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Evidence 1: Critical essay

**Feminism, men, and different perspectives on their relationship for
gender egalitarianism**

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Abstract

It is undeniable that one of the responses to gender disparity and violence with roots in the theoretical, academic and urban scenarios is feminism. Considering that men have a direct impact on the tangible effects of gender injustice, a question is raised regarding their participation and general relationship with the movement. Throughout the visiting of both historical and current factors and public feelings toward the matters of gender inequality and a connection with philosophical currents and theories, a perspective is given on what men's place should be in relation to the feminism project for gender egalitarianism.

Keywords: feminism, men, gender egalitarianism

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In a world where 137 women are killed by a family member every single day, and where 82% of the victims of intimate partner homicide are female (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019), it is clear that men have a direct impact on the tangible effects of gender violence and disparity, considering the simple fact that same-sex intimate relationships are a choice made by sexual minority populations (Poitras, 2019).

It is undeniable that one of the responses with roots in the theoretical, academic and urban scenarios is feminism—as a critical theory—or feminisms, when considering the plurality and heterogeneity of the concept (Castañeda Salgado, 2016) and its expressions. According to a 2017 worldwide survey, 58% of the population would define themselves as a feminist, someone who advocates and supports equal opportunities for women (Statista Research Department, 2021). In 2020, six-in-ten women in the United States think that the term feminist describes them at least somewhat well, while four-in-ten men think the same way (Barroso, 2021).

Under this light, important questions arise: can and should men be part of the feminist movement? Will and should gender relationships change in the future, and in which ways? A solution to these questions can only be sketched with a thorough consideration of both historical and current factors and public feelings toward the matters of gender inequality that are still experienced today.

Gender disparity in both the ontological and experienced arena has been part of the Western philosophical tradition for millennia. According to Deborah Savage (2020), who treated extensively the origins of the notion of male superiority and its inclusion in the Catholic tradition, Aristotle's ideas are the starting point from which this topic can be analyzed. Diverging from Plato's unisex conception of man and woman, in which—derived from his theory of the soul—

there are no important differences between them, so that they are basically interchangeable, Aristotle understands male superiority from his category of opposites and theory of contrariety (Savage, 2020).

Aristotle's understanding of the universe revolved around these ideas, where of anything prime that exists, there is an opposite with a privation of the characteristics of the prime. The four elements that were believed to form everything at the time—fire, air, water and earth—are nothing but interactions between the two primary opposites: cold and hot, moist and dry (Savage, 2020). Therefore, elements are defined by their opposite basic characteristics. With this ontological structure in mind, Aristotle deems man as the prime expression of the human species, and woman as the expression with a privation of the prime's "full range of powers": "Man is the prime instantiation of the species; woman is defined by lack." (Savage, 2020, p. 3).

This superiority of the male form over the female—considered a 'malformed male'—emerges and is validated by Aristotle's own theory of generation. With the knowledge of the empirical fact that male of the species has greater heat than the female, a "superior value" is attributed to man, relative to the coldness of woman (Savage, 2020, p. 4). This valuation extends to the reproductive process: he argues that the heat present in males is what makes them able to purify their blood in order to create and discharge their seed. In this way, man is active and fertile, so he gives the form, woman is passive and infertile, so she gives the matter (taking the principles from Aristotle's theory of hylomorphism). Therefore, in the order of the universe, man has to rule, and woman must obey man (Savage, 2020).

However, this philosophy found its way through the modern world not only by the compulsory readings of Aristotle's work in the early universities of the Middle Ages, but most importantly by Philo of Alexandria's interpretation of the book of Genesis in the first century.

Influenced by the thoughts of Aristotle, Philo interpreted from the sequence of creation—woman created from man’s rib—the ultimately same notion of male superiority, but this time instilled it in the Christian tradition (Savage, 2020), one which still survives—along with most of its conceptions—thousands of years later.

Although a correction for this interpretation is offered by the author, which argues that the Hebrew concept of “corporate personality” was not understood by the aforementioned philosopher (Savage, 2020, p. 13), the historical origin of the notion of male superiority—which is of importance in this paper—has been already covered. Nonetheless, I would like to include my thoughts that propose an even earlier origin for this conception. These thoughts are the result of my personal reflection on the topic, and I ignore if these same ideas have been discussed by any philosopher or academic.

