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SUMMARISING FEMINIST MEN: CHALLENGES AND IMPACT ON MASCULINITY IN THE MODERN ERA

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ABSTRACT

Some interpretations of feminism theorise that men are inherently oppressive and that women are always victims. Feminist men sometimes adopt this attitude. Whilst feminist men can appear as working to create a more just and equitable world for all people, certain feminist men do not lend support to male issues. These men can adversely affect other men, causing them to struggle romantically, physically, or emotionally. A will to prioritize one sex over the other can have severe consequences for both men and women, giving rise to a society that lacks trust and empathy for all, providing a fertile breeding space for the sex-shaming conversations and discontent among the sexes we see today.

Keywords: feminist men, gender politics, male, masculinity, sex-shaming

CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM AND MEN

Many scholars and academics argue that feminism works only by benefitting both genders (Enslin, 2003; Kinsella & Shepherd, 2019). It is clear that feminism has evolved from its traditional roots through a multitude of waves from the latter part of the late twentieth century leading to changes in how we engage in philosophical debates (Witt & Shapiro, 2000). Such a shift can be seen in the works of Horrock (1996), Farrell (1994), and Pizzey et al. (2000), who began to question whether this ideology is as mutually beneficial as once thought. Today an increasing number of social commentators, the likes of Piers Morgan or Candace Owens, mainstream academics such as Jordan Peterson, and a growing number of academic researchers such as Abhisek (2022) and Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir (2022) are raising points of a similar nature.

An increasing number of scholars, such as Yang (2007) and Cobb (2015), now argue that this new fourth wave of feminism is more entwined with the modern dynamics of social media than with its traditional values. An example of this confusion is shown in O'Donnell and Sharpe's works on uncertain masculinities that suggests that "what we see from the turning point of the 21st century is the decline of one the longest-running fables of all time, the superiority of men over women" (2000, p.89). On the other side of the pendulum, society in the West has seen a noticeable rise in the presence of men who have chosen to adopt the feminist ideology and promote its messages. This brief commentary will look to assess the role of the feminist man, who they are and what they look to achieve. However, to add to the literature concerned with the lived experiences of males, the essay will look to contribute fresh interpretations and insights into the possible effects of this type of masculinity on everyday males and how it causes them to question their interpretations of what it means to be a male in the twenty-first century.

FEMINISM'S IMPACT ON MEN

Freud's 1931 paper on female sexuality stated that due to our bisexual nature and genetic cross-inheritance, every person combines both feminine and masculine characteristics. As such, any true definition or claim of either existing in a pure form is solely theoretical and steeped in uncertainty (Freud, 1966). The height of success for male achievement and the status benefits afforded by the patriarchy, or the time of most apparent distinction between the masculine and

feminine roles, was the mid-nineteenth century (Clare, 2010). A period of time when women were perceived as delicate, easily excited, refined and somewhat nervous (Clare, 2010), whereas men typically displayed such traits as physical and mental strength, stoicism, rationality, and a perceived lack of emotion (Jobbins, 2017; Tosh, 2007). This image continued throughout the twentieth century and became the traditional male stereotype. In the late seventies, the personification of what it was to become male developed and became that of someone who shows evidence of being macho, aggressive, rational, independent, and invulnerable, with no room for contradiction or uncertainty (Wilson, 2004). These aspects of masculinity exist today and are used as baseline indicators in assessments such as The Male Role Norms Scale (Thompson and Pleck,1986), which ascribes masculinity to three key facets: status, toughness and anti-femininity.

The latter part of the twentieth century has seen such assessments change as men become more liberal and accepting of the change in gender roles, expectations, and balance, with more men adopting a feminist point of view. Examples of the intersectionality between masculinity and feminism can be found in a review by Kachel et al. (2016) and Kincaid (2022). In the period since the seventies and particularly in the twenty-first century, we are now seeing many versions of masculinity due to the increased presence of women in what were previously considered male-only spaces such as factories, director's boards, sporting arenas or pubs. Furthermore, due to increased acceptance and the lifting of legal restrictions in most Western countries of homosexuality and the LGB community, we now see an increased presence of men who are open with their sexuality, so the stigma of homosexuality is less so than in previous times. This cultural shift and the dominating presence of feminism in our political, educational, and societal systems has led to an increase in men who are very connected with femininity or, as Sbardelini et al. (2022) refer to it, a feminine-masculine duality.

