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The turn to men in gender politics

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Abstract

There has recently been a ‘turn to men’ in gender politics, an increasing emphasis on the roles that men can play in building gender equality. This is a feminist achievement that locates the responsibility for gender injustice squarely with the group who benefit from it, and it prompts programmes and policies that ideally involve men in processes of personal and collective transformation. Yet there are problems with this turn to men. In popular discourse, the bar for men is set very low, with high-profile campaigns asking little of men yet rewarding them with praise and gratitude, and doing little to challenge systems and cultures of oppression. The limits of the turn to men reflect the wider limits of contemporary feminism in popular culture, in which feminism risks meaning everything and thus nothing.

Keywords

Men, masculinities, gender, feminism

Introduction

There has recently been a ‘turn to men’ in gender politics, an increasing emphasis on the roles that men can play in building gender equality. The turn to men has two overlapping dimensions. One is a shift in cultural and community discourse regarding feminism and gender. Another is the emergence of the ‘engaging men’ field – the field of programming and policy focused on involving men in building gender equality. What does this turn to men signal for feminist efforts to make progress towards gender equality?

The notion that men have a role to play in ending gender inequalities, in ending sexist oppression and patriarchal injustices, is not a new one. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, small groups of men organized in support of women’s suffrage and equality. In the 1970s, with the emergence of the second wave of feminism, anti-sexist men’s groups formed in most Western countries. Early radical feminists called for men to take responsibility for ending patriarchy. For example, Andrea Dworkin in 1983 called for ‘a twenty-four-hour truce during which there is no rape’ (Dworkin, 1993, p. 21) at a men’s anti-sexist conference in the United States. Similarly, bell hooks, the famous African American feminist, argued in 1984 that men were ‘comrades in struggle’ (hooks, 1984, p. 67).

However, beginning perhaps in the mid-1990s, there was a significant increase in attention to men’s roles in building gender equality. This was signalled by various developments: an increase in programming focused on men, whether in relation to sexual and reproductive health, men’s violence against women, fatherhood, or HIV/AIDS; a series of international commitments regarding the need to work with men (Flood, Peacock, Stern, Barker, & Greig,

2010); and popular discourses of male feminism. While these developments span the globe, I focus the remainder of this discussion on the turn to men, particularly in Western capitalist countries such as Australia and the United States.

In the first decades of this century, there has been an intensification of popular discourses of male feminism. There has been a proliferation of popular and activist discussions of whether men can be feminists, men's roles in feminism, and how men can be allies. This includes social media memes focused on high-profile male celebrities such as Ryan Gosling as poster boys for feminism, attention to male celebrities' pronouncements regarding feminism, and an unprecedented wave of high-profile men engaging with and speaking up on behalf of what might once have been called 'women's issues' (Solnit, 2014). Lastly, there have been high-profile men-focused campaigns. Most recently, this includes the United Nations (UN) campaign HeForShe, launched by well-known British actress Emma Watson at the UN in 2014.

This turn to men in gender politics is part of a range of social shifts over the past few decades in Western capitalist countries. There have been both structural and ideological moves towards public gender equality, which has become a mainstream democratic ideal. At the same time, there are persistent and systematic inequalities of gender, whether one looks at production and paid labour, political decision making, intimate and familial relations, or culture and representation (Rahman & Jackson, 2010). There are some ways in which progressive changes in gender have stalled or even been pushed back.

The last four decades have been marked by increasingly visible public debates regarding men and masculinities. This is not the first time in history such debates have occurred, but recently, for example, there have been declarations that men are 'in crisis', that 'The traditional male is an endangered species', and even more catastrophically, that it is 'The end of men.'¹

There are significant shifts in men's lives too. There are interesting, contradictory trends among men: broad although uneven attitudinal shifts towards gender equality (Flood, 2015a), the emergence of metrosexuals and hipsters (Shugart, 2008), and the expression of 'hybrid' masculinities (in which, for example, young, White, heterosexual men draw on elements of feminised or marginalised masculine identities and incorporate them into their own gender identities [Bridges & Pascoe, 2014]). On the other hand, there is also intensified public misogyny by men in online spaces and elsewhere.

