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# Men and Feminism: The Art of Negotiation

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# Men and Feminism The Art of Negotiation

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## Abstract

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This study is the result of a month-long interview process with seven men living in the Netherlands. It focuses on the feminist experiences of the men as well as the ways in which they enact or embody feminist ideals in their daily lives. Their backgrounds are very diverse. Some are Dutch natives, while others are migrants from other nations. There are diversities in race, sexuality, age, and class as well. Each interviewee negotiates their masculinity and their feminist ideology differently. Specifically, this study examined the pressure to uphold hegemonic masculinity, homosociality as a platform for feminism, and some of the reasons why men choose not to identify with the feminist label. It should be noted that this study is very limited in its theoretical implications, as there were certain constraints which made it difficult to reach any definite conclusions. Overall, however, it was discovered that there are a myriad of ways of enacting and embodying feminism as a male and that there was often a negotiation between one's feminist identity and one's maleness.

*Keywords:* masculinity, feminism, men, hegemonic masculinity

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## Introduction

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I think that there is a common assumption in current Western society that men are opposed to feminism; that their status as male renders them incapable of understanding the female experience, and therefore incapable of participation in feminist circles. Furthermore, there is an assumption that men are simply not interested in gender studies, gender equality, or feminism. Of course, these assumptions have been influenced by my own background and positionality. As a young, white, female from the northeastern part of the United States, my understanding and introduction to feminist theory and thought has been very limited. Specifically, I have had little interaction with men who believe in feminist principles and ideologies, or at least men who are fervently invested in the topic. Because of these assumptions and experiences, I felt it was important to explore the role that men play in feminism. In order to create or maintain an inclusive brand of feminism, it is crucial to explore the experiences of men involved in feminism as well as the journey which brought them to feminist thought. The aim of this study is to give voices to those men who do uphold feminist beliefs and values and explore their journey to feminism, the difficulties or challenges that they may face in doing so, and their opinions on the ways in which men can be involved in feminism. I am also interested in the feminist label and some of the reasons and motivations for choosing to use the label.

Conversely, I think it is important to understand why some men choose not to take on the label of feminist. Personally, I know a lot of men who understand feminism and might even believe in its ideals, but who would never self-identify as feminist. In order to create an inclusive feminism, I think we need to understand those perspectives and ask what the implications of the rejection of the feminist label are. Does the rejection of the feminist label always have to mean the rejection of the principles? What is it about the label of “feminist” that men are so averse to? I hope to explore these questions and shed some light on the topic to gain new knowledge about making feminism a collaborative effort between both men and women.

Regardless of the label of feminist, I also wanted to examine the various ways in which men can enact and embody feminism in their daily lives, their personal relationships, and their interactions with members of both sexes. Do these men face difficulties in negotiating their status as male with their belief in feminist ideology? How are they perceived by both men and women?

Finally, I felt it was important to explore questions of manhood and masculinity, two very fragile and contestable concepts. Hegemonic masculinity is a concept which is still perpetuated in society today and many men struggle to live up to its ideals. I wanted to know if this was true of my interviewees as well. Most importantly, I wanted to discover if my participants felt that feminism had offered them any alternative or less restrictive forms of masculinity.

Overall, I wanted to examine the supposed tensions between the male identity and the feminist identity. Through the narratives and experiences of seven interviewees, I was able to come to a kind of understanding about the very many ways that men can situate themselves within feminism. This study particularly focuses on the pressures that men face to uphold hegemonic masculinity, their homosocial interactions and the way that feminism can be enacted in those settings, and finally, the importance of intersectionality as well as personal experience within feminism.

## Assumptions

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Before I arrived in the Netherlands, I had a lot of assumptions about the culture and history of the country. I believed that Amsterdam was much less traditional than the United States and that alternative family structures and sexualities would be accepted and embraced by the Dutch population. However, after spending the past 3 months immersed in Dutch culture and learning about the political and social landscape here in the Netherlands, I have discovered that the country is much more heteronormative and patriarchal than I had anticipated. This, of course, affected not only my conception of the Netherlands, but also my understanding of my research topic.

Prior to beginning my research and the interview process, I believed that I had a fairly decent conception of the relationship between masculinity and feminism in the Netherlands. I assumed that men in the Netherlands would be more open to discussing feminism than men in the United States, and that more Dutch men than American men would identify as feminists. I had interacted, albeit sparsely, with Dutch men interested in issues of gender equality and feminism in the classroom setting and at some off-campus events, which made me hopeful that this was a common phenomenon. However, I quickly realized through less-academic settings that feminism is still very much feared and misunderstood in mainstream Dutch society as well.

I expected that, because of the taboos surrounding feminism, men who identified as feminists or were in some way aligned with feminist ideology would have a difficult time negotiating their masculinity with their feminist ideologies, particularly with regard to their sexuality. I assumed that their behavior and language would be policed by other men. I expected that my interviewees would have had negative reactions from male friends or colleagues by choosing to align with feminist ideologies. Again, in my own experience, most men are not interested in discussing matters of gender and sexuality. Often they accuse women of being too sensitive or easily offended if they try to point out the flaws in patriarchal hierarchy. I wanted to know if the response was different if a man brought up issues of gender equality. I also wanted to know how men who align with feminism are perceived by both women who do and who do not identify as feminists. Would women appreciate men who are involved with feminism? I assumed that there were likely some tensions between male and female members of the feminist community. In my own experience, men are often looked down upon in feminist circles, as many women believe that feminist spaces are reserved for women and that men should not be a part of



these conversations. Of course, my own experiences are very limited; therefore I wanted to know if my interviewees had any experiences with ‘male-bashing’ in the feminist community.

Additionally, I assumed that most men who chose to be a part of the feminist movement and community would also self-identify as feminists. However, this was not necessarily the case, for a wide variety of reasons.

Finally, I had not anticipated intersectionality playing such a major role in my interviews. Speaking from my experience, intersectionality is a concept that is relegated to the academic sphere. Without having taken a gender and sexuality course in college, I never would have been introduced to the various ways in which identities are intersectional. I assumed that without an education in gender and sexuality studies, that my interviewees would not have been aware of it either. There is definitely an academic hierarchy present surrounding issues of gender and sexuality, and that certainly crept into my own research. None of my interview questions touched upon the experiences of men with intersectionality, which I think was a definite flaw in my interview guide. Nevertheless, most of my interviewees all spoke about the intersection of prejudices regarding race, gender, sexuality, and social class in one way or another, despite a wide range of academic backgrounds.

The men that I interviewed were, in some ways, exceptions to notions of a ‘typical’ Dutch male. Each of them had a particular interest in issues of gender equality and saw feminism as a guiding principle in their lives, so their perspectives are probably quite different from men who have not had the same exposure to feminist theory or activism. These questions are something that they have dedicated at least a portion of their lives to answering, therefore their answers and experiences cannot be viewed as representative of an average Dutch experience. Regardless, I believe that their answers and experiences shed light on the ways that feminism can be more inclusive and receptive to a broader audience.

## Limitations

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There are several limitations of this study. To begin, the amount of time that was allotted for the research process was very limited. With more time, I could have interviewed more participants, including men who are not involved with feminism in any capacity, so as to contrast their experiences with men who are deeply involved. The pool of participants is simply too small to draw any definite conclusions about the nature of negotiating feminism and masculinity in Amsterdam. Furthermore, my research was limited to Amsterdam and the surrounding area. It would also be interesting to interview men who were from more rural parts of the Netherlands. Are their experiences vastly different? Do they have access to the same resources as men living in metropolitan areas? How does religion or political affiliation play a role in identifying as a feminist? There are several other factors which could be analyzed and examined in a future research project.

A second limitation was the diversity of participants. The men were incredibly diverse in all potential aspects: race, sexual orientation, and cultural background. With a more focused group of men, perhaps my results would have been more concrete. Due to the limited nature of this study, I was not able to explore the correlations between certain types of identities and their experiences. With such a wide variety of ages and experiences, it was difficult to understand how they all related to each other, if at all. On the other hand, such a wide array of participants allowed me to further explore questions of intersectionality and positionality. Future research could expand on the questions I asked, but tailor those questions to a particular group of men for a more focused study.

This study does not necessarily account for age in the analysis of experiences with feminism. The men ranged in age from 26 to 64, all with vastly different experiences because of, among other reasons, the time in which they grew up, went to university, etc. On the other hand, it was interesting to compare and contrast the experiences of men born in different eras. In hindsight, I wish I had interviewed a few more participants who were on the younger side of the spectrum, particularly college-aged students, so as to understand how the current socio-political landscape as well as popular culture affects their understanding of feminism and masculinity. Perhaps a focus on young university-aged men in the Netherlands would be a nice focus for another study.