In recent years, the online promotion of tags such as #MeToo, #BringBackOurGirls and #EndViolenceAgainstWomen in the online space have been beneficial in promoting positive messages and raising awareness of important issues. However, scholars such as Willem & Tortajada (2021) summarise that they have been adopted and used more as tools for self-branding, self-promotion virtue-signalling and at times making defamatory comments about the

character of men. Examples of this can be found in feminist online discussion spaces where men are framed as requiring intervention, a good boy, often viewed as in a position of loss, or a bad boy that needs to be saved, encouraged to be a positive example by engaging with and promoting in their pro-feminist behaviour all the while leaving them open to having their intentions questioned as backed by a sinister motive (Waling, 2022). Most males are perceptive enough to know that overtly macho displays of behaviour can be off-putting to women who may prefer emotional or educational intelligence and sensitivity (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). As such, this was a cliché wheeled out by the "Pick Up Artist Troupe" made common through multiple sexuality-based reality TV shows such as VH1's similarly named show or The Bachelor. Such behaviours are somewhat contrasted in modern dating shows such as Take Me Out or Love Island or directly contrasted in shows such as Married at First Sight. This has had a negative effect now that men are often left in a position of confusion when it comes to interacting with women in both social and romantic settings, as there is an increased concern about whether affable behaviour is shown due to genuine feeling and emotion or just for personal, most often sexual gain.

Since the late twentieth century, the number of men who empathise with the plight of women, both their historical and present quandaries, has increased (Silver et al., 2018; Estevan-Reina et al., 2020). Many appear in complete agreement with the feminist stance. With the recent increasing interest in social justice issues, intersectionality, and gender, all appearing to be brought about as vehicles for male oppression, affected by and promoted through access to 24/7 media, meaning feminist men, can be found in all aspects of our lives. Whilst no clear and recognized definition exists within academia, hypothetical examples can be found in the education system, the political system, mainstream media, our healthcare centres and various criminal justice and family law systems, including our lawyers and judges. Famous examples of feminist men who operate within these circles are Ryan Gosling, Mark Ruffalo, Harry Styles, John Legend (Werft, 2017), and the U. N's HeForShe champions, Ed Miliband and Justin Trudeau (Siegel et al., 2022). In contrast to his political compatriots, David Cameron was targeted by Elle magazine for non-endorsement of the feminist movement (Pearlman, 2014; Cobb, 2015).

Since the inception of feminism, there has always been a wealth of male feminist

academics who have gone on to critique various aspects of masculinity (Horrocks, 1996), such as Warren Farrell, Michael Kimmel, and Dr Michael Flood. Whilst the latter academics have remained staunch feminist allies, Farrell faced harsh criticism from feminists, working within the media at the time, when he switched his primary research interests to the plight of young males. The Independent newspaper referred to his 1994 work "The Myth of Male Power" as "the twinge of jealousy men sometimes feel when confronted by feminine solidarity …. joyless whinge that is wholly blind to the merry and unruly aspects of the sexual debate, the ordinary busy liveliness of human affairs. Farrell is a self-appointed cheerleader anxious that men explore their inner maleness before it is too late" (Winder, 1994). Such criticism also extends to academic circles. As Anderson (2015) suggested, the male crisis Farrell discussed, including the perceptions of male marginalization and their impression of oppression, has been debunked and proven as a myth. Recent times have seen continued references and criticisms of his work, specifically in conversations about the manosphere, as highlighted in works by García Mingo & Díaz Fernández (2022) and Sugiura (2021).

