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Caitlin Moran

What's gone wrong for men – and the thing that can fix them

It was the response I got on social media that made me think I'd stumbled on to something bigger than I initially thought. On *Twitter*¹ a few years ago, I asked what I thought was a pretty simple question: "Men – lovely men of *Twitter*. Hello! The last 10 years of feminism means we're always discussing the problems of women on here. But what are the problems of men? What do you find makes your man-life difficult?"

5 The responses flooded in. "Paternity leave, if you can get it, is much shorter than maternity leave." "We have very few avenues to emotionally express ourselves. We're supposed to fit this stereotype of being tough, and only wanting to touch if it comes with sex. But I want a hug and head pats, dammit!" "Father's Day is so depressing. All the cards depicting golf, or whisky. I'm an acid house² survivor who owns two chickens called Bez and Barry Mooncult. Society seems not to think I might have reproduced." "Suicide is
10 still the biggest cause of death for men under 50 [in the UK] – and yet we seem not to have a plan to address that." "In hot weather, your balls can get so hot and sweaty they stick to the side of your thighs, like clammy bats in a cave."

But one type of reply came up time and time again. "Is this a trick?" "Are you asking this so you can laugh at us?" "Is this a feminist trap – are you going to retweet³ all of these, with the reply, 'Look at the men
15 complaining about nothing – while women continue to endure all the true suffering?'" Boys, and men, have become so used to being the conversational whipping boy, and the punchline to jokes, that they could not believe that a feminist writer was genuinely asking them to talk about their problems.

And, looking at the replies – which kept coming for days; in the end, I got more than 3,000, and the response was picked up in news pieces across the world – I started to feel an unexpected emotion: guilt.
20 Tremendous guilt. Because while not a "classic", [...], man-hating feminist, I have certainly said, "Ugh, men" a lot. I have, I admit, said, "Typical straight white man" on a number of occasions. I have, now I come to think of it, allowed myself to talk about men with the same level of unkind, brisk, "Stop moaning, you silly arse – your problems are marginal at best" tone that, well ... we used to adopt when women talked about their problems.

25 I think my presumption – as a 48-year-old, fourth-wave feminist⁴ – was that straight white men were generally doing so fine that they were the one sociodemographic group you could lovingly ... beat up on a bit. For people of my generation, and older, a wry attitude of, "Ugh, men!" seems like a long-awaited rebalancing of centuries of straight white male cultural dominance. This world of Michelle Obama, female Ghostbusters, lady Doctor Whos, Taylor Swift, Jacinda Ardern⁵, feminist clubs at school, books like *100 Bad-Ass Women from History*, features headlined "50 Women Who Are Changing the World", and 13-year-old
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¹ social media platform now called X

² *acid house*: music genre and lifestyle from the 1980s associated with drugtaking

³ repost on X

⁴ fourth-wave feminist: feminist focusing, among other things, on sexual harassment and body shaming

⁵ *Michelle Obama, female Ghostbusters, lady Doctor Whos, Taylor Swift, Jacinda Ardern*: famous women and female characters who are also role models

girls proudly wearing vagina-based merchandise from *Etsy*⁶ is so recent, it still feels like a mild, and quite marginal, corrective.

35 So what is the problem here? Well, it comes down to what the world looks like to teenage boys, whose entire lives have happened post Amy Schumer⁷, #MeToo and the “The future is female!” slogan. “It feels like boys are losing,” my then teenage brother, Andrew, said to me, back in 2018. “I feel like feminism has gone too far now. Everything’s about women, isn’t it? And their problems. But, in the 21st century, I think it’s harder to be a young man than a young woman. What about men?”

40 And so, after a decade of writing about women and feminism, [... I started] to write about boys and men. And the first conversations I had confirmed just how bleakly some young men see this new feminist world they’ve been raised in.

45 “I’ve got some stats for you,” said one young middle-class boy, [...] “Boys underachieve at school, compared with girls. Boys are more likely to be excluded from school. Boys are less likely to go into further education. Boys are more likely to be prescribed medication for ADHD/disruptive behaviour. Boys are more likely to become addicted: to drugs, alcohol, pornography. Men make up the majority of gang members. Men are the majority of the homeless. Men make up the majority of suicides. Men make up the majority of people who are murdered. Men make up the majority of the prison population. Men are the majority of the unemployed. Men are the majority of those who die at work. Men are the majority of those who die in wars. Men are the majority of those who lose custody of their children in divorce cases.”

He rocked back in his chair, waiting for my reply.

50 At the time, I didn’t know this was the first conversation I was having about the crisis in men. It was, ironically, International Women’s Day, and I was Zooming⁸ with a group of teenage boys and girls about, ostensibly, feminism – until it got derailed by these fairly inarguable statistics about boys, and men. I admit: it caught me on the hop a bit. So on the hop, in fact, that after saying, “Thank you for talking about the problems of boys, and men. I have a lot to think about here!”, I ended the call five minutes later.

