

Men and Feminism: Some challenges and a partial response

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This article explores the relationship of men to feminism, asking how men can support the feminist movement without compromising its gynocentric nature. It begins by discussing two key challenges men face in engaging with feminism, before suggesting some attitudes and practices men might adopt to advance the feminist project.

Introduction

Feminism brings a focused and specialised perspective to discussions of social justice. It focuses specifically on women's interests, experiences and concerns. In this respect, the feminist movement seeks to bring to light gendered issues that are overlooked or underemphasised within mainstream debates. Another way of putting this is that feminism is gynocentric: it is a response to the androcentrism of mainstream culture, including prevailing views of justice and fairness.

This article considers a particular issue arising from the specialised nature of feminist discourse: namely, the relationship of men to feminism. Relatively few men exhibit active support for feminism, while many men express negative attitudes towards the feminist movement. This article discusses two of the main challenges men face in understanding and engaging with feminist concerns. It then offers some tentative recommendations as to the types of attitudes and practices men might adopt to effectively advance the feminist project.

Being for Others

The first and perhaps most obvious challenge men face in engaging constructively with feminism is that it is *not about them*. Feminism is about women. It is specifically oriented towards women's interests, concerns and experiences. In a related sense, feminism is *for* women. The point of feminism is to advance women's position in society and fight for their rights.

Men are aware that feminism is not about them. This is difficult for many men to grasp, simply because they are not used to it. They are used to everything being about them, because mainstream discourses are designed to accommodate and value male points of view. A discourse, such as feminism, that is not interested in their problems therefore appears at first as hostile and alien.

Different groups of men enjoy different levels of access to the privileged realm of masculine social discourse. Men practising what Raewyn Connell has called *hegemonic masculinity* are more likely than those practising alternative masculinities to place themselves reflexively at the centre of the social world. Nonetheless, hegemonic masculinity encourages even marginalised male groups to define their social position by reference to their relationship to other men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). The gynocentric perspective associated with feminism departs radically from this social norm.

The realisation that feminism is not about them leads many men — particularly those practicing hegemonic or traditional forms of masculinity — to conclude that it must be directly opposed to their interests. This popular conception of feminism as *against* men arises from the inability to set aside an androcentric view of social discourse, according to which male concerns must occupy a central role in every discussion. From this perspective, if a viewpoint does not actively further male interests, it must be actively opposed to them.

A related problem that men face in grasping the feminist project is the ambiguous position it affords them. It is ambiguous how far men can contribute to feminism and to what extent their views count within feminist discourse. Whether men's views are heard and considered within feminism depends on whether women think they are worth hearing. And, quite often, feminists are not terribly interested in what men are saying; they would rather hear from women, since their main focus is on advancing women's interests and concerns.

Again, many men are not used to this. They are not used to ambiguity about whether and for how much their perspectives count; they are used to entering any discussion and automatically being heard. Even men who fall outside the hegemonic masculine norm are taught

that they can win access to social privilege by exhibiting approved forms of masculine behaviour.

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 and 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 reflexively as being about the self.

Being to Blame

A second challenge men face in relating to feminism concerns the notion of being to blame. Many men feel defensive in response to feminism. They feel they are being blamed — or perhaps they feel they are to blame. This problem of guilt has been widely noted in discussions of men and feminism (Connell 1993, 72 and 1997, 8-9; Johnson 1997, 60-1). The easy response would be for feminists to say to men, 'Don't worry, it's not your fault'. The problem is that this is not really true. Men are responsible for the continuing oppression of women — and until they grasp this responsibility they will always have trouble engaging with the feminist project.

The feminist struggle is a struggle against attitudes and practices that extend to all areas of social life. It is a struggle that begins by recognising the full extent of the problem. At a community level, we are all involved, since we are all part of the social fabric. As Michael Kimmel puts it, feminism 'takes as its starting point that gender relations are constructed in a field of power' (1998, 63). This field of power not only entrenches the systemic dominance men enjoy over women, but also enables some men to exercise power over other men.