Although there was a diverse range of races, ages, sexualities, and cultural backgrounds represented in this study, there was a lack of diversity in education among the interviewees. Most of the participants have a formal university education of some kind, which certainly impacted their ability to understand feminism and social justice issues conceptually. It would have been interesting to interview men without a formal university education to see if their experiences or conceptions of feminism were different from men who are university-educated.

Another obvious limitation of this study is the language barrier between the researcher and the interviewees. Though all of the participants spoke English near-fluently, their answers may have more accurately depicted their experiences if they had been able to answer the questions in their native language. Many of the participants struggled to find the English equivalent of certain words, phrases, or concepts that just did not have translations, which made understanding some of their experiences difficult.

Most of the interviews were conducted in person, which was my preferred method. However, I did have to conduct one interview via Skype, which was a definite limitation as well. Because of the poor connection, I was unable to understand a lot of what the interviewee was saying. Eventually, we spoke by phone, which worked much better. I would suggest phone calls rather than Skype sessions to any future researchers.

Finally, I should take a moment to reflect on my own positionality as well. I am a white woman from a fairly privileged background. I often use the terms “liberal” and “progressive” to describe my own belief system and the political atmosphere in which I was raised. However, those terms do not necessarily have a universal meaning, and I had to be very careful when interviewing not to use them without some kind of definition. Furthermore, I entered this study with certain conceptions of masculinity and the ways in which men could be involved in feminism, conceptions that my interviewees ultimately forced me to question.

Despite these limitations, I believe that this study does shed some light on the experiences of men associated with feminism living in Amsterdam and the surrounding areas. Future researchers, however, could certainly expand upon this research to make it more focused.

## Methodology

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In order to understand the relationship between men and feminism in Amsterdam, I conducted interviews with various men aligned with feminism in some capacity. Some were activists, some were writers, and others were students. All of them had been living in the Amsterdam area for at least 10 years. Several of the participants were not born and did not grow up in the Netherlands, which added another layer of nuance to the research and analysis process. Many of the interviewees were members of a group concerned with male emancipation which is run by my advisor, Jens Van Tricht. I recruited these men for participation through a recruitment email which was disseminated by Jens. I also reached out to some of the men who spoke at the masculinities panel held at SIT in April. At first, I had specifically hoped to speak with men who self-identified as feminists. However, after interviewing several of my participants, I found that the label did not matter as much as the behavior they exhibited. So, while most of my interviewees did not identify as feminists, they still enacted a feminist ideology in various capacities.

The interviews were held in private homes and cafes throughout the city. One interview was conducted via Skype. They typically lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Participants were asked a series of questions about their conceptions of masculinity, their relationship to feminism, and the ways in which they negotiated masculinity with feminism. I started by asking participants about their childhood, their family structure, values held by their family, and the messages they were given about how to behave or perform their role as a boy. In order to gain context about their relationship with feminism, I asked about their level of education, their professional career, and their background in activism, if applicable. Next, I asked them about their conceptions of masculinity, so as to understand if there was a relationship between enacting masculinity in a certain manner and adopting feminist ideals. What did it mean for them to be men, personally? Did they ever feel that their masculinity was particularly important or problematic in given situations? I also asked them about feminism. What were their first experiences with feminism? How did they initially feel about the concept? Were there any times in their lives when feminism was particularly important or influential? Did their peers ever have misconceptions about feminism? I asked them to define feminism in their own words. I thought this was especially important so that I knew how to frame their opinions and

experiences. Finally, I asked them how feminism played a role in their lives. Did they identify as feminists, or is feminism just an ideology with which they agree?

The end of the interview consisted of a series of questions on the relationship between men and feminism. I asked them to describe how a man enacting feminism should act. How should they embody feminism in their daily lives? To conclude the interview, I asked interviewees if they had any difficulties negotiating two seemingly contrasting aspects of their identity. The series of questions allowed the men to talk about their own experiences rather than their opinions, which I felt was very important for this kind of research. I wanted to know how these men understood feminism, how they enacted it in their daily lives, and if they ever encountered any difficulties being male feminists, or men who supported the feminist movement.

In terms of ethical considerations, I believe that I took all of the precautionary measures. All interviewees signed an informed consent form (see appendix) and were specifically asked if they preferred a pseudonym or their real first names. I did not use last names at all during this study. I made sure to inform interviewees that they did not have to answer any questions which made them feel uncomfortable. In order to curb some of my own biases, I reflected and received feedback on my interview questions prior to my first interview. Overall, I strived to create an environment in which my interviewees felt comfortable. I believe I was successful in this endeavor, as my interviewees shared very intimate details of their experiences with me.

Through these open-ended interviews, I was able to garner the extent to which my participants felt the need to negotiate their masculinity and their feminist ideology. The interview was structured so that I could retrieve the information necessary, but still allowed my interviewees to discuss experiences which fell outside the realm of my research question. This additional information provided context for the experiences of my participants. Through the transcription and analyses of all of the interviews, I was able to gain an understanding of the negotiation between masculinity and feminism in various contexts.

## Literature Review

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### Masculinity

In order to understand the negotiation of masculinity and feminist ideals, it is necessary to examine the common conceptions and depictions of masculinity in mainstream culture. The term “hegemonic masculinity” encompasses the common notions of what it is to be a man in Western countries such as the Netherlands. Hegemony itself is the use of power and domination to uphold a particular set of ideals for a population. Hegemony persuades a population of people to act a certain way, and this persuasion is perpetuated by the media and other social institutions. These practices are so engrained into a culture that they start to appear natural or ordinary. Furthermore, those who choose not to conform to hegemonic values are, in some way, punished by the system in place (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645).

From a young age, most boys are conditioned to understand how they should act in their roles as males. There are particular behaviors associated with being an “authentic” man which should be embraced, and conversely, certain behaviors which should be avoided at all costs. Often, these ‘masculine’ behaviors are at odds with typical feminist ideologies. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic provide a fairly accurate portrayal of the stereotypes associated with hegemonic masculinity. The ideal man, they write, “...is forceful, militaristic, hyper-competitive, risk-taking, not particularly interested in culture and the arts, protective of his woman, heedless of nature, and so on. And in many families, boys are conditioned actually to behave that way” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995, p. 211). Masculine values are also figured in opposition to feminine ones, so that being masculine means that one cannot enact “female” behaviors, such as emotionality or dependence (Bird, 1996, p. 125). While men may or may not identify with these behaviors, they are encouraged to do so, both directly and indirectly, through societal, cultural, and sometimes familial expectations.

Sharon Bird conducted research on the influence of homosocial interactions and relationships on ideals and conceptions of masculinity. Her analysis highlights the danger of neglecting to problematize hegemonic masculinity. Instead, there should be alternative ways to perform masculinity which should be accepted and legitimated. When men, because of the pressures of societal expectations, presume that hegemonic masculinity is the only acceptable performance of masculinity, they reinforce the norms and suppress alternative meanings that

could create a foundation for “the subversion of the existing hegemony” (Bird, 1996, p. 122). Particularly, hegemonic ideals are prevalent in homosocial interactions among men, as this process of socialization between men is critical to men’s understanding and maintenance of gender norms and the masculine identity (Bird, 1996, p. 122).

Bird conducted in-depth interviews with 8 men about their experiences with hegemonic masculinity, particularly with regard to group dynamics and socialization with members of the same sex. She found that homosocial interactions were likely to influence one’s conception of masculinity. Many of my interviewees discussed a similar phenomenon; that the presence of other males could hinder their abilities to fully express their feminist ideologies. Same-sex interactions are one of the most influential ways in which men are socialized into their genders and learn the desirable qualities of being a man. If a man does not act in a manner that is deemed acceptable by his social group, he quickly learns to repress this behavior, or face the consequences, such as ostracization or humiliation by his peers.

Because traditional or hegemonic masculinity is viewed in such a negative light, men could also feel the need to repress those traits that are “traditionally masculine.” This can lead to the development and enactment of an alternative form of masculinity, which seems to relinquish all of the traits of hegemonic masculinity. In his article, *All Men Are Pigs*, Sasha Sanders questions the validity of simplifying masculinities into two distinct categories in this way. He writes,

The new masculinity seems almost reactionary, so that the two become polar opposites: traditional masculinity required that a man proved himself to be a man; new masculinity seems to require that a man proves himself not a man (in the 'traditional' sense). The traditional man is bad and evil; the new man needs to be good and virtuous (Sanders, 1996, p. 117).

