

Translation of an article¹ by Marco Visscher,² a Dutch journalist, in the Belgian glossy magazine *Knack* (3 August 2016). Marco attended the second International Conference on Men's Issues, in London.³

The men who feel oppressed

Women have it good. They pull the strings and men are being marginalized. Or so says a new group of lobbyists. Welcome to the world of men's rights activists (m/f). 'Feminism is cancer.'

'The challenge', Paul Elam starts out, carefully weighing his words, 'is to not fall for the temptation to paint ourselves as victims. Our movement' – and being known as one of its founders, Elam is allowed to speak on its behalf – 'needs to be something feminism always promised to be, but never was: a battle against granting one sex more privileges than the other, and a battle for equal legal treatment.'

Elam believes that feminism has nothing to do with gender equality and that it has now become so successful that women currently are being privileged. He is part of the international men's movement. Yes, there *is* something like that. And recently, its members congregated in London for the International Conference on Men's Issues. If you never heard of them before, blame feminism. Because feminists have taken over the media, control our politicians and indoctrinate our children.

It's hard not to make fun of it. Do *men* feel left behind, after having dominated almost every section of society since God knows when? Do they really think *men* are getting the short end of the stick when it comes to 'institutionalized sexism'? Is this a prank?

Some people in the movement do see humor as a good way to deal with the subject matter. They'll casually point out that young white males nowadays are eligible for scholarship because, as a group, they are underrepresented at universities. Or, they will sarcastically remark that men working in garbage disposal, in the sewers and in mining are extremely chauvinistic and simply won't allow women into their sectors, and that there should be an official quota system for women's representation in these fields, similar to the ones in politics and corporate boardrooms. Not to mention the fact that men play longer games at Wimbledon and not getting more prize money in return.

But for the vast majority this is serious business. They'll point out that after a divorce, fathers have fewer rights to see and care for their children. That there are numerous causes and funds to combat female genital mutilation, but not male genital mutilation (which, by the way, happens way more often). That men in court are being punished more frequently and more severely than women for the same crime. That men commit suicide far more often than women. And that there is hardly anyone willing to listen to these issues, let alone address them. Mike Buchanan, founder of the world's only political party for men: 'From the perspective of the state, men are considered to be second-class citizens.'

Imagine, these men argue, if this was a reversed scenario and women were the ones being disadvantaged. It would have caused a public outrage. The aggrieved party would have been protected and compensated. Why, then, is there a deafening silence when men are the ones being

¹ <https://i4mb.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/160803-marco-visscher-article-for-knack.pdf>

² <http://www.marcovisscher.nl/>

³ <http://icmi16.wordpress.com>

deprived? Those who want to challenge this, are being ignored, ridiculed or ostracized. This is the kind of double standard the men's rights movement wants to call into question.

It appears that men who are putting up a fight against feminism, is not a typical Western phenomenon. For years, Anil Kumar has been asking authorities in India for more legal protection for men against rape, domestic violence, or sexual intimidation at the workplace. Protections that women do have in a traditional, conservative country that is India, a country that is criticised with regard to the many brutal rape cases that take place. When men are accused, they are considered to be guilty until their innocence has been proven. Kumar says, 'This is completely in violation with human rights.'

Who are these men's rights activists? Why are they on the barricades? How do their opinions differ? And how much of an impact can they have?

'It doesn't matter if you have tits'

As expected, the visitors to the conference in London, some two hundred of them, are almost all men: married, divorced or single, fathers, grandfathers or none of the above. Some carry a sad family history with them: divorced, deprived from having any contact with their children, or abused by a dominant mother. One person wears a t-shirt that says: 'Where's my foreskin?'

They are gathered here to be among like-minded people and, more importantly, to finally see their blogging, vlogging and tweeting heroes in the flesh. It increases the willingness for applause at the start of each presentation. In some cases there is a standing ovation before the speaker has even started.

Who are these heroes? Well, there's Paul Elam. Elam, a tall, slim American, founded A Voice For Men seven years ago, a website which serves as a platform to discuss men's issues. Feminists have described his work 'a lobby for abusers', dedicated to men who don't want to pay alimony. On more than one occasion he has received death threats, serious enough to be investigated by the police. 'I'm willing to die for this cause', he declares. 'Without any hesitation.'

Or Karen Straughan, a divorced mother from Canada, who, according to her own description, has been 'pissing off feminists since 2010'. In her reflections on her own blog *Owning Your Shit*, there are more of these expletives to be found. In London, she ends the roaring applause after her announcement in a typical fashion: 'Oh, shut the fuck up.'