The pervasiveness of the power structures feminism aims to counteract means each one of us must do what we can to recognise discriminatory practices and counteract them in our own lives. However, it also means we need to do this in the knowledge that, no matter what we do, it may never be enough. We will still be part of the system we are trying to overcome, simply because there is no alternative. In this sense, we are all responsible. As Dale Spender observes:

We can begin by acknowledging that sexism isn't something other, horrid people do, but in a sexist society, something that all members do. Sexism is a code that we learn and operate and while feminists are trying to make that code explicit, to resist it and cease using it, we are not immune. (1983, 7)

There are, of course, many men who treat women with respect. There are men who have respectful, supportive relationships with women and who support and value their female friends and colleagues. There are men who have never committed rape and men who speak up when others express sexist or androcentric points of view. This is all important and praiseworthy; and yet, to a certain extent, it is all still beside the point. The individual actions of a few good men cannot eliminate the entrenched social biases that continue to oppress women. This is a project that must be pursued on a broader social level.

The history of the feminist movement shows it is possible to make incremental inroads into gender oppression. Research on critical masculinities has tracked the emergence and survival of a range of practices that challenge hegemonic masculine norms (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848). These developments enable feminist and pro-feminist activists to hold open the genuine promise of a more equal future to come. Nonetheless, practical attempts at activism must inevitably take place within the existing field of social power.

The crucial point is that men can choose what side of this struggle they are on. They can order their individual actions to either endorse or, as far as possible, combat the patriarchal social order. The myth that feminism is against men encourages them to shirk this responsibility, by making it seem there is nothing constructive they can do to support the feminist project. On the contrary: there are things that each man can do to help advance feminism. And, at this individual level, each person is only to blame to the extent that she or he fails to act.

The responsibility for supporting feminism outlined above is both too much and too little for many men to bear. It requires them to make fundamental changes to their actions and attitudes, altering their personal and professional lives in potentially burdensome ways, without the prospect of any immediate shift in the wider social order. It is tempting for men to shirk this burden by either becoming defensive — denying the existence or scope of the problem — or seeking solace in expressions of guilt. The task confronting pro-feminist men is to resist these twin temptations, since neither helps to advance gender equality.

I Am Not Where They Are

My aim in the preceding sections was to outline two key reasons why feminism is challenging for men. These are psychological and social barriers that men need to overcome if they are fully to support the feminist project. It is worth emphasising again that the responsibility for overcoming these barriers rests chiefly with men themselves. Men have a responsibility to help advance women's rights and this entails working to engage constructively with feminism.

What attitudes and practices might men adopt to pursue this objective? A useful starting point would be to recognise the necessary limits of their knowledge and experiences. We noted above that feminism is *about* women; that is, it centres on recognising and promoting women's interests and perspectives. The feminist outlook 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 (Connell 1997, 8; Kimmel 1998, 64). 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.

It follows 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 mentioned earlier in this article. 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.

This is Not About Me

We noted at the beginning of this article 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. They must be willing to acknowledge that 'this is not about me'.

This is not to say, as we noted above, that feminism is necessarily against men's interests. The realisation

of the feminist project would certainly deprive men of specific privileges they have historically enjoyed by virtue of their gender. Some of the more obvious advantages, such as privileged access to voting, public office and the professions, have already been eroded, although certainly not completely overcome. Others, such as the ability to use social and legal power structures for sexual advantage and the capacity to exploit women for unpaid domestic labour, remain squarely on the feminist agenda.

In these respects, men certainly have something to lose from the feminist project. However, they also have much to gain. Feminism affords men 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.

The notion of solidarity, as employed in social movement studies, may be useful here. On some accounts, solidarity characteristically 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 own' (Rippe 1998, 357).