Expecting or teaching men to enact a masculinity which is completely opposite of hegemonic masculinity can be problematic as well, because it assumes that all aspects of hegemonic masculinity are negative. Furthermore, it relegates the experience and behavior of men to a particular realm and does not allow for freedom of expression. This dichotomous manner of thinking creates a new binary which can be just as harmful to men as the current hegemonic form of masculinity. There seems to be an imbalance with regard to the masculine and the feminist identity, a phenomenon which I hope to uncover in my interview analysis.

When discussing feminism, it is important to understand that there is a structural hierarchy of masculinities, as discussed by Connell in *Masculinities*. There are relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination within the category of masculinity (Connell, 1995, p. 37). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is only a relational term and occupies a position that is always contestable. Connell goes on to describe three other relations between masculinities, which aid in the understanding of the experiences and narratives of my interviewees as well.

The first relationship between masculinities is one of subordination. In this scenario, one embodiment of masculinity is clearly preferred over another. For example, homosexuality is figured as subordinate to heterosexuality and those who identify as homosexual are figured as less masculine than straight men.

The second relationship is that of complicity. This describes the experience of men who may not fit all of the criteria of hegemonic masculinity, but who gain privilege from its power anyway. Men who choose not to relinquish their privileges or who do not use them to change the oppressive system of hierarchy are complicit in the practice of hegemony. This is not to say that men complicit with hegemony are evil or unreasonable, rather they are simply influenced by the social systems which have privileged them.

Finally, there is the relationship of marginalization. Marginalization, Connell writes, is “always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group,” (Connell, 1995, p. 81) meaning that members of the marginalized group may only gain the social acceptance that the hegemony authorizes them to have. Marginalization is especially relevant in terms of differences in race.

An understanding of masculinity and the various facets of masculinity is crucial to understanding the experiences and narratives of the participants in this study. Next, I will discuss the literature regarding men in feminism.

### **Men in Feminism**

There has been a lot written about men and their sometimes tenuous relationship with feminism. The question that remains is how exactly should men be involved with feminism? What does that look like? There are varying approaches and opinions as to how and if men should be involved in feminism. There are some theorists and writers who believe that men should be actively involved with issues of gender equality, and others who believe that men



should allow females to have the space and the opportunity to have their voices heard. There is a spectrum of involvement which I will attempt to include here. This spectrum is also representative of the views various men that I interviewed.

The first reason why men are perceived as a threat to feminism is because it is believed that men have something to lose if feminism and feminist policies are successful. As the dominant gender, men have considerable privileges in the current construction of our society. Although some men face injustices because of their class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or age, all men are privileged “vis-à-vis women” (Kimmel 1998, p. 64).

In structures of inequality, interests are formed based on the groups who will stand to lose or gain privileges by changing or upholding the structure (Connell, 1995). In the instance of gender inequality, men are typically viewed as concerned with defending their privileges. This is a concept which some of my interviewees brought up as well. There is certainly a fear of losing privileges among those who are benefitting from the current system. However, this analysis of men within the feminist movement neglects to account for men who are not at all privileged in the current system. Men who belong to marginalized or subordinate groups are also harmed. This also neglects to account for men who morally disagree with the hierarchical system in place and who are willing to relinquish their privileges for a more just system. Regardless, this is one of the barriers to including men in feminist activism.

It is important to note that *hegemonic* masculinity in particular is perceived as at odds with feminism. Of course there are men who are not representative of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, these representations of masculinity and manhood are engrained in Western society and thought to be typical of most males. The reason that hegemonic masculinity could be seen as odds with feminist ideals is because a crucial characteristic of hegemonic masculinity is that women exist as sex objects for men. Women provide men with sexual validation and men compete with each other for the validation of women (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645). While feminism is focused on deconstructing the objectification of women and the domination of women by men, hegemonic masculinity insists on perpetuating these norms.

While not all men necessarily identify or agree with hegemonic masculinity, their status as men automatically pits them as “anti-feminist” in some views. Tom Digby echoes this point in his anthology, *Men Doing Feminism*. In our current construction of the male/female dichotomy, the hegemonic male identity is strictly opposed to feminist principles and ideologies. From a

young age, men are socialized into identities and behaviors which are opposed or hostile to feminism. Manhood is figured in opposition to womanhood, and as long as this process continues, it is difficult for some to imagine any man being a feminist (Digby, 1998, p. 2). Until the limited definitions and conceptions of manhood are re-visited, reimagined, and revised, feminist men will likely be perceived as a paradox.

Whether or not men should or can be involved in feminism is also dependent on one's personal understanding of feminism. For some, feminism is an individual source of empowerment for women; therefore men do not have a place in feminist conversations or the space to have opinions about feminist policies. Feminism, in this view, is also dependent on one's individual experiences. If a person has not had particular experiences as a woman, they cannot consider themselves a feminist. In his article, *How Feminism Made a Man Out of Me*, Patrick Hopkins describes his experiences as a male in feminist circles. He was, in some ways, rejected from the feminist community because he could not identify with the experiences of women. He writes, "I was...told I could not be considered a *feminist*, but only a *profeminist man* because feminism required that one have women's experiences—something that presumably no man could" (Hopkins, 1998, p. 39). If feminism is only viewed as an ideology which can be adopted by those with particular experiences, then it follows that men cannot be feminists themselves, only supporters of the movement.

American sociologist Michael Kimmel writes extensively about gender relations, gender inequality, and masculinity. Unlike the standpoint I discussed above, Kimmel does see the possibility of men enacting feminism. He views men not as a threat but as a potential source of support for feminism. However, he does not view men as the primary leaders of the movement nor its most significant members. Men are a necessary part of feminism, but not the central or most significant part (Kimmel, 1998, p. 67). Kimmel envisions men as having a role to play in the feminist movement, albeit not the main role. Feminism is about and should be focused on women, but Kimmel asserts that there is also a place for men to act as its supporters. This is a sentiment with which Stephen Heath agrees. Men can be involved in feminism, as it is a socio-political reality. He writes that women are not feminists simply because of their gender; rather, feminism is a movement with which a woman can choose to identify. If a man does want to be involved in feminism, he must realize that there is a certain degree of exclusion that he will face, as feminism is a matter for women, and it is women who should determine the necessary

changes. Men are always in a position “which brings with it all the implications of domination and appropriation, everything precisely that is being challenged, that has to be altered” (Heath 1987). In short, men can be involved in feminism, but they must be aware of their own privileges in order to do so.

In their article, *Feminisme is Ook een Mannenzaak*, authors Rutters and van Dam describe the importance of male feminists specifically in the Dutch context. They write that without the active participation and support of men, a gender equitable society will never exist. They discuss the importance of male participation in feminism, but are quick to acknowledge that men should not feel that they need to speak on behalf of women. Instead, individual men should question their own role in society and the potential ways in which they are complicit in the system of gender inequality. This article, written by Dutch men, suggests that the work of feminism is not finished in the Netherlands and that more men need to be involved, in some way, in the feminist movement. I think this piece also highlights an important concept: that this work cannot be done without the cooperation of men. While women should certainly be the main voices present in feminist debates, men need to be included in the conversation in order to achieve justice.

Being a feminist man also comes with challenges. Kimmel discusses the discomfort that men may face in attempting to be supporters of feminism. He writes that men should be supporters of feminism and that they should do so in front of other men. They should support feminism despite their fears of rejection, of the reactions of men, and of losing their masculinity (Kimmel, 1998, p. 68). In Kimmel’s analysis, men will face difficulty in negotiating their masculinity, their relationship to other men, and their association with feminism. This theme certainly arose in my interviews as well. In order to be true supporters of feminism, men have to change the ways in which they interact with not only women, but with other men. Simply put, men cannot perform most aspects of hegemonic masculinity and support feminism, hence the art of negotiation. I will discuss this process of negotiation further in the analysis section.

Other sources also recognize and highlight the difficulties which men who choose to support or identify with feminism face. In his essay, *Male Feminism as Oxymoron*, David J. Kahane explains that men who are aware of and support feminism must

...maintain an awareness of the extent to which one acts, feels, and theorizes with a power-laden gender; this means constantly reminding oneself, and being reminded, of

specifics of one's patriarchal tendencies and their pernicious consequences for women, while also struggling to change these (Kahane, 1998 p. 231-32).

