

## What More Do Women Want?

When I ask myself why I wrote this piece, and what I hoped to achieve, it boils down to one thing. This was catharsis. It has served to help process the swirling anger, frustration and fear threatening to overwhelm me as I *feel* the above question being constantly levelled at me. It's charged in the subtext of the challenges and accusations that appear almost every time I create or share works supporting feminism, or highlighting the need for advancements in women's rights. It is giving voice to the most disturbing and upsetting element of my experiences as a feminist and women's rights advocate in my current cultural landscape.

Producing this has been a way for me to reflect on and document some of the emotions these dismissive or accusatory comments awaken in me. Feelings like the dread and helplessness that have kept me awake at night watching my tiny daughter sleep peacefully next to me, oblivious to the all the hazards and pressures I feel so powerless to protect her from. It pains me that I will have to teach her the conflicting messaging that she can do and be anything she wants, because women are equally worthy to men, but also that our society is still fundamentally unequal and there are dangers and unspoken restrictions that come alongside being a woman. I continue to worry that she may grow up in a world where the rights and equalities previous generations fought so hard for have been eroded, and she could face a future in a society with even fewer freedoms and opportunities than we have today.

### The cultural landscape

The evening before I began writing, I had just heard the news the Supreme Court in the US was poised to debate the reversal of the historic Roe vs. Wade decision. Doing so could have allowed swathes of Midwest America to vote on near total abortion bans, and mean severe restrictions could be imposed on many women's reproductive rights. The thought of this possible regression had me hit my knees and pray, for one of only a handful of times I have done in my adult life. It felt like such a huge and weighty example of the ever-present danger the progress previous generations made toward establishing women's rights and freedoms is in. Women's rights and feminism are forever being challenged and chipped away at, and some people seem to simply turn a blind eye.

The gender pay gap still exists, as does an enormous pension gap. Systematic inequality is still a very tangible thing, with real implications for women today. Gender based violence continues to rise at alarming rates. New and increasingly frightening misogynistic groups are emerging constantly. We are seeing clusters of self-proclaimed "involuntary celibates" forming groups spouting dangerous and dehumanising rhetoric which reduces women to mere objects with no free will. Our devotion, our bodies, our very lives are painted as something these men feel they are entitled to without question. I could go on, but suffice to say the supporting research studies, facts and figures, books, articles and headlines- all the data and evidence of the continuing risks, pressures and inequalities facing women in our society today is readily and openly available in a variety of formats and locations.

This particular account and interpretation is born of a very specific set of experiences lived out in this cultural atmosphere. When I use 'we' throughout, I am referring to myself, and the many others I know with similar stories and aligned experiences. This is my personal examination and assessment, and one which I could see provoking either of two reactions in the extreme. On the one hand, I know many people this will fully resonate with, and who may find some relief in the solidarity that will provide. On the other hand, I am all too aware there will be those which these words will serve to agitate. There will be those who are uncomfortable with some of the ideas and views presented, and that is even more reason to bring them to the floor for discussion as opposed to simply allowing them to be shut down and silenced.

### **We have not 'won' the fight for equality**

One of the biggest disappointments for me whenever I publicly share anything relating women's issues is the challenges and objections I am met with for doing so. The numerous accusations of misandry, the high jacking discussions around the difficulties facing women with an unnecessary toot of "what about men" or the defensive cries of "but not all men!" The seeming reluctance to look at the unpleasant realities which make up the experience of a great number of the women I associate with. There is a natural and reasonable level of fear and upset among many women, for where we can plainly see the obstacles and issues that are being faced by modern women, we see no real visible or sustained effort to address the causes. Nor do we see much in the way of a willingness to scrutinise the structures and systems maintaining continued inequality in a society built on the bedrock of archaic patriarchal ways of thinking.

We haven't achieved anywhere near equality, so it is damaging and disturbing that some people seem to think we are 'there', and cannot seem to understand why we continue work to keep a focus on women's rights and feminist ideals. Still many people mistakenly seem to think that women have already succeeded their battle for equality. We are fortunate in my society in that, unlike some parts of the world, women here can vote, drive, go out to work, have a bank account, choose get divorced and more, yes. However, those freedoms are RIGHTS that our predecessors fought hard for, and their existence doesn't automatically cancel the fact that there is still a long way to go to achieve full and proper gender equality. The evidence for that is everywhere, and out in plain sight, but many people are still very uncomfortable with the idea. We pride ourselves in my generation and culture on being progressive and pro-equality. I think it is important we really think about this idea, as we quite clearly haven't attained anywhere near the levels of progress and fairness we may have tricked ourselves into believing exist. Not to mention the fact that we should never be complacent until there is freedom and equality for ALL, right across the globe.

If you're tired of hearing about all these problems and issues you don't feel affect you as you read this, ponder for a moment how tired those who do experience these are of LIVING it. It's even more exasperating when you have people challenge your lived experiences with dismissive or reductive commentaries. Even within my circle of family and friends I have heard an abundance of discouraging dialogue. There have been comments ranging from the blatant denial- "that's not been my experience" or "well, I'm a woman and I don't

feel oppressed” through to the defensive- “I’ve always been such a nice guy to you?” and, of course, the natural progression to outright denunciation -“Why do you hate men?”

So, to the people who don’t know why we are still preaching about inequity, injustice and the vulnerabilities we face as women today, what do I want to say? What more DO women want?