55 As soon as I logged off, I got multiple texts from all the girls who’d been on the conversation, too.

60 “He was just being polite with you! You have no idea how he talks when he’s with his female classmates! Men have problems, yes – but on *WhatsApp*⁹, he calls feminism ‘a cancer’, and feminists, ‘Feminazis!’” “He and his friends all make rape jokes – they say it’s banter, but it’s clearly never occurred to them that they know women who have been raped!” “You don’t know how boys talk when you’re not around. They blame it all on women. Why aren’t all the mums talking about this?”

[...]

65 Although I researched dozens of other topics – body image; the boringness of most men’s clothing; how male genitalia works like a classic movie duo, with “Cock” as the leading man, and “Balls” the adorable comedy sidekick; pornography; fatherhood; midlife crises; old age – time and again, I came back to male role models in popular culture.

⁶ American online shop

⁷ *Amy Schumer*: (b. 1981) American feminist comedian and actor

⁸ to hold an online meeting

⁹ messaging app

Both celebrities and fictional characters in books, TV and movies, essentially work as an *Argos*¹⁰ catalogue for young people to work out who they want to be. That old saying, “I cannot be what I cannot see”, has been wheeled out a million times when discussing female role models, resulting in effective, organised campaigns to show young girls role models in politics, STEM¹¹, business, music, sport and space. But for young men and boys? I started to realise that the problem for them had begun in my own generation – their parents. Their mums and dads. Us.

[...]

When I started interviewing men my age about their lives, and asking why they didn’t talk about these things in public, a certain batch of sentiments came up repeatedly. “Men talking about their problems is boring.” “I don’t want to make a fuss.” “I don’t want to be accused of having Emotional Man Flu.”

Which is why the difference between where women and men currently are in “talking about their problems” is vast. Women are newly fascinated with being absolutely, viscerally honest about all the problems to do with being a woman: Schumer will do 10 minutes on her vagina “smelling like a small farmyard animal”, while Lily Allen¹² will perform under balloons that read “Lily Allen has a baggy pussy”. Women just do not give a shit these days, in the best way possible. Breaking a taboo, or being visceral, is now a very viable career path that inspires both relief and love from your fans.

But can you imagine a male comedian talking about a funky-smelling penis? Or a male pop star admitting to having a small, or average-sized, penis? It seems incredible to me that, as yet, there is not one famous man in the world who has admitted to having a small, or even average-sized, penis [...]

How can we make a world where boys find a new space and language to talk about their bodies in the same, joyful, honest, affirming way? Because the existence of dick pics alone tells us: young men do want to start a conversation about their penises. It’s just, so far, this is the best idea they’ve come up with (granted, it *is* a bad idea).

Feminism. What men and boys need is feminism. And what women need is boys and men who use feminism. Feminism is still the only thing we’ve invented that exists solely to look at the problems of gender, and bring about equality between the sexes.

Until now, feminism has worked on making women equal to men in power, safety, status, politics, relationships and the economy. But it now urgently needs to embark on the second phase – which was absolutely predicted by the word “equality”.

For men are not equal to women in numerous things: 1) Their ability to talk about their problems – instead, men have “banter” [...]. 2) Women have “The Sisterhood” – which knows it should, even though sometimes it doesn’t, spring into collective action whenever an issue is raised. 3) Women have thinktanks and charities and hashtags – they organise the fuck out of International Women’s Day, while International Men’s Day still gets less attention than International Steak and a Blowjob Day. 4) According to need, men are not equal in services for mental health, as that terrible suicide rate still shows. 5) I have never seen a single discussion about how to prevent boys being excluded from schools, kept out of gangs, kept out of jail, prevented from becoming addicted to pornography, or becoming homeless, that has received even half the traction that women and girls can get for doing “No Makeup Monday”.

¹⁰ British shop

¹¹ abbreviation of the four academic disciplines Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

¹² *Lily Allen*: (b. 1985) British singer and actor

105 And this last one is pivotal: because it's so much easier for women and girls to show love and support for each other than men. Men do not have an equivalent of the "Yass, Kween¹³!" or the "dancing girl" emoji, or "Watch my girl go!", that women get when they post something brave, honest and bold about her life. And this is one of the major stumbling blocks men need to address if they want to enjoy the kind of change and liberation that they seem, at root, to be jealous of in modern women.

110 I suggest this lack of public support is down to the still dolorous fear of homophobia: boys supporting other boys with the wild love that girls give each other risks a "Do you fancy him, then?" or, sadly, "You bender¹⁴".

Unexpectedly, one of the biggest problems for straight men is homophobia. You can't form an effective brotherhood if a large section of the cohort won't share a political bunkbed with its gay brothers.

115 Being honest, breaking taboos, starting conversations, organising campaigns, forming alliances and supporting each other. These are the basic feminist tools women have used to improve their lives immeasurably in the last hundred years. Two – possibly three – generations of men have watched as their wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and friends have changed what our idea of "being a woman" is, in the most joyous, amusing and liberating way possible.

120 Now those wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and friends need to tell men: "Your problems aren't boring. It's OK to make a fuss. We won't accuse you of Emotional Man Flu. We love you and we worry about you. Please use these tools we have invented to solve your problems now.

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¹³ *Yass, Kween*: expression used to show appreciation

¹⁴ insulting term for homosexual man