Considering an original state—which is referred to as the state of nature by thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke—in which the human species has just emerged in male and female forms, the only provider for power—and with it, authority—is physical strength. In this original time, there are no classes or discrimination by whichever reason, and there is no culture or collective knowledge built throughout generations. Naturally, males would dominate and control females because of their biological characteristics: the animalistic domination happens because of physical strength. And from males not all of them would dominate everyone else, but the strongest, who would also rule over other males.

This original source of authority and capacity of domination has naturally been degraded in significance as humanity—in hand with culture and scientific advancement—has developed. What personally makes an impression is that even though the human species as we know it today (*homo sapiens*) has evolved for several hundreds of thousands of years (Rafferty, 2021), not in

physical strength but in that of the mind, this notion of superiority is still a part of our imaginaries and realities. I find this understanding of the original human as an animal in search of domination to be in the same terms as that of Hobbes, and although it may be deemed pessimistic for human nature by some, it is congruent that the origin of (wo)mankind happened this way.

Either way, caused by Aristotle and Philo or by the animalistic, original human nature, the notion of male superiority deeply harms the lives of females (and males too) all the way through current timeframes. It has even transcended religion to be instilled in our whole worldviews: it even exists and takes shape in the artistic expressions of our cultures.

As Robin James (2020) argues, patriarchy is deeply sedimented into our artistic language, to the point that female suffering is regarded as aesthetically pleasing. This can be seen throughout the work of black female singers, as is the case of Billie Holliday and Bessie Smith, finding its way to contemporary stars such as Rihanna. They use heartbreak and emulation—performance choices—to recognize (confirm) and subvert structural problems by working with and against the ideological content of their lyrics and production.

The Barbadian's 2016 single *Love On The Brain* is a great example, especially when performed live¹. The singer's use of intonation and body language gives through an extra-human aesthetic dimension a completely opposite and sarcastic meaning to the lyrics she sings, which represent the expectations of heteropatriarchal society. Growling the vowels during the performance represent moaning during good sex—which again, society expects—and anger at the same time—the use of heartbreak and emulation. Also, the use of a Prince-like falsetto at the beginning of the verses “produce sounds and a voice that are extra-human because they can't be attributed to a clearly gendered voice” (James, 2020, p. 91).

¹ The live performance on which the author bases her analysis was part of the Global Citizen Festival 2016. It is available on <https://youtu.be/yXvyJDqgQec>.

However, and as I am going to argue from here on, the notion of male superiority also impacts men (albeit to an arguably lesser extent). Although there is skepticism from feminist academics such as Jordan and Chandler (2018), “High male suicide rates are often constructed as evidence for an apparent “crisis of masculinity”” (p. 1). Beyond the analysis of narratives regarding this argued crisis, the empirical data shows an alarming scenario: “In the majority of countries where data is available, [suicide] rates are between three and five times higher among men than women” (Jordan & Chandler, 2018, p. 2). This is a proof that gender-related problems exist on both male and female sides, and thus should be treated from both fronts.

From personal experience and a national perspective, I sense a lack of full determination of the place that men should take with regards to feminism in its current mainstream (and urban) female-created expressions. There have been instances when I read that men are accepted as allies to the movement, while in others I have seen messages of complete exclusion arriving at the realm of hate—in my experience and according to my ability to feel. Therefore, this same experience was the catalyst for me to research about the topic and find out what the academy—and not only social media—had to say. Although the articles I found were only written by men—and that I could consider my first finding—they come from serious academics who explicitly vouch for respecting feminist literature, recognizing their privileges as men, and only speaking from their perspectives.

Ajnesh Prasad (2020) reunited six male academics and asked them to answer the question of *What are men’s roles and responsibilities in the feminist project for gender egalitarianism?* Each of them, through their personal experiences and own relationship to the feminist movement, expose both similar and opposing views in some respects. While Alejandro Centeno argues that the mother-son relationships have to be reformed, others attack the problem from an adult

standpoint. A refusing posture of men identifying with the term ‘feminist’ can be sketched from Carl Rhodes, Muhammad Azfar Nisar, Scott Taylor, and Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar’s interventions. From them, the importance of men taking a step back and listening first—stop, listen, learn and act—is highlighted (Prasad et al., 2020).

