

## Can Men be Feminists?

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The question of whether men can be feminists raises a variety of broader issues. Some of these relate to whether men can have the kinds of understanding, solidarity and political commitment necessary to qualify as feminists. Others concern the role that men can and should play within the feminist movement. This talk begins by exploring some of the psychological and social barriers men face in understanding and supporting feminism. It then concludes with some practical suggestions as to how men might seek to engage constructively with feminist ideas and objectives.

I have been asked to speak this evening about whether men can be feminists. I'm going to begin by exploring and motivating the question, but ultimately I'm going to avoid giving a definitive answer. I hope nobody is too disappointed! My reason for avoiding the question is that while I think it raises some interesting and significant issues, ultimately it pales in importance compared to another question: namely, how men can constructively support the feminist project. I therefore want to end my talk by focusing on that issue.

I want to begin, however, by exploring some reasons why it might be thought that men cannot be feminists. It might seem on the face of it that, at least in principle, there's no reason why men cannot subscribe to feminist ideals of gender equality or respect for gender differences and believe that those ideals are not currently realised. They might also have a real political commitment to reforming society to bring feminist ideals about. However, once we look more closely at the connection between feminist theory and practice, some serious questions arise about men can have the kinds of understanding, solidarity and political commitment necessary to qualify as feminists in the full sense of the term.

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Men might well subscribe to feminist ideals in the abstract, but can they really *understand* them in the way necessary to qualify as feminists? The basic point to emphasise here is feminism is *about* women; that is, it centres on recognising and promoting women's interests and perspectives. The feminist outlook, then, is premised on knowledge and understanding of women's experiences – and, put simply, these are experiences men cannot have.

It is natural for men who wish to engage with feminism to search for some analogue in their own experiences. However, while this can be useful, it is dangerous if it encourages men to ignore or understate the limits of their knowledge. Some men are disempowered by virtue of class, race, sexuality and other factors; just as women have many different experiences of gender inequality, men occupy many different positions in relation to the dominant social hierarchy. However, being a woman is not the same as being gay or a member of an ethnic minority. There is much to be learnt from placing oneself in another person's shoes, but in the end this type of reflection is necessarily imperfect.

A related issue concerns the type of solidarity that exists within the feminist movement. Solidarity is itself a contested notion. On some accounts, solidarity arises between groups that have common interests or enjoy a relationship of mutual recognition and support (Bayertz 1999, 17-19). Other authors identify another form of solidarity, where one individual or group makes 'the concerns of another person or group, which faces a special plight, her [or his] own' (Rippe 1998, 357).

The relationship between pro-feminist men and the feminist movement seems to fall somewhere between these two different models. The future of men is bound up with the future of feminism: it promises them richer and more fulfilling relationships with women, children and each other (Kimmel 1998, 59). However, the basic fact remains that men are not where women are. Full engagement with feminist objectives requires men to move beyond self-interest and treat the viewpoints and concerns of women as important in their own right. This is an important project for men to adopt, but even men who take their engagement with feminism very seriously cannot see feminist issues exactly as women see them.

Finally, an issue arises about the level of political commitment men have in relation to feminism. Men can, of course, be committed pro-feminists. However, the fact remains that the stakes are not as high for them as they are for women. I don't mean to suggest that men have nothing to gain from feminism. On the contrary, feminism affords men a great deal. It offers them the promise of social relationships with women premised on mutual respect and equality. By challenging traditional conceptions of masculinity, it provides an opportunity for men to adopt alternative social roles. The task of pursuing such a rich and vibrant social environment, along with the fulfilment that may be gained from genuinely equal relationships, is surely inspiring as well as right.

Ultimately, however, this type of cost-benefit analysis is beside the point. Men who adopt feminist aims and objectives chiefly for their own benefit can only ever be peripherally engaged in the feminist project. The point of feminism is to promote the well-being of women. This entails overcoming the traditional practice of constructing women as a means to the fulfilment of male desires. Men who wish to advance feminism must therefore be willing to put aside their own interests and adopt, as far as possible, a female-oriented point of view. However, this puts them in an inherently different position to women in terms of their political stake in the realisation of feminist objectives.

It will be apparent from what I have said that I think there are deep challenges raised by the question of whether men can be feminists. I also think, however, that ultimately this question obscures a more important issue. This is the issue of how men can best lend practical support to feminism. I was reading an interview the other day with Kathleen Hanna, whom many of you will know from her work with feminist bands like Bikini Kill and Le Tigre. She was asked by the interviewer whether there are many feminist bands today. She replied that while perhaps not many bands openly identify as feminist, 'feminism isn't something that you are, it's something that you *do*' (Singer 2013). I think that puts it nicely. Anyway, if Kathleen Hanna says it, then it must be true.