Male fear of women and femininity is not a modern phenomenon (Clare, 2010, p.194). Anderson (2015) argues that current discourse has moved on from the traditional notion of the male-hating feminist. In contrast, however, it remains in constant discussion among extreme groups and fuels a lot of manosphere content (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Sugiura, 2021). A potential reason for this rise in the visibility of such men comes from, as Tompkins (2006) writes, the suppression of male desire and the devaluing of their experience attained through the positioning of women as the epitome of the American moral high ground throughout most of the twentieth century. This overt change in portrayal and framing subsequently allowed for subtle changes in the portrayal of men and masculinity by promoting traditionally framed feminist activities, such as holding babies, discussing their feelings and being more caring and accessible than the previous generations' counterparts. Such changes in the stereotypical image have led to a softening of the male image as a whole, which has been absorbed by the media and women throughout the world. Its impact can be evidenced in a survey by O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000 p.114) that found seventy-five per cent of respondents claim that "it is important for men to be sensitive and caring as it is to be strong and tough". Often, these men do not harm the

feminist movement or other men, nor do they cause overt or intentional distress. Their means of showing support are often manifested by calls for more education, the challenging of previous sexual attitudes and behaviours, the promotion of feminist organizations and causes, support in feminist activism, allyship (Silver et al., 2018) and the opportunity to exemplify what a feminist society would deem to be the ideal role model for men of this generation.

This cultural shift offers a potential explanation for why pastimes like video gaming, sports, and cars, amongst others, are now looked upon from a position of judgement and ridicule by other men. This has left those who enjoy these activities feeling like they no longer belong, that they must seek to change their behaviours and take on board hobbies or behaviours that may not come naturally to them. An aspect of the feminist man that has the potential to be detrimental to masculinity is any attempts to make it difficult for them to act in their natural manner or display stereotypical male values, causing feelings of uncertainty and insecurity concerning their masculinity on both an individual and societal level. An additional avenue where there is potential for risk can be when feminist men challenge traditional gender roles, such as the idea that men should be the breadwinners and women should be the homemakers leading to conflict with other men who hold more traditional views, such as men are expected to be assertive and competitive.

Historically, traditional men have been raised with the mantra of being strong, stoic and in control of their emotions irrelevant to their circumstances, the adage of "bravery in the face of danger." Recently, with the influx of modern dating apps, women often traditionally attracted to confident and assertive, some men are failing to find romantic partners (Thomas et al., 2021). Overly feminist men criticise these behaviours, making it difficult for those who display them to succeed in their relationships and careers and creating a hostile working environment. It must be noted that there are males raised within such a traditional household that more extreme interpretations of behaviour could arise potentially from something forced upon them as a child. In contrast to traditional male traits, Anderson (2009) states that excessively feminist men can be seen as weak and indecisive, making it difficult for them to find a romantic partner. This can lead to feelings of anger, resentment, and in extreme cases, physical or sexual violence. Both aspects somewhat reflect the incel community, who share the same difficulties in finding not

only intimate but social relationships and reject the notion of feminism.

Holding either opinion can sometimes socially alienate other men, who may feel threatened by their beliefs, making it more difficult for women to achieve genuine social equality. As Thompson (2015) states, unfavourable or incorrectly formed attitudes about feminism create barriers to activism. White Knights and overly feminist men not only enable uncomfortable situations but may also promote negative stereotypes about men, such as the idea that all men are rapists or abusers. As Tory MP Sir Christopher Chope summarised in the UK House of Commons recently (Scott, 2023), men are accused of being sexist or misogynistic simply for being men. Such accusations can make men feel alienated and unwelcome in specific spaces, making it difficult for them to speak up about their experiences or participate in conversations about relationships and gender equality. This issue can be exacerbated by overly feminist men, who can make it difficult for men to find love due to fuelling distrust and hostility towards men. As Thomson (2015) suggests, it could be detrimental to men who do not embrace feminism in that it may potentially lead to them finding it threatening to interpersonal relationships of either a sexual or familial nature.

