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Empowerment is a zero sum game

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Presentation by

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I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that we meet on, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

But I'd like to go one step further, and also acknowledge that the Australian government policy that we live under continues to participate in colonial oppression, and it's done nothing to recognise the sovereignty of aboriginal people in this country.

I acknowledge, in particular, the aboriginal women who bring so much strength to their communities, and who have suffered the most punishment as a result of this ongoing colonial oppression.

I make these distinctions because it isn't enough to stand before crowds of people and acknowledge traditional land ownership, without acknowledging the rest of that. Words can be powerful but they can also just be words, and paying the service to an idea is not what leads to change.

As the late great Stella Young used to say "No amount of smiling at a set of stairs is going to turn them into a ramp", and words are meaningless unless we back them up with action. Change is impossible unless we fight for it and unless we're prepared to accept uncomfortable and hard truths about ourselves and our own privilege.

It's perhaps fitting then that I begin today with that simple idea, that change does require hard work and sacrifice, and cannot be brought through positivity alone.

It certainly cannot be achieved by merely expressing the right kind of attitude. Paying our due diligence to the things that we feel we ought to say in order to be on the right or left side of progressive society. Empowerment is not a zero

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sum game and those with great power and privilege must accept that equality means losing some of it.

It's also interesting that two years ago when I first spoke at this conference I did so on a day when my sister was, she'd just gone into labour. And I was in Adelaide with her and I had said to her the night before, "Just whatever you do, don't go into labour on Tuesday because I have to go back to Melbourne to speak at this conference."

Of course, what did she do? So she said: "It's going to take a long time so you should just fly and do it and then come back".

So two years ago my nephew, Elliott, was born and I look at him and I think what kind of world will he grow up in? He's got white skin. So far, he identifies as being a boy, or is identified as a boy and lives his life as a boy. Whether or not that changes later on, I'm not sure.

But he's been born with a set of privileges. Our unconscious acceptance of privileges begins from the moment we enter the world and begins to solidify when we start to interact with the structures that exist outside of our family groups.

For children, it's usual for the indoctrination into traditional gender roles to begin the moment the parents are told, if it's a boy or a girl. These are, for the most part, unconscious biases but they do damage all the same.

The scientist Robert Winston demonstrated one of these vices when he invited people to interact with a baby dressed either in pink or blue. The babies perceived to be boys – those dressed in blue – were bounced on knees and

handled more roughly, while those dressed in pink – the girls – were cooed over and treated more delicately.

As it turned out the babies had been dressed in the opposite colour assigned to their gender and the study participants were shocked to watch video footage of how their biases had influenced their behaviour. Each had insisted prior to the experiment that they didn't treat girls and boys differently.

Other studies have suggested that baby boys are held outwards, allowing them to observe the world, while baby girls are cuddled inwards and protected from it.

This different treatment continues as children grow older. Girls are encouraged to be quiet and polite, while boys are chuckled at for their rambunctiousness. It's pervasive. Someone very close to me who's aware of these issues once sent me a photo of their toddler son climbing a shelf and captioned it, "being a boy".

In complimenting children, people most often choose to call boys brave or boisterous. Girls, on the other hand, are praised with words like pretty.

Gender inequality is broadcast to children through pop culture and movies as well. Between 2006 and 2009 only around 29.2% of speaking roles in family movies were female.

To put that into more context, for every female who was allowed to speak in a leading box office family film made between 2006 and 2009, there were 2.42 male characters given voices.

It goes without saying that the women who are allowed to appear are most often white, conventionally attractive, young, cis gendered, heterosexual and able bodied. Is this the fault of the creators?

Women are also under represented behind the camera. Across 1,565 content creators surveyed by the Geena Davis Institute at the time of research, only 7% of directors were women. Only 13% of writers were women and only 20% of producers were women.

As the Institute says, this translates to 4.8 working men behind the scenes to every one woman; a fact that may explain why in these same leading box office family films, only 19.5% of featured characters who had jobs were women.

The other 80.5% of roles were taken up by men who, as I've already pointed, were given two thirds more opportunity to speak.

A friend of mine – the journalist Emily Maguire – once wrote an article called “Girls on Film” in which she recalled some of the attitudes of children in the writing workshops she facilitates. Emily talked about one of her eight year old students, a girl, who wrote a story about a fierce but heroic pirate called “Jessica”.