Or Janice Fiamengo, a somewhat reserved Canadian literary scholar, who, last year, catapulted herself outside of academic circles by putting weekly video messages on YouTube. She draws attention to the stifling atmosphere at universities, where students increasingly want to refrain from participating in courses or discussions which are deemed to be uncomfortable for either themselves, or their fellow students. In Fiamengo's own field, the intrinsic value of literature has become irrelevant. Books are now only read 'to teach certain political correct attitudes', she explains.

As the observant reader might have noticed, there are women in the men's rights movement as well. Most of them used to have some affinity with feminism, but became alienated. They've concluded that feminism doesn't challenge them enough to take their responsibility, but defines them as victims instead. They believe that feminists teach women to appear weak and fragile, pending the salvation of the state. At the three-day convention, all attending women are cherished and revered.

Karen McFly (a made-up name she uses on the internet when talking about these issues), flew over from Germany. She's working as a translator at an IT company, and says that she always 'cringes' when other women speak on behalf of women in general. 'I get annoyed when feminists launch a campaign in which they claim that "all women" are too afraid to travel by bus or subway due to sexual harassment. I'm ashamed. It creates a wedge between people. It leads to a

withering of compassion.’ In contrast, she finds that the men’s rights movement acknowledges women’s strength.

Zoë Kuijper, from the Netherlands, is more blunt: ‘It shouldn’t matter if you have tits or not.’

Well, in fact, in today’s world, it *does* matter, and men’s rights activists highly regret this.

They bond with each other on basis of their notion that feminism has been slowly seeping through society without much opposition. Swayne O’Pie, who 25 years ago was the only man taking women’s studies, says: ‘Feminism is the only ideology that is prohibited to be criticized openly. That should raise suspicion.’ He confesses that, although women are not to be found in leading positions, the men in those positions have taken over their agenda. ‘The idea’, says O’Pie, ‘that in our modern society, there’s still something like a patriarchy that excludes or represses women, is blatantly rubbish.’

Yeah, some fine patriarchy, advocates of men’s rights declare with unconcealed cynicism, which sends men to war, makes them pay the majority of taxes and lets them carry out the most dangerous of jobs...

As offensive as possible

Some speakers at the conference represent a clear right-wing, conservative agenda. Phillip Davies is being introduced as the only British Member of Parliament who dares to challenge the leniency in allowing females access to privileges. He focusses on law-and-order and regards the judicial system as far too soft, especially for women. Davies would like to see women get the same kind of harsh sentences that men get when committing the same crimes.

Another speaker, Herbert Purdy, accuses feminists for trying to introduce Marxism through the backdoor. He points out that Communist leaders have aimed to abolish the nuclear family. ‘What’s the most effective way to bring about a revolution?’, Purdy asks his listeners. ‘Perform a coup d’état: you take out the head of state.’ And what are the feminists doing to the family? They ‘do the same to its head – the father.’ And they’ve done a good job at that, Purdy says. Approximately half of all marriages ends in a divorce. As a result, a lot of boys lack a role model.

However, to others, this conservative emphasis on family values is completely irrelevant. These so-called MGTOW’s (Men Going Their Own Way) are the antithesis. They conclude from their cost-risk analysis of relationships that there’s not much benefit from having one. These are men who no longer wish to date women and in some extreme cases are secluding themselves from society.

Yet another attendee comes from the pickup artist community – you know, men who learn in workshops how to get laid. In those circles men’s rights activists are looked down upon. ‘They are being viewed as wimps’, he says. A rare individual dares to be active in both communities.

‘I do feel slightly uneasy’, Fred Neecher says confidentially. We’ve been talking for quite some time. For years, Neecher, a pensioned English teacher from London, has been disillusioned with the Labour Party, which he voted for all his life. By chance, he came across anti-feminists and, Neecher ironically says, just like young Muslims, he ‘radicalized’ over the Internet. ‘Feminism and Nazism are scarily similar’, he says. ‘It is based on biology, and a vocabulary riddled with incomprehensible hogwash.’

Yet now, at the conference, he is surrounded by mainly right-wingers, ‘and I still regard myself a lefty!’ He disagrees with some of the rhetoric that has been uttered. Feminists weren’t Marxist at all, he asserts, because Marx was a *man* and feminists didn’t like that at all. And the Conservative Party is not, as they all seem to think over here, a socialist party at all. Anyway, Neecher doesn’t

talk with his friends about any of the stuff at the men's conference. 'I do not want to risk losing any friendships.'

