Strategies and Justifications used to Maintain and Defend Men’s Privilege¹

When a requirement for a gender analysis is raised in bureaucratic settings it is common that people will (appropriately) register this as a threat to male privilege and status.

Connell (1987) describes the ‘Patriarchal Dividend’ accruing to men including higher wages, greater wealth, more decision making power, servicing from women, more leisure time etc. Connell (2003) explains that calls for gender equality result in resistance from men who seek to defend male supremacy in terms of a deeply felt sense of male entitlement. This booklet catalogues some of the techniques used in this defence. [Note – each strategy is on a separate page making it easy to print and hand to interested party]

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While there are many justifications employed in the defence of privilege it is important to recognise three important aspects. First, most men do not recognise that they have any privilege at all, and are quick to assert those aspects of their identity or social location that confer *inferiority*, being working class, migrant, homosexual etc. Second, if at all reflected upon, most men would consider their social position in terms of entitlement, and some even use the term *rights* (Dragiewicz, 2011). Third, it is also relatively common for women to speak up to defend men when privilege is challenged. This can be explained as women’s socialised nurturing and peacekeeping drive wanting to ‘protect’ men under fire. Or alternatively women who are antifeminist based on their “personal success within the system: both professional success (a high status job with good pay) and social success (popularity with men, attractiveness, and a good marriage)” (Rindfleish, 2000). What follows are six common justifications for maintaining male privilege.
One very effective approach is to deny the existence of privilege and/or suggest that the protagonist is making a storm in a tea cup. He can trivialise the challenge by reminding those present that his behaviour or treatment from others is quite commonplace and normal, even unremarkable. Apple (1982, p. 37) explains that hegemony “is constituted by our very day to day practices. It is our whole assemblage of commonsense meanings and actions that make up the social world as we know it.”
Privilege can also be justified by denying any personal responsibility for a situation that benefits men over women. That the man may have informally caucused with his superiors to ensure the favourable decision is rarely admitted nor discovered. Bagilhole (2002) identifies collusion as one of four responses senior men have to the introduction of equal opportunity policies. The others include confusion (discussed below), cynicism (demanding women change and adapt) and contrariness (overt resistance).
Justification Three: I treat everyone as a person!

This form of humanist gendered neutrality based on the false individualism that treating everyone equally (regardless of gender) is the ultimate in women’s rights advocacy. In a series of in-depth interviews with senior Australian public servants Connell (2006) found a common degendered approach to their work. Many expressed the view that “if gender is systematically deemphasized, gender equity would seem to be achieved”. Respondents explained that gender is ‘not something we think about here’- and more, it seemed to be something they didn't want to think about.
The maintenance of the all the structural inequalities in Australian society relies on the widespread adherence to the idea of the ‘fair-go’ meritocracy. In spite of the evidence to the contrary (McNamee & Miller, 2004) many men fear that admitting unearned privilege will undermine the pride and deserving nature of their achievements and status. Such individualism is emblematic of neo-liberal patriarchy that denies the existence of systemic inequalities.
Leadership is an unquestionable, essential ingredient of modern bureaucracies and anyone who suggests that it might actually be an ‘alienating social myth’ (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992) is dismissed as irrelevantly crazy. Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) expose the dominant masculine norms associated with ‘successful’ leadership including competitive ethos, militaristic symbolism, male bonding, emotional detachment and viewing women as sexual objects. Within a competitive hierarchy the men’s power and associated privileges are both legitimated and celebrated. Mavin, Grandy, and Williams (2014) add that women seeking to progress in the hierarchy often develop masculinised practices including gender micro-violence between women.
A final justification for maintaining privilege is to point out to all parties that no-one has ever witnessed him speaking disrespectfully to women. It is not the case that sexist attitudes are personally embedded and consistently expressed by individual men (Flood & Pease, 2006). Rather an understanding of the performative aspect of masculinity (Brickell, 2005) and that fact that social practices are inherently reflexive means that men generally consciously represent themselves according to the social setting. Women can be particularly wary of the duplicitous nature of white collar men, in comparison to the relative direct sexism of work class backgrounds.
Along with the previous justifications there are commonly situations where men’s privilege is directly or indirectly challenged. While by no means exhaustive what follows is a list of a range of commonly employed strategies to ward off such challenges.

