

## What You Can Do to Support Women

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As both a male peer educator and a radical feminist activist, one of the most common questions I hear from men about feminism is, What can I do? It is true that many men are openly hostile towards women and towards feminism, and that most men (in my experience) are at best ambivalent about feminism and somewhat suspicious of feminist groups. Nevertheless, most men at least pay lip service to the fundamental doctrine of feminism, that women deserve the same rights as men and that any just society must include an end to gender oppression. These men, mostly political liberals, agree that the oppression of women, where it exists, is an injustice that must be stopped. However, they rarely know where and how they can act to help the cause of gender justice. In this series of articles I will present a few suggestions, which are intended to be very broad but nonetheless have clear and practical implementations. Most of them will apply to both men and women, although they will be primarily addressed to men, and some will deal exclusively with the issues raised by men within what is fundamentally the *women's* movement. In other articles I hope to present more specific strategies for both women and men, but before any of that, we need to understand the basic things, the simple things that, if understood, make so much difference. As [Andrea Dworkin writes](#),

And if there would be a plea or a question or a human address in that scream, it would be this: why are you so slow? Why are you so slow to understand the simplest things; not the complicated ideological things. You understand those. *The simple things*. The clichés. Simply that women are human to precisely the degree and quality that you are.

- **Believe and support women** - This may seem obvious, but it is extremely important and something that few men ever really practice. Any claim to support women's rights and gender justice is empty and meaningless unless you support the real, breathing women in your life, day in and day out. Listen to women. Listen to them when they tell you what they want. *Believe them* when they tell you about their experiences. *Believe them* when they tell you that they have been abused. Support them when they fight against that abuse. Don't forget to ask women what they think and what they want. Don't ignore what they say. Don't marginalize their experiences. Don't abandon them when they have to fight against men.
- **Get involved** - This suggestion is the simplest of them all, one of the most powerful, and yet one of the most often ignored. If you want to fight for women's rights then the best way to start getting involved in feminist groups. If you live at or near a college, there are sure to be feminist student organizations which you can find through the college's student union. If you live in a major city, there are sure to be community feminist groups, including local chapters of the [National Organization for Women](#) (NOW) and community organizers for [Take Back the Night](#). And once you've found an organization, *get involved*: donate your money, time, your ideas, and most of all just plain old-fashioned *work*. Working with my campus group, I have come to see that what activist groups need the most is simply help with the day-to-day work: mailing letters, planning events, contacting speakers, posting fliers. Far too often in political activism, even on the Left, men have sat back and done the heavy work of leadership and ideology, while women have been left to do all the menial everyday labor. It's time to reverse that. Get in there and help as much as you can.
- **Educate yourself** - You can't properly fight for something if you don't understand what it is you're fighting for (and what it is you're fighting against). Realize the ways in which the oppression of women happens. Learn about how degradation and abuse *systematically* come together to terrorize and brutalize women, to keep women *as a class* subservient to men. When you come to see the isolated atrocities that women tell you about as part of a larger pattern of misogyny and patriarchy, you will often be accused of being hyper-sensitive (if you were a woman, they might call you hysterical). **Cultivate hyper-sensitivity**. The reason that we have to fight for women's rights is because the norm is callous, insensitive, numb to the suffering of 52% of the population. Against the tide of numbness, feminists dare to educate themselves and to recognize the oppression of women for what it is.

Like any education, this education demands reading and learning. The most important thing is day-to-day contact with and recognition of women (see the first point). But men who want to fight for women's rights also need to read up. Learn about the history of feminism. Learn about feminist theory. Preserve the memory and celebrate the legacy of those who have struggled before us. A list of all the key feminist readings would be longer than this article, but some good starting points include:

- Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*
- John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*
- *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, ed. Miriam Schneir
- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*
- *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present*, ed. Miriam Schneir
- Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*
- Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Politics*
- Andrea Dworkin, *Letters from a War Zone*
- Robin Warshaw, *I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape*
- Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*
- Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*

These are the starting points from which all activism for women's rights begins. Believing in women. Fighting for women. Educating yourself about the experiences of women. In [the next article](#) I will examine the most important ways of bringing that political fight into your own private everyday life: **refusing to abuse women, calling out other men, and acknowledging feminism.**

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