



Men in Feminism

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There continues to be an ongoing debate about what men involved in the feminist struggle call themselves. There never has been a clear answer to this question. At issue is not whether or not men are involved in the feminist struggle(s). As Michael Kimmel and Tom Mosmiller have demonstrated, men have been proactively involved in the struggle for women's liberation since the earliest days of feminism (see **Against the Tide: Profeminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990**, Beacon Press, 1992). And of course, men have been actively opposed to women's equality and women's liberation for at least as long. What is at issue is what men who are involved call ourselves.

Before I delve into this issue, I want to spend a few paragraphs re-examining the use and power of language. Feminists recognized the importance of language through consciousness-raising groups. As a result of these often radicalizing experiences, they realized that men have historically been in positions to define the words that are used and thereby define the context of our reality (see, for example, Mary Daly, Marilyn French, bell hooks, Gerda Lerner and Marelouise Janssen-Jurreit). For example, some feminist her-storyans have analyzed the creation story in the bible as men's attempts to justify the subordination of women. By creating a myth of humankind beginning with men as "in god's image" and women created "from the rib of Adam," men are seen as the center of the world -- with women as an appendage or an afterthought. Traditionally, creating a woman from Adam's rib has been seen as a theological foundation for the subordination of women by men.

Some feminist theologians have re-analyzed this story to suggest that by being created from Adam's rib (ie: his side), the relationship between women and men are seen as more of a partnership than subordination - domination. While holding onto the original creation myth, these feminist theologians use language and the power of re-naming to utterly re-evaluate the relationship between men and women -- as sanctioned by god.

In numerous ways, feminists reclaim language, and thereby the power to define reality for themselves and for all of us from a different perspective. By reclaiming the power to define, feminists claim the power to name. Once named, their reality (the founding of a common language to describe their experiences), becomes our reality. Feminists are thus armed to confront the institutionalized and personalized expressions of male domination that affect their lives. By defining their language and reclaiming their power to name, feminists find their voice(s) and are thus able to give voice to the oppression, domination and victimization they experience -- experiences that had been systematically kept from expression due to the silencing of women's voices.

As Paolo Friere reminds us in **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**, "...the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible... Within the word we find two dimensions: reflection and action... Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world."(p. 75) He goes on to say "To exist, humanly, is to NAME the world, to change it. Once named,

the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of the a new naming, Men (sic) are not built in silence, but in word...in action-reflection" (page 76, emphasis in original).

Friere's statements here demonstrate an understanding that the process of naming is how we as human come to understand our world and our place in it. At the same time, the process of naming, as a dynamic process, defines who we as well as the world in which we interact. Naming is an action, and because all action occurs in a political context, naming is a political action.

Feminists realized that men have been (and continue to be) in positions to do the defining and therefore, women (and others who are oppressed) are immediately at a disadvantage exactly because the power to name has placed them there. It has been argued, for example, that even the name "wo-man" puts women in a position of being juxtaposed to men -- not full and complete in their own right, but a prefix to a man -- who continues to be the center, the foundation, the basis. By defining for their own selves what they will be names, feminists (and other oppressed peoples) begin and continue the process of liberation.

It is in this context that any discussion of what men who are involved in the feminists struggle(s) call ourselves. Following the feminist process of making the personal political, I'll develop my arguments by exploring my process.

In 1983, I was a first-year student in a medium-sized university in South Texas. One of the requirements at my school was to volunteer at a social service agency. I worked at the local women's center, which provides services to battered women and rape survivors -- an overtly, proudly feminist organization.

As an 18 year old european-american male, I entered the work, and began to understand the feminist principles upon which the center was founded. About this same time, we began creating the women's studies department at the university. I developed feminist friends and internalized many of the feminist ideals around which I was working and studying.

At this time, I found very few other men (in rural south Texas) willing to join the struggle, or who were even politely tolerant of my burgeoning awareness. I felt isolated and alone -- for although I had very good women friends, they were not men and did not go home at night to an all-men's dorm. Their went home to a very different place -- and although they too had their own struggles in personal-political relationships, mine were different. Although I identified as feminist, the word never really fit comfortably because my reality and my experiences were/are so different. This is not to say that I presume that all women's experiences are the same -- crossing class, racial, orientational and belief differences. It is to say that as a person who has a penis, my reality didn't fit what I understood to be "feminist." I understood feminism to be about women's experiences and women's lives -- sometimes vis-à-vis men, often times not. I was never sure how to fit myself in. At the same time, I had no other word to describe...me.

For example, my developing consciousness brought me to an understanding of the ways that pornography harmed women. Living in an all men's dorm in the late 1980's, it was difficult to get away from. It was nearly impossible to find other men with whom I could have an analytical discussion about the harm that pornography caused, and examine the ways that it affected me. While I could have these kinds of

discussions with women, they didn't go back to a dorm that may be showing pornographic films; they didn't have roommates and entire dormitory that subscribed (openly) to pornographic magazines. Women's experiences in feminism is different than men, and the label feminist did not, and does not account for those differences.

In the mid 80's (probably around 1987), I stumbled (almost literally) across Jon Snodgrass' 1977 classic **For Men Against Sexism** which offered me a new term -- anti-sexist. Although this label better fit my reality as a man doing anti-sexist living; I was made uncomfortable by it's "anti" definition. I'd much rather define me as what I am FOR, as opposed to what I am against. Still, being anti-sexist was clearer for others to comprehend because there were so few models of a feminist man ("so what does that mean anyway?"), and it allowed me to define my politics/values while simultaneously allowing me a voice that was different (although unified) with my feminist sisters.

Still later, I came across the term profeminism -- and knew that I had found my label. I am definitely PRO feminism, and strongly/solidly identify with radical feminism. And, I am allowed the possibility to have a reality, have experiences and have a voice that is different, although in chorus, with my feminist sisters. Finally, I felt like I had a way to describe who I am, what I believe in and what my values are without needing to go into a long treatise. I am profeminist!

So, male feminists? Being feminist is more than being in intellectual agreement with theoretical principles. The self-definition of feminism is both an acknowledgment of the belief in women's liberation (or women's equality, or women's superiority -- depending on the brand of feminism one subscribes to -- but this is a different discussion), and a personal-political statement. By defining oneself as feminists, women make a political statement of their re-naming of themselves. It is a socio-historical-political statement of their personal odyssey. Men can not share this experience -- although we certainly can and many of us do share an intellectual and even deeper commitment to these ideals and values.

So men cannot be feminists -- regardless of the degree to which we believe in and support the ideals, values, principles, attitudes, and behaviors of feminism. We have never been women, and can not experience the world as women have -- as such, we can never come to the personal-political place where feminism is a liberating and life-sustaining self-definition. As men, we can only understand theoretically.

Our experiences, realities, and yes, even our struggle, is different. Certainly connected, but our work for liberation even within a feminist framework is along a different path. This is exactly what feminist have been claiming for generations, that treating women like men is not necessarily fair nor is it liberating -- for women are different than men, and these differences should be allowed for and celebrated. By defining ourselves as feminists, men deny these very differences, and ignore the work that we must do.

I'm involved in the radical profeminist struggle because I believe in the liberation of women. But I'm also involved because I believe a radical womanist lifestyle also holds the most promise for men's liberation. Calling myself a feminist does not actualize my heartfelt belief and commitment to women, and men's liberation.

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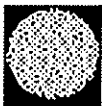
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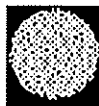
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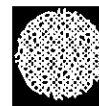
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