

An honourable MENTION to being a man about International Women's Day

by Callum Watson [1]

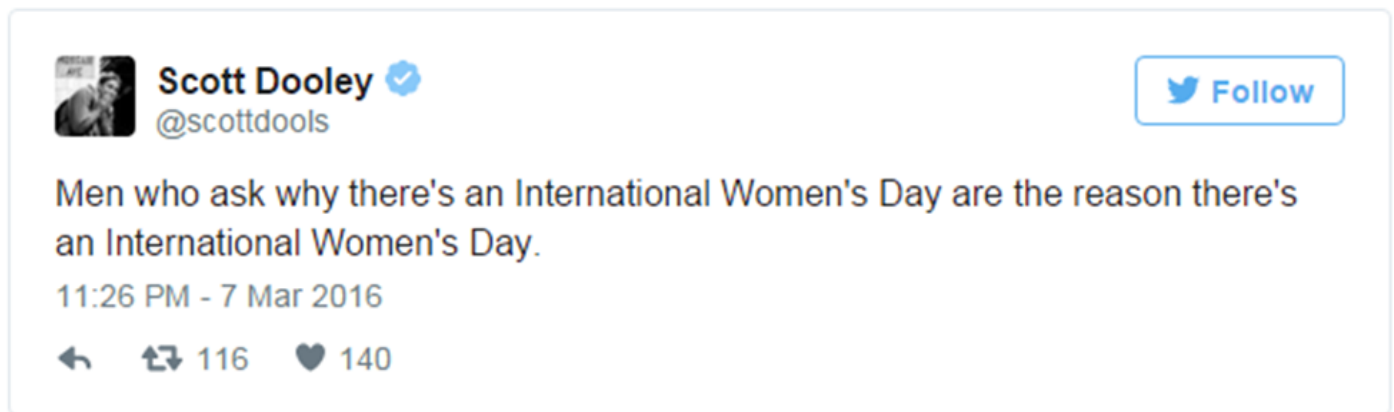
On 8 March, we celebrated **International Women's Day**. To misquote from an often cited statistic, 95% of men **immediately think** "What about International MEN's Day?!" when International Women's Day is mentioned. The other 5% are liars.[2] Many will not have voiced this openly. Those of us working in gender-related fields may have felt guilty about it afterwards. But we have all thought it. Perhaps we could go as far as to define a man as being a male human being who has been subject to the constant stream of sociocultural messages telling him explicitly and implicitly that he is superior to women. Moreover, when we accept and embrace the fact that we are "men", this necessarily involves some degree of conformity with the social expectations of our gender and thus, it almost inevitably means accepting a privileged position that gives us a degree of power, and notably power over women (at least in the same demographic group). That is not to say that our acceptance of the male gender label is a free choice by any stretch of the imagination – conformity to masculine social norms is enforced through some pretty hefty sticks alongside the carrots of privilege (see for instance **Kilmartin & Smiler, 2015**).

Many men (often privately) feel unsettled by the idea of International Women's Day, even those who openly support in gender equality and take on feminist causes. The fact that **International Men's Day** (19th November, for the record) is of little respite would suggest that the sense of unfairness or inequality is not what is at play here, even though this kind of rhetoric is often pursued by the more vocal critics of International Women's Day. Rather, I would suggest that International Women's Day, by its very existence and necessity, unveils gender as a dominant yet fundamentally illegitimate power system, and it is this that disturbs so many men.

This is further compounded as **privilege is invisible, especially to those who have it**. Gender *inequality* is the norm. Gender equality (or, more specifically, situations where men are not in dominant positions over women) is still so scarce that on the rare occasion where it does manifest itself, it appears to women and men alike that men are being dominated. For example, despite the fact that women are stereotypically seen as chatterboxes, **several studies indicate** that it is men who tend to exceed their fair share of talking time, especially when given the opportunity to impart expertise or influence. In classroom contexts, teachers who think they are calling equally on male and female students to talk tend to let men/boys dominate the conversation and **in one case**, when a teacher gave an equal share of talking time to his male and female students, it felt like he was giving 90% of his time to girls, a view shared by his male students.

