

WHAT ABOUT MEN?

As a woman, and a professional working in the VAWG space, I am waiting for the protesting to start. It is predictable. It happens in response to every single LinkedIn post where I highlight or discuss concepts and issues related to gender-based violence. But the volume is cranked up to the max on and around the 8th March every year. Because, the **8th March** is of course, **International Women's Day**. A day of global significance, one that aims to unite us in coming together to each play a part in taking a stride forward to achieve women's equality.

On this day, women share their lived experience, daily struggles, their important perspectives on critical issues that still disproportionately oppress and subjugate women and girls. Given the prevalence and scale of misogyny and gender-based harms that are concerningly playing out in our classrooms, shaping the scripts and narratives of our future generations, days like International women's day are important.

But can you hear us?



It is feasible that our stories, experiences and request for change are not heard. **The voices of women and girls drowned out by the "what about men!" counternarrative.** This "whataboutism" (the process of responding to an issue with a counter allegation, circumventing the original issue raised) is loud. **It is problematic as it gaslights women and girls, invalidating their perspectives and**

experiences as they have been for thousands of years. It halts progress. It is triggering for women and girls everywhere. It feeds the "hysterical feminist" narratives. It puts us firmly back into our box; just where the patriarchy wants us.

I always find social media a particularly unpleasant place to be on and around International Women's Day. Arguments ensue from both sides that are unproductive, lack substance or evidence base. This mud-slinging helps no-one.

I found myself a victim of it, only this week, when I responded to a post (co-incidentally written by a woman) that shone a spotlight on the concept of *whataboutism*. Whilst I agreed with the overall points made by the post, I did not agree with its tone, in the way that it mocked men for the views they commonly express. We have to remember that seeking equality will feel like oppression for those that have traditionally held all the power and privilege.

By failing to acknowledge this, by shutting men down, by mocking them - we run the risk of entering into stalemate territory. It widens the divide between men and women; reducing the propensity for allyship and alienates men from critical conversations that are still to be had and learning that must take place.



Yes, responding to *whatabotary* is frustrating, but it presents an opportunity to educate boys and men and to see the issues we raise through a different lens, highlighting that the issues they experience are not a consequence of women challenging the oppression that has shackled us for millennia, but the result of the patriarchy.



This much needed critical learning and shifting of the narrative simply won't take place when we are locked in a situation of seeing who can shout the loudest.

But it just might if we make space for the “*what about men?*” question within our activism. I get it, it feels counter-intuitive to linger on men's issues on what should be a day focused on women's equality. But my interpretation of feminism, is that it is about striving for equality and structural change for all genders.

In order to dial down men's protests on International Women's Day we need to take a pause, and reflect on what underpins the “*whataboutism*” we are bombarded with. Often, it derived from people expressing their reluctance to engage in debate or to drive change that they will not be the benefactors of.

Perhaps, to counteract this, reframing VAWG as a societal issue, as opposed to a feminist one, we will achieve some traction. By enabling men and boys to recognise and understand that the structures and concepts that oppress women, are also responsible for causing harm to men and boys.

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I am aware that I will receive criticism from all sides for the views expressed in this blog. I am already anticipating the “*It's not our job to educate men!*” argument. **But if not us, then who?** Because, as a mother of two boys I know that education of these issues is not consistently coming from schools and the curriculum, allowing influencers to spew their misogynistic hate without challenge or reproach.

Equally, I am aware of the limitations of my argument. I recognise that there are many men that are so deeply entrenched in misogyny, that no matter how we pitch and position our argument, they will not respond to a woman who they believe (due to their gender) are beneath them and have no place to challenge their viewpoints.

But, if we can influence just one boy or man to see VAWG with a new perspective, by inviting them into the conversation and enabling them to recognise the change they can make, and the responsibility they have to drive that change, then that, surely, is progress?