Holding men responsible for gender inequality

Coming back to this turn to men, there are clear positives to this discursive shift in gender politics. There is an important sense in which the turn to men is a feminist achievement, above all, because it locates the responsibility for gender injustice squarely with the group who benefit from it, that is, men. Compare this with popular discussions of racism and racial injustice, in which there is not a similar emphasis on the specific responsibilities of *White people* for addressing racial injustices and supporting anti-racist efforts.

One might hope that this 'turn to men' thus prompts practical efforts to engage men in progressive gender change or practical guides to the positive roles men can play. Indeed, there does seem to have been a significant increase in popular discourse regarding men's progressive roles in feminism. While articles on 'what men can do in support of feminism' have been standard fare in pro-feminist or anti-sexist men's politics since the 1980s, in the last decade or so they have also become increasingly common in the popular press and social media.²

These populist articles on male feminism and men's roles in feminism make four valuable contributions. First, they start from the presumption that men have a political or ethical obligation to act in support of gender equality. They emphasise men's collective responsibility

for and complicity in gender inequalities and the need therefore for men to take action to challenge these. Second, they identify the practical actions men can take in support of gender justice. Identifying both a desired end state and the small steps that will lead towards this desired outcome are valuable elements in change making (Crooks, Goodall, Hughes, Jaffe, & Baker, 2007). Educational and advocacy materials directed at men typically include guidance on how men should get their own ‘houses in order’ (Flood, 2010). Complementing this, recent populist media articles on men supporting feminism have recurring themes regarding what men should do. Men should:

- Start with ourselves. Do the personal work of change. Assume that we’re part of the problem.
- Recognise and challenge institutionalised sexism and male privilege.
- Affirm and support women’s leadership.
- Listen to what women have to say.
- Educate ourselves regarding feminism.
- Avoid patriarchal practices in our support for feminism.
- Focus our efforts on challenging other men.
- Respect women-only spaces.
- Be accountable for our mistakes.
- Hold each other to account.
- Do the activist work.

The third contribution such articles make is in identifying typical problems in men’s relations to feminism. These include patterns where men profess a commitment to feminism that is shallow or undermined by their own behaviour; expect women to do the work of educating them; show a support for gender equality that is based entirely in, and stops with, support for the women and girls in their own lives; use the feminist label to get sexual attention from women; adopt the label as a veil for their actual sexist behaviour or as a deflection of potential critique; and so on. Highlighting the common pitfalls in men’s adoption of feminism may improve women’s and men’s ability to hold men to account. Fourth, therefore, these materials may contribute to the refinement and extension of men’s actual egalitarian practices and relations. For example, some articles echo the point made in feminist-informed scholarship that men lack the experience of living as women in a patriarchal society (Harding, 1991) and that this complicates men’s identification with feminism. For some, this means that while men should act in support of feminism, they should not use the term ‘feminist’ for themselves, opting instead for ‘pro-feminist’ (Brod, 1998). Such discussions may improve men’s involvement in what is a delicate politics, of privileged allies acting to undermine that privilege.

Men’s identification with feminism makes it more possible for others to hold them to a gender-equitable standard. This is true in men’s and women’s everyday relations but also true of high-profile and powerful men. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau received widespread acclaim for his comment at the World Economic Forum (January 2016) that, ‘we shouldn’t be afraid of the word feminist. Men and women should use it to describe themselves any time they want’ (Cheung, 2016, para. 1). But this endorsement also has enabled others to ask whether Trudeau’s government and its policies are living up to this self-proclaimed feminist ideal (Kassam, 2017).

Discourses of men’s roles in gender equality in popular media are complemented by an intensified attention in popular culture to the ways in which men *do* gender inequality or sexism or patriarchy. This is evident for example in popular discussions of ‘mansplaining’ (in which men explain things to women that they already know), ‘manspreading’ (in which men take up more physical space than necessary, on public transport and elsewhere, for example,

by sitting with their legs spread), and other patriarchal practices among men, as well as ‘toxic masculinity’ in general. Such accounts represent a valuable popularisation and dissemination of feminist critiques of men’s sexist practices.

Asking little of men

However, there are also serious political limitations to this turn to men. Much of the visible attention to men’s roles in building gender equality has only weak feminist politics. I illustrate this using two examples before offering further general commentary.

