

Inspiring more choices for men

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Abstract

Gender is a narrowing operation that affects women and men differently. Men benefit from gender in some ways but are still forced into a narrow box. Men can take action to disrupt the narrowness, empower ourselves and enrich our lives. One way to express this politics is by wearing different clothes.

1,200 words

Today I'm mostly going to talk about men, but I'm going to start off talking about feminism, because feminism has done a wonderful thing for men. As we all know, feminism uncovered women's inequality, but to do this they had to point the finger at **gender** as a major organising principle in society that deals with sex and reproduction, and that also distributes power according to which sex you are.

Now feminism of course has focused mostly on women's inequality, but there's another aspect of gender that everyone suffers under: gender is basically a **narrowing operation** that works by dividing up the whole population into two boxes that are completely disconnected from each other. So you have "men" in one box over here, and "women" in an entirely separate box over here.

And this is where gender links with power: once the population is divided into two groups, one group gets power and the other is pushed away from power. It's certainly true what feminism says - that the "men" box has more power than the "women" box. But the point is that it is still a box. It's narrow, and confined. The privileges men enjoy only happen when we stay inside the box. If we want social acceptance, recognition, and social rewards we have to stick within the confines of the box - otherwise we're out, and we lose everything.

This sharp division between the sexes where men are privileged and women are marginalised has been the situation for most of the last 200 years. But feminist activism in the 20th century, and especially since the 1960s and 70s, has changed the situation for women. Feminist activists have managed to stretch the box for women, so that now women are more legitimated than they used to be, and they have more choices than they used to have. Certainly feminist activism has resulted in women having more choices than men. This is not because of anything natural about women. Women's range of choices has come about through activism by women, a whole lot of women taking risks to actively push against the boundaries of the "women" box.

Now for men the situation is more complicated than for women. Both women and men are pushed into narrow boxes, but men get substantial social benefits from being in the “men” box. We are readily accepted as legitimate political and economic players: We don’t have to justify being involved in the workplace, in politics, in public life - it’s **taken for granted** that we are involved in these socially valued things. That’s the privilege.

But that privileged box is still a box - it’s narrow, and it comes at a cost. We pay a price for our privilege, in four main areas:

- our emotional expression;
- affectionate relationships with others;
- receptive pleasures; and
- spiritual connection.

These areas of life are often not considered terribly significant. Many men are simply not aware of these absences and, if they think about it at all, don’t think that this is a big price to pay. But what all these add up to is **isolation** - the fate of most men is to live lives of isolation, cut off from meaningful relationships with other men, from satisfying connection with their wives and other women, struggling to connect with their children, and disconnected from themselves.

The result is that men die earlier than women, men are sicker and more likely to get sick than women, and men are **many** times more likely to kill themselves..

So men’s privilege - the cost of being in that narrow box - is **a matter of life and death**. It is that significant! Our limited emotional expressions, our lack of rich affectionate friendships, our unease with receptive bodily pleasures, and the paucity of spiritual connection in our lives means that men die before we need to.

The way forward is to break out of the box- expand the range of choices for ourselves, enrich our lives through learning new skills, new ways of being, new forms of self expression.

This doesn’t mean we need to abandon all the privileges. We can demand acceptance into social spaces as different sorts of men, and work with women to demand acceptance of a diversity of people into the social spaces of power.

Richly diverse men have a vested interest in being esteemed not because we are “tough and manly”, isolated and with no commitments to relationships. We need to be esteemed and valued because we are skilled, and smart, and capable, and because we are solid and resilient. And we can have these qualities because we have good support networks and through those we are able to care for ourselves. And because we care for ourselves we are able to care for others.

All this is possible when we reject the narrowness of that box, when we act to expand the range of choices for ourselves and for other men.

To do this requires new things: new skills and self awareness, new ways to conduct ourselves in interactions with others, and new repertoires of self-

expression. We need to do personal growth work, we need to develop new relationships, and we need to act and appear differently.

We can express this politics by wearing different sorts of clothes. New shapes of garments emphasise different aspects of our bodies, enable new patterns of movement, and new forms of interaction with other bodies.

Wearing softer fabrics, a wider range of colours, wearing skirts or dresses - not to appear to be a woman but as an expression of another way of being male, as a statement that men don't have to be confined to a narrow box, and as a demand that men be legitimated because they are people - not only because they are "tough and manly".

Mind you, being tough and manly is a fantastic way to be - the sturdy oak, the rock, the dependable one, are very fine qualities that both women and men rely on. And many people benefit from the strengths and devotion and selflessness that men often contribute to social life.

Also there are many pleasures that men traditionally enjoy - sports, rough and tumble, the toughness and strength of muscles, the sweat and strain of really using our bodies and testing their limits.

But if these things are **all** we are capable of, or if we feel **ashamed** of being any other way, then we are confined - we are restricted - we are back in that narrow box that limits what's OK for a man to do. And we will suffer the cost of that narrowness.

So my message is not about rejecting the conventional strengths and abilities and pleasures of being a man. Rather, I urge us to reject the prescription that says "these are all a man can be".

I urge us to take action - expand the range of choices for ourselves and other men. Demand acceptance as **people who are also male**. Demand acceptance as rich diverse human beings, who have a male sex, and who express ourselves in rich diverse ways.

Thanks for listening.