

Against Patriarchy: Tools for Men to Further Feminist Revolution*

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By Chris Crass

For all of us who are men who believe in social justice, who want healthy and beautiful lives for our loved ones, and who are working for positive change in the world, let us commit or re-commit to making feminism central in our lives, values, and actions. Black feminist scholar bell hooks writes, “When women and men understand that working to eradicate patriarchal domination is a struggle rooted in the longing to make a world where everyone can live fully and freely, then we know our work to be a gesture of love.” She continues, “Let us draw upon that love to heighten our awareness, deepen our compassion, intensify our courage, and strengthen our commitment.” It is time for men in the millions to take courageous action in our society to further feminist revolution.

The everyday violence and oppression of sexism in our society is epidemic and not only must end, but can end. Sexism devastates our relationships, communities, social justice efforts, and our lives. While we did not choose to be men in a patriarchal society, we have the choice to be feminists and work against sexism. Below is a list of tools and suggestions that have helped me over the years as I have struggled to understand what it means to be a man working for feminism.^[1] Let us look to the leadership of women and gender oppressed people for guidance and work alongside them, let us bring more and more men into feminist efforts, let us embrace feminism as a healing and transformative force in our lives, and let us feel in our hearts that we can do this.^[2]

- 1. Develop an intersectional feminist analysis of patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy, heterosexism, and the state.** Study feminist analysis from writers such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Suzanne Pharr, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, and Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martinez. Learn about the historical development of patriarchy in books such as Maria Mies’ *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*, and Andrea Smith’s *Conquest*. Explore the impact of patriarchal violence on your life and what you can do to stop it in Paul Kivel’s *Men’s Work*. Read bell hooks’ essays about men and feminism in *Feminism is for Everybody* and *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*. Learn more about gender justice in Leslie Feinberg’s *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Reflect on your experience of gender using Kate Bornstein’s *My Gender Workbook* as a guide.
- 2. Study social movements and organizing experiences led by women and gender oppressed people historically and today**—from Ida B. Wells and Abby Kelley to Septima Clark and Ai-Jen Poo. Also learn about men in the movement who supported women’s leadership and feminist politics—from William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois to Ricardo Flores Magon, Carl Braden, and David Gilbert. Take stock of the resources around you that can support your learning. Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, and Labor Studies programs were won through the struggle of previous generations. Some of the most visionary and powerful feminists of our time teach; seek out opportunities for study at colleges. Look into political education and training programs led by social justice organizations with feminist politics. Look for events about women’s history and feminism at progressive bookstores, social justice conferences, and with community groups. Join or form a study group to read books from some of the authors already mentioned, and to learn more about feminist history.
- 3. Think about women, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people in your life who support your development as a feminist.** These may be friends, people you’ve worked with, or family members. Reflect on what you have learned from them. Far too often patriarchy teaches men to ignore or devalue the wisdom of gender oppressed people and this both undermines their leadership in society and robs us of their leadership in our lives. Take time to thank people for what you’ve learned and look for opportunities to support them and strengthen your relationships.