The HeForShe campaign was launched on behalf of UN Women in September 2014. In the launch speech by famous UK actor and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson, she emphasised to men that, ‘Gender equality is your issue too’ (Watson, 2014). She offered a ‘formal invitation’ for male allies to show their support for feminist efforts to build gender equality.

HeForShe is vulnerable to four criticisms. First, the campaign asks very little of men. Particularly in its early expression, the campaign simply asks men to sign an online pledge. Although the pledge states that ‘I commit to taking action against gender discrimination and violence in order to build a more just and equal world’, the campaign does not ask men to refrain from sexist or violent behaviour themselves (Elk, 2014). Second, the campaign provides few actual processes for change. The UN’s HeForShe website and complementary HeForShe webpages hosted by other organisations do list suggested actions for men to take, but most are negligible, and the campaign offers little substantive education aimed at changing men’s patriarchal attitudes and behaviours. Third, the campaign has been criticised for the individualising way it frames the problem and the potentially protectionist way it frames the solution. HeForShe’s appeals to men imply that the problem is one of individual men’s misdeeds, absolving men as a group from collective responsibility for cultures and systems of oppression. HeForShe also risks a framing of men’s roles as protectionist, a playing out of traditional gender roles in which men defend and protect women and kindly help them (Gyte, 2014). This echoes a common theme in appeals to men in the violence-prevention field, focused on men’s love and concern for the women and girls in their own lives. As a U.S. Government public service announcement emphasised, ‘It’s happening to our sisters and our daughters; our wives and our friends.’ Such appeals may continue men’s policing and ownership of women’s bodies and sexuality rather than emphasising women’s value as human beings deserving of autonomy and safety in their own right (McEwan, 2014).

The fourth criticism is that HeForShe, like other efforts to engage men, does little to challenge men and invite them into personal and social change. This criticism was apparent in some feminist reactions to Emma Watson’s speech and the campaign’s tone. For example,

It is particularly worrying to see the appeasement of men on a high-profile stage. The “I know it’s hard for you too” spiel serves to provide a cup of hot chocolate and a cosy blanket for men, so that they don’t have to feel threatened. As if their existential privilege isn’t enough to keep them warm at night, it is apparently important that we also softly stroke their foreheads and validate their issues as being equal to the oppression faced by women. All this, simply to encourage them to sign a pledge. (Gyte, 2014, para. 3)

Six months after HeForShe first was launched, UN Women extended the campaign by launching the HeForShe IMPACT 10x10x10 initiative, in January 2015. This one-year pilot effort is described as seeking to engage governments, corporations, and universities as instruments of change.³ Ten leaders in each of these three sectors have signed on as ‘impact champions’, committing to implement specified strategies in their own institutions or countries. This

initiative is likely to produce more tangible impacts than the online HeForShe pledge, although documentation of its scope or impact is not yet available.

My second example is the Australian White Ribbon campaign. The contemporary White Ribbon campaign in Australia represents not only the most significant manifestation in Australia's history of men's involvement in preventing violence against women but perhaps the largest White Ribbon campaign in the world. The Sydney-based organisation White Ribbon Australia coordinates national-level advocacy and social marketing and supports and works with a wide range of organisations running local White Ribbon events. There are significant achievements to the efforts done in White Ribbon's name in Australia. Community awareness of the campaign is widespread, over 1,000 community events were held in 2015, over 300 schools have gone through the Breaking the Silence schools programme, 64 workplaces have been accredited as White Ribbon workplaces and another 200 are lined up to do so, and the campaign has a very large social media following (White Ribbon Australia, 2015).

There is no doubt that White Ribbon Australia's work is a *feminist* project, offering a feminist analysis and agenda. It focuses squarely on men's violence against women, frames the project as part of a feminist tradition, and links violence against women to sexism and masculinity (White Ribbon Australia, 2015).

However, the Australian campaign also has some limits as a feminist project. I describe four. First, while the White Ribbon campaign has described itself as 'male-led' (although this language was dropped in 2015), in fact much of the work is done by women. Only one third of the community events in 2014 were organised by men, many of the key staff of the national organisation (including the chief executive officer [CEO]) are female, and white ribbons are sometimes worn by women rather than men. Now, this is understandable given that so much of the work of preventing and reducing men's violence against women has been and is done by women, and women in general understand and support the issue much more readily than do men. However, the national organisation could be doing more to recruit men in particular to its ranks and to encourage men to shoulder more of the burden of the community-based, unpaid work of campaign and event organising.

