

## Why I Am a Male Feminist

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The word turns off a lot of men (insert snarky comment about man-hating feminazis here) -- and women. But here's why black men should be embracing the "f" word.

When I was a little boy, my mother and father used to argue a lot. Some mornings, I would wake up to the alarming sound of my parents arguing loudly. The disagreement would continue until my father would yell with finality, "That is it! I'm not talking about this anymore!" The dispute would end right there. My mother never got the last word.

My dad's yelling made me shrink in fear; I wanted to do something to make him stop raging against my mother. In those moments, I felt powerless because I was too small to confront my father. I learned early that he had an unfair advantage because of his gender. His size, strength and power intimidated my mother. I never saw my father hit her, but I did witness how injurious his verbal jabs could be when they landed on my mom's psyche.

My father didn't always mistreat my mother, but when he did, I identified with her pain, not his bullying. When he hurt her, he hurt me, too. My mother and I had a special bond. She was funny, smart, loving and beautiful. She was a great listener who made me feel special and important. And whenever the going got tough, she was my rock and my foundation.

One morning, after my father yelled at my mom during an argument, she and I stood in the bathroom together, alone, getting ready for the day ahead of us. The tension in the house was as thick as a cloud of dark smoke. I could tell that my mother was upset. "I love you, Ma, but I just wish that you had a little more spunk when you argue with Daddy," I said, low enough so my father couldn't hear me. She looked at me, rubbed my back and forced a smile.

I so badly wanted my mother to stand up for herself. I didn't understand why she had to submit to him whenever they fought. Who was he to lay down the law in the household? What made him so special?

I grew to resent my father's dominance in the household, even though I loved him as dearly as I loved my mother. His anger and intimidation shut down my mother, sister and me from freely expressing our opinions whenever they didn't sit well with his own. Something about the inequity in their relationship felt unjust to me, but at that young age, I couldn't articulate why.

One day, as we sat at the kitchen table after another of their many spats, my mother told me, "Byron, don't ever treat a woman the way your father treats me." I wish I had listened to her advice.

As I grew older and got into my own relationships with girls and women, I sometimes behaved as I saw my father behave. I, too, became defensive and verbally abusive whenever the girl or woman I was dating criticized or challenged me. I would belittle my girlfriends by scrutinizing their weight or their choices in clothes. In one particular college relationship, I often used my physical size to intimidate my petite girlfriend, standing over her and yelling to get my point across during arguments.

I had internalized what I had seen in my home and was slowly becoming what I had disdained as a young boy. Although my mother attempted to teach me better, I, like a lot of boys and men, felt entitled to mistreat the female gender when it benefited me to do so.

After graduating from college, I needed a job. I learned about a new outreach program that was set to launch. It was called the [Mentors in Violence Prevention](#) Project. As a student-athlete, I had done community outreach, and the MVP Project seemed like a good gig until I got a real job in my field: journalism.

Founded by Jackson Katz, the MVP Project was designed to use the status of athletes to make gender violence socially unacceptable. When I met with Katz, I didn't realize that the project was a domestic violence prevention program. Had I known that, I wouldn't have gone in for the job interview.

So when Katz explained that they were looking to hire a man to help institutionalize curricula about preventing gender violence at high schools and colleges around the country, I almost walked out the door. But during my interview, Katz asked me an interesting question. "Byron, how does African-American men's violence against African-American women uplift the African-American community?"

No one had ever asked me that question before. As an African-American man who was deeply concerned about race issues, I had never given much thought about how emotional abuse, battering, sexual assault, street harassment and rape could affect an entire community, just as racism does.

The following day, I attended a workshop about preventing gender violence, facilitated by Katz. There, he posed a question to all of the men in the room: "Men, what things do you do to protect yourself from being raped or sexually assaulted?"

Not one man, including myself, could quickly answer the question. Finally, one man raised his hand and said, "Nothing." Then Katz asked the women, "What things do you do to protect yourself from being raped or sexually assaulted?" Nearly all of the women in the room raised their hand. One by one, each woman testified:

"I don't make eye contact with men when I walk down the street," said one.

"I don't put my drink down at parties," said another.

"I use the buddy system when I go to parties."

"I cross the street when I see a group of guys walking in my direction."

"I use my keys as a potential weapon."

"I carry mace or pepper spray."

"I watch what I wear."

The women went on for several minutes, until their side of the blackboard was completely filled with responses. The men's side of the blackboard was blank. I was stunned. I had never heard a group of women say these things before. I thought about all of the women in my life -- including my mother, sister and girlfriend -- and realized that I had a lot to learn about gender.

Days after that workshop, Katz offered me the job as a mentor-training specialist, and I accepted his offer. Although I didn't know much about gender issues from an academic standpoint, I quickly learned on the job. I read books and essays by bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis and other feminist writers.

Like most guys, I had bought into the stereotype that all feminists were white, lesbian, unattractive male bashers who hated all men. But after reading the work of these black feminists, I realized that this was far from the truth. After digging into their work, I came to really respect the intelligence, courage and honesty of these women.

Feminists did not hate men. In fact, they loved men. But just as my father had silenced my mother during their arguments to avoid hearing her gripes, men silenced feminists by belittling them in order to dodge hearing the truth about who we are.

I learned that feminists offered an important critique about a male-dominated society that routinely, and globally, treated women like second-class citizens. They spoke the truth, and even though I was a man, their truth spoke to me. Through feminism, I developed a language that helped me better articulate things that I had experienced growing up as a male.

Feminist writings about patriarchy, racism, capitalism and structural sexism resonated with me because I had witnessed firsthand the kind of male dominance they challenged. I saw it as a child in my home and perpetuated it as an adult. Their analysis of male culture and male behavior helped me put my father's patriarchy into a much larger social context, and also helped me understand myself better.

I decided that I loved feminists and embraced feminism. Not only does feminism give women a voice, but it also clears the way for men to free themselves from the stranglehold of traditional masculinity. When we hurt the women in our lives, we hurt ourselves, and we hurt our community, too.

As I became an adult, my father's behavior toward my mother changed. As he aged he mellowed, and stopped being so argumentative and verbally abusive. My mother grew to assert herself more whenever they disagreed.

It shocked me to hear her get in the last word as my father listened without getting angry. That was quite a reversal. Neither of them would consider themselves to be feminists, but I believe they both learned over time how to be fuller individuals who treated each other with mutual respect. By the time my father died from cancer in 2007, he was proudly sporting the baseball cap around town that I had given him that read, "End Violence Against Women." Who says men can't be feminists?

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