“Pirates aren't girls”, one of her classmates protested and several others agreed. “Well what about Anna Maria in *Pirates of the Caribbean*?” the writer shot back.

“She's not a main one”, came the reply. “The main pirates are all boys. The main pirates are all boys” Emily writes.

“So are the main robots, monsters, bugs, soldiers, toys, cars, trains, rats and lions. You’re allowed to include a girl in your motley group of rag tag heroes, but she’ll never be one of the main ones and there will usually only be one of her.”

So to me the answer seems clear. If 80% of influential roles across the sectors that carry the most power are held by men, then inequality needs to change.

Men must be prepared to sacrifice that whopping 30% of additional privilege they hold so that women can have a fair and equal share.

But unfortunately this kind of practical equality is difficult to conceive the people who are unused to losing out. If we are surrounded by inequality and even subjected to it, any kind of interruption to this has the potential to be felt in positive or negative ways.

Consider the following example. In Peggy Orenstein’s book *Schoolgirls* she recounts a story of a teacher suddenly made aware of the inequality in her classroom between the genders.

In an attempt to change this practice of boys speaking far more often than girls and interrupting the girls, the teacher began calling on girls and boys alternately from her attendance roster, ensuring that there was gender parity in the students invited to speak in class.

After only two days the boys in the classroom began to complain about the new regime insisting that their teacher was being unfair and favouring the girls. As the teacher explained to Orenstein, equality for these boys was hard to get used to. They perceived it as a loss.

It's easy to see how this compares to the interruption of other pre-existing states of inequality. When suggestions are made regarding quotas and positive discrimination, or affirmative action if you prefer to think of it that way, it is rare for people to fully grasp how and why these steps are so important.

Instead they see the move as an attempt to unfairly discriminate against people who have supposedly done nothing wrong, and hence have done nothing to deserve this punishment.

Technically this is true. It's not actively wrong to be born into a life benefited by privilege, just as it isn't wrong to be born into one disadvantaged by the lack of it.

But what is wrong is obstinately refusing to recognise the ways in which privilege creates unfair divisions between the haves and the have nots.

I recently read about another classroom experiment designed to explain privilege to the students. The teacher had each student crumple a piece of paper and then placed a recycling bin at the front of the room.

The students were told that they each represented the country's population and the recycling bin a passage into the wealthy upper classes. Each student had the opportunity to become a member of the upper class, if they could accurately throw their crumpled pieces of paper into the bin from the seat that they were sitting in.

Immediately students in the back row complained. As opposed to the complaints in Orenstein's example, these were legitimate calls against

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discrimination. Those favoured simply because they happened to be sitting in the front seats at the time of the experiment, would have to work less hard and would have more luck on their side, while those sitting in the back rows were immediately disadvantaged by nothing more than their location.

Of course, some members of both groups defied expectations with those in the front rows missing the bin and some from the back hitting it. But this is life and outlives to expectations happen all the time.

The conclusion drawn by the teacher was this: that the closer you sat to the target, the better the odds of you hitting it, and this is what privilege looks like.

Interestingly, the only ones who complained about fairness were those sitting at the back. While those placed at the front accepted their good fortune as if it were their right.

It's easy to think of ourselves as deserving when we're favoured by the odds. It's easy for a world which favours man and class and white skin and heterosexuality, to pretend that the benefits bestowed for these attributes have been earned, and not simply engineered in their favour.

To use a more pressing human rights example, it's easy for people born into the citizenry of Australia to complain about cue jumpers trying to get a free pass as if there is some kind of skill required to be randomly born in the right country.

Is equality a loss? Spiritually speaking, no. Equality should be viewed as a great game for society. Something which delivers us from a mediocre species to something more highly evolved.

A society which cares about the equal rights of all its citizens and is prepared to make the kinds of radical changes necessary to bring about these equal rights, is a society which understands what it truly means to be civilised.

But practically speaking, equality is a loss and it needs to be recognised and accepted as one. It represents a loss of privilege and power to the people most likely to enjoy it, and most likely to falsely view that power and privilege as either their birthright, or as something they've worked hard for.

By its very nature equality cannot exist alongside privilege because the latter demands that its recipients be given special priority and consideration. Equality for women cannot coexist in a system that privileges men nor can it exist for LGBTQI people in a system that privileges heteronormativity; for disabled people in a world that caters to the able bods; for people of colour and first nations people living in a society that values white supremacy and colonisation, or for impoverished worker that a capitalist state relies upon to maintain separation of class.