Second, the Australian campaign is defined less than White Ribbon campaigns in other countries by a focus on *men's roles* in prevention. Some of the campaign's main activities are generic violence-prevention activities rather than efforts focused on men's roles, such as its school and workplace programmes (White Ribbon Australia, 2015). While such programmes can make valuable contributions to violence prevention, they also risk diluting international White Ribbon campaigns' focus on men. Ironically then, while there has been a turn to men in violence-prevention efforts, a significant Australian effort has in fact weakened its defining focus on men.

Third, the campaign's efforts in Australia have an insufficient focus on movement building. The Australian White Ribbon campaign does make some important contributions to building groups and networks centred on anti-violence advocacy. It identifies and recruits men as public advocates or 'ambassadors' for the campaign, fosters community-based events and actions, supports 40 or so regional White Ribbon committees, and assists local and national campaigns with materials (templates, media materials, and so on). However, there is less focus on building activist networks and movements. The national organisation does little to mobilise ambassadors or other men and women as advocates and activists, foster ongoing advocacy networks, or build links to other social justice efforts. However, in the last year, White Ribbon Australia has reworked its ambassador programme, requiring all ambassadors to go through a re-committal process and increasing its expectations of individuals identified as ambassadors. The national organisation is also stepping up the educational work it will do among ambassadors. Still, there is less energy from the national organisation for building grassroots networks and movements,

and what energy there is for this comes instead from local women's organisations and community groups.

The White Ribbon campaign frames the problem of men's violence against women often in terms of individual attitudes and behaviours, and this is its fourth weakness. Like some of the violence-prevention field more generally (Salter, 2016), it neglects the wider material and structural relations central to gender inequalities. White Ribbon also has relatively little to say about other forms of social injustice that intersect with and compound the gender inequalities shaping men's violence against women. At the same time, a growing attention to *intersectional* practices and approaches is visible in White Ribbon's work, for example in its 2015 'diversity workshops' for culturally and linguistically diverse men on preventing gender-based violence in our communities and in its 2016 report on working with men from immigrant and refugee communities (Murdolo & Quiazon, 2016).

In some ways, White Ribbon Australia's efforts look more akin to those of, say, a breast cancer foundation, 'raising awareness' about a particular social issue, rather than a social justice organisation aiming for radical social change. In this sense, while White Ribbon Australia's work is feminist, it is only *weakly* feminist.

Gratitude and praise for men

There are other ways in which the turn to men, this new attention to men's roles in feminism, plays out some old patriarchal dynamics. One of the clearest expressions of this is the disproportionate attention and praise given to male feminist allies. For example, male celebrities who offer even the simplest expressions of support for gender equality have been lauded and fawned over (Leveille, 2014). This does indicate the success and influence of feminism, but it also validates the idea that feminist ideas only are legitimate when voiced by a man (Zeisler, 2014). The disproportionate attention bestowed on male feminists relative to female feminists may be shaped by the novelty of men's advocacy for women's rights, but it also reflects the status and cultural legitimacy granted to men in general. In a related dynamic, men who turn up to gender equality and anti-violence events may receive thanks from the women present (Bridges, 2010).

There is a gendered 'economy of gratitude' at work here, similar to wives' over-thanking of husbands for their domestic labour in heterosexual households. When men are thanked more than women for work around the house, this symbolically tells men that they are 'engaging in work which is not required of them [... work which is] more of a thoughtful gesture than an obligation' (Bridges & Pascoe, 2013, para. 9). Lauding recognition on the few men who do offer public support for gender equality says to them and to others, this is not your job, so thank you for 'helping out'. While thanking men who participate in anti-violence efforts may be necessary pragmatically to encourage their participation, it also risks maintaining patriarchal dynamics.

