

Roles of Men with Feminism & Feminist Theory

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Can Men do Feminist Theory?

There are perhaps as many definitions of feminism and feminist theory as there are people who declare that they are feminists. Ben Agger (1998) states that the major achievement of feminist theory is to make the politics of sex and gender central to understanding oppression. However, feminist theory is not only about understanding but also about action. A goal of the feminist project is to end the oppression of women and attain social equity for them.

The politics of patriarchy have suppressed women's voices and dominated social discourse and social action to the benefit of men and detriment of women. Thus it may be problematic for some readers that I, as a white male in this patriarchal society, am struggling to define the male role in feminism, which was born out of the women's movement and revisits the unanswered question, can men do feminist theory?

This question can only be answered in differing ways for the meanings of text and answers to social questions are contested symbolic mediations imbedded in social relations of power. Perhaps a more important question than whether or not men can "do" feminist theory is whether men can engage feminism and can they be feminists?

Can Men be Feminists?

It is crucial for men to be a part of feminist agency. If feminism is to attain its goal of liberating women, men must be a part of the struggle. Indeed, men probably bear more of the responsibility for ending oppression of women since patriarchal men have been the main perpetrators of that very oppression. But can men do this by becoming feminists?

Although I believe that men can be pro-feminist and anti-sexist, I do not believe we can be feminists in the strictest sense of the word in today's society. Men, in this patriarchal system, cannot remove themselves from their power and privilege in relation to women. To be a feminist one must be a member of the targeted group (i.e a woman) not only as a matter of classification but as having one's directly-lived experience inform one's theory and praxis.

A clear analogy can be made between male profeminism and anti-racism. Men cannot really be feminists anymore than whites can be black nationalists. However, men can be pro-feminist and whites can be pro-black nationalists. At the same time it is not enough to simply be a member of the disenfranchised minority to be either a feminist or a black nationalist. Feminism, like black nationalism requires political consciousness and even activism.

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Sexism restricts roles for men as well as women. But while sexism impacts women more negatively than men it also affects individual women to differing degrees. Some women internalize sexist beliefs and subservient behaviors to a greater extent than others and do not/cannot embrace feminism.

Sexism negatively impacts men by forcing them into a hyper-masculinity which engages high-risk behavior and limits their emotional expression as full human beings. However, regardless of these and other secondary effects of sexism, men still benefit from patriarchy (the social system of sexism) whether or not they choose to fight sexism in others or themselves. Women, and feminists in particular, face the damaging primary effects of sexism and the wrath of patriarchal society whenever they resist their subjugated social role and often even when they don't. So if men cannot be feminists how can we be a part of a feminist agency? Does feminism address only women or doesn't it also address men in some way?

What Should be the Role of Men in the Feminist Movement?

Feminist discourse might even have more pertinent impact on men than on women. Many women know they are oppressed by patriarchy. They have the life experiences of belonging to an oppressed group and have most likely shared personal stories that reveal their wounds from patriarchy. Men, on the other hand, are less likely to recognize their gender privilege and probably have not shared stories of wounding women through their own oppressive behaviors nor have they grieved with other men over the harm they have caused to women. Vulnerable, acquiescent behavior is not commonly accepted as manly in today's society. Nevertheless, I believe that real feminism is not just about hearing personal stories but also about changing the structure of gender relations and acting to eliminate all forms of patriarchy.

Unfortunately, some segments of the men's movement, such as men's rights groups and followers of Robert Bly's mythopoetic movement, seem less focused on dismantling patriarchy and more focused on, in bell hook's (1992) words, "the production of a kind of masculinity that can be safely expressed within patriarchal boundaries. She further explains that the most frightening aspect of the contemporary men's movement, particularly as it is expressed in popular culture, is the depoliticization of the struggle to end sexism and sexist oppression and the replacing of that struggle with a focus on personal self-actualization. She suggests that the men's movement should not be separate from the women's movement but instead become a segment under the larger feminist movement. In this way men would not be taking center stage in yet another part of women's lives allowing a slightly more subtle form of domination to continue.

Paul Smith, who co-authored the book *Men in Feminism* suggested recently in *Cultronic* that men should not be in feminism but nearby. He challenges men to think of feminism working on them. But this cannot be done without changing, not only how men relate to other men, but how we relate to women as well. Perhaps men need to be "menists," supporting women in their feminist work while allowing feminism to work on them, challenging themselves and other men to end patriarchy. In this way feminist theory and practice could be a catalyst for liberating both men and women from their restrictive gender roles and the system of patriarchy.

Can Men Do Feminist Theory?

Any substantive theory for social change must provide something for most if not all members of society. Theories which use abstract and elitist language will not be accessible to the oppressed groups most in need of social justice. A good theory, then, will also have multiple layers of messages for different social groupings. While some radical feminists may take an essentialist position that feminist theory construction is only possible by women other feminists will insist that men can participate in feminist theory, under certain conditions. Alison Jaggar (1988) describes these conditions as follows: men will have to learn women's text, a process that will require at least as much humility and commitment as that needed by white/Anglo women to understand the experience of women of color.

What Should be the Role of Men with Feminist Theory?

As suggested by Alison Jaggar and others, men must first learn the text of feminist theory. This learning must not only involve the traditional reading of seminal works in feminist theory by feminist authors but must also involve a learning of social and political experience from a feminist perspective. Men should consult with feminist women when writing about feminist theory. Men should also support more authorship of feminist theory by women and challenge other men to see feminist theory as a legitimate and necessary practice that challenges men to end patriarchy. Above all, men need to engage with feminist theory and practice, letting it work on them, in order to liberate all genders and build a society constructed on justice and nourished by love.

References

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