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It's not enough for men to turn up. They have to do the work.



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13/03/15, 12:00 AM [View more articles from Clementine Ford](#)



A fictional 'all-male feminist support group' in Portlandia



I celebrated International Women's Day this year by taking part in an all day feminist event at the Sydney Opera House called All About Women. Audience members were fortunate to hear from incredible feminists like Roxane Gay, Celeste Liddle and Randa Abdel Fattah.

Across the day, panelists discussed issues of men's violence against women and how feminism needs to move beyond seeking equality for white businesswomen with white businessmen and work towards radical liberation for all women - for women of colour, Aboriginal women, disabled women, trans women, Muslim women and every other woman who has historically been sidelined by the mainstream feminist movement. In a session called 'Mother Courage', Rosie Batty sat in conversation with Tara Moss and discussed openly the impact not only that men's violence has had on her life, but how

that violence has been enabled by institutional dismissiveness towards women's safety and value.

During one panel, I talked passionately about the layered invisibility of women in pop culture, and how this reflected image of the world succeeds in diminishing not just our voices and engagement, but even the minimal space we feel we're entitled to occupy. I discussed the casual expectation and acceptance that this was just the way things are, and how it's actually insidious sexism and lazy thinking that allows for more enforced forms of sexism to exist. My co-panelists and I talked about the importance of women's anger, and how it has been pathologised - that women are still ridiculed as 'hysterical' and 'irrational' when we dare to behave in anything other than the kind of nice, sweet, docile Stockholm Syndrome that's best found at places like Sunrise and 2DayFM.

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After all this refreshing focus on liberation and structural oppression, the very first audience question had the gall to query why feminism doesn't spend more time and

energy on engaging male 'champions' and providing space for them to speak about feminism. Why, she asked, had the morning session titled How To Be A Feminist not included a single man on it?

The short answer: Feminism has far too many women it needs to work on including in public discourse before it starts worrying about the ridiculous notion of making space for men

Besides, men already take up far too much space in feminist discourse. They are the looming shadow in the room, the invisible spectre that dictates women's discussions and dominates mainstream feminist concern. We have been instructed so readily to worry about what the men will think that we have elevated their thoughts and feelings above our own. A good deal of women have now learned to pepper their feminism with caveats, sentiments designed to reassure people that feminism is really a rather gentle kind of philosophy - a group of nice women doing nice things who would like equality if that's okay with everyone else but who most definitely don't pose a threat to the general order of things.

In its quest to be palatable and welcoming, feminism has gone down a dangerous path of becoming too conciliatory in its aims. You'll no doubt have been at a public talk or discussion about feminism and heard reassurances that, of course, we are not talking about ALL MEN! That of course the men in THIS ROOM are good, decent ones who care fiercely about women's rights. That most men are wonderful human beings who wouldn't lift a finger against a woman and who certainly never, ever participate in or benefit from the structures which oppress us.

But if men are genuine allies to women - if they are genuinely invested in women's liberation and equality - why should they feel entitled to any kind of acknowledgement or reward? More to the point, why do we feel constantly pressured to give it to them?

This is a challenging idea for some people. The roots of patriarchy run very, very deep. People are afraid that if feminists don't mollycoddle sympathetic men that they'll throw a tantrum and go home. But feminists need to stop worrying about how we engage and involve men and instead resist the urge to simply replicate the same power dynamics that underpin our oppression in the first place. The language applied to men who pay even the vaguest lip service to women's liberation is a good case in point. We call them 'Ambassadors'. 'Champions of Change'. 'Everyday Heroes'. We congratulate them for wearing white ribbons and for talking about employing women.

But who's doing the actual work? Women, that's who. And we are never praised for it. We aren't celebrated as Good and Decent people. We aren't heralded widely by our communities. There are no Ambassadorships handed to us or titles bestowed like 'Champion' and 'Hero'. When Charlie Pickering writes the occasional article about how bad violence against women is, he gets 50,000 Facebook shares and a thousand women squealing about what an incredible person he is. When a woman does the same thing, it's not uncommon for her to be called a man-hater and a bitch who deserves to be violently assaulted.

Our own 'Minister for Women' was last week invited to launch the HeForShe campaign in Australia at the same time his government is busy defunding women's refuges and health services around the country. Most of the women's health sector workers that I speak with are scathing about what White Ribbon actually represents, but are too afraid to say so publicly because they're scared their funding will be further cut.

Women. Do. The. Work. But men continue to reap the rewards and accolades just for the incredible act of turning up.

Why? Because they need to be acknowledged? To be praised? To take the credit for work that women have performed with greater risk and more tireless efforts? To be revered and admired, their egos stroked with the palms of a thousand tired hands?

Men. It isn't enough to lend your nominal support to movements which fight for social justice. I am not interested in placating you, nor do I care if feminism makes you personally uncomfortable. Women are being killed in ridiculous numbers. Sexism is rife across every level of society. This isn't about your feelings. Stop expecting women to preface their anger and activism with disclaimers that, of course, it's not about YOU personally.

Because it is. It's about you because it's about patriarchy, and even the kindest, nicest, most supportive and decent man benefits from this structure in ways that women just don't. Men have to be proactive in recognising that and fighting against it, and that requires effort and commitment. It's not enough to just turn up.

You have to do the work.

Because that's what women do. We do the work. We Make It Happen. We are Champions. We are Heroes. We are Warriors. And maybe it's time you started praising US for that.

This is an edited extract from a speech delivered by Clementine Ford to mark International Women's Day 2015.



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