

Why Women's Spaces are Critical to Feminist Autonomy

By Patricia McFadden

The issue of male presence, in physical and ideological terms, within what should be women-only spaces is not just a matter of ideological contestation and concern within the Women's Movement globally; it is also a serious expression of the backlash against women's attempts to become autonomous of men in their personal/political relationships and interactions. As human societies have become more public through the intensified struggles for inclusion by various groups of formerly excluded constituencies (the largest of which is made up of women of differing classes, ages, sexual orientations, abilities, ethnicities, nationalities, and locations), so the struggle for the occupancy and definition of space has also taken on a concomitant significance.

In this short article, I want to explore some of the reasons why this contestation over women's spaces has arisen. I also want to argue strenuously that women must not allow men into our spaces because strategically this would be a major political blunder for the future of the Women's Movement, wherever it is located and engaged with patriarchal hegemony and exclusion. To argue for men's inclusion into women's political and structural spaces is not only fundamentally heterosexist; it also serves an old nationalistic claim that women need to take care of men, no matter where they are located and or what they are engaged with. This claim is inherently premised on the assumption that women who are not attached to or associated with a man are dangerous, rampant women who must be stopped. That is why the statement that women need to "take men along"



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smacks not only of the deep-seated patriarchal assumption that women's mobility requires male approval. It also facilitates the transference of socio-cultural practices into the Women's Movement that nurture male privilege and pampering in spaces that women have fought for centuries to mark as their own.

In order to make my points, I want to refer briefly to the conceptual notion of space and try to show how space is gendered and highly politicised as a social resource in all societies. Throughout the known human narrative, certain spaces have been culturally, religiously and politically marked as either "male" or "female," and we know that in terms of the latter spaces, these were and still are largely linked to wom-

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en's breeding and feeding functions in all human societies, without exception. The spaces we refer to as *public* are assumed to be male, and for centuries men have excluded women from the public where all the key decisions relating to power are deliberated and implemented.

Additionally, across human time, those spaces that were feminised were also considered the least important; they were and still are places where women functioned through the benevolence of males, but which they never owned and still do not have entitlement to if they live in close intimate relationships with adult males. Notions of "the family" and "the household" remain fundamentally masculine in terms of all the key institutions of our societies, and women cannot create a "real" family; when they construct households these become immediately feminised and stigmatised as *Other* (female-headed/single-headed/women-headed, etc.).

Therefore, when we take a really close look at notions of space and its occupancy in gendered terms, we realise the shocking fact that it was only in the 20th century that women have occupied limited space in patriarchal societies in their own right as women and or as persons. Space was and continues to be largely defined as a male construct in every way conceivable, and for most societies of the South, one can-

not even refer to the changes that have occurred in Northern societies around this issue to make any generalisations. The majority of women in the South exist outside space as a politically defined resource. In the main, and especially for poor women on a continent like that of Africa, space remains fundamentally tied to the archaic notions of patriarchal privilege and the ownership of women both privately and publicly. That is why the Women's Movement as a political, ideological, activist and structural space must remain just that: a women-only space.

Additionally, it is vital for any conversation about the presence or absence of males in women's spaces to locate the notion of space itself within a political narrative about what space means in patriarchal gendered societies. The fact of the matter is that space is not neutral territory; it is highly politicised in class and locational terms. The rich live in certain spaces and the poor are systematically excluded from those spaces by barbed wire and electric fences, vicious dogs and poor males in overalls carrying guns in their hands. Space is kept under close scrutiny by the military which declares particular areas of a national territory "no-go" areas to the public, and the ruling classes themselves construct all sorts of exclusionary practices and mechanisms that keep certain groups of people out of 'their' spaces. Colonial whites used the state to put in place systems of surveillance that excluded Africans from their spaces through the institutionalisation of "passes" and the extension of license to any white to be able to stop any black person and demand that they account for their presence in a particular place at any time of the day or night.

And in one of those rarely acknowledged moments of patriarchal collusion between black and white men within the colonial enterprise, black men were allowed to stop and interrogate any black woman who was not in the presence of an adult male outside the confines of the "Native Areas" of colonial Southern Af-

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rica. The same practice probably applied in other parts of the continent and of the world, for that matter, at varying points in time.

