

CAN A MAN BE A FEMINIST?

By Hugh Ellis

Feminism is a journey, not a destination.

My feminist journey started in a logical enough way: as a young man who was, um, interested in women. Fortunately, some of them said no, and some of those, allowed me to become their friends. And a friend sees and hears things a 'lover' often does not.

I got to see how some of my friends, well educated professional women, were verbally abused in the streets, got passed over for promotion, and were often in fear of sexual assault. I came to think that these were not isolated incidents, but an indication of a global culture that, often subtly, regards females as lesser beings.

I came to realise that, as long as I didn't support the struggle for women's rights, I was falling short of my potential as a man.

On my journey, I have learned many lessons.

One of the hardest was that not all women are feminists, or will easily become feminists. "I don't want a male feminist – I just want a normal man," one former partner said shortly before breaking up with me. I've met many women who are committed to the feminist struggle and welcome the participation of men. But I have also had women get angry with me for refusing to be a "manly man".



Another lesson was that feminism is incomplete without a commitment to break down other prejudices that hold people back, especially those concerning race and class. I vividly remember the woman living in a shack in Okahandja Park informal settlement who asked me, the feminist journalist, how it would help her if she magically became equally poor, unemployed and oppressed as her male neighbour.

I learned also that there are some feminist spaces where men are not required. The most vulnerable women – rape survivors for example – will only feel safe to express themselves in female-only spaces. I've been ushered out of some female-only meetings, and while that was painful, I now see that sometimes (but by no means all the time) this was necessary.

My most recent lesson is that no one is a complete feminist. The dregs from an anti-feminist world are still within my head. Non-feminist friends remind me that I'm the guy who once said, "show us your boobs!" to a girl in a bikini, or "you deserve to be punched in the face," to my ex-girlfriend. I did not carry out my threat, but part of me IS still that guy. I am still working on my thoughts, words and actions, making myself a better feminist.

I would like to invite all men to join me on this incredibly productive feminist journey – start by talking to people, at home and at your workplace, but don't stop there! As philosophy professor Sandra Bartky writes, in *Men Doing Feminism*, "we need 'gender traitors', and lots of them, to effect a thoroughgoing reform of our institutions and a wholesale movement to a new plateau of consciousness." SN



For more information on the Who Needs Feminism? Campaign, go to www.facebook.com/WhoNeedsFeminism