These difficulties in approaching women as romantic partners or occasionally in workplace relationships result in behaviours that fall under the "White Knight" phenomenon (Leone et al., 2020; Krendel, 2020). In these cases, men assume the role of saviour in situations where there is the suspicion of threat, ridicule or harm to a female and plays on the stereotype of the damsel in distress being swept off her feet (Glick & Raberg, 2018; Lamia & Krieger, 2021). Whilst there are cases where the interference of a well-intentioned male prevents harm from coming to a woman, as Clare (2010) suggests, it is an action that may subliminally reflect a male's biological underlying compulsion to prove himself and his manhood to women. This hypothesis could provide evidence for the recent campaign throughout London that encouraged Men to "have a word" or interject in situations where a woman may feel threatened or in danger (Mayor of London, 2023) or EE's UK "Not her Problem" campaign using threatening tones from men, including sportsmen such as Jordan Henderson to acts as a deterrent to online misogyny during the ladies Euros in 2022 (EE Press Office, 2022). A relevant contradiction to this can be found in the works of Leone et al. (2022), and Carlson (2008), and an opinion that is now becoming more

commonplace is that traditional men can feel prohibited from intervening in suspicious situations due to potential conflict with peers due to interference in their seduction attempts.

Further confusion surrounds this discussion aspect as White Knighting behaviours can be called out under the hashtag "#Toxic Masculinity," A recent term in popular discourse that builds upon discussions that took root in the latter part of the twentieth century, where it was viewed that the masculinity portrayed by various outlets and social commentators was in a deviant state, akin to that of a disease (Clare, 2010). The term and discussions surrounding it have increased dramatically in popularity across all aspects of media, academia, education, politics, and society (Brown, 2021; Krendel, 2020).

At times, some interpretations of feminism theorise that men are inherently oppressive and that women are always victims systematically, through the patriarchy, in the workplace, and gender-based discussion or violence, an attitude also adopted by some feminist men. Whilst feminist men can appear as working to create a more just and equitable world for all people, regardless of their gender, there are certain feminist men and traditional men who, as a result, feel they do not lend support to male issues, as shown by the claims of a debunked male crisis discussed previously. Evidence of this in the workplace can be seen by the continued push for equal representation in STEM fields, C-Suite roles, or in the boardroom, yet little is spoken about addressing the imbalances that occur in areas such as the arts and humanities or education. Examples of these areas include 76% of UK teachers being female (Gov.UK, 2023), 80% of psychologists being female (Johnson et al., 2020), and five in every six counsellors being female (Brown, 2021). This uneven split continues into future generations as the following fields: psychology (81.4%), teaching (78%) or social sciences and humanities (68%) are primarily composed of female students (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023).

An issue that arises from the perspective of feminist men is that men are the primary perpetrators of aggressive or violent behaviour. This attitude can contribute to cutting men out of discussions about causes and solutions and lends itself to the impression that male victims are simply being overlooked. This follows the patriarchal view that all violence towards women is often deemed a tool for men to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and gendered power structures.

Furthermore, in cases of sexual violence, whilst displaying dominance over women, it does so also over other men, thus fulfilling a man's natural need for social status and power (Fahlberg & Pepper, 2016; Hindes & Fileborn, 2022). It is critical to remember that whilst the manifestation of violence in a physical form is predominantly shown by males, like women, males also face the threat of becoming victims of psychological and verbal violence (Thobejane, Mogorosi, & Luthanda, 2018). Adopting this attitude can result in numerous issues for male victims due to the promotion of campaigns with such messages as Believe All Women, where there is societal support that a woman who tells of an experience of violence should be believed to be telling the truth until proven otherwise. This compounds upon the physical violence faced by male victims of violent women as in this situation, socially they do not feel that they will be believed, and there is very little in promoting a responsible government strategy or funding for support or residential services. Gaining access to accurate statistics remains complex, as many incidents go unaccounted for. Ullrich (2019) extends upon this notion of mistrust by summarising that the patriarchal view of violence is echoed throughout the UK Criminal Justice System, whose old gender perceptions are steeped in sexual inequalities, making it difficult for men to report. For those that choose to do so, the prosecution process is often long-winded and fraught with difficulties. This overemphasis on the behaviour shown by men toward women has led to numerous campaigns and safety bulletins aimed at increasing women's safety but does not account for men who remain the primary victims of violence in Western society on a macro level.

