

Vive le difference* ... sort of

by Hugh Ellis

Why is it that whenever I mention I'm a feminist, or even that I'm interested in women's rights, the other person in the conversation immediately rattles off a list of differences between men and women, as if this proves me entirely wrong?

I wanted to write this article, my sisters and brothers (I felt like a preacher writing this sentence, but anyhow) to respond to such comments as best I can.

In the past, I often did not respond in the best way. My standard response was either to get angry ("I know we're different, dummy, aren't all people different from each other? Doesn't mean we're not equal") or to go 'academic' on them (and quote the numerous feminist writers who have made the understanding and respect of difference a key argument in their work). Instead, here, I want to try to show you I understand.

Feminism as a threat

I do get it: both sexes feel threatened by the modern world, of which feminism – to some extent - is a part.

Women often seem to fear that what they have been educated to hold dear – 'femininity' – could be taken away. They like to see themselves as caring, emotional, understanding – they don't want to lose these qualities. At the same time, they are surrounded by a world that displays these qualities less and less, to the point where their lives are often in danger.

Men are under pressure, too. On one hand, there's a great deal of social pressure to 'be a man' - to be tough, strong, authoritative, often to the point of invincibility. If not, you're a wimp, and possibly gay. On the other hand, step over a poorly defined line just a little, and you're seen as an ignorant* 'caveman', a 'typical male', whatever that may be.

So, in the face of these threats, many people have gone back to what they 'know'. To difference – "we're just made that way", "Women are from Venus and Men are from Mars".

Feminism as an answer

To people who feel this way, I want to say that feminism is no threat. In fact feminism is the answer to many of the dilemmas I just mentioned.

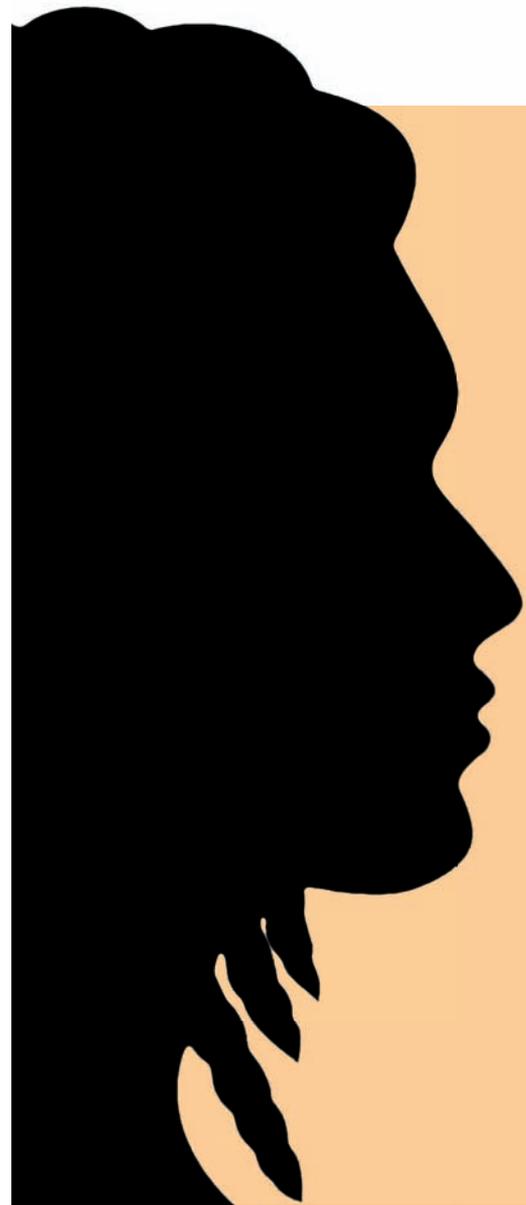
As I see it, feminism accepts difference. But not in the way the world does (I think I really must consider a career in the Church...). Most feminists say, if there is difference, let us celebrate it, and more importantly, learn from it.

If women can teach men to take a more caring attitude to their fellow beings, what is wrong with that? And if men can show women what they learned from their fathers about standing up for themselves and defending their children's rights, how can that be a bad thing?

See the truth ...

What feminism also says, of course, is that it's not only gender that defines us. It says that yes, some men like rugby. But if you like yoga more, that doesn't make you any less male.

(I would like to encourage rugby players to do five sun salutations every day to help relieve lower back problems, but that's another column).



"If there is difference, let us celebrate it, and more importantly, learn from it."

However, we won't force a man to attend a yoga class. Or even to cry more. But we do ask that, as men, we get in touch with our emotions. So we don't end up killing women, and other men, in fits of rage. And in a country with 50 per cent unemployment, we think it only fair that women, as well as men, should be allowed to bring their entrepreneurial talents to the table.

Dear All

Sister Namibia would like to give you space to contribute to the contents of our next magazine. You can write for either our Feminist Forum or Brother Namibia pages.

We would like you to submit a 600 word opinion piece that can be witty/anecdotal or serious or both - whichever tickles your fancy. Some suggested topics are:

1. What does it mean to be a man in a non-traditional and non-patriarchal household?
2. What alternatives to violence are men seeking out as an answer to Gender Based Violence?
3. Why was there a drop in the number of women in the new cabinet?
4. What are Sexual Rights from a man's point of view? What Sexual Rights does a man have?

You are not limited to these topics. If you have something interesting, that is not sexist or does not depict women in a distasteful manner - send it along! Also feel free to forward this to any women or men that would be interested in writing for *Sister Namibia* magazine. We look forward to hearing from you!

Please email your contribution to sheena@sisternamibia.org or to P.O. Box 86753, Eros, Windhoek.

Here endeth the lesson (I should definitely find myself a robe and a white collar, but never mind). Guys, let's not reject the women's rights movement. I think we'll come to see the truth of the old slogan 'women's rights are human rights'. ♀

Hugh Ellis is a lecturer in journalism and communication technology at the Polytechnic of Namibia. The views he expresses here are personal views.

Glossary

***Vive le difference**
Long live the difference
ignorant uninformed,
lacking knowledge



SMS your views!!!

We would love to hear your views and opinions on this article. Please SMS them to 0814 629 639 or email us at sheena@sisternamibia.org