

ALL MEN

MALE VOICES TELLING THEIR STORIES TO MAKE A CHANGE

04 The first difficulties

Excerpts from testimonies are heard

Man 1:

The first time was bad because I felt like I was being portrayed as a worm because I'm a man.

Man 2:

You're convinced you're very modern and progressive, then you find out that you've been fooling yourself a bit.

Man 3:

The difficulty was that I didn't think it applied to me.

Musical interlude

Irene:

Welcome, to all men. And also welcome to all the other people listening.

You noticed this time, didn't you?

I'm very happy that you found my thoughts at the end of the previous episode useful and that you wanted to let me know.

Today's episode will also bring along a series of considerations, but let's take it slowly.

First of all, once again, many of you wanted to answer the question I asked, that is when you realized that your gender, the male gender, was ONE gender and not THE gender.

Here are some of the answers I received:

Testimony 1:

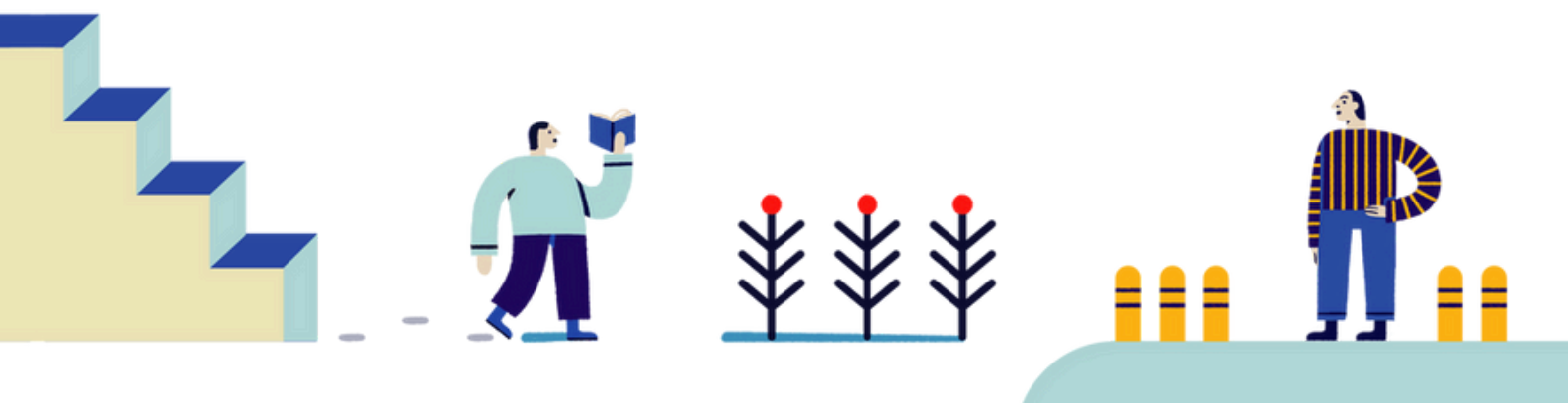
I was already aware of this as a teenager, when I began to take a keen interest in the female gender, and not just sexually. Sometimes I had to act like a boy, for the sake of convention or social acceptance, but it always made me uncomfortable.

Testimony 2:

I was lucky (privileged?) to grow up in a family where equal rights and duties between genders were taken for granted. During a lunch with my mother's relatives, I was so upset that my aunt was not eating at the table with everyone else, but standing in the kitchen, always ready to serve the guests, that I insisted stubbornly (as a small child is capable of doing) that she come and eat at the table with us. Later, my father explained the reason for this strange behavior (which I never saw at home, either before or since then). That's when I understood that there was a part of society that conceived the female gender as serving the male gender and that I lived in a privileged position.

Testimony 3:

Late, like everyone else, it seems. I owe it in particular to my older sister, who introduced me and my other sister to feminism. I think she started talking about these issues six years ago, during my last years of high school. Before it was explained to me and I took the time to think about it, I had never given it any thought. Like others, I thought it was a convention whose effect on society didn't exist anymore. Only later I connected the use of the generic masculine to a series of memories. During middle school and high school, when we happened to address specifically female issues (whether it was anatomy, history, or literature), the girls were caught up in an excitement that at the time seemed arrogant and, above all, unjustified to me. It seemed that just because the topic dealt with their gender, it had to be the most interesting and worthy of analysis, to the detriment of other topics that were (for me) objectively more fascinating. Only after I began to reflect on feminist issues. I realised that it was not arrogance, but excitement at the idea of finally being the main characters of a story that has always been focused on us men. And that therefore, always using the generic masculine still has a significant impact on society.



Irene:

This is "All men - male voices telling their stories to make a change", a podcast that starts with the belief that the role of the male in eliminating gender-based violence is central, but that doesn't mean it's easy. And so men will be the ones to talk about it, because if the problem is systemic, the solution has to be collective.

Today's question is the last but one in the first phase of the interview, the one where we explored the relationship with the self. Let me remind you that the next two phases will concern the relationship with other men and then the relationship with women. But let's take it one step at a time and focus on today's question, which goes something like this: What was it like to approach these issues for the first time? What were and what are the difficulties?