Equality can only be realised once privilege and power is dismantled and the dismantling of this privilege and power can only be necessitated by taking it away from those who have it, in effect, creating a loss for them.

And so it's my contention that we need to stop viewing the pursuit of equality as something to be strived for by lifting the oppressed up to the level of those in power. Instead we need to reframe it as accepting the inevitability of loss and privilege and redress the imbalance of power by forcing those who have it to step down and relinquish it.

American science fiction writer, John Scalzi, once wrote, “In the role playing game known as the real world straight white male is the lowest difficulty setting there is.”

This summation of the privileges bestowed by being on the right side of gender, sexuality and race is about as succinct as you can get. To be born white, heterosexual and a cis gendered man, is to be favoured. Add the privileges of education and class and you’ve won the birth lottery.

There’s been an unfortunate trend in the broader feminist movement lately of further rewarding men when they express even the most basic sentiments of support for gender equality, and this confuses me.

It takes more than platitudes and good intentions to create substantial change and benevolent gestures made by the powerful mean nothing in the long term, if they’re offered without any real sacrifice.

I couldn’t help but laugh last year when the United Nations launched their “He for She” program, a symbolic attempt to distract from the fact that they will fail to deliver on this year’s millennium development goals relating to the global empowerment of women.

Instead, the United Nations presented us with a campaign in which men were asked to click an online pledge to be a “He for She”, a responsibility that was never quite explained, but which seemed to work by making men feel good about themselves, while women offered gratitude for their tokenistic support.

It struck me as bitterly ironic that at no point during the launch of “He for She” did any of the countless male representatives at the UN look around and think:

“Well maybe a significant change would be making sure that there weren’t quite so many of us here, taking these positions of leadership away from women”.

For women to be equally represented men must accept that loss is an inevitability; loss of domination, loss of power and loss of the individual’s grip on it.

This is an unavoidable consequence of changing the status quo and it’s one we should all embrace. But still these attempts to bestow gratitude and rewards on men who offer basic support for women’s rights continue.

A column in *The Age* last year called for feminists to pass the baton to men so that we can let them lead us into the feminist wonderland. It informed us that there were men feminists could learn about gender equality from.

Men like Eddie Maguire, who had taken on the brave and subversive task of building a change room for women at the Collingwood Football Club. This simple act was hailed as a call to revolution, as if Eddie had built the change room himself with his own bare hands.

Eddie Maguire has an enormous amount of power and holds multiple positions of authority across both the business and media worlds. Yet we’re expected to believe that all that is required for him to be an agent of change for women’s rights is to look around at his sports ground in 2014 and go “Hmm, not very sheila friendly here. I’ll get on the blower and order a change room with a dress on the door.”

No-one bothered to ask why there was a lack of facilities for women using the sports grounds and why it had gone on for so long.

If the Collingwood Football Club can be viewed briefly as a microcosm for wider society, it can be said that no-one had to question it.

The world we live in caters primarily to men, and to white men at that, and women are expected to be grateful when token gestures are made to include us.

Token gestures that will almost never translate to the kind of substantial change that includes men accepting the loss of privilege, because we labour under the illusion that gender equality not only can be realised without any real disruption to men's power, but that it has an obligation to avoid doing so if it wants to be fair.

And yet this is just one set of attributes that combine to lend privilege to the bearer. There are countless other combinations. I may be a woman but I too am favoured by the arbitrary circumstances of my life.

I have white skin which gives me automatic privilege in a world that marginalizes people of colour. I am able bodied, mostly, a privilege I have almost always had no cause to think about because the world that I live in caters to suit me and my body.

I'm not strictly heterosexual but I live in a relationship with a man which grants me the privilege of heterosexuality. If I so choose, my partner and I can marry and instead of that being egregiously interpreted as an assault on normality and the sanctity of marriage, it will be celebrated as a natural progression of our relationship.

I am sis gendered which simply means that my biological sex accords with my gender identity. As a sis person I can never fully appreciate the privilege that comes from not being forced to prove my womanhood or from being incorrectly viewed by a trans-phobic or trans-suspicious world as an aberration.

I have economic privilege which has assisted me in having educational privilege. It was never a question of, if I would go to university, but what I would choose to study when I got there.

Because of a particular set of privileges of my life and the lives of my immediate family, friends and peers, I am unlikely to ever be homeless.

