

Feminists are not responsible for educating men

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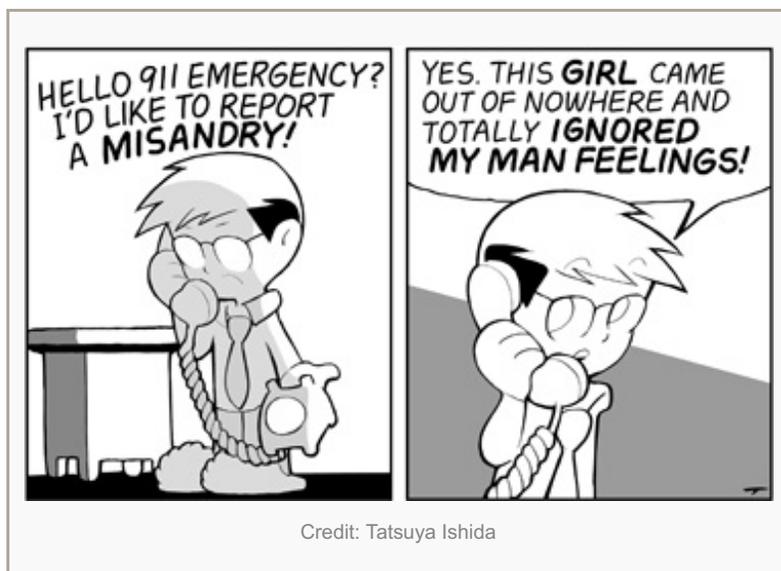
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As a vocal feminist with many intelligent, lovely male friends, I'm often met with indignance when I choose not to engage with them about feminism. Surely if I *really* cared about changing our culture of discrimination and inequality, I should be trying to educate men? Isn't that an activist's job? Shouldn't feminists be *grateful* when men want to bounce questions off us, because it shows that they are at least *trying* to understand?

It's both exhausting and diversionary being expected to hash out the basics with men who haven't bothered to think about their own privilege before. Men are not entitled to expect feminists to educate them. Real change will only happen when men accept that the burden of education is on them, not on women.

Recently, I politely declined to debate with one such baffled male friend, who followed up by sending me some well-intentioned advice on how I could be a more effective feminist. Having never thought much about feminism before, he said, he just didn't find my social media posts *appealing*. Too shouty and academic. What I needed was to explain things in a way that *appealed to men*.

Considering himself as the sort of bloke who "could be part of the solution", he helpfully sent me a link to a twelve-minute TED talk which contained, in his words, "a basic yes/no test" for misogyny together with proposed steps to solve the problem. In an impressive gesture of hubris, he suggested the next time I was asked to educate a man who was genuinely trying to learn about feminism, I forward this snappy sound-byte resource he had just found for me.



It's astonishing that 50 per cent of the population are so regularly asked to [make a sales pitch](#) for liberation from structural disadvantage and systemic violence.

Here's the thing about being expected to hold the hand of each individual man as he grapples with the possibility that despite his self-perceived good nature and honest intentions, he is a beneficiary of the structural oppression of women. It actually hurts. Patriarchy hurts women on a daily basis. But even though it can be traumatic to discuss rape culture, for example, we live in hope that by showing men how it hurts us they will begin to understand and become our allies. When men appear to take an interest in feminist discourse it tugs at this yearning. While they can play devil's advocate and toss around hypotheticals that are utterly disconnected from their reality and then opt out at the end, for women these discussions require revelation and vulnerability; they are a sharing of our actual lived experience.

The most common argument is: **If You Won't Educate Me How Can I Learn**. This is how it usually plays out. Self-described Nice Guy interjects discussion with earnest appeals for feminists to engage with his personal opinions. Having pushed past his bristling discomfort at feminists being bitter, resentful and combative (but not before pointing

out this sacrifice), Nice Guy is bewildered not to have his theories discussed immediately and in a reasonable, non-angry way. Despite the hundreds of resources on the subject which he could, like the rest of us, go off and read, Nice Guy expects women to stop what they are doing, and instead share their experiences of oppression and answer his questions. In an ironic twist, Nice Guy is unaware that by demanding women divert their energies to immediately gratifying his whims, he reinforces the power dynamics he is supposedly seeking to understand.

It goes without saying that there is nothing wrong with having basic questions about feminism. Unpacking something as complex and insidious as patriarchy, particularly when it requires an examination of your own privilege, isn't easy. Where it becomes problematic is when you are so confident that your questions are SUPER! IMPORTANT! that you try and co-opt feminist discussions to have them heard.

To borrow the analogy of another woman:

“It's as if you have walked into a postgraduate mathematics seminar, yelling: Hey, how can you even use imaginary numbers anyway if they're not real?’ When someone rather distractedly points you to a first-year text-book in the corner, you leaf through the first couple of pages half-heartedly for a few seconds and say: ‘I don't agree with some of the definitions in here – and anyway you haven't answered my question. Doesn't anyone want to have a discussion with me?!’”

This incredulity is usually delivered with a sound telling-off for being sarcastic, unreasonable, illogical, ungrateful and bitter. Now, as a woman raised under patriarchy I am socialized to respond to men's praise and approval. Having suffered the consequences of men's disapproval, conflict is counter-intuitive to me. It's tempting to give in to the desire to be recognized as a “good” feminist who takes the time to explain things in a polite, fun, sassy way. But here's the kicker: polite feminism not only doesn't work, [it is actually self-defeating](#).

Spending time and energy nurturing men through their journey of self-discovery is not only incredibly dull, it actually serves to reinforce existing power dynamics and keeps us from collectivizing as women and enacting real change.

My advice to men who genuinely wish to learn about feminism is this: read and listen to the voices of women when they explain what misogyny feels like and how it operates. Never ask women to find resources for you; seriously, get a library card. Or the internet. Don't interrupt to disagree or derail by using individual examples of women in positions of power or instances of what you see as “reverse sexism” (here's a hot tip: “misandry” isn't a real thing.)

To paraphrase [Audre Lorde](#):

“When people of colour are expected to educate white people as to their humanity, when women are expected to educate men, lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world, the oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions.”

If you are in a group that has the structural advantage of wages, safety, health and education – when you've basically already won the life lottery just by showing up – it is your responsibility to educate yourself. And really, don't tell women to be nice. We're angry. We have every reason to be. Frankly, you should be too.

This post is [reprinted](#) with permission from the author. [Cecilia Winterfox](#) is a writer based in Melbourne, Australia.

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