

Engaging Men: Q&A with Michael Flood

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- **Michael Flood**

Dr Michael Flood is an Associate Professor and an ARC Future Fellow (2015 – 2018) at the Queensland University of Technology. His research agenda focuses on gender, sexuality, and interpersonal violence. Dr Flood's research at present is focused in particular on interpersonal violence and its prevention, particularly with reference to men and masculinities.



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INTERVIEW: Dr Michael Flood has spent years pondering how best to get men to play a shared role in the pursuit of gender equality. BroadAgenda's co-editor Dr Pia Rowe asked him why ... and to what end.

Q: The report released this week 'Engaging Men' is not your first foray into this field. You have in fact spent many years investigating the role and engagement of men in gender equality. What prompted your interest in this subject?

A: I've had a long involvement in social justice activism and research related to the role men can play in building gender equality. My work recently has focused on how to engage men in preventing violence against women, along with how to engage men in fostering gender equality in the workplace. So this report really is just part of a broader research agenda to do with men, gender and gender inequality.

Q: Why is this important – why do we need to engage men? After all, when we look at the number of men in leadership positions, you might think that they're already doing quite well for themselves!

A: That's true, and in fact, that's precisely what this report addresses. The report is seeking to challenge men's dominance of economic and political life, and it's seeking to further the efforts of building gender equality at work. It starts with recognition that gender inequalities, in which women are disadvantaged and men are unfairly advantaged, are systemic and pervasive in Australia.

The report makes the argument that to address those inequalities, one thing we'll need to do is engage men. And the reason we need to engage them is because men are part of the problem. Gender inequalities in the workplace and elsewhere are sustained in part by men's attitudes and behaviors, and by men's everyday relations with women.

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But this report also very much emphasises that men are part of the solution - and that it's possible to engage men to play positive roles in building gender equality in their everyday lives at work and an organisational level.

Q: So what are the keys to 'engaging' men?

We have to start with recognising where men are at, and it's clear that men's attitudes towards gender and gender inequality are poorer than women's. Men tend to be less aware of sexism and gender inequalities and when they do see a problem they often don't really know what to do about it; or feel unwilling to speak up. They and worry about how they will be judged by their male peers. So there are some serious obstacles to engaging men as advocates for gender equality.

On the other hand, most men do support gender equality, particularly when it comes to basic feminist ideals such as women and men having the same rights and opportunities at work. In fact when men do advocate for gender equality, ironically, they're often perceived more positively than women who do the same thing. They're less likely to be perceived as anti-male, less likely to be perceived as acting out of self-interest and so on. It's not a magic bullet, it's not the be all and end all solution to combat gender inequality, but certainly a part of what needs to happen to make progress.

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Q: And conversely, what doesn't work? Do we have any evidence-based information about that?

A: We do indeed. So for example we're unlikely to make major change in workplaces and organisations if all we do is engage a small number of senior men as advocates for change. And particularly if we don't involve them in making both personal and organisational change. It's easy for example to engage men in superficial or tokenistic ways, whereas what's really required among senior male leaders is that they walk the walk, not only should they talk the talk obviously, but they should also walk the walk. They should address their own behavior, their own treatment of men and women in the organisation, and they should push for organisational change.

We also shouldn't assume that men are all the same. We shouldn't assume that they all come from the same place

in terms of their attitudes towards gender, or their experiences of gender and other forms of inequality. We know for example that some men are poor, some are working class, some are gay etc. In other words, there is diversity among men in terms of class, ethnicity, sexuality and so on, and we have to acknowledge that diversity when seeking to engage men.

Another point is that we have to be careful not to put men on a pedestal when they do make change. It's very easy in this field to give men praise and attention that is out of proportion to their efforts, and certainly out of proportion to the praise and attention given to women who've been working for gender equality for decades.

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Q: How do men feel about this – do they want to be engaged in gender equality issues and efforts?

A: Absolutely. There is a general receptiveness among men to be part of the solution and to play a positive role in building gender equality. Sometimes that can be based on a simplistic understanding where men may adopt the kind of comforting idea that really the problem is other men - a tiny majority of sexist men - whereas what is more likely in fact is that they themselves may collude with, or be complicit with sexism or gender inequalities in subtle ways. Men, in general, benefit from unearned privilege and assumptions about men's competence and skills in leadership. So part of this work is to invite men to think about their own involvement in wider systems of inequality and privilege, and getting men to do our own work, to put our own houses in order, as well as challenging other men.

Men of course sometimes feel blamed, and defensive about this issue. Therefore part of this work is finding ways to appeal to men's existing care for the women in their lives, along with their existing commitment to human rights principles and the principles of equality and justice. And we need to use messengers and messages that will appeal to men.

Q: There's a lot of focus on women and 'women's issues' in the media at the moment – where does this leave men? Have we inadvertently left them out?

Feminists for a long time have been inviting men, calling on men, asking men to play some role in building gender equality. There is nevertheless in the media and wider community a perception that feminism and gender equality are 'women's issues'. And even when men feel 'on side' and feel that gender inequality is an important social problem, they may have little sense of their own role in addressing it: they may feel like "yes that's important, but what's that got to do with me?".

However, that's changed recently. In media and in community discussion we have seen what I would call a 'turn to men', and this involves an increasing emphasis on the role that men can play in building gender equality. This is visible for example in media discussions of male celebrities' pronouncements about feminism, celebrities or high profile men such as the actor Ryan Gosling, the Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and others.

There's media attention now on men as feminists and men's role in building gender equality. That's also been complemented by a growing wave of activity around the world in engaging men, whether that's in relation to fathering and parenting, or HIV-aids and sexual and reproductive rights, or violence against women. So I think there's a very significant and positive focus on men and the roles men can play. However, sometimes that's motivated by problematic concerns that perhaps the pendulum has swung too far and feminism is now taking over, which I personally don't think is the case.

Q: What do you see as the biggest barriers to gender equality at the moment?

Gender inequality is both personal and structural and it is built into the fabric of men and women's everyday lives: but beyond that it's also built into our systems and culture. We will need culture change to shift the norms. And we

will need to change the structural ways in which workplaces are organized, and in which governments make policy.

Gender inequality is systemic and pervasive, and we need comprehensive top to bottom cultural change and action to shift it.

Q: Do you support the notion that ‘men are the game changers’ when it comes to gender equality?

I agree with the idea that gender inequality will not end till men participate, it makes perfect sense that we will only make progress towards gender equality if men’s behavior and attitudes change because men are as implicated in gender and gender inequalities as women. Having said that, that doesn’t mean that all our efforts should focus on men, or that we should now stop having women only and women-focused programs and funding and so on. In fact, *continuing to foster women’s empowerment and women’s leadership is a critical part of this work.* And while I passionately believe that we have to engage men to effect change, that doesn’t mean that men have to be in every room, in every campaign.

... Gender inequality is systemic and pervasive

Q: Where should we go from here – what are some of the next steps?

A: I think one key next step is to popularise the feminist engagement of men in the workplace towards gender equality. We must continue inviting men in the processes of social and personal change, and showing them the ways in which gender and gendered inequalities are of everyday relevance to them.

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Second key step is to continue to make the case to men that they will gain and benefit from the progress towards gender equality. Yes there are some unfair forms of privilege, some forms of unearned advantage that some men will have to give up, but men in general will also gain: they will gain personally, in our relationships, in our working lives, and so on.

And thirdly, I think we have to expand our vision of what gender equality looks like beyond individual equitable treatment, beyond equality of opportunity, and to systemic and structural change towards a world of gender justice.