Certainly, being a male feminist takes great strength and motivation. As the dominant gender, men must come to terms with the many privileges afforded to them in our current system of hierarchy and oppression. There must be a constant sense of awareness and willingness to acknowledge one's privilege and positionality. The difficulty of this process varies from individual to individual, which was apparent in my interviews as well. Some men had trouble speaking up in front of their peers, while others took pride in confronting other men about their inappropriate behavior.

Just as the literature demonstrates, there are various degrees to which men can be involved in feminism, a spectrum which I will discuss further in my interview analysis. I will also discuss the role of hegemonic masculinity and homosocial interactions in the lives of men who are aligned with feminism.

## Interviewee Biographies

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### Hans

64 year old Hans was born in Indonesia and lived there until he was three years old, at which time he moved back to the Netherlands with his parents. His parents both worked full-time jobs, his father as a geologist and his mother as a general practitioner. Hans studied medicine at the and later became a general practitioner. He most strongly identified with the term “emancipation,” which, he said “means that the inequality in power diminishes” (H.F., personal communication, April 15, 2014). During his early career as a general practitioner, Hans, along with some of the nurse practitioners in his office, started emancipation groups for the empowerment of women with young children. He has also written a book about his experiences and theoretical notions of emancipation, particularly with regard to gender. Overall, Hans is a very knowledgeable and experienced man in terms of emancipation and the empowerment of others. Hans chooses not to identify as a feminist. Rather, he prefers the term “emancipated man.”

### Diego

Diego is a 30 year old anthropology student. He moved to the Netherlands ten years ago. Born in Curacao, Diego was raised by a single mother. His mother was active in the women’s rights movement in Curacao, as she was a policy-maker who worked specifically on the cases of single mothers. Diego recalled that she always instilled in him “a healthy respect for women” (D.B., personal communication, April 24, 2014). Diego noted that Curacao is a very patriarchal society with defined gender roles. Despite growing up in such a patriarchal environment, Diego said he never adopted these values himself. He remembered that teachers and authority figures would often correct behaviors that they found to be ‘feminine,’ but that his mother was very open to alternative ways of performing one’s masculinity. Diego does identify as a feminist.

### Rohit

49 year old Rohit is of Indian descent. He grew up for a part of his life in Uganda, but moved to the Netherlands in 1973. During his childhood, Rohit was exposed to very strict gender roles. Despite these gender roles, Rohit himself never felt that he could place himself within the established categories. Rohit identifies as gay, and says that he recognized same-sex desire from

a young age. Today, Rohit performs freelance work for organizations interested in diversity training and programming. He has also done programming for juvenile delinquents in the Netherlands as well. Despite his clear alignment with feminist ideologies, Rohit does not identify as a feminist.

### Kyle

Kyle is a 26 year old Applied Psychology student. He grew up in a small town near Utrecht and recalled that it was a very safe environment in which to grow up. He said that his parents were very supportive of his various interests as a child (which included gymnastics, soccer, and ice skating) and that his parents taught him the value of hard work as well. Kyle works with teenage boys who have autism, a role that he considers very important in his life. He is involved with a group in Amsterdam focused on men's emancipation and also devotes some of his time to an organization that gives training to fathers of Moroccan and Turkish background. He cited the importance of equality throughout society, not just between genders. Kyle did not identify as a feminist, according to his own definition. However, he said that perhaps not everyone would label him as a feminist if they had different definitions of feminism.

### Egbert

35 year old Egbert was born in Curacao, but moved to the Netherlands when he was 4 years old. Egbert recalled a very equal situation in his home when he was growing up. Although his mother was a stay-at-home mom, both his mother and father participated in household chores. The children were also involved in housework as well. As a gay man, Egbert cited the similarities in oppression between women and gay men. His feminist consciousness began early when he began to realize the gendered portrayals of men and women on TV and did not see his own desire represented. Egbert does not self-identify as a feminist, although he is deeply influenced by black feminism and much of his writing could be categorized as feminist in nature.

### Arne

Arne is a 40 year old father of two young boys. He was born in Suriname but raised in the Netherlands by Dutch parents. Arne said that his parents were very aware of gender issues. His mother founded the feminist studies department at the university in their city, where she also

taught as a professor. His father worked part-time so that he could stay with his children once per week, a new practice at the time. Arne studied sociology, mathematics, and gender studies at UvA beginning in 1994 and works as a researcher on the health care system in the Netherlands. Arne identified as a feminist, but also said that he feels he is more interested in male roles in society.

#### Marten

Marten is a 59 year old man who was born in Friesland. Marten identifies as gay and has been involved in the gay community of Amsterdam in the past. He has a degree in social work and is a Gestalt therapist. Marten is interested in broader issues of social justice, which is why he does not identify as a feminist. He believes that gender inequality is just one of many issues currently plaguing our society. Marten performs training sessions on gender diversity and sexuality diversity for various organizations, such as prisons.

## Analysis

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The following section explores the experiences and opinions of seven different men living in Amsterdam who align themselves with feminist ideologies in some way. I asked the men about their experiences with feminism, masculinity, and the process of negotiating those two aspects of their identities. Each of them offered a slightly different perspective as to how and if men should be involved with feminism, which represents a spectrum of beliefs surrounding the seemingly tenuous relationship between masculinity and feminism. I believe that it is incredibly important to explore both positionality (meaning the interplay of one's social identity markers) and intersectionality when discussing the experiences of these men, as there are a myriad of possible ways of enacting feminism and masculinity. As there are only seven interviewees included here, I am by no means suggesting that these experiences are completely representative of men living in the Netherlands. I question whether that could ever be possible. However, I do think that despite the limitations, these narratives are valuable in demonstrating the potential ways in which men can be involved within the feminist realm.

There are several prominent themes which I found important to examine in my analysis. I will begin by discussing the respondents' attitudes toward hegemonic masculinity, particularly with regard to the pressure of upholding such values. Next I will discuss the importance of homosocial interactions as a platform for feminism. Finally, I will uncover some of the reasons why men choose not to use the feminist label to identify themselves. The first is a perceived lack of intersectionality associated with the label. The second is the belief that a label should be reserved for those with personal experience with oppression. While there were many other themes and narratives which the men spoke about, these themes were the most prominent throughout the research process.

### Pressure to Uphold Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is a difficult concept to escape, even for men who are actively involved in gender equality and feminist activism. Hegemonic masculinity demands that men are independent, especially with regard to financial stability (Bird 1996). Historically, in Western culture, men are expected to be the primary breadwinners and provide financial relief to the household. This was true throughout my interviews as well. Many of the men expressed the



pressure to perform their traditional masculine role in various scenarios and capacities despite their belief in gender equality.

During my interview with Hans, he spoke about the importance of his roles as both a father and a husband. It became clear to me throughout the interview that Hans' experiences in a family environment had influenced his conceptions of masculinity. I asked Hans to describe in his own words what it is to be a man. Hans recalled an earlier part of his life, when he was just beginning to work and raise a family. He said,

...to be a man, meant when I started with work that I felt more responsible to earn money. But my wife also, had also a profession, she's a psychotherapist, we made clear, we agreed in both taking responsibility in making money. But I felt nevertheless, more responsible... (H.F., personal communication, April 15, 2014).

I never asked Hans exactly *why* he felt more responsible to make money and provide financially for his family, but I suspect the pressure to uphold traditional, hegemonic values of masculinity is at play here. Hans is a well-educated man who believes strongly in notions of equality and justice between the sexes, yet he also felt that he had a greater responsibility within the household to provide financially. Although his wife was well-established in her profession and was able to earn a decent living, Hans equated his masculinity with the ability to earn a proper living and felt the pressure to do so in order to perform his masculinity in an acceptable manner.

However, Hans also expressed his displeasure at unconsciously desiring to uphold these traditions of masculinity as well. With respect to feeling more financially responsible, Hans said that he felt

... it was, also possible to diminish it. I was the first in the health center that went to work part-time. So I could stay one day a week with our child. I was the first. But after my first step more colleagues followed. And we agreed in doing this, my wife and I. But nevertheless... (H.F., personal communication, April 15, 2014).

Perhaps Hans' awareness of gender equality and feminist activism influenced him to approach his role within his family more equally. He opted to work part-time, though none of his male colleagues were doing the same, in order to spend time with his son. Despite the agreement that he and his wife made, however, Hans indicated that the pressure to enact hegemonic masculinity in terms of financial gain still remained. The term "nevertheless" suggests that this pressure was something that he often struggled with. In Hans' experience, financial responsibility was an

aspect of the “normative” definition of masculinity and manhood, (Connell 1995) a responsibility that he must enact in order to consider himself a man.