Over sustained periods, prolonged exposure to abuse or violence brings significant risks to mental health and leads to varying outcomes in the short- and long term (Moffitt, 2013). Short-term effects can include depression and social isolation; longer-term effects include suicide, self-harm or acts of violence toward others out of a need for revenge. With men's issues overlooked in the domestic violence space (Broberg, 2022) and the notion of traditional masculinity going through a turbulent time, it should not be a surprise that men are experiencing suicide at a higher frequency than seen before. Whilst this has not gone unnoticed amongst politicians and the press, little has been done in response. We continue to see funding for services handed over to women-only services and the creation of independent living spaces for female victims, such as

the 15-story facility in Ealing recently announced by Woman Pioneer Housing and questioned by some residents (Booth, 2023), but very little progress in addressing the same issues for men. This is reflected by the increased number of social and charitable organizations that have pooled together to provide men with peer support networks. In the UK, this involves organizations such as Andy's Man Club, The Proper Blokes Club or The Mankind Initiative. This emergence is not limited to the UK either, as groups such as EVRYMAN and Mensgroup now operate in the United States, and there are services such as Mensline or Dads in Distress in Australia that serve well to illustrate the international nature of the bias in political spending and discussions in this area.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that there is somewhat of a disconnect between certain traditional types of men and those who overly identify with the feminist point of view. It is also clear that they are here to stay and will continue to hold positions where decisions can affect all areas of society. Without doubt there is evidence that suggests feminist men are beneficial in society, and perhaps this is nowhere better exemplified than the fight against sexual violence. However, it also extends to promoting individual identity and some would argue that it goes a long way to addressing the unequal historical balance between the genders. What cannot be ignored is how some men adopting this ideology can affect other men, causing them to struggle romantically, physically, or emotionally. We live in a time where it can appear challenging to be a manly man or man that can empathize with the plight of women. The increased frequency of terms like toxic masculinity or the internet slang "Soy Boy", someone lacking male characteristics (Moonshot, 2021), provides ample evidence. The desire to promote the needs or concerns of one gender over the over does not result in a more equitable or fairer society. It only fuels the isolation of one gender and can fuel a sense of resentment toward the other. The will to prioritise one sex over the other can have severe consequences for both men and women and gives rise to a society that lacks trust and empathy for all, providing a fertile breeding space for the sex-shaming conversations and discontent among the sexes we are seeing today.

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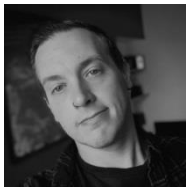
Matthew Shaw is from London, UK. He holds an MA in Social Policy and BA (Hons) Criminology from Plymouth Marjon University. Matthew is currently undertaking his PhD analysing the "Crisis in Masculinity" and the potential pathways to violence that may arise from it. Amongst his research, he has discussed potential pathways for the rehabilitation and reintegration of British children in Syrian refugee camps, the history of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programs in the African region, the driving factors in the female migration to Iraq and Syria, intimate partner violence committed and the rise of "Incel" culture as a form of extremism in the United States. Matthew has also studied various political strategies relating to the field, including critiques of Neoliberalism and the current Prevent strategy.

He has completed two internship positions working alongside the Criminology and Forensic Investigation department at Plymouth Marjon University, assisting the Arts and Humanities faculties in researching program experience enhancement. This experience led him to participate in a European PhD study at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, assessing psychological, sexual, verbal, financial and physical violence between intimate partners. This was followed up with a research placement at the Global Counter-Terrorism Institute. He currently holds an Action Counters Terrorism Training certificate and employment development certificates in safeguarding adults and children, drug and alcohol awareness, suicide and self-harm awareness and intervention. His academic work builds upon his previous professional experience, his experience as a father of a blended family with children across the age of seven to eighteen compiled, through social outreach work for those recovering from substance abuse or alcoholism, in addition to his role as a CCTV analyst within Plymouth City Council in collaboration with Devon and Cornwall police.

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