Emma Watson’s Speech to UN

Today we are launching a campaign HeForShe. I am reaching out to you because we need your help. We must try to mobilize as many men and boys as possible to be advocates for change. We don’t just want to talk about it. We want to try and make sure it’s tangible. I was appointed as Goodwill Ambassador for UN Women 6 months ago.

The more I spoke about feminism, the more I realized that fighting for women’s rights has too often become synonymous with man-hating. If there is one thing I know for certain is that this has to stop. For the record, feminism by definition is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes.

When I was 8, I was called bossy because I wanted to direct a play we would put on for our parents. When at 14, I started to be sexualized by certain elements of the media. At 15, my girlfriends started dropping out of sports teams because they didn’t want to appear masculine. At 18, my male friends were unable to express their feelings.

I decided that I was a feminist. This seemed uncomplicated to me. But my recent research has shown me that feminism has become an unpopular word. Women are choosing not to identify as feminists. Apparently, [women’s expression is] seen as too strong, too aggressive, isolating, and anti-men, unattractive even.

Why has the word become such an uncomfortable one? I think it is right I am paid the same as my male counterparts. I think it is right that I should be able to make decisions about my own body. I think it is right that women be involved on my behalf in the policies and decisions that will affect my life. I think it is right that socially, I am afforded the same respect as men.

But sadly, I can say that there is no one country in the world where all women can expect to see these rights. No country in the world can yet say that they achieved gender equality. These rights are considered to be human rights but I am one of the lucky ones.

My life is a sheer privilege because my parents didn’t love me less because I was born a daughter. My school did not limit me because I was a girl. My mentors didn’t assume that I would go less far because I might give birth to a child one day. These influences are the gender equality ambassadors that made me who I am today. They may not know it but they are the inadvertent feminists needed in the world today. We need more of those.

If you still hate the word, it is not the word that is important. It is the idea and the ambition behind it because not all women have received the same rights I have. In fact, statistically, very few have.
In 1997, Hillary Clinton made a famous speech in Beijing about women’s rights. Sadly, many of the things that she wanted to change are still true today. What struck me the most was that less than 30% of the audience were male. How can we effect change in the world when only half of it is invited or being welcomed to participate in the conversation?

Men, I would like to give this opportunity to extend your formal invitation. Gender equality is your issue, too. Because to date, I’ve seen my father’s role as a parent being valued less by society. I’ve seen young men suffering from mental illness, unable to ask for help for fear it would make them less of a man. In fact, in the UK, suicide is the biggest killer of men between 20 to 49, eclipsing road accidents, cancer and heart disease. I’ve seen men fragile and insecure by what constitutes male success. Men don’t have the benefits of equality, either.

We don’t often talk about men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes but I can see that they are. When they are free, things will change for women as a natural consequence. If men don’t have to be aggressive in order to be accepted, women won’t feel compelled to be submissive. If men don’t have to control, women won’t have to be controlled.

Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong. It is time that we all see gender as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals. We should stop defining each other by what we are not and start defining ourselves by who we are. We can all be freer and this is what HeForShe is about. It’s about freedom. I want men to take up this mantle so that their daughters, sisters and mothers can be free from prejudice but also so that their sons have permission to be vulnerable and human too, reclaim parts of themselves they abandoned and in doing so, be a more true and complete version of themselves.

You might think: who is this Harry Potter girl? What is she doing at the UN? I’ve been asking myself the same thing. All I know is that I care about this problem and I want to make it better. And having seen what I’ve seen and given the chance, I feel it is my responsibility to say something. Statesman Edmund Burke said all that is need for the forces of evil to triumph is for good men and women to do nothing.

In my nervousness for this speech and in my moments of doubt, I told myself firmly: if not me, who? If not now, when? If you cast doubts when opportunity is presented to you, I hope those words will be helpful. Because the reality is if we do nothing, it will take 75 years or maybe 100 before women can expect to be paid the same as men for the same work. 15.5 million girls will be married in the next 16 years as children. And at current rates, it won’t be until 2086 before all rural African girls can have a secondary education.

If you believe in equality, you might be one of the inadvertent feminists I spoke of earlier and for this I appraud you. We must strive for a united world but the good news is we have a platform. It is called HeForShe. I invite you to step forward, to be seen and I ask yourself: if not me, who? If not now, when? Thank you.