Hans was not alone in feeling the pressures of societal expectations. Kyle, 26, expressed his desire to raise a family in the future. He talked about wanting to be financially independent, although he would not be opposed to his partner contributing to the household as well. He said that right now he is working hard to gain experience so that he can have a well-paying job someday because

I want to be able to raise a family and to support, to buy a house and stuff. So that’s a bit, I think maybe a bit old-fashioned, and it doesn’t per se have to be me only to support the family, it can be the woman as well, but if the woman is not able, at least I want to be able, just in case. And for me that’s very important because I want to be able to have a family later on. I am very sure about that (K.D., personal communication, April 17, 2014).

Although Kyle did acknowledge the role that a woman could play in the financial responsibilities, it is clear that Kyle is speaking from the premise of hegemonic masculinity, as there is an expectation that at the very least, men will be financially stable and independent (Donaldson 1993). However, there is an attempt here to negotiate hegemonic values with a feminist or egalitarian lens as well. It is interesting to note that Kyle himself positions his outlook as “old-fashioned,” or more in line with traditional Western conceptions of men as breadwinners. This suggests that there is still some kind of pressure to uphold or align with more traditional values in Dutch society, despite the discourse on the completion of emancipation prominent in the Netherlands.

A third interviewee, Marten, does not have children or a partner, but still expressed the criticism he faces by others in his profession for not earning enough money. There is pressure, in his experience, to not only be financially stable, but to be wealthy. This, he says, embodies the way that society has conceived of manhood and masculinity. He says,

... I should be much more successful in my profession, meaning I should earn much more money because I’m, in my profession, I’m quite at a high level. I wrote books and stuff like that. I’ve given lectures. So people always think ‘but you can do much more, why don’t you have a big house and a car?’ And those are also things I think about masculinity. Because I don’t think people would say that so quickly to women. But because I’m a man and I’m successful I also should be in a car and I should have my own house and I should... so I think that’s also the things about how to be a man (M.B., personal communication, April 22, 2014).

Marten's experience highlights the way that 'traditional' gender roles and norms continue to be upheld in Dutch society. Marten does not believe that a woman in his position would face the same social pressure, and associates the pressure to be successful and wealthy with masculinity, an association more interviewees made. In Marten's experience, he faces criticism for not being successful "enough," that is, that there is always pressure to do or be more.

It is important to note that the three interviewees mentioned above were white men living in a Western society. Each of them is presumably middle-class men, so their association of financial independence and stability with masculinity is certainly affected by their race and class position in society as well. Perhaps men with different racial, cultural, or financial backgrounds would face different pressures, or perhaps those pressures would manifest themselves in different ways. This would be an interesting focus for another study on masculinity and feminism.

Another aspect of hegemonic masculinity is emotional detachment, as masculinity is dependent on figuring femininity as the other (Bird 1996). Females are seen as emotional creatures, while males are seen as rational. Emotional detachment also manifests as independence, and this pressure to be independent does not necessarily refer to financial independence as I discussed above. For instance, Arne discussed the discomfort he faces when he is made to feel dependent on others for knowledge or information. He said

...I still think it's difficult for me to acknowledge not knowing stuff. Not being able to solve things, handle things on my own. Being dependent or unknowing...not having any answers. And that's something that I think has very much to do with what masculinity is about in our society today. Insecurity or weakness is not really something that's part of that image. I haven't really found a solution for that. So it's still, in my relationship with women, and my relationship with other men...it's not always easy to act differently or to know what it should be. (A.V., personal communication, April 29, 2014).

Arne describes the difficulties he faces in not being completely independent. He acknowledges that this is a prominent expectation of men in Western society. I find it interesting that Arne problematizes his behavior, rather than accepting this behavior as typically male. Arne views this as a problem or limitation of his performance of masculinity and desires a solution. Arne also notes that his difficulty with dependence affects both his relationships with women and his relationships with other men. I think Arne's narrative also suggests that there is a fear of being seen as feminine by other men, as dependence is traditionally viewed as female or feminine in some way (Bird 1996). Arne's narrative demonstrates part of the negotiation that occurs between feminism and enacting masculinity. While he does face some pressure to emotionally detach, he

can recognize that this is a limitation of Western traditionally-understood masculinity and can then seek a solution.

Kyle also experienced the pressure to be emotionally detached, particularly with regards to his romantic life. As a straight man, he felt pressure from his girlfriends to act in a traditionally-masculine way. They were often surprised when Kyle would express the desire to discuss emotions, feelings, or deep thoughts, which suggests that conceptualizations of hegemonic manhood and masculinity are held by females as well. As a psychologist, Kyle expressed that it is not difficult for him to be able to talk about his emotions. However, tension surmounts in his relationships when his partners are not as comfortable discussing their emotions. He said,

...then a lot of times, the tension there is that a lot of people think it should be the other way around. That the woman is more like the person who wants to talk and who wants to exchange feelings and thoughts and emotions, and the guys... don't talk too much about these emotions. And that's sometimes hard because when I want to talk about my emotions, the girls react very differently. I mean I had ex-girlfriends who were dealing with it very well, but there were also girls who couldn't understand. Because they were probably, I don't know, but I think they were used to a very different kind of reaction or different kind of guys maybe, I don't know (K.D., personal communication, April 17, 2014).

Kyle expresses the limiting nature of concrete gender roles, which are related to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity as well. In his experience, Kyle is expected, by the women he enters into relationships with, to perform more traditional masculinity by suppressing his feelings and emotions. However, Kyle chooses to resist the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and enact the behaviors with which he is most comfortable, a resistance which I would argue is a form of negotiating his feminist ideologies with the social pressures to conform to hegemonic masculinity. Kyle's career as a psychologist also plays a role in this scenario as well. He is interested in issues of gender equality, but he is also conditioned as a psychologist to think critically about emotions. Perhaps his career and education have influenced his interest in discussing emotions rather than his identification with feminism. Either way, he demonstrates a negotiation between the role he wants to perform and that which he is expected to perform.

Overall, most of my interviewees acknowledged the pressures to uphold Western hegemonic masculinity in their daily lives. This pressure came from a variety of sources: internal expectations, familial expectations, or the expectations of peers or colleagues. Each of these

men, however, recognized the restrictive nature of these roles and negotiated their performance of masculinity in order to accommodate for their feminist ideologies. I do not know if their feminist ideologies were necessarily the cause of their negotiations, however, it is interesting to note that there was a correlation between an interest in feminism and gender equality and a recognition of the restrictions of hegemonic masculinity.

### Homosociality as a Platform for Feminism

Homosociality, or the non-sexual attractions and interactions between members of the same sex, is a crucial aspect of masculinity and the way that hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated in Western society. Homosociality promotes clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinity and non-hegemonic masculinities through the segregation of social groups (Bird 1996). Homosocial interactions also promote an individual's self-conceptualization of masculinity, as other males police each other and encourage one another to conform to hegemonic masculine behavior (Bird 1996). This is particularly important for men who do identify with feminism, as their feminism is generally challenged or unsupported by homosocial interactions with men who identify with hegemonic masculine values. Many of my interviewees spoke about their experiences in large groups of males who embodied hegemonic masculine behaviors, including the sexual objectification of women (Bird 1996). Some interviewees expressed the way that they negotiated their feminist ideals with the pressures by their peers to engage in hegemonic masculine behavior. These narratives represent one way in which men can use the existing structures of hegemonic masculinity to combat sexist or anti-feminist messages in their homosocial interactions.

