



4 Reasons Why Feminism Is for Men

It may seem obvious. Or may seem like a contradiction. But hear me out.

By Annika Blau

Illustrations by Ellen Porteus



At first glance, “feminism is for men” may seem like a contradiction in terms. **But hear me out.**

There are obvious and substantial benefits for men to gain from feminism. Many men are already aware of the ways in which patriarchy hurts them, even as it foists material privilege and status upon them. Any men who fall outside its macho parameters are familiar with the deep-seated insecurity this can engender. (We should also recognise upfront that the debilitating nature of the masculine ideal is amplified for those who are not white, heterosexual, cisgender and able-bodied.) In highlighting the male experience of existing within a narrow masculine ideal, I don't intend to minimise the crippling effect that the feminine ideal has on women. Rather, I hope that recognition of the harm done to both genders will make feminism a movement that is not fought by women alone.

This isn't to suggest that the benefits for men must be illustrated before feminism is valorised—the emancipation of women is a critical goal in and of itself. But with this qualification in place, I proceed with my thesis: **feminism is for men and women.**



#1. MASCULINITY IS A NARROW & RESTRICTIVE IDEAL



It is no secret that our idea of what's "masculine" is punishingly narrow in scope, and while it's loosened in the past forty years, there is still much work left to do. The workforce is still largely segregated into characteristically "masculine" and "feminine" roles, which, for men, stigmatises their entry into care roles like

nursing and teaching. Our culture still prefers men who play rugby over those who bake. Cross-dressing as a heterosexual is still a definite no-go. "Stay at home Dad" is still more of a fallback position than an aspiration. The sheer novelty of the term is proof enough of how marginal the role is,

and even shows like *Modern Family*, where the general conceit is that it embodies all the different facets of contemporary suburban life, still settled on couples with housewives—homosexuality, adoption, second marriages and cross-generational love made the cut, but no (heterosexual) stay-at-home Dads. And even if the man does work, there's still emasculating undertones if he's not the higher earner. Then there's the physical archetype of masculinity, a standard that comes less and less naturally in a workforce centred on computers over manual labour. Technology may be erasing the distinction between men and women's physical capabilities, yet the muscled alpha male remains the dominant image of manliness.

It has long been recognised in feminist literature that patriarchy does not privilege all men evenly, and that their rewarding under the system correlates with how closely they resemble the masculine ideal. The sociologist Raewynn Connell (previously Bob Connell) examines this phenomenon in her seminal literature. According to Connell, there are many, many different “masculinities” being practised by men everywhere, but only a small subset of those are approved of by society. This is the “dominant” masculinity, and all who fall outside its confines are abhorred.



Sadly, the “ideal” male characteristic of strength is often asserted through violence against both men and women in Australia. Both domestic and street violence are endemic in our culture, and both maim and kill every year. Street violence received swathes of media coverage following last year's string of “king hit” fatalities. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, paramedics are called out to treat a king hit victim every second day. While the media repeatedly refer to these incidences as “alcohol fuelled violence”, and the

NSW policy response has likewise centred on alcohol restriction, the role of “masculine” stereotypes is being ignored.

What is it that makes a man want to punch another man in the head unprovoked? I can’t say for certain, but I can confidently guess that it has *at least something* to do with a barbaric hangover from an outdated masculine ideal, which locates power in physicality and success in domination.

David Penberthy was a rare journalist astute enough to point out the potential implication of gender roles in his excellent op-ed on Shaun McNeil, king-hit killer of 18-year old Daniel Christie. This is the charming McNeil of whom we speak:



Penberthy details the masculinity currently being aspired to by many Australians: a “moronic new breed of man” obsessed with strength and physical prowess, a narcissism that is only amplified through social media:

[McNeil] is a lover of social media, and has turned his dopey little corner of the internet into his personal shrine. He’s posted an endless series of snaps and selfies flexing his pecs, showing off his tats in a ripped muscle shirt, triumphantly holding an empty bottle of Bundy, apparently consumed in its entirety, in what might be his crowning life achievement to date...