The relationship between pro-feminist men and the feminist movement, as described above, falls somewhere between these two 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, as we have seen, men are not where women are. Full engagement with the feminist project therefore requires them to move beyond self-interest and treat the viewpoints and concerns of women as important in their own right.

I Can Make a Difference

We saw above that many men respond defensively to

feminist ideas. Negotiating this hurdle involves accepting responsibility for the feminist project, while resisting the temptation to avoid true engagement by seeking refuge in guilt. In order to move forward in this way, it is necessary for men to recognise the practical role they can play in advancing feminist objectives. This involves acknowledging that 'I can make a difference' and then translating this into action.

The preceding discussion suggests two strategies men might adopt in order to effectively promote feminist objectives. The first strategy is to recognise the social dimension of the feminist project. Feminism, as we saw above, is an ongoing social struggle; this means that everyone must do what she or he can to bring about social change. At the same time, however, it can only be counterproductive for men to excessively personalise the problem.

There is no feminist advantage to be gained from pro-feminist men being overwhelmed by personal guilt. This is how Andrea Dworkin put the matter in a famous speech to a pro-feminist male audience:

Hiding behind guilt, that's my favorite. I love that one. Oh, it's horrible, yes, and I'm so sorry. You have the time to feel guilty. We don't have the time for you to feel guilty. Your guilt is a form of acquiescence in what continues to occur. Your guilt helps keep things the way they are. (1993, 62)

On the other hand, there is much to be gained by each man asking himself how he can help advance feminist aims. There is only so much each person can do, but that just makes it all the more important that we do it.

It follows that the second strategy men might adopt to promote 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.

I Am Here to Learn

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. And 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 the feminist agenda.

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 personal and social 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, such as sexuality, pregnancy, menstruation and abortion. 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.

Conclusion

We have seen that feminism is gynocentric: it stands as a deliberate reaction to the entrenched androcentrism of mainstream culture and thought. It follows that a man who wishes to engage with feminism must adopt a gynocentrist outlook. This is not easy, since it means he must learn to be for others. He must reorient his worldview, not only away from his natural self-centred outlook, but in opposition to the prevailing shape of social discourse, which reinforces and nurtures his instinct to place his gender at the centre of the world.

There are many challenges and questions that beset this project. This article does not claim to give a comprehensive response. Rather, it has sought to shed light on two of the main challenges men face in engaging with feminism: the difficulty in grasping a discourse that is not about them and the problem of owning their responsibility in relation to the feminist project. It then sketched the contours of

a constructive male attitude towards feminism, which involves 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.

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Butterflies

(for Elisabeth Kuhbler-Ross)

At the siding, railcars held shoes,
stockings, neatly folded dresses, panties, assorted
corsets and brassieres, shirts, socks, suits, coats,
toys in tea boxes, suitcases of small shoes
and babies' clothes packed carefully by blue and pink,
several cartons of spectacles, cases of emeralds,
pearls, opals, diamonds, wedding rings, false teeth,
gold fillings, sacked hair...

Autumn brought the smell of soft rain
with the falling leaves.
A crow called from the top of the tower
over the swinging gate.
Smoke still rose from the locomotive
but the chimney stacks in the compound were
cold. The last late butterflies veered
across the brown field.

Inside the empty barracks along with the smell of stale piss
and the stink of bugs and creosote, carved
scratched etched pencilled on the walls initials
names names names and butterflies,
she found butterflies etched everywhere...

Barbed wire rusting and empty towers
on the walls of Majdanek
and over the compound butterflies soaring.

On the other side of the world a boy of ten
I kept caterpillars in bottles, fed them on milkweed,
wondered at their growth. Watched
the slow changes when the chrysalides formed till
shell cracking from the back they came
wet and shapeless in the night.

Then hanging slowly, pumped and plumed
veined wings they tested with slow flaps
like angels when first formed essaying flight
then finally the morning breeze lifted them
to the summer sky.

Free
as smoke
from the kitchen chimney.

JOHN KNIGHT