Perhaps the broadest weakness of the turn to men is that it sets the bar for men very low, spending too much time appeasing and reassuring men and not enough in challenging systems and cultures of oppression. There are frequent emphases in violence-prevention efforts engaging men on reassuring them that 'most men are not violent', that violence is a problem of 'other men', that they are among the 'good men' (Flood, 2015b; Seymour, 2017). And of course, men themselves may protest, 'NotAllMen' (Plait, 2014). Feminist commentators such as Clementine Ford argue that a 'softly softly' approach to men is ineffective. It does not lead to change, is too compromising, and involves too much deferring to men, treating them with

undeserved reverence and authority (Ford, 2014). One reaction among feminist women here is sheer fatigue. On the feminist blog, *The Belle Jar*, the author writes,

I am tired of talking about feminism to men. ... I know that ... I'm supposed to sweetly explain to you how much I love and value men. ... I'm supposed to butter you up, you men, stroke your egos, tell you how very important you are in the fight for equality. ... I'm tired of smiling through a thousand thoughtless microaggressions, tired of providing countless pieces of evidence, tired of being questioned on every. single. damn. thing. ... I'm so fucking exhausted by the fact that I know that I will have to, at some point in this piece, mention that I understand that not all men are like that. I will have to note that some men are good allies. ... honestly I'm tired of handing out cookies to people just because they're being decent fucking human beings. (Anonymous, 2014)

Can anyone be a feminist?

The limits of this turn to men echo the wider limits of contemporary framings of feminism. Indeed, the turn to men itself may reflect wider shifts in the place of feminism. There are two intersecting elements to this. Feminism has become popular, and feminism has been stripped to some degree of its political and ideological force, risking co-option and de-fanging.

Feminism had been deeply unpopular in mainstream culture in the 1980s and 1990s. It had been stereotyped as anachronistic and irrelevant or dismissed by a 'post-feminism' in which emancipation already has been achieved (Hemmings, 2016). Yet more recently, feminism somehow has moved closer to the leading edge of popular culture (Friedman, 2016). This is visible in advertising's rhetoric, celebrities' adoption of the label, women's magazine endorsements, and so on. No longer such a dirty word, feminism is now seen to have a broader, almost universal appeal. In celebrity culture for example, feminism often is referenced, not as an unshaven relic from the past, but as a contemporary and caring position to take up if one is to be properly ethical and political (Hemmings, 2016). (However, feminism's popularity should not be exaggerated, given continuing patterns of women's uneven and ambivalent identifications with the label and the movement and men's greater levels of hostility towards both [Flood, 2015a].) There are also signs of feminism's resurgence as a social movement, with various recent instances of grassroots activism.

While feminism may be more popular now, *what* is the feminism that now appears to appeal so widely? There have been a number of influential feminist critiques of how 'feminism' is represented or taken up in popular culture. The term 'commodity feminism' was coined in the early 1990s to refer to the ways in which 'feminist ideas and icons are appropriated for commercial purposes, emptied of their political significance and offered back to the public in a commodified form' (Gill, 2008, para. 1). In this co-option of feminism, it becomes merely a 'style' that can be achieved by consuming particular products (Abbott & Wallace, 2005).

Jumping forward two decades, one finds similar critiques, of 'pop feminism', 'feminism lite', 'marketplace feminism', or 'cupcake feminism' (Bianco, 2016). In *We were feminists once*, for example, Zeisler (2016b) critiques 'marketplace feminism', in which feminism is branded as an identity that everyone can and should consume. Feminism is commodified, trivialised, and marketed, such that feminism has shifted from an ideological movement to a trending hashtag. Here, feminism 'has come to mean everything, and, consequently, nothing' (Bianco, 2016, para. 7). Marketplace or celebrity feminism is focused on individuals rather than systems and ignores the substance of feminism – that is, whether individuals are doing work in the service of gender equality (Zeisler, 2016a). For feminist women themselves, the claim is that 'feminism these days is more personal ideology than broad-based activist movement' (Friedman, 2016, para. 3). The modern self-labelled feminist is focused on popular culture's

manifestations of feminism, while ignorant of institutional and structural gender inequalities and the ongoing struggles against them (Friedman, 2016).

Within feminism there are debates, of course, over such shifts. Does pop feminism signal the de-politicisation of feminism, or does it also allow wider populations to be introduced to and included in the movement (Friedman, 2016)? Indeed, there are debates over the stories being told about feminism itself, echoing wider debates within different streams or currents of feminism. For example, Zeisler's own book is said to 'defang, depoliticize, and decontextualize', neglecting if not misrepresenting radical feminism's energetic critique of neoliberal and corporate feminisms (Murphy, 2016, para. 30).