In the period immediately after independence in many societies of this continent, women who were unaccompanied by an adult male and dared to re-enter or remain within the public arena after the formal working day was over, were and still are susceptible to arrest and criminalisation as "whores," who should be locked away for their own protection because "good women" are at home feeding the children and catering to the sexual needs of their husbands after the sun goes down.

These and many of the discourses which define and mark space as male and gendered, exclusionary of women as persons and as individuals who are entitled to mobility and to the occupancy of space in their own right, must be brought into focus in considering the pressure that men and certain groups of "good women" are putting on the rest of us within the Women's Movement to allow men into our limited political spaces.

My retort is that those women who like men so much that they cannot spend any time

during the day or night without male presence can set up what are called "mixed" organisations, which have a right to exist as all other civil society structures do which enhance human desires and interests in the common good; but not as part of the Women's Movement. Therefore, to insist that our Movement, which we have struggled to establish, often giving our entire lives to its creation, should become a "gender-mixed space" is not acceptable at all and must be vigorously contested.

Suffice it to say then that space is always highly contested and it is a political issue, and women must understand and keep that in mind as we ask ourselves questions with regard to the presence of men in our Movement. Spaces are never given—like all resources in our societies, whether these be material, aesthetic or social—spaces are struggled for, occupied and crafted, marked as belonging to a particular group through struggles that are basically about establishing ownership and using that ownership to fulfil an agenda. And the Women's Movement has a very clearly stated agenda—that of the emancipation of all women from patriarchal bondage and exploitation. Patriarchy has effectively used exclusion as a central tenet of its ideological claims to hegemony in all our societies, whether one is looking at notions of identity, of rights and privilege, of access and inclusion into institutions and sites of power.

Exclusionary practices use space as a key element in the implementation of a specific agenda. The claim that women's place is in "his home" is an old strategy that mobilises notions of femininity; locates them in the private, and imposes an ideology of domesticity through which females are socialised to believe and accept that the narrow, male-privileging spaces called "home" are the most appropriate spaces for them to spend all their lives in, breeding and working for "him" and "his family." This claim is so powerful that millions of women continue to believe it, even when they have been

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able to leave the home and acquire an education and professional skills that they could use to become autonomous. Still, they return to that space where they become “real” women in backward patriarchal terms; terms which they sometimes choose to define themselves through but which do not have to become the markers of all women, especially in the public which is a common space that belongs to all women and all citizens.

I think that one cannot consider the issue of male intrusion into women's political spaces without also considering that this demand is always made with the conscious desire to undertake surveillance on what women are thinking, saying and doing. I know that some of my sisters will say I cannot generalise because there are “nice” men who name themselves “feminist” and who are interested in securing the rights of women against patriarchal dominance. At one level, that may be true. There are a few men

who are experiencing a new political consciousness through association with women's struggles for freedom and autonomy. But in my book, such men need to get themselves into a political movement which will mobilise more men to change themselves, especially in relation to masculinity and the hegemony that patriarchal ideology grants all men. In that way they will be better able to support women's demands and rights for freedoms. Because while “nice” men do support women and “allow” their wives and partners to do activist work, they also influence the politics of women when they enter women's spaces and interact with the ideas and activism of women within the same framework.

Women must be able to formulate and express their own ideas as individual women and as a constituency that is affected by patriarchal laws and practices in uniquely gendered ways—an experience which no man is open to and cannot experience for as long as patriarchy defines gendered relationships to power and privilege in their present form. And when men are in women's spaces, women tend to react to their presence in intellectual and sexual ways. Men tend to intimidate most women; even the wimpiest male has an impact on the confidence of some women, and that is a cost we should not have to incur in our own spaces.

Men also tend to take over discourses and to steer them in particular directions, often adopting a defensive attitude towards women's radical consciousness and consequently damping down women's sense of entitlement to their rights. The presence of men in any women's space has fundamental consequences for women's sense of themselves and their visions of the future. In my opinion, women cannot afford to be nice about such a threat. In fact, it is through their intrusion into women's spaces that men have been able to redirect the politics of the Women's Movement in many countries—shifting its character from a radical political platform where women experience themselves

as autonomous and entitled persons, into a welfarist movement that is focused on the old sexist notions of reproduction and cultural custodianship—in behalf of the very males who claim that they are being excluded.