And while I may endure my share of mental health issues, as many of us do, I have the privilege of knowing two things. Firstly, that I can access medical help and intervention and secondly, that I am assisted by the unearned privilege of class in being taken seriously by the medical community.

And so it turns out that as a white sis gendered, mostly heterosexual, economically blessed and educated Australian women I too have won a portion of the lottery of life. It was not earned.

I was required to do nothing to have it bestowed upon me. It seems in fact that all I have had to do to be blessed with that particular set of privileges in life is simply turn up.

If I can acknowledge this, that my privilege is undeserved and arbitrary, that they're the result of luck rather than hard work and that their very existence prevents real equality from being realised, why is it so difficult for so many others? Because equality is perceived to be a loss.

A few months ago I posted a photograph of Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill, Le Tigre and The Julie Ruin fame on my Facebook wall. The photo was a still from a documentary made about Hanna called “The Punk Singer” and it showed her standing on a stage in the early 1990’s.

In the documentary she’s seen saying “All girls to the front. I’m not even kidding. All boys be cool. For once in your lives go back, back.”

The importance of this scene cannot be understated. One of the motivations behind the riot grrrl scene Hanna was a part of was to challenge the accepted belief that women couldn’t play instruments as well as men.

In standing on that stage and calling for the men to move back in a space that they’d always dominated, Hanna was making space for women not only to participate, but to feel safe and free and involved and in control. It was an enormously powerful gesture.

So I posted this on my Facebook wall and explained the context and within the space of a few comments, people, mainly young men but it did include young women, began arguing that this was sexism. That this wasn’t what equality looked like. That men being forced to lose their space at the front of the stage, was actually a form of reverse sexism which, as we all know, is the worst kind of sexism there is.

It just wasn’t fair that men were being told to go to the back of the room. Would we do that to black people as if somehow the comparison between black people and white men was a valid one? Kathleen Hanna was sexist, this meme was sexist and feminists clearly aren’t interested in real equality only in oppressing men. Men, it was argued, shouldn’t have to lose things in order for

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women to gain. And I followed these arguments with no small amount of frustration.

Has the perception of equality and striving for it been so twisted that we no longer understand what it looks like?

To put it more simply, and in context with the Kathleen Hanna conundrum, if the first three rows at a concert are only made up of men, how can women equally share that space without a proportion of men losing it?

Privileges are unending and can be shared evenly; the privilege to listen to music, the privilege to make music, the privilege to be taken seriously in the music world. But what cannot be shared and still maintain its identity is power. Power is, by its very nature, something that's either wielded over others or enjoyed in spite of them. Power is so often tangible in a way that privileges are not.

And here is another uncomfortable truth – that sometimes it's necessary for those who have never experienced discrimination to understand what it feels like. Asking men to stand at the back of a room so that women can, for the first time, take their place at the front, is not throwing the balance of power out of whack.

It isn't spitting in the face of equality activism and more to the point, it is not substantially or even remotely hurting those men who have considered without question that it is their right to stand wherever they want and take up as much space as they like.

The oppressed and marginalised have no responsibility to ensure that those with power will be left unscathed by the revolution. Change bruises and it scars

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and those are the marks that we must carry as a society to know the mistakes that we've made.

In regards to the Kathleen Hanna conundrum I thought it was interesting that these young men and women alike were so incapable of seeing this. It reinforced to me something that's been worrying me for a while. That most people seem to think of equality as a theoretical prospect, something they can will into existence merely by saying they support it, but that they actually have no obligation to engage with beyond enthusiastic head nods and meaningless platitudes.

It concerns me that so many people don't seem to understand that equality might mean that they have to spend some periods of time standing at the back of the room, and that this isn't a case of reverse sexism or a reverse oppression or whatever other ridiculous label you want to call it.

It's actually part and parcel of the hard and challenging work of redressing the imbalance of power that privileges certain people over others, and creates such a foundational structure for inequality to proliferate in all its guises.

If you are holding onto power while pretending to advocate for equality, you are part of the problem. If you are speaking for the marginalised when you enjoy power and privilege over them and refusing to let them speak for themselves, you are part of the problem. If you refuse to address the ways in which you benefit from other people's oppression, preferring instead to talk about equality as if it's a matter of simply giving people a hand up to the platform on which you stand, you are part of the problem.

And these are again the hard and uncomfortable truths that we need to face, especially those of us who enjoy an intersection of those privileges and the associated power.

