

Involving Men

Kat Banyard, FEM 07

“Violence against women diminishes us all. If you fail to raise your hand in protest you are part of the problem”. Those are the words of the actor Patrick Stewart. We at the Fawcett Society agree with those sentiment, and more. We believe men must raise their hands in protest at women’s inequality as a whole and also be active participants in the feminist movement. Because while women’s lives have undergone a revolution in the past 30 years, the same cannot be said about men’s. Only when men become full partners in the movement for gender equality – and start to challenge and redefine what it means to be a man - will we see an end to women’s exclusion from power, an end to women’s poverty, and an end to violence against women. During this talk, I will outline why feminism *needs* men, how feminism *helps* men, and provide a few ideas on how women and men can work *together* to bring about a 21st century revolution in gender relations.

First, just a quick clarification: as some of you may (or may not) have noticed I’ve undergone a little Oscars-style costume change. But I just want to clarify that my t-shirt reads ‘Feminism Helps Men’. Last time I wore this at an event I received somewhat bemused enquiries as to why I was promoting the lads mag of the same monogram.

So why do men *need* to be involved in feminism?

I’m going to focus on two key themes that illustrate why men’s active participation in feminism is not only desirable but crucial: violence and money.

Despite women making up nearly half of the labour force in Britain, women receive on average just 54 pence for every £1 of income received by men. Women working full-time earn just 82% of the male full-time hourly wage, and women working part-time receiving just 59% of men’s hourly pay. Figures on employment, pay, income, pensions and assets all tell a similar story. – women do not enjoy equivalent economic status to men. A crucial cause of this huge inequality gap is the distribution of caring. Women in our society currently have primary responsibility for unpaid care. As a result, women are unable to compete on equal terms with men in a labour market that fails to cater for the needs of employees trying to balance the dual responsibilities of paid and unpaid work. Not only do we need substantial changes in the workplace – we need substantial changes at home – with men equal partners in caring. To achieve this we have to re-evaluate notions of masculinity – what it means to be a man. So men are not pressured in to being the main ‘breadwinner’ for their families – but encouraged to take an equal share in bringing up their children. This is vital for *women*: enabling them to participate in the paid economy on a more equal footing. This is vital for *men*: enabling them to spend more time with their families. And this is vital for *children*: recent research by the Equal Opportunities Commission found that emotional and behavioural problems were more common by the time youngsters reached aged 3 if their fathers had not taken time off work when they were born, or not used flexible working to have a more positive role in their upbringing. In order for this crucial transformation in men’s roles in society to occur – men themselves need to re-evaluate male cultural stereotypes and be a part of the feminist movement that seeks to bring about their change.

The second issue that shines a light on the need for men’s involvement in feminism is violence. Male violence against women is endemic. Two women a week are murdered by their current or ex partner, and at least 47,000 women are raped every year in the UK – mostly by men they know. But rapists are not born, they are made. We need to disrupt the close association between masculinity and violence and create a society that does not foster in some men the desire to exert strength and dominance through violent behaviour. But bringing about such a huge societal shift will not be easy. It will involve a long process of engagement and education. Indeed, focus groups carried out recently by Amnesty International with men aged 18-35 revealed a strong unwillingness by these men to talk or think about violence against women, a superficial response of ‘yes’ when asked if violence against women was bad which when challenged revealed a low level of understanding about it. And they also revealed little understanding of men’s own potential to help and remedy the problem. To end violence against women all men need to take responsibility for recognising and rejecting the harmful male cultural

stereotypes that help to foster male violence and be an active part of the feminist movement which seeks to create a new world not just for women – but also for men.

It is clear then that men *need* to be an active part of the movement if feminism is going to create real and lasting change. But happily in addition to that – men as a group will reap huge benefits from an effective feminist movement. I will touch on just a few of those areas now to demonstrate **how feminism helps men**.

Society pays a huge economic debt for women's inequality. In September 2004 the Government published a study that assessed the cost of domestic violence in the UK at £6 billion a year. A recent IMF study reveals inequality between the sexes is costing the world billions a year in lost economic growth – to the extent that the researchers advocate a global initiative to force governments to address the problem. Furthermore, if Britain is to succeed as a high skill economy competing in a global market place – the pool of talent from which we draw our workforce must be maximised. But at the moment, women are shut out and unable to fulfil their potential in a workplace ill designed for the realities of modern day life.