It's a sentiment that is frequently heard. On the Internet, a lot of activists make use of a pseudonym when blogging or commenting. Outside of the realm of the digital world it is scary to talk about it. At the conference, everybody is eager to give their opinion, however, more often than not, they refuse to have their name put in this article. The photographer has to vow not to displaying anybody in an identifiable way without their consent. It is not without reason that Paul Elam says, 'What I've been doing for the last ten years, would have been professional suicide for others.'

Consequently, I've been met with a mixture of suspicion – as the media is in control of the feminists, right? – and a longing to try and convince me and get me into their ranks. Thus, hours after we spoke, Jari Selin, who has posed himself as a men's rights activist in Finland, sent an email with links to no less than 168 articles, reports, presentations and videos, 'in case you're really interested'.

There are piles of flyers, brochures and densely printed broadsheets, all asking for attention to the injustices that have been brought upon men. Did you know that genital mutilation occurs to men six times more often than to girls and women? Did you know that 84 percent of the male inmates wouldn't be in prison if the judicial system would've treated them similarly to females? Did you know that 78 percent of all suicides are men? Did you know that in 70 percent of all cases where domestic violence is unidirectional, the woman is the perpetrator? (Oh, and as an aside, did you know domestic violence is most frequent within, guess what, lesbian couples?)

The emphasis on men being aggrieved isn't enticing to all those present. Kathy Gyngell, a conservative blogger, laments: 'Everybody in our society is now competing to be a victim.' The question remains whether a contest to out-victim one another is an effective strategy. And what exactly is at stake here? Should we abolish gender-specific laws, or should we broaden them for men?

Meanwhile, the contest seems to be in feminist bashing. Mike Buchanan: 'One of the many shortcomings of feminists, is their lack of a moral compass.' Snickering. Herbert Purdy: 'I hate feminism. For it is poison.' And: 'Feminism is a parasite that is sapping the strength – men's strength – from our societies.' Nods of approval. Cautious clapping. Janet Bloomfield: 'Feminism is a hate-filled, backward ideology which is immune to facts.' Laughter. Howling.

Not quick enough

Will the men's movement get any kind of influence? The answer to that will vary from country to country. Michael Odijk, from the Netherlands, has some doubts, although he sees a window of opportunity. Odijk has observed an increase in popular protests against 'a technocratic elite that seems to want to dictate how their ideal version of a society should look like, and that regards the democratic system as an impediment', he says. And because feminism is part of the worldview of the political class, that ideology could also get increasingly questioned.

It is clear that something need to change in order to get noticed. 'Let's stop fantasizing that the tide is turning', conference organizer Mike Buchanan explains to his audience. 'We like to believe that, but things aren't moving fast enough.' Some, like Lucian Vâlsan from Romania, advocates to start infiltrating political organizations and human resource departments. 'Feminists are great at doing that, we're not.' Others opt for small-scale meetings in living rooms or one-on-one discussions at the watercooler with your colleagues.

During her talk, blogger Janet Bloomfield admits there is 'a marketing problem'. There are too many outspoken anti-feminists and too few people who try to build bridges. There is, she acknowledges, no reason to suppose that the rise of feminism will come to a halt by itself and

there is no indication at all that politicians will start to listen to men's rights activists. Concerned faces all around.

Nevertheless, there are developments that brighten the mood of some of the attendees. One man remarks that robotization will put a halt on jobs in which women have been specialized, like healthcare and education. Those women will be at home, while surgeons, software developers and plumbers will still be in business. Additionally, an increasing amount of men will be disadvantaged by the family court system, and this will mean more and more people will personally know aggrieved men. The first time you might think: *sure, he will probably not tell you the complete truth on why he isn't allowed to see his kids*. But when there is a continuous stream of similar stories from men who appear sympathetic, there might be something going on. This is how Frenchman David Loup got involved, due to a friend who was obligated to pay the medical bills of his three-year old epileptic daughter, but was not allowed to see her. 'Such injustice cannot remain unnoticed forever,' Loup says.

'I think that most people have a gut feeling that there's something not right', says Alison Tieman, a Canadian cartoonist and founder of Honey Badger Brigade, a collective of artists centered around men's rights. 'Maybe they cannot express it correctly, or they are afraid of bringing attention to the issue. But sooner or later, the belief that women are adults who have their own will and who don't need an excessive amount of protection to hold their own in society, must be breaking through.'

When Janet Bloomfield wraps up her presentation, she says: 'Feminism is cancer', not coincidentally the phrase on her bright pink T-shirt, 'and we are the cure.' Intense applause follows.