- 4. Think about men in your life who can support your process of learning about sexism and developing as a feminist activist.** This could include talking through questions and struggles you are having and/or reading one of the authors mentioned above together, as well as participating in organizing efforts that have feminist goals. While support for your development as a feminist will often come from women and genderqueer people, and it is important to show gratitude for that support, it is critical to build bonds of mutual support with other men as we work to grow individually and also to develop a culture of feminist activism amongst men.
- 5. Learn about current struggles in your community that further feminist goals and have a gender analysis.** Look for opportunities to get involved and support these efforts. Your support can include donating money, volunteering to do office work, doing outreach for events, showing up with others to demonstrations and rallies, and recruiting other people in your life, particularly men, to get involved as well. It is important to support and respect the existing leadership of these struggles, rather than come in thinking you're going to take over. Look for opportunities to build relationships with the people involved in these efforts. The more you show up and make useful contributions, the more you can also build trust and respect.
- 6. Develop a feminist analysis of all the social justice work you do, and work with others to help make that analysis more central in your efforts.** Reach out for help and ask questions. Notice when you feel that asking for help is a sign of weakness and try to do so anyways.
- 7. Help create political education opportunities** such as reading groups and workshops for other people to come together and learn more about feminism. Help promote other groups' events on similar themes. Make a special effort to recruit men.
- 8. Go deep and go personal.** Day-to-day patterns of domination, both institutional and interpersonal, are the glue that maintains systems of domination. While most of this list is focused on activist efforts, it is also important to bring our politics into our personal relationships. Far too often, activist men support feminism in their public life and retreat into male privilege at home. Going with the flow in personal relationships generally means going with the flow of domination; liberation requires consistent and conscious decisions to choose and create something different. Just like any other effort to win and create another world, set goals in your relationships to practice feminism. It will likely feel awkward, contrived, and uncomfortable at times to bring this level of attention to your personal life. When almost every aspect of society is based on and reinforces male supremacy, it should be expected that our steps towards feminist liberation will at times feel uncomfortable and awkward, and sometimes terrifying. Being clear on our goals, seeking help when we need it, and knowing that we can increase our capacity to live our values through practice, can help us also make feminist action a powerful and rewarding habit.
- 9. Become more aware of your own participation in social justice efforts.** For example, count how many times you speak and keep track of how long you speak at meetings and in discussions. Count how many times other people speak and keep track of how long they speak. Be aware of how this breaks down according to gender. Create a method to help you do this for a few months, or until this awareness becomes routine.
- 10. Practice noticing who's in the room at meetings and events:** How many cisgender men? [\[3\]](#) How many cisgender women? How many transgender people? How many white people? How many people of color? Is it majority heterosexual? Are there out queers? What are people's class backgrounds? Don't assume to know people, but also work at becoming more aware. Listen to people and pick up on how they identify themselves. Talk with people one-on-one who you work with and get to know them. Learn about the various ways that people identify and express their gender and explore what it means to be transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming.
- 11. Be conscious of how often you are actively listening to and supporting what other people are saying.** As a white guy who talks a lot, I've found it helpful to write down my thoughts and wait to hear

what others have to say. Others will frequently be thinking something similar or have better ideas. Practice listening. Support people to develop their ideas. Ask them to expand on what they think about events, ideas, actions, strategy, and vision. Think about who you ask and who you really listen to. Developing respect and solidarity across race, class, gender, sexuality and ability is complex and difficult, but absolutely critical and liberating. Those most negatively impacted by systems of oppression have played and will play leading roles in the struggle for collective liberation.

12. Think about whose work and what contributions to the group are recognized and celebrated and whose are not. Practice recognizing more people for their work and try to do this more often. This also includes men offering support to other men who aren't recognized and actively challenging competitive dynamics that men are socialized to act out with each other. Strive to become fluent in appreciation and gratitude. Capitalist patriarchy thrives on the idea that there is a scarcity of power and that there is only enough for some people at the top to have it. Creating a culture of appreciation and gratitude can help us remember that there is an abundance of power that we can share, and that each of us is capable of making important contributions.

13. Be aware of how often you ask people to do something as opposed to asking other people, "what needs to be done?" Male socialized people often assume a higher level of competency than they actually have. Additionally, it is a patriarchal norm to assume men are in charge. There are likely others who are just as qualified, or even more so, who could be in positions of coordination. There are also a lot of men who are skilled coordinators and this is an important set of skills to pass on to others. Encourage and support others to take on this important leadership role.

14. Be aware of ways you might think you are always needed, in every discussion, in every work group, to make sure things go right. Be aware of how this may impact other people's participation. Struggle with the saying, "you will be needed in the movement when you realize that you are not needed in the movement." Humility and encouragement of others, along with appreciation of your own unique gifts and contributions, are key ingredients for successful leadership.

15. Work with and struggle with the model of group leadership that says that the responsibility of leaders is to help develop more leaders, and think about what this means to you: How do you support others and what support do you need from others? This includes men providing emotional and political support to other men. Look for opportunities where people can grow as leaders and help others take note of those opportunities. When possible, have group discussions about how to best support various people to make the most of those opportunities. As Ani Difrancia has said "Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right." Every organizing experience is a leadership development opportunity if you look at it right.

16. Develop a keen awareness and appreciation for work that is traditionally defined as women's work. Take on this work, and recruit other men to engage in it as well. Socially defined "women's work" can include cooking, cleaning, providing transportation, replenishing food and supplies, caring for children, tending to people who have special needs (because of illness, age, or ability), taking care of logistics, providing emotional support, mediating conflicts, and other such responsibilities that help build a healthy community. When you engage in this work, learn from the people already doing it, so that you can do it well. Give people appreciation for doing this work and, in the process, grow the understanding of how important this work is to accomplishing overall goals. When this work is shared more equally, it frees up other people's time whose leadership and participation is needed. Thinking about the needs of others and helping meet those needs is also a concrete way to move out of emotional isolation that many men experience. When recruiting others, take a moment to explain to men why you're asking more men to do this work. See if they have suggestions of men in their lives who would be good to recruit and encourage them to reach out.

