

Debate: Is 'engaging men' the game changer for gender equality?

Diversity Council Australia and National Australia Bank Annual Diversity Debate, November 8, 2016. Dalton House, Sydney.

Dr Michael Flood's talk (Negative team, 1st speaker)

START

Most people in this room agree that we should engage men in work towards gender equality. Should men be involved? Yes. And that's not the topic of this debate. The question is, is engaging men a *game-changer*? Does it represent some particularly radical, or important, or change-making approach?

Engaging men means involving members of a dominant group in challenging their dominance.

When men are involved in feminist work, this is *ally politics*. Ally politics is when members of a dominant group – men, white people, heterosexuals – are involved in efforts to address that dominance, that privilege.

Engaging members of the *dominant* group in change is a vital part of our work. And recognising that men in general receive a patriarchal pay-off from gender inequalities, that gender inequality is as much a story of *male advantage* as it is a story of female disadvantage, these are important insights.

But, ally politics can only ever been seen as *one* component of social change efforts.

Black feminist Audre Lorde wrote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." She might also have written, "The *masters* will never dismantle the master's house.' Certainly not by themselves. Certainly not without being part of a broader feminist movement.

Ally politics is fraught. It's complicated. That's why engaging men cannot be seen as the game changer.

Engaging men is not a new idea.

Nor is engaging men a new idea. A century ago, men organised in support of women's right to the vote. Second wave feminists in the 70s and 80s called on men to join efforts to end women's oppression.

Engaging men doesn't 'change the game'.

What about the actual work of engaging men? Engaging men doesn't easily or quickly produce substantial change in gender inequalities, although it can certainly contribute to change.

Men are less likely to recognise sexism than women.

Many men simply don't recognise, or indeed defend, existing gender inequalities. Men on average have greater trouble identifying sexism than do women. And men routinely overestimate their peers' agreement with sexism.

It's hard to get men involved.

It's hard to get men involved. In a big study of 100 US campuses trying to engage

men, the most frequent challenge reported was getting male students and male staff to participate. In Australia, in the White Ribbon Campaign, much of the work and many of the events are done by women, not men.

Men's engagement is shaped by patriarchal dynamics.

When men *do* get involved, their involvement is shaped by patriarchal dynamics. Men receive more praise and attention than women for our work, and out of proportion to our efforts.

Engaging men doesn't change the game because changing the game is hard.

Perhaps the most important reason why engaging men is not a game changer is that changing gender inequality, including changing men, is *hard*.

Let's take seriously the facts of gender inequality. Gender inequality is embedded in our everyday lives and relations, and in wider structures and institutions. Change is slow, uneven, and met with resistance. And that's especially true among men.

Large proportions of men resent feminist efforts and resist the recognition of sexism. They deny, minimise, and blame.

It's not all bad. There's a growing body of international evidence that, if they are done well, efforts to engage men can shift attitudes and behaviours. Engaging men *can and does* shift gender inequalities.

But making social change is hard. Engaging men is just *one* of the effective strategies we should adopt. It's not a magic bullet.

Engaging men sometimes is the same old patriarchal game.

Here's another way that engaging men is not a game-changer. Sometimes, engaging men is the *same old* patriarchal game.

Too often, we appeal only to men's paternalistic concern for the women and girls in their lives, and not also to what is right, what is fair and just. We tell men that 'real men don't hit women', when in fact it is 'real' men – men who are invested in sexist notions of manhood – who are *most* likely to hit women.

Now, I'm a pragmatist. If appealing to men as 'real men', if calling them Champions, will increase our overall progress towards gender equality, then great. But I'm not sure it will.

In practice, efforts to engage men often set the bar very low. They risk marginalising women's voices. They focus too much on reassuring men and not enough on challenging systems and cultures of sexism.

Let's clap the men just for turning up. Let's give men a cookie just for being decent human beings. Let's constantly reassure them, "It's not you."

In fact, I wonder if engaging men sometimes has been seen as a 'game changer' for the *wrong* reasons. Because it's uncomfortable to focus on women when men have been at the centre. Because 'not all men'. And because as feminism is de-radicalised and co-opted, men can be feminists too.

I do love this passion for engaging men symbolised at this debate. But we also risk an excessive and naive optimism about men. We risk putting aside our feminist principles and practices. Instead, engaging men is one strategy, one tool, among

many.

Engaging men must be done well if it is to be effective. It must be based in strong feminist agendas, and done in alliance with women's networks and movements. It must involve men in tackling systemic gender inequalities. It must address the intersecting inequalities of race, class, and sexuality which shape women's and men's lives. And, *even* if it is done well, it still will not be a game changer.

Changing men is the true game-changer.

However, if we can *change* men, if men can change, in large numbers and in substantial ways, yes, that will be a real change in the game.

Yes, absolutely, we must engage men in building gender equality. And, doing so is but one part of the game.

FINISH

This speech may be circulated and quoted, with acknowledgement.

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