Men also personally pay emotional debts for women's inequality - through the absence of loving and supportive relationships with women if characterised by violence and control, or through having to work long and inflexible hours at work –thus unable to witness the full wonder of their children growing up. Research by the Equal Opportunities Commission found 70% of fathers with babies under 15 months want to be more involved with their children, and 9 out of 10 dads are as confident in caring for their children as their partners. Feminism seeks transform relations at work and in the home – so a man *can* spend more time with his family, so a man is *not* compelled to be the main breadwinner because his partner cannot match his earning power.

Feminism helps men because of the way it challenges heterosexuality as the 'norm' and theorises and campaigns about homophobia and stereotypical constructions about men and hetro/sexuality.

Feminism also helps men because it promotes the humanity of men. It advocates that male violence against women is not inevitable. It advocates that loving fathers are just as able and just as necessary in the process of raising children. And it advocates that men shouldn't be straightjacketed by societal pressures of what is and what is not appropriate behaviour for 'real' men.

Feminism helps us all.

Before I move on to what action you as men can take – or you as women can take to ensure men are involved, I want to briefly address an issue that sometimes causes confusion. As long as women's inequality exists, as long as women are subject to violence by men simply for being women – there will be a need for a women-only space in which women can heal. Now more than ever we need to be aware of that, as women-only services such as refuges and rape crisis centres are chronically under-funded. And I would encourage everyone here to support the Women's Resource Centre's campaign calling for action to address this. However, the need for women-only services and spaces such as these should not be confused with the political feminist movement that seeks to transform both women and men's lives. Because, as I hope I have demonstrated, the involvement of individual men in that movement for change will be critical to its success.

OK. **So what action can feminist men take to start addressing women's inequality?** Well, there is no 'guidebook on how to achieve a feminist utopia' (unfortunately). And, while there have always been men involved in feminist activism, active male involvement in feminism right now in the UK is relatively low. But, what I hope you will take away from today is the inspiration to change this and to join and learn from fantastic projects such as the White Ribbon Campaign and Damian's work.

First - start close to home. Learn about the issues. Read a feminist book. Examine your own attitudes and behaviours – uncomfortable as this may be.

And start to take action in your daily life. Challenge and interrupt sexist remarks and behaviour by your peers. Challenge the male cultural stereotypes that pressure you to behave in particular ways. If you have children – take an equal share in the caring!

In addition to this, you can take more public action. This doesn't mean grabbing a loud speaker, standing on a crate and proclaiming your gender wisdom to all passers by (though by all means if it's what you want to do...). You can integrate feminism in to your current hobbies or pursuits. For instance, the organiser of FemFest – the gig taking place tonight profiling female bands and the issue of women's exclusion from the mainstream music industry – is Tom Moulton. He's in a band and occasionally puts on gigs anyway – so decided to do some feminist action by putting on this gig and donating the profits to Ladyfest Leister – a feminist arts festival taking place later in the year. If you are a member of a football team – why not organise a match that raises money for a local refuge – or get your team to pledge support for the White Ribbon Campaign - or even join the Fawcett Society as a team?

Alternatively or in addition to this, you may like to get involved in more sustained collective feminist action – by joining or setting up a feminist group with other women and men. Active, mixed-sex feminist groups have the potential to be incredible forces for societal change. A fantastic example of this is the Warwick Anti-Sexism Society – based at Warwick University – which has roughly equal numbers of male and female members. This group has carried out an FHM campaign, raised awareness about feminist issues in their union, and through workshops and discussions have been able to explore the constructs of masculinity and femininity together through sharing experiences and perspectives. I also urge all men here to join the leading feminist society in the country – the Fawcett Society.

Finally, it is worth noting that women will play a key role in involving men in feminism. While it is great to see some male faces here - the reality is that today you are in the minority. Feminist women will need to reach out to supportive and sympathetic men and actively seek to engage them in campaigns.

The Fawcett Society believes one of the biggest challenges in 21st century feminism is how we work to transform men's lives in a common cause of gender equality. We want to change not just what childcare the state provides, but who changes the nappies at home. We want to change not just who holds power in international conglomerations, but who controls the household budget. Thankfully, there are many men –including those here today – eager to bring about that change and be active participants in contemporary UK feminism. As a start, let's see what we can achieve in a year. Let's see how many men come to FEM 08.

Thank you.