17. Take time to emotionally support other people and deepen your understanding of the political significance of emotional work to building liberatory culture, community, and movement. People

socialized as women often provide the bulk of emotional support in interpersonal relationships, organizations, communities, and movements. While transferring skills and recruiting people to take on responsibilities is important, supporting people to work through internalized oppression, internalized superiority, self-limiting beliefs, and believe in themselves is key to helping people grow as successful activists. Emotional support is also an important part of creating healing and nurturing political culture that helps us sustain our efforts and live our values more fully. In larger society, emotional vulnerability by men is often responded to with ridicule or violence. Providing emotional support and opening yourself to emotional vulnerability are steps towards creating feminist masculinities.

18. Learn about the impact of sexual violence on the lives of women and gender oppressed people. Sexual assault and harassment are prevalent, not only in society, but also in the movement. While we work to make larger scale changes in society, there are also important roles we can plan in stopping sexual assault and harassment in activist efforts. Learn about ways you can actively challenge rape culture and help build feminist culture. For example, in society at large and in activist settings, women are routinely sexualized and turned into objects of male desire while their leadership, skills, experience, and analysis are marginalized. Remember that women are flirted with, have their bodies commented on, and are hit on over and over again. We need to help make movement spaces, and as many other spaces as possible, safer for women to participate fully rather than spending their time deflecting unwanted advances, comments, and actions. This isn't about creating an anti-sex culture, but promoting a respectful and consensual one with women's self-determination and autonomy at the center. Men talking openly and honestly with each other and, where appropriate, in group discussions about how to help make this happen is an important step. Men supporting survivors of sexual assault and harassment is an important part of this process. Additionally, it is key that men pro-actively speak out against rape and rape culture in the company of other men and promote consent culture.

19. As you work to challenge male supremacy and struggle for feminist change in society, explore your relationship to cisgender men. Often as men become more conscious of gender and feminism, they work and build community with women and gender-oppressed people. This makes sense, given who is primarily talking about gender and taking action for gender justice and feminism. It also makes sense because many of us have experienced male violence, with our political commitments and identities additionally making us targets. However, it is also important for feminist men to actively build community with other men, both to heal ourselves and organize more men to challenge patriarchy and work for feminist liberation. How can men support and encourage each other in the struggle to develop radical models of anti-racist, class conscious, pro-queer, feminist manhood that challenges strict binary gender roles and categories? This is not a suggestion to end or stop building relationships with people who aren't men. Rather, we should have a wide range of relationships with people of different genders and maintain a commitment to bringing more men into movement for collective liberation.

20. Remember that social change is a process, and that our individual transformation and individual liberation are intimately interconnected with social transformation and social liberation. Life is profoundly complex and there are many contradictions. Mistakes are part of the process. Remember that the path we travel is guided by love, dignity and respect even when it brings us to tears and is difficult to navigate. Often when men in the movement are asked if they are feminist, their first response is to talk about how frequently they fail to live up to feminist principles. Far too often, men committed to feminism become incapacitated with shame and act from a place of critique of themselves and others, which prevents us from bringing leadership to help shape events. As we struggle, let us also love ourselves and reach out for help. Believe in your ability to make important positive impacts in the world. Make changes to this list and include additional tools that have been helpful to you. Keep your list and share it with other men you are working with. Remember that we are in this together and that everyday is an opportunity to live our values and take action to further feminist revolution.

Notes

* “Against Patriarchy” is an excerpt, revised specially for *The Feminist Wire*, from Chris Crass’s new book [*Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy*](#) published by PM Press.

[1] These tools come out of conversations and reflections rooted in social justice organizing over the past 25 years. Thank you to Justin Stein, Lewis Wallace, Molly McClure, Marc Mascarenhas-Swan, Chanelle Gallant, Josh Connor, Chris Dixon, and RJ Maccani for sharing initial ideas and feedback. Thank you to Amar Shah, Rachel Luft, Dan Berger, Carla Wallace, Rahula Janowski, Charlie Frederick, Paul Kivel, and Lisa Albrecht for their feedback.

[2] Gender oppressed refers to people who don’t fit into the gender binary of male and female. This includes people who are genderqueer, gender variant, gender non-conforming, intersex and who either live outside of being male or female or have both male and female genders.

[3] Queer and transgender activists developed the term *cisgender* as a label for individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity. Cisgender is a companion term to transgender.