14 Strategies for warding off challenges to privilege
Strategy One: Provide advice and decisions on gender issues in spite of lack of knowledge/expertise

Very few people would feel comfortable to be the passenger in a jet where the pilot had little or no flight knowledge or experience. And yet it is common that men have the hubris to suggest they could engage in serious policy and program formulation on gender relations with the bare minimum of formal understanding. Storek (2011) demonstrates the consistency with which men tend to overestimate their knowledge and abilities.

Yes, I did a two day intensive on pilotty stuff a few years ago, and I have lots of experience flying. I think this lever is the take-off device.
Strategy Two: Withdraw from Discussions

The obverse strategy to the previous is to acknowledge that understanding gender dynamics is extremely complicated and therefore he would be remiss to even consider being part of a working group to discuss policy or programs. Alcoff (1991) gives an excellent analysis of the political consequences of privileged people refusing to speak on issues beyond their identity category. Pease (2010) also recognises the contradiction of the fact that when men speak on gender issues they tend to be taken more seriously directly because of their privileged status.
A time worn effective strategy is to ignore the content of the criticism and instead attack the person as being biased or emotional. Such a personal attack is also referred to as an ad hominem criticism meaning ‘to the man’ which Smith (2001) explains is apt given that women who provoke are disparaged precisely because they are not men. Anderson (2009) explains the role of the mass media in promoting the stereotype of feminists as man-haters and Roy, Weibust, and Miller (2007) demonstrate the negative impact this has on women’.
Strategy Four: Silence women by charging them with weakness

There is enormous pressure on women to demonstrate that they can perform effectively in a man’s world. It is an effective strategy to silence women’s complaints of discrimination by implying some innate feminine weakness. This results in an insidious double-bind where women who are compliant and cooperative will not have their voices heard, and those who speak up are written off as emotional. Similarly Oakley (2000) points out the double-bind for “women in leadership positions is that they must be tough and authoritative (like men) to be taken seriously, but they will be perceived as “bitches” if they act too aggressively.”
Strategy Five: Appear reasonable but require proof

There are a range of strategies that men use that are masked by appearing rational or reasonable. In this instance a challenge to privilege is not accepted until there is some empirical and robust evidence provided to support the claim. This can have the desired effect of either a) making women feel anxious about raising an issue unless they are thoroughly prepared with evidence, and b) distracting women with the task of researching and collating evidence before any action will be taken. This delaying tactic is a stock favourite of power holders.
A very common managerial response to challenges for action on social justice issues is to introduce a codified and generic policy and set of associated procedures. It is also quite common that these result in very little progressive systemic change. Riger (1991) for example demonstrates how most organisational sexual harassment processes actively discriminate against women and discourage complaints. Gummer (1990) notes that it is more helpful to see such strategies as cultural rites, symbolic gestures of appeasement that are not designed to solve substantive issues. See also Peirce, Smolinski, and Rosen (1998) on why sexual harassment complaints fall on deaf ears.
It should not be surprising that in an orthodox macho style of leadership prevalent in Australia that addressing gender concerns is constantly marginalised (Coleman, 2003) as the ‘real work’ is undertaken. Very often managers hear ‘gender’ as ‘women’s issues’ although a focus on the power and privilege of men and masculinity (as demonstrated in this booklet) is equally important. Sinclair (2000) found in her attempts to introduce ‘masculinities’ to senior male managers resulted in belligerent silence and then outright hostility. She concluded that it the topic of men and masculinities was ‘undiscussable’ with the men.
Strategy Eight: Use lots of inappropriate jargon