In my interview with Diego, I asked him specifically about what it meant for him to be a man. He spoke at length about his experiences as a male student in the anthropology department at his university. Here, he said, a lot of the male students in his class embody hegemonic masculinity ideals, such as competitiveness and the objectification of women (Bird 1996). Since Diego has become aware of gender equality, he finds it

harder to get along with other men. I find I have a hard time getting along with other men. I have far more female friends now as well because I find that they expect less performed masculinity from me. Yeah, like an alpha-male, he-man sort of thing. And that's tiresome to me. I don't enjoy that. It really really really really gets under my skin when people behave that way and expect me to reciprocate that behavior. Just to go along with that same behavior (D.B., personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Diego's classmates demonstrate a common embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. In homosocial interactions, it is common for men to become competitive with each other, (Bird 1996) a concept brought to light by the terms "alpha-male" and "he-man" that Diego uses to describe his interactions with other men. By refusing to engage in these types of behaviors with his peers, he challenges the Western or perhaps Dutch societal construction of hegemonic masculinity and presents an alternative masculinity, something that he enjoys. Diego went on to say that when he does not

reciprocate that behavior or at least mirror or respond in the same general type of behavior...it throws them. It throws them off. Which is actually kind of fun. You can play games with that. It's really fun to see somebody just deflate. Because I do look a certain way and I'm fairly large, so I don't know why, but a lot of younger guys especially, there's only younger guys in my class, gravitate towards me because I have more experience and whatever. And it's so much fun to see them just deflate and not, just by not responding in the expected manner. I really enjoy that (D.B., personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Hegemonic masculinity is not something incontestable; rather, it is a concept which can be changed via social processes, when agencies of socialization create new expectations for masculinity (Connell 1995). In Diego's narrative, he presents one way in which to start creating new expectations for masculinity, perhaps a kind of masculinity which is embedded in feminist ideology. Through homosocial interactions, men are socialized into their masculinity, so by changing the ways in which men interact with and police each other, the definition and expectations for masculinity can change as well. Diego notes that his physical appearance plays a role in his ability to challenge normative ideals of masculinity. Because he physically embodies the essence of the ideal male, (he uses the term 'rather large') he is able to challenge the conceptualizations of his peers.

When I asked Diego how men can and should be involved in feminism, he acknowledged that men should continue to police each other:

I think we (men, EC) are the ones who can do it best. I mean you change from the inside-out. You don't change from the outside-in, usually. Obviously women shouldn't stop calling men out on their bullshit, but it makes a far bigger impact if you do it yourself. If another man does it towards you. It makes a much much much bigger impact. It's really, if only because men are held in higher regard, it makes a bigger impact. If only because you're conditioned to see men as more of an authority figure. If only for that, really, it should be that men change each other first. I think once you change each other, your behavior towards women automatically goes with it...Men change other men first. And

the behavior towards women comes with it (D.B., personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Diego expressed that men should use homosociality to widen the definition of masculinity. He noted that it was important for women to continue policing men as well, but that it has a bigger impact on the consciences of men when other men comment on their behavior. I suspect this is because it is other men who socialize men into their genders and police their behavior from a very young age.

Larry May elaborates on this phenomenon in his essay, *A Progressive Male Standpoint*. He writes,

"It is a regrettable fact that men generally take other men more seriously than they take women. But the regrettable nature of such a state of affairs can be overcome in some cases if the male voice of authority is used as an effective critical tool" (May, 1998, p. 348-9).

Both Diego and May highlight one of the ways in which men can enact feminism in their daily lives. By policing the behavior of other men to change the limited definition of hegemonic masculinity, men can help other men create and feel comfortable with alternative masculinities.

It is important to note that Diego's experience is clearly influenced by his identity. Diego is a straight, cis-gendered male, so in that way, he represents the "ideal" male in terms of hegemony. If Diego had been more diverse in terms of gender presentation or sexual orientation, his experiences certainly would have been different. In any case, this narrative represents yet another way in which men can enact feminism in their daily lives and interactions, particularly with members of the same sex.

Other interviewees expressed the importance of homosocial interactions in redefining gender norms as well. Egbert enacts "feminist homosociality" in his daily life, as he said

So I've have a lot of conversations with my male friends about, not specifically about feminism, but about how they engage with women in their relationships ... So I think that's how men can be involved in feminism. So not be part of feminist spaces but to kind of call men out on their behavior when they are being sexist (E.M., personal communication, April 16, 2014)

Egbert acknowledges that there must be a particular space for women within feminism, and that men need to do work within their own circle of male acquaintances and friends. Again, this type of behavior and policing of men by men reflects the homosocial way in which men are taught about their masculinity and how to relate to it. It is interesting to note that Egbert does not speak

to his male friends specifically about feminism, but about their relationships with women. However, I think that by talking to men about how they engage and interact with women, Egbert is indirectly talking to them about feminist ideals. Egbert is able to embody a feminist ideology in his daily life simply through the way in which he speaks and interacts with his male friends and acquaintances. I think this narrative represents a powerful yet simple way in which men can enact feminism. However, I think there is still room for men to discuss the problematic ways in which men interact with one another, not just women, a concept which Diego discussed.

However, enacting feminist homosociality is not necessarily easy. Kyle said that he sometimes feels intimidated or uncomfortable speaking with groups of males about their sexist behavior. He recalled,

...when I'm in a group of a lot of guys, then a lot of times I get more shy or...then I have to explain myself, why am I behaving like that? Because in general I'm not that shy, I'm not, I can be quite confident. But in this moment I am not, so people ask me. And then I have to explain them that I do not like that behavior. But then they feel threatened or something and they get angry like...So then it's no use to explain yourself because also you feel like you're the one who's ruined the nice, atmosphere or something... (K.D., personal communication, April 17, 2014)

So while some interviewees felt quite comfortable, and even happy, policing the behavior of other men, others felt that it was not worth the conflict which often arose. Although Kyle did not necessarily police the men directly, his reaction to their behavior is one that indicates a problem with such behavior. Perhaps it is enough simply to remain quietly resistant. I think Kyle's experience is a common one among men, something that Michael Kimmel discusses in his article, *Who's Afraid of Men Doing Feminism?* He writes that men should be the foot soldiers of feminism, and "we must be so in front of other men, risking our own fears of rejection, our own membership in the club of masculinity, confronting our own fears of other men" (Kimmel, 1998, p. 68). It is not enough to simply believe in gender equality or feminism. Instead, men must risk the discomfort and fear of rejection in order to set an example for other men.

Rohit said that he has never been comfortable with the way that men in large groups act. He does not identify with the values or behaviors of hegemonic masculinity. As a way to counter the negative effects of hegemonic masculinity and the pressure that men feel, Rohit advocates for education of the younger generation, so as to introduce them to alternative ways of relating to their masculinity. He said,



We can do this... but we should do this with our own gender. And we are older, so we've been there and those guys are there. So we've got a role as a mentor, coach, whatever. Giving things to the next generation. New concept, progressive, equal looking, thinking, doing (R.V., personal communication, April 28, 2014).

Like Diego, Rohit believes that this change in masculinity comes from the inside-out, meaning that men need to teach other men about the limiting nature of masculinity. But for Rohit, the older generation has a responsibility to the younger generation to be the catalyst for this change. Rohit believes that because of common shared experiences among men, other men are best equipped to police and correct members of their own gender. Specifically, Rohit uses the term 'progressive,' a term I have purposefully avoided in the context of this analysis. However, I find it interesting that he uses a term with such powerful connotations in the Western context. There is an underlying assumption rooted in Rohit's narrative that equality between the sexes is progressive, something I find interesting to point out. Certainly, this is not a universal belief. Perhaps Rohit's interest and background in gender diversity training has led him to this association. Either way, I believe that Rohit's experience represents yet another way of negotiating masculinity and feminism. By attempting to instill his own beliefs about masculinity into a younger generation of men, Rohit embodies his beliefs in feminism and gender equality.

Homosocial interactions are a crucial way in which boys and men are socialized into their gender, as they learn what is and is not accepted within the community of men. While this practice can serve to reinforce traditional gender roles and practices of hegemonic masculinity, my interviewees also used homosocial interactions to resist and challenge hegemonic masculinity and advocate for feminism. Though my interviewees did acknowledge the difficult nature of doing so, as they sometimes faced criticism or rejection, they also indicated its importance as well. The practice of homosocial interaction can occur between members of the same age group, or members of different generations, such as in Rohit's experience. The men that I interviewed found that they could (mostly) successfully negotiate their masculinity with feminism by using their homosocial interactions as a platform for rejecting hegemonic masculinity, a practice which represents one of the many instances of male involvement in feminism.

### The “F” Word: Problems with Adopting the Feminist Label

Though all of the men that I interviewed enacted feminism in their daily lives and stated that feminism is a guiding principle in their lives in some capacity, almost none of the men identified as feminists. I found this quite surprising, as I thought there would be a definite correlation between adopting a set of values and adopting the label which corresponds to that set of values. However, my interviewees had a host of reasons for not wanting to call themselves feminists. While there were other reasons as well, the two most prominent included a lack of intersectionality associated with the label and the label as being linked to personal experience. I will discuss them separately, so as to give equal attention to both.

