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How Can We Help Women? By Helping Men

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In her thoughtful op-ed in the New York Times, family historian Stephanie Coontz answered the question "How can we help men?" with a ringing endorsement of gender equality: "By helping women," she answered. I'd like to suggest the converse is equally true. How can we help women? By helping men.

Women's progress towards equality is incontestable; it seems obvious that we are, today, more gender equal than we have ever been in our history. But progress towards greater equality has slowed: Women have pushed the glass ceiling higher on the corporate ladder, but all that leaning in has not crashed through to the board room. Girls and women compose half of all students in our law, medical and business schools, and have made enormous strides in STEM courses, yet working mothers are doing more housework and child care than they did 30 years ago. Every day, we read stories of sexual assault -- in our schools, homes, at parties and in our military.

How can we further the campaign for women's equality? How can we help women get there? By helping men. Particularly, we need to help men decouple those aspects of masculinity that hold men -- and women -- back from living the lives they say they want.

This is crucial. A 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center found that women and men rated "being a good parent" (94% of women, 91% of men) and "having a successful marriage" (84% of women, 83% of men) equally highly -- and nearly twice as important as "being successful in a high-paying career." (Interestingly, women rated career aspirations slightly higher than men did, 51% to 49%).

So women and men want the same thing: good careers, loving relationships and happy families. Women are advised to lean in or to opt out -- as if they can do it alone. But women can't have the lives they want without some support from men.

Let me offer a few examples. Take education. Four decades after a concerted effort to remedy dramatic gender discrimination in education, we read today about a "boy crisis" -- gender disparities in college attendance, a gender-grade gap with girls earning better grades and taking most academic honors, while boys populate the detention room, special education classes and are diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) far more often. Remedies abound, from the sensible (greater attention to individual learning styles) to

the illogical and possibly unconstitutional (single-sex classes with thermostats set at different temperatures, gender-specific classroom seating arrangements and course materials, all based on outdated stereotypes).

In reality, much of the cause of the "boy crisis" in education lies with the definition of masculinity held by the boys themselves -- the notion that academic disengagement is proof of masculinity. Helping boys to engage academically requires that we recognize different learning styles along an array of measures -- which in turn leads to recognizing diverse aptitudes and competencies, enabling everyone, girls and boys, to better achieve to their potential.

Or take balancing work and family. We know that women will not be able to balance work and family until -- well, until men do. If we want to help women, we need to help men find all those inner joys of housework that anti-feminists have been celebrating for decades -- or at least get us to do our share.

What about health? Yes, we know that women outlive men by about 5 years, 81 for women and 76 for men. Men are more likely to die of stress-related illness and miss work due to workplace accidents. By defining masculinity as risk-taking stoicism, men are less likely to have routine screenings, less likely to comply with workplace safety in the name of proving masculinity. Our notions of masculinity deprive our spouses and partners and families of our presence for those five years because of our adherence to these ideals of masculinity.

Conforming to these traditional ideas of masculinity may be hazardous to our health, but it is also hazardous to the health of our wives, partners and children. What's common among these is that men often feel they must prove their masculinity -- and they must prove it to other men. One wants to be a man's man, a man among men.

If the past few decades have made anything clear it's been that we are neither Martians nor Venusians. And what's good for Earthlings -- male and female -- is good for all of us. If we want to help women achieve greater equality, we have to engage men.