Those men who have strong negative reactions to International Women's Day may well have suffered immensely to try and conform to gender roles that earn them respect as 'successful' men. This is often driven by pressure to provide for their families. Many of these men will likely lack privilege relative to other men due to intersecting power systems related to class, race and age for example. Understandably, they will strongly resent any attempt to change the rules of the game to the detriment of their prospects of success. This, then, is why we often hear men (and women) calling for "humanism" instead of "feminism". Rather than celebrating International Women's Day or International Men's Day, they would prefer an initiative like "International Human Being Day" that would not shed light on the gendered system of power in the same unsettling way.





Source: <http://www.someecards.com/news/women/international-womens-day-tweets/>

Other men may recognise that their guilty little secret is out and seek to make amends. They see themselves as the benefactors of an unjust distribution of power and may wholeheartedly embrace International Women's Day in manner that is as vocal and visible as possible. Essentially this is a form of "protector complex" where they seek to capitalise on their dominant social position to win "gains for the disadvantaged." While it is probably well-meaning, it can deny women access to the social space they have been afforded once a year to showcase their leadership and shape public discourses. Men who are already influential will inevitably endorse some causes and representations of womanhood more than others, thus shaping the agenda towards what they find most appealing or valuable.

And yet, despite these challenges, I still see International Women's Day as a gift to men, albeit in the same league as other gifts of social progress such as the root canal and the prostate exam. To reap the benefits of this gift, however, requires us to behave in a way that is best articulated by my old maths teacher: "why don't you shut up and listen for once? You never know, you might learn something." [3] International Women's Day provides an opportunity for men to learn a lot if they listen quietly and reflect on what is going on around them. (Indeed, it is one of the few times of year where men have nothing to lose and all to gain from *not* asserting themselves.) On a basic level, they can learn about some of the daily challenges that women face. On an intermediate level, they can reflect upon why it suddenly seems strange to see spaces dominated by women, be it physical spaces on stage or on the streets, or discursive spaces in print or in the media. On a more advanced level, they might consider how they contribute – however unintentionally – to the usurping of these different spaces from the women around them on a daily basis. A yet higher level might be to consider the price they themselves pay to dominate (or not) the spaces around them and the conflict it involves with people of other genders and other men.

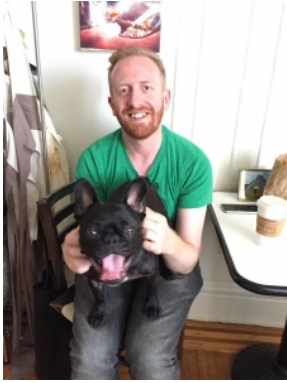
Most men have fought hard for the privilege they have amassed (a.k.a. wealth, respect or standing) but also, many do genuinely believe in justice and equality. While International Women's Day may seem threatening to many men at first sight, it provides them with the opportunity to take stock of how they interact with the women around them on a daily basis and how this might contribute, for better or worse, to gender equality on a macro level. How often were you tempted to interrupt on that day? Did you learn something new by not interrupting? How much space do you take up on public transport? Do you work less for more pay than some of your colleagues? Should you afford a particular woman more respect now that you've listened to what she has to say? Should you maybe go back and read another article or watch another video from International Women's Day? Probably. And with that, I cede the floor.

[1] I would like to thank Aiko Holvikivi for her insights and for the exchanges we had, which strengthened the quality of this piece.

[2] Editor's note: 97.3% of statistics are made up on the spot.

[3] Needless to say, my maths teacher was hoping we might actually learn how to do simultaneous equations, not turn into gender equality activists. Also, I wouldn't endorse this advice myself in

most classroom settings.



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