

# Should men be feminists? Can they?

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"Men's involvement becomes a problem when it takes away from women," Zeleke explains. "Especially if it takes funding away from women's groups and shelters."

Susan Cole, an editor of Toronto's NOW Magazine and a prominent feminist, agrees that women have reason to be skeptical of men jumping on the feminist bandwagon — "especially," she says, "when Brian Mulroney wears his little white ribbon on TV." But she believes that the ribbon campaign is on the right track.

## Wild and Hairy

Not surprisingly, the media is paying more attention to women's issues now that men are speaking. A man who recently participated in a conference on sexual violence commented: "Three women spoke before me, but it was only when I got up to speak that the TV cameras went on."

Private and corporate donors are also more willing to give to men's organizations than to women's shelters and centres.

Michael Kaufman, a founder of the White Ribbon campaign, acknowledges that wearing the symbol means little if men do not act upon it. "What is important," he says, "is that it gets men talking. It gets men thinking about ways that we, even those of us who are not physically violent against women, create a climate in which violence against women has been possible and accepted."

The decision of the Ryerson women's centre should not come as a surprise. Many women feminists have watched the expanding 'men's movement' with apprehension, wondering if men are actually out to restructure society or if they are simply trying to draw attention back to themselves.

Men's organized reaction to feminism has mainly been negative. The last five years have seen the rise of the "men's rights" movement, which acts on the belief that women's rights are threatening men's — often in the form of fighting an abused woman's right to custody of her child. Less extreme is the "mythopoetic" movement,

about how they're really feeling ... in a place where they feel comfortable and even safe to talk."

He adds that men's experience of sexism is different from women's and that men must deal with it. "Many men... are very isolated and very confused," he says. "And while we have a lot of power, ... look at the



which took its cue from Robert Bly's bestseller *Iron John* and went in search of the wild, hairy (and almost always white) yet sensitive man — though the sensitivity is only for show, like a mating dance. In the United States there is an increasing number of "men's studies" departments in universities, as though men's histories were marginalized in the same way as women's in mainstream education.

The pro-feminist men — tip-toeing around actually calling themselves 'feminist', a label claimed by many women as women's own — acknowledge that men have a position of power over women, and are forming their own, often all-male organizations to address this inequality.

Michael Kerman, the organizer of Man to Man, an all-male conference held this September in Toronto, suggests that men need to begin by working outside of existing feminist structures. Men, he says, "don't have a lot of opportunities to talk

fact that men die sooner, men work too hard, men have trouble being close to anybody. Men are affected by the way... society is structured, in ways that keep them apart."

## Male Bonding Nothing New

But Kerman's suggestion, and even his phrasing — his observation that "society is structured" against men, without the recognition that men have played the main role in the structuring — has some other pro-feminist men alarmed.

Martin Dufresne, the leader of Montréal Men Against Sexism, says that this view of men gives them an undeserved "redemption." "The price men pay," he says, "is quite small compared to the advantages they gain ... As long as we present ourselves as victims, we don't struggle effectively against our privileges."

Dufresne was a harsh critic of an all-male conference held last year in Montréal. The notion that men needed a place to express themselves, he says, "is ridiculous, when one realizes to what extent men control the media and the literature."

But Robert Wallace, an English professor at Glendon College, deeply distrusts pro-feminist organizations — including Dufresne's. "Male bonding has been around forever," he says. "I don't understand what the difference is between these guys talking about women in an ostensibly new way, and a bunch of guys sitting around in a pub... I don't want to hear men talking about women. I'd rather hear women talking about men."

But the pro-feminist organizations suggest that there is more to it than this. "Violence is not gender-neutral," notes Bob Alexander, spokesman for Metro Men Against Violence. "Since it is really a behaviour of men, if we as men don't get involved I don't think it's going to end. I don't think it's going to end because women tell us it's got to end."

Yet Wallace wonders whether men can be critical of their own positions when talking among themselves, when it seems to him they cannot understand a woman's position or even a different kind of man's position. "I know a gay man who has for a number of years been part of a sensitivity training group. The agonies that poor man has gone through in trying to explain to all these heterosexual men that he's not the same! ... They want to get to know themselves better so that they can have more comfortable relationships with women."

Alexander's observation about his own group suggests that Wallace may not be far

from wrong. "Not everyone in our group would identify themselves as pro-feminist," he concedes. Many men, he says, may be joining out of "a sense of guilt."

These 'guilty' men are the pro-feminists' ball and chain, and the ones Wallace fears threaten the women's movement.

"What is it that they're trying to achieve in knowing themselves more completely?" Wallace asks. "Is it really a space for women that they're trying to provide? Or is

it a safer and more comfortable zone for themselves with women, who already know themselves better and are putting a claim on that space?"

Kaufman hopes that in seeking safe and comfortable zones men will accidentally find pro-feminism. "I may be listened to by some men who are not able yet to listen to women, and that's a problem, but we've got to reach those men."

Susan Cole agrees it's ironic that men are listening to each other and not to the women who first spoke; but, she urges, "let's use that."

The question that feminists are raising, then, is not whether or not men should get involved but how they should get involved.

Cole believes that men are on the right track and suggests that there is much more they can do. "For us, the message is in our blood, in our veins. Men have to learn from us." She suggests they raise money for women's organizations, fight men's rights groups, "stand on the sidelines on the [women's] march and cheer."

But Wallace considers it more constructive for men to say to women's organizations, "If you want to use me in some way, I'm available." He is concerned that men are spending too much time organizing and talking, and not enough listening. "They should remember," he says, that a better role for men may be simply "to let women have power."

See also "Self-righteous stomping on Men Walking," page 9.

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