinds of social shifts that are urgently required in order to liberate men from the ways in which they're oppressed by rigid, patriarchal ideas of masculinity. Advocating for men's rights to be emotionally complex creatures who won't allow shame to stop them from seeking help is admirable, yet it was once again derided as a form of 'soy boyism' from the Men's Rights brigade and its band of merry footsoldiers.



As we all know, real men don't drink soy milk. (Image: Getty)

But how else do we solve the problems faced by men if not by completely re-evaluating what it is men have been instructed to be? There's no point lamenting men's experiences with poor mental health if at the same time you're praising them for valiantly getting on with things and absorbing all the pressures of modern life.

Men shouldn't have to sacrifice everything in order to support their families financially, nor should their role within a family be reduced to that of 'breadwinner' and physical 'protector'. As *BBC Future* reported, one of the reasons men choose to die by suicide can be traced to an upturn in unemployment -- because when you construct the idea of strong and successful masculinity on the ability of men to earn money and 'provide', you increase the likelihood that their stress levels will be linked to this status.



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Boys Do Cry: The Artist Taking On 'Fragile Masculinity'

Despite many people's view of me, I'm deeply invested in celebrating positive masculinity and creating better conditions for men to be healthy, whole human beings. I don't want my son growing up in a world in which he faces an increased risk of dying by suicide.

As Morley said, it's important that we reconsider what masculinity is *and can be* so that we can actually support men to create a better world for themselves -- one in which success isn't linked to how much they dominate women, but how well they stand alongside us.