...Nowadays [these men] can find equally feeble-minded narcissists in cyberspace where they can boast about their physical prowess, be it their ability to cut their heads open by crushing a beer can and withstand the pain, to put the gloves on and lay into the heavy bag at the local gym, or in the worst cases,

to chronicle their own acts of violence or vandalism towards people and property with stills and video.

Penberthy also tracks the correlation between violence and Australia's high steroid and amphetamine use, which once again is a byproduct of Aussie men relentlessly pursuing the "ideal" male physique. Penberthy concludes that for this "new breed of blokes", a night's success is measured not by how much fun you've had, but by "how many strangers you've belted."

A standard response to male-on-male violence is the claim that the male brain is hardwired for violence. However, Connell dismissed this possibility while writing on the topic of Daniel Christie for *The Conversation*.

*The psychological evidence is very clear. More than a hundred years of research looking for broad psychological differences between men and women have found remarkably few. The **evidence**, from studies involving millions of people, shows that men as a group, and women as a group, are psychologically very similar. So we cannot explain men's involvement in severe violence by a "male brain", or testosterone, or anything supposed to produce different mentalities among men and women.*

Instead, "masculinities are patterns of conduct that have to be learned", Connell says, citing the role of media targeted specifically at young men by Hollywood:

Action movies, commercial football, other body-contact sports, cop shows, thrillers... Those genres... are built on narratives of masculine aggression, physical confrontation and dominance... Media are feeding young men narratives about how to get excitement, success and respect through confrontation.

If Connell and the evidence she cites are correct then violence of the variety that we are witnessing is a direct result of how men are socially conditioned. A limited view of masculinity informs limited depictions of men in the media. This, in turn, reinforces a limited view of masculinity, where physicality and action are prioritised.

In summary: The sooner we break down restrictive gender roles, the sooner we'll stop witnessing ludicrous displays of self-aggrandising barbarism every Saturday night.



#3. THE MASCULINE IDEAL ESCHEWS EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

A particularly destructive aspect of the masculine ideal is its emphasis on action over emotion. With the historical coupling of emotion with femininity, men are still expected to repress and control displays of emotion. When paired with a compulsion toward self-reliance at all costs, we get a particularly toxic cocktail, often resulting in depression. Because men are less likely to talk about their experiences of depression, hundreds of cases of male depression go unrecognised and untreated. This could be why we have an average of *five men* dying by suicide each day in Australia. Prominent men have spoken out about the difficulty of reaching out to other men for help and admitting vulnerability. As Beyond Blue writes:

In general, men tend to put off getting any kind of help because they think they are supposed to be tough, self-reliant, able to manage pain and take charge of situations. This can make it hard for men to acknowledge they have any health problems, let alone a mental health problem.

Unlike patriarchy, feminism doesn't undersell the emotional capacities, sensitivities and intelligence of men. It attributes to men and women equal reserves of empathy, compassion, feeling and insight, which are critical to the relationships that make life meaningful and bring happiness.



Victim blaming is rife in our culture. Too often, when women are raped the onus of blame is flipped back onto them. “What was she wearing?”, “Was she being seductive?”, the commentators ask, as if men don't have the

willpower and moral compass to withstand a low-cut top or some mild flirtation. Aside from being utterly reprehensible, this approach paints men as Neanderthals who are slave to primitive urges for sex, violence and domination. I think men are more than that. And so does feminism. *Rape and assault do not correlate with testosterone.* There are thousands, millions of men who do not rape or abuse women.