For true equality and liberation to be possible we have to be willing to sacrifice that which gives us power. It is necessary to address the representation of people in power, not just according to their gender, but also according to their race, sexuality, able bodied-ness and gender identity.

When I say that I mean that gender equality cannot be conceived as a fight to make white women equal with white men, but all women equal with all men. It cannot mean making middle class people equal to the 1% but addressing the capitalist structures of power that keep the world's global poor working in horrendous factory conditions, without even the most basic of care provided for them, so that wealthy western countries and their inhabitants can enjoy material luxury.

Not all those people who experience privilege and power do so consciously, but once awakened to it they must be prepared to accept that the benefits they enjoy come at the price of other people's dignity and marginalisation.

A good example of this can be found, I think, in the argument for marriage equality. Marriage is one of those funny beasts where even the mere possibility of questioning it elicits consternation and/or defence within the community.

Some argue that marriage is an outdated concept, a patriarchal tradition rooted in the belief that women were a form of economic and property trade. Others insist that it's a personal choice and the business of nobody else but those two people involved in making it.

And if you've ever wanted to glimpse an approximation of World War 3 on the internet, check out the comment thread of any online column querying the retro practice of women taking their husband's names.

So defensive of people of their marriage unions that it seems almost impossible to have a rational discussion about how that institution has historically flourished from inequality. It's a curious contradiction that whilst so many of us seem eager to address the current model's discrimination towards same sex attracted lovers, there's less enthusiasm for the archaic history of marriage as a whole.

The pursuit of marriage equality is vital, not least of which is because every Australian of legal age should have the right to embrace it or reject as they see fit and according to their own system of values. But despite the need for inclusivity, marriage remains a largely conservative institution founded on the monoculture ideas of a two parent nuclear family.

I have sympathy for the non heteronormative point of view that suggests aspiring to marriage equality is aspiring to conventionality, particularly when taking into consideration the social benefits that have been granted to people who play by its rules.

The reward for entering into an institution so highly praised by the status quo is great and as such no-one can be reasonably faulted for desiring it. But still there's an indefensible hypocrisy in choosing to participate in a practice which actively excludes others, while positioning yourself as a strong advocate for their rights.

This is an unpopular view amongst many. But I am perplexed by the congratulatory tone that some of those people campaigning for marriage

equality have taken on in regards to what they did or didn't personally do to recognise gay people in their own marriage ceremonies.

This seems mostly confined to objecting to constitutionally enforced language which recognises marriage as being the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, either by coughing over it, turning one's back from the pulpit, or including a disclaimer or caveat to assure people that the lucky couple in question disagree with John Howard's prejudiced amendments to the Marriage Act.

But I think that surely one supports marriage equality in Australia by not getting married until the law changes to recognise the rights of all people. Despite the genuine feeling behind acts of defiance, they're also largely meaningless if people continue to participate in the privilege anyway.

The government isn't keeping itself awake at night watching the tally of marriage ceremony disclaimers roll in. No-one is afraid of lefties making a defiant statement in a church or a garden while conveniently exchanging the same vows that will bind them into an exclusionary legal contract.

What may have a chance of making a difference is seeing fair minded people opt out of the marriage process altogether. Marriage is an important cornerstone of the conservative framework. So why not hit those opposed to equality with a decrease in certificates for Births, Deaths and Marriages office?

But such a deliberate protest is difficult. Marriage is a powerful institution and weddings are a way for people to share their love for their partner in front of the people that they care most about. If there weren't such an attractive concept we probably wouldn't be trying to abolish restrictions to its entry. But what message does it send to stand in front of a room full of people and

deliberately acknowledge that while the contract you're about to enter into isn't accessible to the people you care about, you're going to do it anyway.

How is that different from patronising a business that deliberately and cruelly excludes women, or people of colour, or the disabled? To my mind it's the same as deciding to eat at a whites only restaurant while reassuring your non-white friends that you'll put in a good word for them with the management. Your public disagreement does nothing if you're still paying for the product.

So once again equality comes from people sacrificing their privilege. Not from waiting for the oppressed to rise up and meet it. It's very easy for us to distinguish between rights and privileges based on an arbitrary hierarchy.

But as I feel like I've demonstrated, the intersections of our privilege need to be taken into account by all people. We all need to be aware about what we can do in order to address the imbalance of equality felt by all people.

As I said, empowerment is not a zero sum game. Some people will lose out, but in the end I think we'll all gain from it.

Thank you very much.