Surveillance of women's political consciousness is a key objective of the patriarchal backlash, which manifests itself through male demands for inclusion into women's spaces. One need only look at all those organisations that have men within them to see how collusive and compromised such organisations become within a short space of time. Often these men take over the most critical elements within the organisation, often the control over finances and the publications section, imposing a male voice over the views and knowledge that women bring to the public. We know that voice and the visibilisation of women's experiences are foundation stones of the Women's Movement—saying what we know and want is so very central to our agenda and our freedom. Why therefore are some women's organisations handing over their newsletters and documentation sections to males who gladly 'speak on their behalf.' Have we not demanded the right to speak for ourselves and used this facility to debunk the myths and stereotypes that still characterise the male media. Yet some women see no political threat with having a male, one of those 'nice' ones, occupying the status of knowledge processor in their organisations.

Within the language of compromise, such organisations are conforming to 'gender mainstreaming' which basically re-inforces the welfarist tendencies within women's activism through the de-politicisation of women's agency in the public.

Gender becomes an empty notion, without any relationship to power and contestation, and women are told to consider the interests of boys and men in the same breath as they attempt to bridge the yawning gap between them-

selves and males across time and space. The de-politicisation of women's struggles lies at the heart of the demand to include males in women's political spaces, because it is clear to males (as well as to conservative females, most of whom predominate in the Women's Movement across the globe) that by occupying a political space in the public which women have crafted and marked as their own, women become radical and develop a consciousness of themselves and their rights. This is a threat to the privilege and interests of males in all patriarchal societies.

For me, this is the core of the matter. When women occupy public spaces as persons who understand that for millennia they have been denied their inalienable rights as human beings, they begin to demand the restitution of those rights through the creation of structures within which they situate financial, technical and intellectual resources.



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When women become articulate about who they are sexually and cast off the old patriarchal myths about what a woman can be and what she is not allowed to become, women become powerful and acquire the ability to say no to violence; no to unpaid labour; no to exploitation and discrimination in the name of cultural preservation. Women become persons who relate to the state in new and challenging ways, no longer waiting for men in the state to dole out a few "favours" in the name of benevolent dictatorship.

Such women become autonomous and their Movement becomes a force for the transformation of oppressive relations of power in both the public and the private spheres.

Such women are a danger to all males, regardless of how some men define themselves. Therefore, women's spaces as politicised spaces must be occupied under the guise of "inclusion" and those women who resist such surveillance are accused of being man-haters and of acting in "exclusionary" ways—the same old story we have heard for centuries. When women first demanded the right to be free, to have access to education (not even equal access, just access to the collective knowledge of their respective societies), they were accused of hating men. Those of us who have refused to be ritualised and owned by men through heterosexual marriage, and who have sometimes gone on to love other women, are marked as "heretics" and man-haters. The tarring of women with the brush of heterosexist vitriol is well-known and most women fear it because it is a harsh and ruthless brush that marks a woman for the rest of her life as Other and Dangerous.

But we have learnt along the long road of our struggle for freedom, that compromising only takes us back even further than where we started. So we must hold on to our spaces because they are the only living spaces that we have and can own as women in these deeply woman-

hating, patriarchal societies we continue to live in at the present time.

If men want to engage in gendered politics, let them set up their own structures and create a new political discourse on democracy and equality with those who live in their societies. As politically conscious women well know, men have a lot of work to do on themselves. While a helping hand is always useful, the old saying that charity begins at home applies moreso today to men than ever before. Men must clean out their patriarchal household as men, first, and get themselves a new identity—one that does not depend on owning women; on buying and selling women; on raping, forcibly occupying, and pillaging the bodies of women or on plundering women's minds so that they can prove to each other that they are real men. Men need to develop a political ideology that does not require that men exclude women from the institutions that we too have built and which belong to us as much as they belong to all who live in our societies.

That is where I stand as a radical African feminist on the sacred spaces we have carved out, often with our very lives, and I am not prepared to share them with any man, as long as males continue to be privileged by patriarchy. ♪

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