

‘GRAB ‘EM BY THE BALLS...’

What I discovered was the emergence of a problem when we neutralise the language used to define and express feminist values, which I initially thought would offer up a practical solution. The extent of my male small-group interviewees’ understanding of feminism was “*equality among the genders*” and “*things being equal*”¹. At first, I assumed that this basic understanding was enough for boys to engage meaningfully with the movement’s worldviews. In my interview with Howard, however, an important barrier to this engagement emerged. When asked about what holds many boys and young men back from identifying as feminist, or identifying with feminist values, Howard explained, “*I think a lot of boys see feminism in a reductive way as being about equality between the sexes, but there’s much more to it than this. The inequality that exists today is complex, and sometimes hard to see*”². As well as this, when the average adolescent male in our society looks around him, he often already sees equality between the sexes. This would explain why one of my small-group interviewees put forward the view that “*we’re already equal, we all receive education and have the same opportunities*”³. When we correlate this kind of misinformed attitude with the statistic that 75% of questionnaire respondents⁴ selected a definition for feminism centred around ‘equality’, then a clear disconnect emerges in terms of how some boys and young men perceive the status of girls and women in society, and the perceived value of feminism in relation to this skewed perception.

Kat Banyard refers to an “illusion” of gender equality in our contemporary society⁵. This illusion of equality having been achieved between the sexes, she says, is why feminism has been “chased from the mainstream”⁶. Banyard’s view goes a significant way to explaining the opposition that exists to feminist discourse and action among my peers. In our interview, Howard provided evidence that corroborates this notion of an ‘equality illusion’ when he described how “a lot of guys I know, especially younger people, just refuse to accept that the wage gap exists. They see equality in their meso world, or what they think is equality, or they

¹ Male small-group interview participant, May, 2018.

² Interview, adult male, White Ribbon Ambassador, March, 2018.

³ Male small-group interview participant, May, 2018.

⁴ Questionnaire, October, 2017.

⁵ Banyard, K. (2010). *Equality illusion - the truth about women and men today*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, p.2.

⁶ Ibid.

read an anti-feminist blog online, and they see that as being the broader reality”⁷. Despite what I would have thought are the empowering influences of school, media and globalisation in positioning young people to see and understand the prejudice and exclusion that exists for girls and women in our society today, my research indicates that an ‘equality illusion’ is indeed at work in society, and its trickery is having traction.

Turner explains the Conflict Theory by highlighting Marx’s emphasis on the way in which “deprived groups” take up a collective stance of “opposition” to “superordinates”, which results in a “polarisation” of interests and goals⁸. It appears that the central challenge for the feminist movement’s inclusion of boys and men, however, lies in how men are mistakenly identifying as a ‘deprived group’ in relation to feminism’s perceived “preferential treatment”⁹ of girls and women, which is creating a kind of ‘false’ ideological conflict.

⁷ Interview, adult male, White Ribbon Ambassador, March, 2018.

⁸ H. Turner, J. (n.d.). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*.

⁹ Attribute to the adolescent male small-group interview