The real question, then, is not whether men can be feminists, but how they can help bring about feminist goals. Perhaps the

main challenge men face in engaging with feminism relates to an issue I mentioned previously: feminism is *not about them*. The point of feminism is to advance women's position in society. In order to engage with feminism on its own terms, men must learn to *be for others*; they must enter into a discourse that exists primarily to advance the interests and hear the voices of a group to which they do not belong (Crowe 2008a, 324-5; 2008b, 147-9). This is difficult for men – particularly (but certainly not only) for white, straight, traditionally masculine, middle-class men, for whom most areas of social life are experienced as being about the self.

This is a challenge men face in engaging with feminism, but it's not an excuse. There are, I think some practical strategies men can use to adopt a feminist-oriented perspective and lend concrete support to feminist goals, without yielding to the temptation to ignore women's voices and reconceptualise feminist concerns purely from their own point of view. The contours of such a constructive male attitude towards feminism might involve understanding and embracing four ideas. First, I am not where they are. Second, this is not about me. Third, I can make a difference. And, fourth, I am here to learn.

My first suggestion, then, is that a man who wishes to make himself open to feminist concerns must be willing to recognise and affirm that 'I am not where they are' (Heath 1987, 1). That is, he must be willing to acknowledge the limits of his experiences and understanding. This does not always come naturally to men, for reasons I mentioned earlier. Men are used to discourses being *about them*; they are used to being able to enter debates on the strength of their own experiences. However, feminism requires them to adopt a far more modest attitude.

In the end, perhaps the only real way for men to expand their knowledge and understanding of feminist issues and concerns is to cultivate close, trusting and respectful relationships with women. In this way, men may be privileged to gain a certain level of access to female perspectives. However, even this type of knowledge is inevitably second hand. It may bring men closer to women's perspectives, but it cannot put them where women are.

Second, pro-feminist men must be willing to acknowledge that 'this is not about me'. I noted a moment ago that feminism is both *about* and *for* women. It is concerned with advancing the rights of women for their own sake. In this respect, men who wish to support feminism must be willing to put their own interests to one side and work primarily for the advancement of others. This is not because feminism is necessarily against men's interests, although the realisation of the feminist project would certainly deprive men of specific privileges they have historically enjoyed by virtue of their gender. Rather, it is because feminism exists to protect women's rights and make their voices heard.

Third, pro-feminist men should focus on the concrete ways they can support and foster feminist objectives. This involves acknowledging that 'I can make a difference' and then translating this into action. Feminism is an ongoing social struggle; this means that everyone must do what she or he can to bring about social change. There is only so much any one person can do, but that just makes it all the more important that we do it.

One way of following through on this practical commitment to advance feminist goals is to formulate personal plans for action. This amounts to saying 'this is what I am going to do to contribute to gender equality.' There are many steps men can take in this regard, including assuming greater responsibility for domestic labour, supporting and respecting women's social and sexual choices, challenging sexist social conventions, speaking up for feminist issues in the workplace and supporting feminist political causes. This allows men to take responsibility for feminist issues, without seeking to dismiss or appropriate the feminist project.

Perhaps the most important thing men can do to support feminism, however, is to listen to what women have to say. That is, *really* listen: not only hear the words, but try to understand what they mean for the person who is saying them and avoid the temptation to reduce them to ideas and concepts with which one is already comfortable and familiar.

It is a sad fact of social life that women do not always talk to men about things that are important to them. They are often more

comfortable talking to other women. This is entirely understandable, since other women may be more likely to not just comprehend what a woman is saying, but grasp what it really means to her from her own point of view. On the other hand, this phenomenon also means that some men go through their whole lives without being placed in a position where they really have to try to grasp a distinctively female perspective. It is no wonder some men have difficulty comprehending feminism.

There is, however, no point in women talking to men unless men are ready to listen. And it is worth remembering, in this context, that no man has a right that a woman allow him access to her inner life. The only way for a man to have the opportunity to learn about what is important to women is to earn the trust and respect of the women he knows. In this sense, as in many other ways, the personal is political. If you wish to support feminism, begin by respecting women.

It follows that men who wish to engage with feminism must be willing to affirm that 'I am here to learn.' And, in this respect, they are relying on the women in their lives seeing them as sufficiently trustworthy and helpful to include in serious discussions about their experiences. These discussions, if they are to cover the gamut of feminist concerns, will touch on issues that are sensitive and intimate for many women and that men may find confronting. It requires genuine and sustained effort for a man to try to understand what women feel about these matters. He is privileged if the women he knows trust him enough to help him.

Men who wish to support feminist must reorient their worldview, not only away from their natural self-centred outlook, but in opposition to the prevailing shape of social discourse, which reinforces and nurtures their instinct to place their gender at the centre of the world. There are many challenges and questions that beset this project, but I have tried to finish this talk on a positive and empowering note. I'm not sure, in the end, whether men can be feminists. However, what matters most is not what you call yourself. It's how you live your life.

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