Returning to the turn to men, this emphasis on men as feminists fits very well with the logics of pop feminism. If *anyone* can be a feminist, then men can too. If anyone can wear a t-shirt saying 'This is what a feminist looks like', regardless of their personal gendered practice or their place in gender relations, then there will be t-shirts in men's sizes too. Indeed, there is a contemporary trend in Australia of high-profile men whose public political agendas and ideologies are far from feminist claiming the term 'feminist' for themselves, including such men as Malcolm Turnbull, Tony Abbott, and Alan Jones (Crabb, 2016). Not only are men named or naming themselves as feminists but they may also be given awards once reserved for women, for example with *Glamour* magazine featuring a man (Bono, lead singer of the band U2) as one of its Women of the Year in 2016. (Individuals born male also may take up identities as women in the case of transmen, but the significance of this must wait for another discussion.)

A too comfortable place for men within feminism also is assisted by the common framing of gender equality as universally desirable. If gender equality is in everyone's interests, if no one ever has gained from gender inequality, then men and women are equally well placed to be part of the work of feminism. The idea that men will benefit from progress towards gender equality is widespread in efforts to enlist men in this work (Flood, 2015b). While certainly there are some benefits to men here, simplistic narratives of the universal benefits of gender equality deflect attention from the profoundly material ways in which this is not the case (Hemmings, 2016). Such narratives also make sexism and inequality seem to come from nowhere. They make invisible the perpetrators and perpetuators of gender inequality, the men who hold and exert patriarchal privilege and the myriad sexist practices and relations for which they are responsible.

What now for men in feminism?

This turn to men, this focus on men's roles in building gender equality, is firmly on the agenda. In popular discourse, programming, and policy in the near future, there will continue to be an emphasis on engaging men, whether in the prevention of men's violence against women or in other fields. This has both progressive and regressive potential. It may involve men in personal and collective change, strengthen feminist advocacy, and accelerate progress towards gender justice. Or it may provide men with tokenistic ways to sidestep responsibility for sexist inequalities, re-inscribe familiar forms of patriarchal masculinity, and intensify the de-politicisation of feminism.

If feminist attention to men is to make a real contribution to progressive social change, several conditions must be met. First, its vision of the problem and thus of the solution must be much more robustly feminist. They must be squarely focused on the structural, material, and institutional dimensions of gender inequality, the ways in which men and masculinities are implicated in these, and thus the need for their transformation. Such a vision is apparent in particular international initiatives focused on men and gender, for example in the development

field (Edström, Hassink, Shahrokh, & Stern, 2015), but are all but absent in popular media discussions of men, gender, and feminism.

Efforts focused on men should involve, second, a much more substantial call to action. They should set the bar high, inviting men's participation in personal and social change. They should expect that men will strive for gender-egalitarian identities, practices, and interpersonal relations and contribute to community action. Minor declarations of support for or identification with feminism from men are far from enough, and men must also *do the work* of activism (Ford, 2015; Zeisler, 2014). If men are to claim feminism, they must *practise* feminism (Ratchford, 2014). This also means that the organisations and institutions that sign on, for example, as supporters of HeForShe or similar initiatives must be accountable for their gendered processes and structures, and that men engaged in collective change must ally with feminist groups, women's movements, and other advocacy for social justice.

Finally, we must continue to assert the substance of feminism, making claims about what is and is not feminist and what it means to claim the label 'feminist'. We should not expect feminism to be universally embraced, because to do so is to undermine its political capacity and theoretical insight (Hemmings, 2016). While it would be desirable if far more men declared their support for feminism and took up personal and social change in its name, not all men can be feminists, and some men do not deserve the name.

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Notes

- 1 These were the front cover headlines, respectively, of *The New Statesman* (June 3–9, 2016), *Newsweek* (September 27, 2010), and *The Atlantic* (July/August 2010).
- 2 See the following two websites for examples of such materials, the first representing older materials and the latter more recent: <http://www.xyonline.net/content/what-men-can-do-stop-sexism-and-male-violence>; <http://www.xyonline.net/content/men-supporting-feminism-male-feminists-etc-xy-collection>.
- 3 See <http://www.heforshe.org/en/impact>.

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