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Women don't make men suffer, macho society does

By Fionola Meredith
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I don't hate men. Honestly. I don't harbour any twisted castration fantasies. Neither am I envious, resentful or afraid of men. In fact, you know what? I really like some of them.

I love my father, my husband and my son and I have quite a few male friends. So let's just get that straight at the start.

Because it's been my experience that, the moment you start challenging sexism, you're quickly shouted down as a man-hater, a crazy arch-feminist who wants to crunch men up and suck the bones and then install a matriarchal dictatorship, where the few male survivors are rounded up and forced to act as slaves to cackling female supremacists.

Disclaimer over, let's turn our attention to a controversial new book which claims that men are, effectively, the new women.

In *The Second Sexism*, South African philosopher David Benatar says that men face economic insecurity, work longer hours and suffer worse health than women.

"More boys drop out of school, fewer men earn degrees, more men die younger," Benatar argues.

He appears to believe that feminism has gone too far and men are suffering as a result.

It is, he claims, a "neglected form of sexism".

Cue an ear-splitting shriek of rage from feminists around the world.

I feel their frustration. In the Oppression Olympics, women are quite clearly the losers.

Do we really have to say all this again? It gets tedious.

Okay, here we go — women earn less and own less than men, they are more likely to do the menial jobs that no one else wants to do and they are woefully under-represented in politics and public life, as well as in the boardroom and the judiciary. Oh, yes. And they are continually judged on their appearance in a way that men never have to face.

Then, when they're old, they become invisible.

I'll tell you what: you'll know there's been a revolution when you see some snaggle-toothed old trout reading the news, rather than the glossy young babes who do it at present.

In laying the blame on feminism, Benatar has overstated his case. It is not the fault of women's gradual gains in equality that men are dying sooner, or that they are more likely to be victims of violence.

Men are genetically predisposed to die younger than women and are less likely to take good care of their health.

And they are more likely to encounter violence, because, statistically, they are more likely to be violent themselves.

Male reaction to the most minor improvements in women's socio-economic rights and political opportunities is frequently hysterical and disproportionate.

Every few years, you get someone like Benatar popping up to whine that men are hurting and it's all women's fault.

A decade ago, it was Sean Stitt, of the Irish men's support group Amen. He was worried that Ireland was rapidly turning into a matriarchy, where men were the 'disposable sex'. Ten years on, they still haven't been flushed away.

The writer Susan Faludi captured this phenomenon perfectly — "Nothing crushes the masculine petals

more than a bit of feminist rain," she said: "A few drops are perceived as a downpour."

This should not be a competition, some kind of fight-to-the-death war of the sexes, with women and men struggling to come out on top.

In an unequal society, no one — male or female — wins.

It's true that many men are suffering. Not at the hands of feminists, but because male- dominated society only allows certain kinds of male behaviour.

Especially here in Northern Ireland, a conservative society with a macho political culture and a hard-bitten history of violence, men are still discouraged from openly showing their emotions, or admitting to feelings of fear, or inadequacy. They are taught that to be masculine is to be strong, confident, self-contained and always in control. No surprises then, that when the mask slips, they fall apart.

So, it's in the human interests of everyone that we move to challenge and dismantle these old polarised sexual stereotypes. In Northern Ireland, I have a feeling that it will take some time.

Yesterday, I received an e-mail from a clever, thoughtful schoolgirl who, in separate encounters, had been patronised in a sexist, sleazy way by two well-known local men: a politician and a journalist. "How can women be taken seriously in this country when they are, first and foremost, seen as women, not individuals?" she asked.

Good question. And until it's answered and the culture changes, both men and women lose out.

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