#### Perceived Lack of Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to describe the various ways in which one’s identities intersect to form particular forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality is an approach to understanding feminism which asks one to consider race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, etc. when discussing or analyzing issues of injustice or even of privilege. Intersectionality is a crucial term in the field of gender studies, one that most people involved with or interested in feminism would understand. Although feminism has the potential to be intersectional, there are particular brands of feminism which tend not to have an understanding of intersectionality. Most of my interviewees were clear that they only supported an intersectional approach, but that even then, the feminist label was too restricting. Most of them preferred not to use the label because they did not feel that it represented their other interests in social justice.

For instance, Diego chose to identify as a feminist. However, he only did so

... For lack of a better term. Because like I said I think it’s far more than gender relations. (Feminism, EC) allows for far more than just gender relations. For example black feminism is a thing...I mean it’s ridiculous to have to say it’s black feminism, it’s ridiculous to have to add that to it. It’s supposed to already be inclusive. But apparently the word feminism isn’t enough to describe that, so they have to add a word to it (D.B., personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Diego’s narrative illustrates a common thought among most of my interviewees: that feminism is a set of tools which allows for the analysis and understanding of more than just gender relations. Specifically, Diego expressed the desire for a more inclusive term, as he did not necessarily feel that the term feminism included him. He addressed black feminism, the term he felt was most

inclusive, and therefore representative of his worldview. It is also important to examine Diego's positionality with respect to his need for inclusive thinking. As an immigrant to the Netherlands from Curacao, it follows that he would search for a brand of feminism which includes his own experiences within the patriarchy. While Diego may be privileged via his gender, he likely faced discrimination as a man of color living in a society dominated by white people.

Egbert had a similar mode of thinking about black feminism, and it is important to note that he, too, is originally from Curacao. He said,

I do align myself with feminism, but it's a specific brand of feminism, so it's black feminism. Because it takes race and gender into account. And it also takes into account that black men are also marginalized within white patriarchy (E.M., personal communication, April 16, 2014).

In Egbert's experience, black feminism is the only brand which includes the intersections between race and gender. Black feminism allows him to negotiate both his race and gender and recognize that he is often marginalized despite being a member of the dominant gender. Positionality is incredibly important to examine with regard to these kinds of questions, as one's personal experiences have influence on the ways in which they situate themselves within feminism. Both Diego and Egbert expressed the need to work within the framework of an inclusive brand of feminism.

Marten echoed similar sentiments as well. As a gay man, Marten also has experience with the intersections of one's identity. While he is privileged as a man, his sexual orientation likely causes him to face discrimination. Marten chose not to identify as a feminist

...[b]ecause for me, feminism is broader than just feminism. So you know... I would call myself a man who is very much into fighting for an inclusive society. And feminism is a part of it. Just like anti-racism and just like sexual diversity and stuff like that... I think feminism is one of the parts of inclusive society. Very important part. But I would not call myself a feminist. Just as I would not call myself an anti-racist or... I don't want to call myself even a gay activist, even though in my work I am... that makes me too one-part of myself (M.B., personal communication, April 22, 2014).

For Marten, there is a fear of making his identity too exclusive and one-dimensional. By identifying as a feminist, he would, in his understanding, have to give up the other aspects of his identity that contribute to his worldview. As someone who is passionate about issues of injustice and inequality, Marten does not feel that the feminist label encapsulates the entirety of his experience.

While feminism has the potential to be inclusive of various kinds of experiences, there was an understanding among my interviewees that feminism is generally not understood as inclusive of other forms of oppression. They aligned with a particular brand of feminism, black feminism, because they felt that it had the ability to encapsulate their intersectional identities and experiences. There was a conscious choice not to identify specifically as a feminist because the current connotation of the word is that it is only about issues of gender inequality.

#### Feminism Linked to Personal Experience

Personal experience has always been an important aspect of feminist thought, theory, and ideology. In the 1960's women's liberation movement, the rallying cry was that "the personal is political," (Hanisch 1969) meaning that personal issues, specifically issues which plagued women such as reproductive rights, were also deeply political. From this stance, it is often understood that one must have the necessary experience in order to identify with a label or movement. So, if men generally have less experience with the issues that plague women, then it naturally follows that they should not label themselves feminists, at least in one school of thought. Much of the literature touched upon this issue as well. Hopkins writes that he has been told by various women that he could not take on the label of feminism because it requires that one has female experiences (Hopkins, 1998, p. 39). May echoes this concept as well, writing that "if experience is intimately connected to understanding, than those who have not had a relevant experience will have to work harder to attain the understanding" (May, 1998, p. 338). This is not to say that one cannot gain an understanding, but that one must be guided by someone with the relevant experience. Heath writes that men's relationship to feminism "is also necessarily one of a certain exclusion—the point after all is that this is a matter *for women*, that it is their voices and actions that must determine the change and redefinition" (Heath 1987). Men can and should be excluded from feminism, according to Heath, because the movement should be by and for women. Like most of the literature states, my interviewees mostly felt that feminism was something that they could support, but not something with which they could completely identify.

Egbert stated that taking on the label of feminist felt appropriate. Although he believes in and supports feminist through his daily interactions with both men and women, he said

...I think certain labels are reserved for certain groups of people. And I don't want to claim feminist as a label because, it kind of annoys me when people claim a label just to align themselves with a group. So I'd rather just people judge me on my work. And if

they think that my work is feminist, then that's fine (E.M., personal communication, April 16, 2014).

Egbert does not necessarily state the need for personal experience in order to claim a label, but I suspect that is the framework under which he is operating, as he said that labels are “reserved for certain groups of people.” Egbert’s final statement suggests that one can enact feminist ideology through their behaviors while at the same time rejecting the actual label. He places a greater importance on the behavior or the work of an individual rather than on the label which they choose to align with. Someone should not appropriate a label without having the relevant experience to support the identification.

Rohit aligned with Egbert’s outlook on the importance of the label as well. While he believes in gender diversity and trains people in gender and sexuality diversity as part of his career, Rohit felt that the feminist label should be reserved for women, specifically. He said,

A girl or a woman can be a feminist. I can be pro-woman. Not anti-, or women are not threatening for me in any way. But feminist... I wouldn't call myself disabled. But I could say pro-disabled people. I think feminists can be... but it's my kind of thinking. Feminists can be women themselves who are front leaders, who come up for equal rights. Like the definition of feminism. And I can't be a feminist man, but I can be a supportive pro-women guy. I can be supportive in your cause. But that doesn't make me a feminist, I think. It doesn't ring a bell. No. It doesn't say anything to me for myself (R.V., personal communication, April 28, 2014).

In his narrative, Rohit makes a clear connection between the identification with a label and personal experience, as he states that only women can be feminists. Furthermore, he indicates that the feminist label is intimately tied to the body. There is an assumption here that most women have particular or universal experiences. He also describes the importance of women enacting the movement for change themselves, a statement echoed by Kimmel, who says that men are a necessary but not sufficient part of the feminist movement (Kimmel 1998). In his view, men should be supporters of the movement but the focus should be on women. According to Rohit, however, supporting a cause does not necessarily mean that one labels themselves accordingly. Rohit’s explanation also suggests that such a decision to identify as a feminist is very personal, as he says “it doesn't say anything to me for myself.” Certainly, there are men who choose to identify with the feminist label, but Rohit feels that personal experience is necessary in order to do so.

Arne, on the other hand, would call himself a feminist, but felt the need to qualify the definition in order to do so. For Arne, feminism is more about changing the existing gender structures and the expectations of men and women to perform in restrictive gender roles than it is about the female experience. He said that

...I have no problem with calling myself a feminist, but then more in a general way. I wouldn't say I actually speak for female; I don't have the female voice. That's not my position in this debate. But I understand their struggle and I understand their will, their need for change... I didn't feel I fit it in the definition of masculinity or the role of males in society, so for me, that's the reason I think about feminist theory and practice. And I changed it to a male version of it. Like I don't believe I could say something for women but I think men should think about their gender position and their reproduction of the male role for themselves. And that's my connection to feminism and in that sense it's not really feminism because it's not about the female part of it. But it's about gender structures (A.V., personal communication, April 29, 2014).

Arne outlines his version of feminism: that it is about the opportunity to change the oppressive systems of gender in the Western world. Particularly, Arne discusses the pressure to uphold hegemonic masculinity and his own insecurity with his masculinity. It is interesting however, that in the end; he does not consider this kind of work or thinking explicitly feminist because "it's not about the female part of it." This illustrates a clear example of equating feminism to women and needing the female voice and experience in order to align with the movement. However, Arne asserts that he uses feminist theory and practice in order to think about the issues which he does not think of as explicitly feminist in nature.

