[Kamila Hyat](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/kamila-hyat)

March 12, 2020

**Boys in the age of feminism**

For reasons that are locked into our history, ideology and culture, feminism has become a derogatory word in many places around the world including our own country.

Men who openly say they are feminist are few in number, even at the global level. Justin Trudeau is perhaps the best known of them. But there are others. Pop icon Harry Styles, actor Daniel Radcliffe and tennis player Andy Murray have all openly termed themselves feminists and said they want to uphold the equality of women in all spheres of life.

Though he is mainly known as a nationalist, Castro openly associated himself with the feminist movement, produced long pages of laws creating a more level playing field for Cuban women, brought them very close to equal status in a traditionally misogynistic country and at one point, during the Cuban Revolution, while handing out guns to soldiers, told men who demanded more than the women who were receiving a larger number, that the women were better soldiers, more disciplined and more capable of using their weapons intelligently.

These are not the kind of words we have been hearing at home. The argument goes that events which openly promote the rights of women have deeply polarized society and therefore should be curbed. The question of course is that if polarization is such a threat, why can’t views hostile to women instead be challenged. Participants in the women’s rights movement have reported that their fathers and brothers received threats after holding up posters which said that the rights of their daughter or sister over their bodies belong entirely to them (the girls).

It is indeed uplifting to see men join so openly in the feminist movement. Many casual observers had noted there were a large number of men present at the women’s day marches on March 8 this year than during previous years. But we must remember that these men probably made up well under 0.1 percent of Pakistan’s largely chauvinistic male population who are backed by an equal number of women holding views that are essentially hostile to women.

There is an argument that women, who as mothers, grandmothers, sisters and others help raise boys, are pushing them towards a narrow-minded outlook on women and a male-dominated stance on the world. This was clearly visible during TV vox pops aired following the controversy involving Marvi Sirmed and Khalilur Rahman Qamar. Almost no one spoke out for Marvi and even young, educated women said they needed no freedom beyond education, the right to move in public space and that most women in the country were in fact not oppressed at all.

But there is a wider question. It is a question that has begun to unfold across the world. Is the misogynistic manner in which many parents everywhere raise their boys contributing towards the failure of boys at school as well as their sexist attitudes? There are reports coming in from Europe, Asia and the US that boys are unable to match girls in academic performance, especially when it comes to crucial school-leaving exams given at 16.

The relative lack of maturity of boys at that age compared to girls is cited as one factor. Boys who do stay at school beyond 18 and move on to university catch up, and it is still men who hold the most coveted positions in corporations and enterprises. However, there are suggestions that girls are empowered, enabled and consistently given confidence by parents who assure them that they can choose whatever career path they opt for. However for boys, the choices are still kept relatively limited.

Whereas girls are encouraged in today’s world, notably in developed countries, to take up sport, adopt non-traditional hobbies and to excel, boys are largely handed the same toys they have been allotted for generations and less attention is directed towards their growth, their development, their confidence. In essence, they are expected to fend for themselves and through the learning years this affects their performance at school.

In the 1970s, when it was noted that girls obtained lower grades than boys in co-ed classrooms, often because boys were more willing to speak up and generally seen by teachers as being more naturally inclined towards hardcore subjects such as mathematics or physics, a process of change began.

The feminist movements pushed this forward. Much more emphasis was placed by schools and at home on ensuring a more just environment for girls by offering them the building bricks and complicated spatial puzzle games that had once been reserved mainly for boys. As the tilt in teaching methods and classroom pedagogy shifted to suit girls, girls moved ahead. Astonishingly, even in Singapore and China, girls today have the edge on boys in mathematics.

The girls have succeeded. Though they still lag far behind in many areas in developing countries including our own, despite what the clerics and ordinary people on the street insist, they have moved somewhat closer to equality. More girls go to school, more girls go to work – though the harassment, victimization and patriarchy they face has not changed. But for feminism – essentially an ideology which suggests men and women are equal in all walks of life – to succeed, we need to educate and empower boys to a point where they recognize the equal intellect and equal ability of girls. Many are still unwilling to do so. Others simply pretend in the presence of their female peers or friends.

The equation can only change step by step. Along the way, some conflict is to be expected. This conflict has occasionally occurred in the West as well, though we have witnessed it come forward in a particularly vile manner at home. Post after post on social media declares women who fail to follow tradition or seek anything more than education, limited free movement and a few other limited rights as deviants who will bring the pillars of society tumbling down. It is educated male feminists who can help hold up these pillars, take a stand alongside women and accept that men can care for their children as well as their partners and that women can outshine them as carpenters or pilots or astronomers.

These concepts would make many scoff. Feminism is simply not an acceptable phrase among men in our country or even among most women. A better understanding of what it means and more role models such could make the difference.

The writer is a freelancecolumnist and formernewspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com