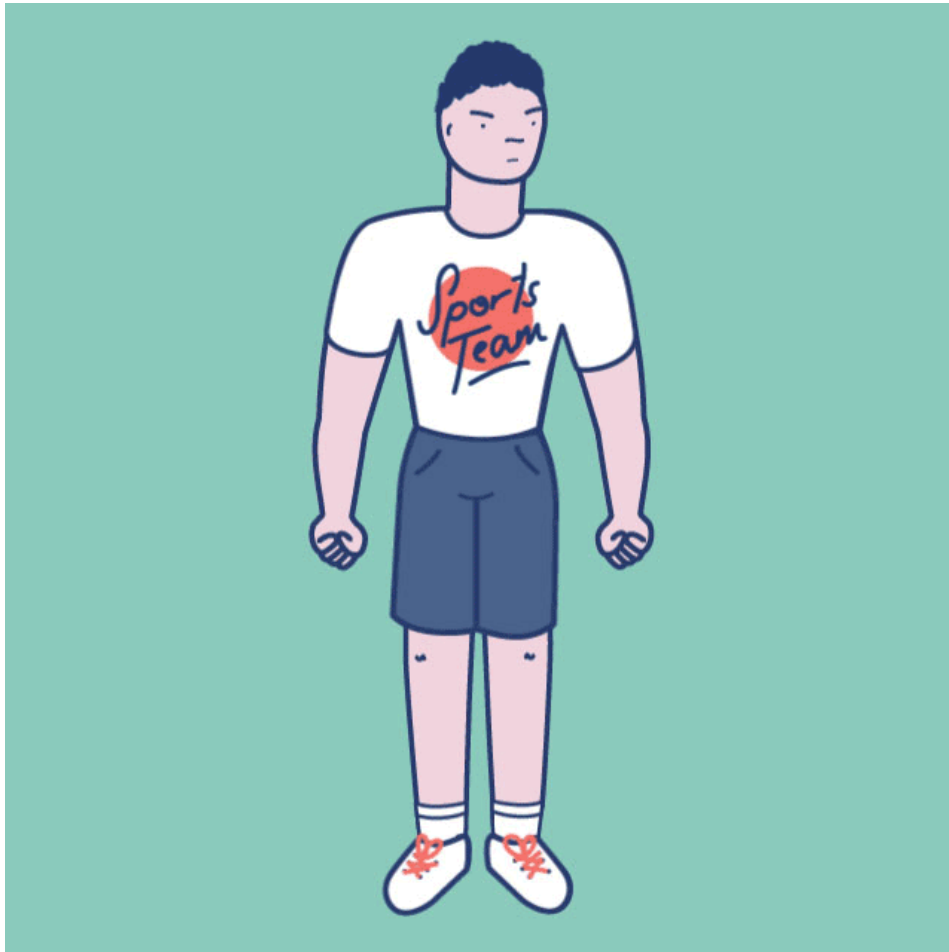
Feminists believe that rape is not inevitable. Feminists believe in a future where men don't rape women, because feminists believe that men have the degree of moral faculty and self-reflection that separates them from animals.

In summary, I turn to the words of Chally Kacelnik:

The thing is, it's patriarchy that says men are stupid and monolithic and unchanging and incapable. It's patriarchy that says men have animalistic instincts and just can't stop themselves from harassing and assaulting. It's patriarchy that says men can only be attracted by certain qualities, can only have particular kinds of responses, can only experience the world in narrow ways. Feminism holds that men are capable of more – are more than that. Feminism says that men are better than that, can change, are capable of learning, and have the capacity to be decent and wonderful people.



So, what do we do about it?



If, as men, you believe the abolition of restrictive gender roles is indeed a worthwhile objective, then make it a reality. Feminism can equip you with the model and theoretical resources you need, but **it is not the job of women to fight your fight for you**. They can and will be powerful allies, but they're busy overturning their own centuries of repression by patriarchy.

Speak up, but **don't do so in the safe-spaces designated for conversations about female experience**. Make your own spaces. Make them online and make them in the real world. Produce your own analyses of the imagery that perpetuates one stereotypical masculinity at the expense of others. Lobby the gatekeepers of these narratives to broaden their scope. Think about how we can socialise boys from the youngest age with broader ideals of what it means to be a man. Fight to get these new, positive images into media forms.

In short, put forward a cogent and defensible case for the broadening of the masculine ideal, whose goal is neither to dismiss nor undermine analyses of how patriarchy harms women.

And remember, always remember, that it's *feminism*, not patriarchy, who

believes you have the capacity and the will-power to do so.

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Annika Blau is a Sydney-based writer with a lot of opinions.



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