Use of corporate jargon to neuter the political effects of women’s demand for gender justice works well, and is often employed by women who fear their message may be ‘too strong’ unless tempered with managerial obfuscation. For example the City of Melbourne (2016) recommends “The Victorian Government establish formal partnerships with the community, corporate sector, not for profit sector and educational institutions to lead the development and commitment to a set of standards and the pathways to achieve gender equality”. Similarly Women’s Health Victoria (2016) states that “the ecological model of social change provides an evidence based foundation for a whole of society approach to gender equality that accounts for the relationships and dependencies between the different levels of society ...”. This so-called model has become the de rigueur corporate-speak framework that has been criticised both for its incoherence and anti-feminist impact (Pease, 2011).
Strategy Nine: Require that gender issues focus on hard facts and outcomes rather than ideological values

In our spreadsheet driven actuarial world, women’s rights and gender equality are often reduced to the observation and collation of gender disaggregated data. Countless government reports are filled with tables and spreadsheets demonstrating ‘facts’ about gender (actually sex) differences (Baden & Goetz, 1997). Many gender mainstreaming efforts become simplistic planning and evaluation documents largely devoid of theoretical underpinnings and disconnected from contemporary feminist political analysis (Hankivsky, 2005). The result is that gender is seen as an individual identity category whereas it is primarily a structural relationship. Thus Mukhopadhyay (2004) argues that achieving gender equality is as much a political as a technical project.
Diversity Management has become the latest corporate fad term to deal with challenges to power inequalities, in a way that completely obfuscates power and replaces with ‘interpersonal sensitivity’ or ‘awareness’. Sinclair (2000) observes that the language of diversity appeals more to men than gender as it is less threatening and goes with the idea that ‘Everyone is different so let’s all develop our communication skills and tolerance to bring out the best of everyone’. She argues that diversity management is a sell-out to a “management-controlled agenda determined to sanitize a conflict-laden issue and bestow on organisations the appearance of enlightenment without beginning to critique the management framework.”

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Social researcher Moore (2010) interviewed ribbon wearers to discover that for the majority it was effective fashion item to demonstrate ‘I’m someone who cares’, and was associated with little interest or action on political matters. On the lapels of powerful men however the politics is clear and effective, even though I enjoy the dividends of patriarchy, let’s pretend I care about women’s lives. The $3.7M annual budget of White Ribbon Australia is in effect the largest charity supporting the defence of male status with money spent on “self-congratulatory feel-good talk-fests and various other empty virtue-signalling initiatives” (Funell, 2016). Men have also been documented using their public support for anti-violence campaigns as a strategy to disarm women they then subsequently rape (Clark, Quadara, & Studies, 2010).
Humour is an effective defence if caught involved in misogynist or women undermining activities. Particularly in all male groups men enjoy bonding over ‘jokes’ at women’s expense. It is also quite common that male managers are given much more leeway in making mistakes by their colleagues than would be provided to women. This is because in the macho and hierarchical bureaucratic setting women are ‘not meant’ to be managers, and so may be under constant scrutiny by others seeking evidence of their lack of competence. On the other hand men are able to rely on the homosocial ‘boys-club’ to support and protect them through difficult times when (and if) their mistakes are uncovered.
A common and effective method for dealing with interpersonal challenges to privilege is simply to use verbal and non-verbal power tactics – interrupting, interjecting, eye-rolling, phone checking, smirking, prematurely closing the discussion, physically leaving. Feminist social psychologist Lips (1991) explores are great variety of these gender power games not just in the workplace but also within sexual relations, families, and political organisations.
Last but not least is a tried and true strategy by men everywhere who have been confronted by women on their sexism. Simply withdraw into a shell having taken offence. Better still, some men even skip straight past attempting to defend themselves with argument, and just accept the criticism, perhaps with an apology. Women often feel compelled to accept such contrition and with any luck the issue will blow over ... until the next time. If you happen to be a man reading this booklet please do your best to avoid this strategy and do your best to listen genuinely to women’s concerns about inequality. Remember, women have a lot of good reasons to be angry, so don’t take personal offence.
References