Nearly every interviewee I spoke with associated the feminist identity with female experience in some way or another. They were careful not to align with the identity so as not to attempt to speak on behalf of women. I believe that this is another way of negotiating one's masculinity or male identity with one's belief in feminism. These men felt that there should be a place for men within feminism, but that it should not overpower or distract from the voices of women. Choosing not to take on the label of feminism allowed these men to give women the necessary space and opportunity in which to have their voices heard. Despite not taking on the label, these men still enacted feminism in their daily lives and saw it as an important theory by which to analyze and understand various sorts of injustices.

## Conclusion

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The narratives of my participants were incredibly diverse because of their different cultural, ethnic, racial, educational, and class backgrounds. Furthermore, there was such a small sample of men that it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions. Despite the diversity in their experiences and the limited number of participants in this study, there are a few overarching messages which were prominently featured in my interviews and analysis. Embedded within the larger themes of hegemonic masculinity, homosociality, and the refusal of the feminist label, each of the interviewees found a way to negotiate their feminist beliefs with their male lives and bodies.

First, interviewees asserted that there was either internal or external pressure to perform hegemonic masculinity in some capacity. Hegemonic masculinity manifested itself as independence, either financial or emotional. Combatting the pressures to be financially independent, emotionally detached, breadwinners with their beliefs in gender equality was one way in which the men negotiated these two aspects of their identity. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that these ideals of hegemonic masculinity were inherently problematic or in conflict with feminist beliefs. Therefore, they had to be reimagined from a feminist lens. The interviewees' experiences with hegemonic masculinity suggest that despite an attempt to re-imagine the roles of men in Western society, that these ideals are strongly engrained into Western social practices.

Secondly, interviewees described the importance of homosociality with regard to feminism. Homosocial interactions are one of the most crucial ways in which boys and men are socialized into their gender. Through these interactions, they are taught the acceptable behaviors, thoughts, and actions of their gender. Interviewees' experiences were in line with the definition of homosociality as well. Interviewees cited a conflict between the ideals perpetuated by homosociality and the ideals aligned with their feminist ideologies. However, these men could negotiate their feminist principles within the realm of homosociality, a term I referred to as feminist homosociality. Many of the men cited that they often corrected their male peers and colleagues when they were being sexist or otherwise inappropriate. In some cases, this was an inter-generational phenomenon. Either way, participants recognized the importance of defending their feminist beliefs.

Finally, there were some common patterns in the reasons that men cited for not wanting to identify as a feminist despite closely aligning with the ideology. One reason for not wanting to use the term feminist was because there is a conception that the term excludes other important social injustices, such as racism or homophobia. Feminism was seen as exclusively referring to gender relations, and the men wanted to identify with a more inclusive term. The second reason for not choosing to identify as a feminist was because of the conception that the identity should be closely aligned with one's personal experience. Most of the men cited that only women can identify as feminists and that men could merely support the movement in an auxiliary capacity.

I think that this study, in spite of its limitations, sheds light on the experiences of men who identify and align with feminism in some capacity. Their stories demonstrate that although Western society has made great strides as far as gender equality and freedom of expression are concerned, there is still a distinct societal pressure for men to act in traditional or hegemonic roles of masculinity. They also highlight the importance of homosocial interactions in the formation and conceptualization of one's masculinity. This platform also proves to be an effective manner in which to educate other men about the importance of feminism. Finally, their stories uncover some of the reasons that men choose not to use the word "feminist" to describe themselves.

I believe that it is important that these men have a voice and a space in which to participate in the feminist realm, and I hope that this study has provided such a space. I think that their stories are useful in demonstrating the various ways in which men can be involved and aligned with feminism. As many of my interviewees said, it is a very personal relationship, so it is possible for any man to find his own space and voice within the movement. Finally, I think this study revealed some of the ways in which feminism has space to be more inclusive in many of different capacities. Without the voices, experiences, perspectives, and full participation of men, we as a Western society can never truly reach the goals which the feminist movement has created.



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## Appendix

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### **Informed Consent Form**

#### **Male Feminist Perspectives, Challenges and Difficulties**

#### **Emma Craig**

The purpose of this research is to examine the perspectives, challenges, and motivations of Dutch men who self-identify as feminists. I will ask participants about their own particular feminism and how that does or does not play a role in their conceptions of masculinity and manhood. The benefits of the study are twofold. First, participants will be given a chance to reflect on the ways in which feminism has influenced their lives, their ideologies, and their understanding of the self with regard to gender. I think that this study has broader implications as well. By examining the difficulties (or lack thereof) that male feminists face, I can begin to understand how to make the feminist movement more intersectional and more inclusive. While the scope of this study may not generalize to all male feminists, I think that it will begin to answer some major questions about inclusive feminism.

Subjects will be asked to describe their personal experiences with feminism as well as the ways in which feminist principles or ideologies have influenced their conceptions of masculinity. Interviews will be around one hour, and follow-up interviews are a possibility. The questions will focus on issues of masculinity and feminism, as well as the relationship between those aspects of one's identity, so subjects should have a level of comfort discussing those topics.

Participants can receive more information about this study by contacting Emma Craig via email: [ecraig@students.stonehill.edu](mailto:ecraig@students.stonehill.edu). They can also reach out to the Academic Director of SIT Amsterdam, Yvette Kopijn by emailing: [amsterdam@sit.edu](mailto:amsterdam@sit.edu).

Subjects are free to withdraw consent or withdraw participation in the project at any time. Subjects have the right to refuse to answer questions that make them feel uncomfortable during the interview process. Participation in this study is voluntary and any refusal to participate or decision to discontinue participation during the study will not result in penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. If a subject wishes to withdraw from the study or withdraw consent, they may contact either Emma Craig or Yvette Kopijn.

Confidentiality of records identifying the subject is assured. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Only Emma Craig will have access to these materials. Transcripts and recordings will be kept indefinitely, unless otherwise noted by the participant.

I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I give my consent to be recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Emma Craig  
SIT Amsterdam  
Spring 2014

## Men and Feminism Interview Guide

**Primary Research question:** What are the challenges, difficulties, and motivations of Dutch men who self-identify as feminists? How do their feminist values influence their conceptions of manhood and masculinity?

- I. Explain the ethical guidelines. Ask if participant prefers pseudonym or real name.
- II. General background knowledge of participants
  - a. When and where you were born?
  - b. Could you please give a brief overview of your early life? How was the Netherlands (or the place that you grew up) in that time? Where did you grow up? What kind of norms and values were important in your family? Did you have any role models?
  - c. Could you please describe your educational background?
  - d. Could you please describe your background in activism?
  - e. Could you please describe your professional life?
  - f. Are there any other organizations or hobbies that you are involved with?
- III. Masculinity and Manhood
  - a. What kind of a boy were you, how were you perceived as a boy? What kind of messages were you given about what it means to be a man? Do you think this reflects a broader Dutch context?
  - b. What does it mean for you to be a man in your life now?
  - c. Could you bring me back to some moments in your life where masculinity or manhood was particularly important? Was there any pressure for you to perform in a certain way?
- IV. Feminism/feminist thought
  - a. Could you bring me back to the time where you were first introduced to feminism? What were your initial thoughts or reactions to feminism? What did it mean to you in that particular time?
  - b. How would you define feminism? A working definition
  - c. Do you self-identify as a feminist? Why or why not?
  - d. If you do not identify as a feminist, do you still see feminism as an ideology that you agree with or follow in some way?
  - e. Are there any points in your life or particular memories in which feminism was a major influence?
  - f. Do you think that there are any misconceptions of feminism among your colleagues or peers? Could you describe them?

- g. Has the definition of feminism or your identification with feminism changed at all throughout your life? What prompted those changes?

V. Feminism and Men

- a. Do you believe that men can be involved with feminism? Can men truly label themselves as feminists?
- b. In your experience, how do people react to your self-identification as a feminist? (If applicable) Or how do people react to your work (activism, writing) that could be viewed as feminist? Is there a difference in male and female reaction?
- c. Have you ever faced difficulties or challenges in negotiating your masculinity and your identity as a feminist? Do you see these identities as being in conflict with each other or are you able to integrate feminism and masculinity in your identity?

VI. Recap of the interview, time for additional questions. Restate ethical guidelines.