



Adopting the Principle of Pro-Feminism

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When I was first asked to speak at a seminar on the issue of “pro-feminism,” I was hesitant. I was unsure if I, as a man, should be talking about what it might mean to be pro-feminist. I discussed it first with a number of people close to me, particularly women, to get their advice on the matter before making the decision.

When I reflect on this, it struck me how different my response would have been in the not-too-distant past. I would have confidently accepted, sure in the knowledge that the right to make that decision in isolation was mine, confident that I, as a man, could assert what being pro-feminist was and was not. I had, after all, been claiming my support of feminism as an ideology since my early adolescence. I would engage in political debate and action in support of feminist causes.

Yet, when I look back on that time, I am ashamed to recognize my own sexism and perpetuation of male dominance through my lifestyle, in relationships, and in how I conducted myself in my daily life. In retrospect, the contradiction between what I did and what I said I supported seems embarrassingly clear. However, at the time I was completely blind to it.

Gradually, over time, I have had pointed out to me the way in which I have been caught out by the ways of thinking and acting of dominant male culture, and have come to recognise some of these ways and challenge them in myself.

Some of the ways of thinking and acting that I, like so many other men, have challenged, involve:

- dominating airspace, making sure it is my voice and views that get heard;
- feeling a responsibility to come up with a solution, to problem-solve rather than listen and understand;
- keeping control of decision-making, seeing co-operation as a loss of control;
- not being able to accept responsibility for perpetuating injustice, either deliberately or unwittingly;
- not being able to apologise, to say that I was sorry;
- assuming that another person's or group's silence meant that they had forgotten about my wrongdoing and that I could carry on my relationship with them without doing anything to redress the injustice;
- searching for a woman's opinion that supported my own opinion, rather than listening to women's opinions which were different;

- dividing women from each other by quoting or representing a woman's view that supported my own, to other women who had a different view;
- undermining or silencing women's challenges of my behaviours by labeling them "hard-line" or over-critical;
- dismissing issues raised by women because they were not raised in what I believed to be the right manner or context.

Now, I have not said much so far about how I can act in a pro-feminist way, but I think it can be suggested that acting in the ways I have just outlined would fit more with acting in a sexist way than in a pro-feminist way. . . .

So when I look back in my life I can see that, although I believed that I was acting in a pro-feminist way, I was at the same time blind to my own sexism. It is clear that I was a poor judge of whether I was acting in a pro-feminist way or not.

I could clearly not rely on myself to hold myself accountable. I could not rely on other men to hold me accountable for my sexism when they were blind to these practices, not only in me but also in themselves. It is clear that it was women, those persons who experienced the effects of my sexism, who were in the best position to judge whether I was acting in a pro-feminist way or in a sexist way. I have to say, of course, that when I look back on this current period in my life, from some future point, there will be aspects of my perpetuation of sexist practices that I am at present blind to that will become embarrassingly clear through the ongoing efforts of women to challenge me.

However, if I as a man leave it to women to take on the responsibility to educate me in my sexism, is that not shirking my responsibility to take action against the abuses of power perpetuated by my gender?

Yet, if I take on this responsibility as a man, or with my gender in isolation, how can I know I am challenging and not perpetuating our abuse of male privilege? . . .

To return to the beginning, I spoke of how I consulted women on their views of my speaking on the issue of pro-feminism and their views of what needed to be said. A better process might have been to apply a partnership accountability process. Such a process could have been:

- gathering a group of men to discuss what it might mean to adopt a principle of pro-feminism;
- having a group of women observe this discussion and, following this, have a discussion among themselves about their responses to what the men said;
- the men would be an audience to their responses and would, in turn, discuss among themselves their responses to the women's experience of their initial discussion;
- finally, observers who had witnessed the entire proceedings could be called upon to reflect upon the whole process.

Such a process of partnership accountability with men and women, in a context of respect, trust, partnership, and openness to critical analysis, can lead to men taking the responsibility for taking action against the abuse of male culture while gaining access to the knowledge and partnership of women. . . . The best judges of whether these practices are occurring are not men, but the women who experience the effects of these practices; and the knowledge, wisdom, and partnership of women can be achieved through structured processes of accountability.