### **We want allies, not adversaries**

You don’t need to counter someone advocating for the equality, rights and safety of women with a “what about men?” or “men too!” This serves nobody as effectively as if you used that energy to act on behalf of men’s causes you care about. We are well aware that things happen to men to, and highlighting when they happen to women doesn’t mean we are denying that.

‘Whataboutery’-It’s a phenomenon I have observed often, and one which I don’t really see equated in the reverse. I find it hard to understand, as I wouldn’t dream of commenting on an article or social media post about skyrocketing male suicide statistics, and the shockingly high proportion in which they happen by comparison to women with a “ yes, but women die of suicide too!” I can absolutely agree that this is unacceptable, and I have always been an active supporter of men’s mental health movements and services in their work to draw attention to this. I still can’t imagine responding to an article noting that there was to be a minute’s silence held for all the men who have died of suicide with “well I hope they have one for the women to!” I mean, I would certainly hope that they would have, but I’d also recognise that a space dedicated to emphasising the male suicide problem is not the relevant arena for me to express that. Let the light be cast on the issue in hand. Instead of barrelling in to effectively snuff that light out, carve out a separate space to shine the spotlight on the issues you care about too. If you are not actively lobbying for changes, conversations or championing advances for the causes you believe in, then you are passively allowing the status quo to continue unchecked. If it is safe and plausible for you to do so, you should get active on the issues that you really care about, and don’t expend energy derailing important conversations around others.

### **We want our safety to be a priority**

Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa, Gabby Petito, Bibaa Henry, Nicole Smallman, and most recently Ashling Murphy...a list of names that requires little context or explanation. We know what has happened, and we also know the women listed make up only a fraction of the number who have been killed in the last eighteen months, during a time when gender based violence has reached epidemic levels. Sadly, instances of physical and sexual violence against women are disturbingly every day. It needs to be understood and accepted that we live in a time when women are facing increasing danger, and currently male violence against women is a huge problem in our society. We need men especially to be able to look at this without seeing it as a personal attack. Absolutely nobody is suggesting the behaviour of a portion of violent and misogynistic men is indicative of the character of all and every man. That would be ridiculous.

It's time to recognise that we know it is not ALL men. The point really is, it's ENOUGH men. More than enough. And as far as we are aware, it could be any man. The Teacher, Police Officer, Judge, Politician... The fact that there remains a higher proportion of men in positions of power and influence can also make obtaining justice, or even speaking up in the first place, difficult for victims. Systematic failures and structural inequalities have shaken women's faith in the very institutions which have been charged with public protection and safety. We were never more aware of this than when the news broke of the tragic death of Sarah Everard at the hands of a serving Police Officer. The public outcry was further exacerbated by the aftermath of her death. The resulting revelations about her killer and his seemingly unchecked warning-sign behaviour in the past. The victim blaming comments made by a high-ranking Police Officer implying Sarah would have been safer if she had been more aware and educated on the arrest process and challenged her abductor. The heavy handed policing of the women attending her vigil and the subsequent highly publicised arrests- all of this is now absorbed in our collective consciousness, and something the women and girls of today are not going to forget quickly.

Most importantly, we want people to start making women's safety a priority by tackling the thing that is most putting it in jeopardy-the actions and behaviour of those violent and dangerous men.

### **We do not want to TAKE anything away from men**

It really is as simple as that. Wanting equal opportunities and freedoms for women does not require us to take anything away from men. Everyone can and should have these things. There is no lack or limitation other than the ones we choose to impose.

The only exception to this would be taking away men's power OVER women. If you think this is unfair, or that superiority and control over women is something that men require, I urge you to please sit with that for a moment. Sit with that and consider the reasons why that line of thinking is dangerous and threatening. And please don't suggest it's the "natural order". If it were natural supporting systems and continuous reinforcement wouldn't be necessary. If it were natural, we wouldn't be fighting against it- the "order" has been very much created and maintained by the minds of those it benefits.

We don't want to overthrow patriarchal structures and systems to replace them with some sort of female dominated utopia. We are not looking to establish power over and exact vengeance upon the world of men. No. This is not what feminism is for me certainly. I want to see inequality tackled and unfair systems dismantled because they are damaging to EVERYONE. We don't want to remove the privileges for some, we just want to extend them to all. I'd like to see a world where fair treatment and equal access to opportunities, choice and freedoms was available to everyone, and the current status unfortunately is that this is far from the reality.

### **Less is more?**

Ultimately, the most important thing we want through all of this is simply understanding. Understanding that when it comes to women's rights, there is still a great deal of need for

discussion and activism. We also need an appreciation of the impact it has when important discussions are derailed, diminished or dismissed. An impact that's palpable on a very human and personal level to those who are involved in the campaigning and supporting women's rights work. However while working through all the possible outlines and potential answers to the question "what more do women want?" I have concluded that we could also be doing with a big long list of less! Less obstacles, objections and objectification. Less policing of our bodies and behaviour. Less of the shaming and victim blaming. Less living with fear and uncertainty. Less feeling entirely responsible for our own safety from violence and danger... The list goes on, extensive but by no means unreasonable.

And beyond that, of course, there are things we simply want NO MORE. No more missing posters, no more headlines, no more vigils, no more grieving friends and families.

**For the women and girls of the future.**

**For all the women who went before.**

**No More.**