On the other hand, Janne Tienari is a supporter of feminism as “an important source of social identity for all” (Prasad et al., 2020, p. 11). In his joint paper with Scott Taylor, they exchange their diverging views on men’s ability to step in and take an active role in the feminist project. Tienari’s proposal—coming from experiencing what can be considered as ‘state feminism’ in Finland, which he argues has yielded great results for gender egalitarianism—centers on the need for everybody to be included in the “significant social movement and body of knowledge” that feminism represents, and that should also “be inclusive of men in terms of identity” (Tienari & Taylor, 2019, p. 13).

The most important point to be made, is that feminism—which strives for gender egalitarianism—is not about being anti-male, but rather antipatriarchy. “And men can be (and do) that, too” (Tienari & Taylor, 2019, p. 5). According to feminists like bell hooks (2000), there is a need for converting men. Without them as allies in struggle, the movement does not progress. However divergent the different postures may be regarding men, there is one thing for certain: the feminist movement’s importance and validity is supported by the authors.

The aforementioned perspectives—and the mainstream public feeling toward feminism—involves a dualistic conception of man versus woman and vice versa, that again, can be retraced back to Aristotelian thought. Breaking with these dualisms is in part what posthumanism strives for, and which I consider is a philosophy that can deeply transform our understanding of today’s problems and our solution proposals. Rosi Braidotti (2020) states this essence beautifully: “One

knows that Life lives on regardless of human pretensions and expectations. “We” can only intervene in *this* as transversal ensembles, acting collectively: “We”-who-are-not-one-and-the-same-but-are-in-this-convergence-together” (p. 5).

Understanding that having differences—that go beyond sex and gender and reach pure individuality—is our main similarity and leveraging this to focus on converging solutions for us as a part of a greater living system, *Gaia*, is the posthuman approach. Therefore, changing our ontological way of structuring the universe can have not only an impact on human relations, but on Earth as a whole.

Men should not be excluded from the feminist movement just because of being men, just as women should not be experiencing systemic oppression just because of being women. It is undeniable that men will never be able to experience the sexist oppression that acts upon women, but are male human beings not able to be empathetic? Can we not comprehend and actively live the categorical imperative: do others as you wish others would do to you? Can we not understand that gender egalitarianism—with inclusion in the process to achieve it—will enable the maximization of happiness for all? This compatibility with philosophies of great importance such as the Kantian and the Utilitarian—with the account that the latter is considered at the ideal state, where no minorities are left behind—acts as a testament of the validity of converging together.

I believe that an effective solution will not emerge around a me-versus-them, man-versus-woman line of thought. Everybody should act toward gender egalitarianism, and that includes both women and men. If there is no practice, there is no experienced change in society. And if we do not achieve justice for the human race, I believe we will not achieve it for *zoe*: “our shared life as an inhuman, non-anthropocentric force” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 4).

Meaningful change—that which perdures—has to blossom from inside, it is never imposed. Our biological sex is not something we get to choose. We should not be ‘held accountable’ for it in any way, be it positive or negative. This goes in line with John Rawls’s thought experiment of the “original position”, where a previous-to-life acceptance of a “veil of ignorance” covering our worldly characteristics would evidence true justice in society (Duignan, 2021). Deciding to respect the dignity of life in all of its forms is an approach that we can definitely choose. And it may not mean the same for everybody, but every single soul can recognize the potential of change that exists within the others.

I am conscious of my place as a man and for me, that includes listening first and not trying to take the lead. I understand the right and need that women have to not only express, but to start to design alternative ways of living. But as an empathetic human being I know I can be, and the need for inner-born transformation in every being, I would like my voice to be heard and my actions to be felt someplace along the road. I do not know when that will come to be, but I will certainly be here for it, the same way that I strive to be today with the people I treat.

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Note:

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https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html