Man 1:

Well, I was frustrated. At first I was very frustrated because when I gained access to certain insights, or rather certain information, before insights, I felt they were an attack on me, something that questioned the other forms of discrimination I suffered. So the fact that it was pointed out to me (not necessarily by people, but also by books, simply by things I read, by films I watched) that I was the bearer of a certain kind of privilege, I experienced it as if it jeopardized and questioned the fact that I was coming from a very poor family, who lived on food donations from the church. And so the thing was, "Oh yeah? So what about this? So this isn't the case anymore?" And so at first I was really frustrated. After a while, I realized that in reality, the concept of intersectionality is that those struggles were intersected and that the fact that I had a certain type of privilege did not mean that I was not discriminated in other ways and, above all, that my privilege could not represent an opportunity for me to improve as a person, to observe certain dynamics and to be less harmful to other people. Especially because I realized how awful and painful it was to be bullied, to be poor, to come from a family where we spoke a strong Salento dialect at home in Rome (Salentino is a discriminated dialect because it's the dialect of Puglia, which was historically discriminated as part of the south of Italy, TN). As if, in the end, all this turned out to be a tool to go even deeper, because the people I met who tried to go further, to accept that request, that information about their privilege, succeeded precisely because they said: wait, you're not telling me that I'm bad, you're telling me that there is something in me that, if brought to my attention, if brought to the surface, needs to be guided in a certain direction.



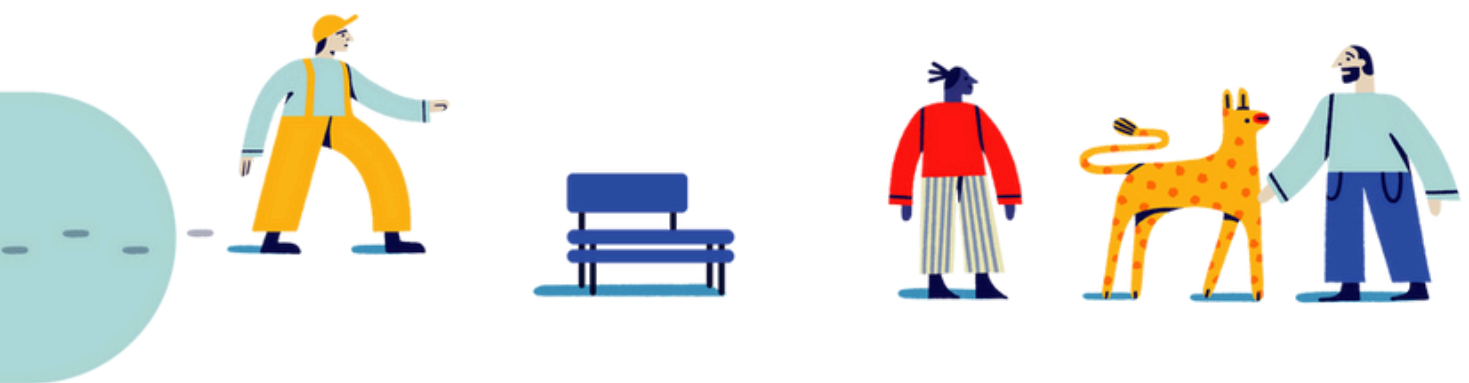
No one is telling me that I am wrong, nor that I am to blame. No one is telling me that I must suffer the pains of hell. And even if someone is saying something similar, if they say it in a way that is unpleasant, they will have reasons for communicating it in that way. But after brooding over it for a long time, then at a certain point, I don't know if I ever really stopped brooding, because noticing so many small privileges, in my opinion, is something that punctuates your whole life and you never stop realizing it. And it's not true that it's an easy path, it's a difficult, tiring path, but it's worth it. I mean, I don't think I'm capable of doing the "do it because everything will be wonderful" advertisement. No, it's a pain, it's tiring, it's constantly tiring. And every time you think, 'Wow, what a cool guy I've become' because you compare yourself to the worst, then you realize that's not how it works, it's not by comparing yourself to the horror that you have dignity, but comparing yourself to what you can become, to what you can be.

Man 2:

Having grown up in a predominantly female environment, with mostly female friends, in mostly female schools, in an almost entirely female university, I considered myself a man who was very attentive to certain issues, certainly progressive in my thinking and very close to women's issues. In reality, in recent years, when the issue became more topical and I began to read about it, to study it, and analyze it, I realized that I still had a lot to learn, that there were many things I had to learn, many things that I took for granted were not so obvious. Perhaps many times, more or less unconsciously, I had contributed to perpetuating a certain type of culture. So perhaps the greatest difficulty is to break down one's own certainties. That is, you are convinced that you are already very modern and progressive, and then you find out that instead you have a lot to learn about the subject and that many times you have not been so progressive or modern after all, and you have been fooling yourself a little.

Man 3:

Studying all these topics and learning about these issues definitely brings with it a mixture of guilt and a desire to improve. I mean, there's always an underlying desire moving you to be better, to learn more, that allows you to have a better relationship with everyone around you. The other thing is definitely the huge sense of guilt you feel when you study something and realize it's wrong, and you immediately think, "Did I do this?" and the answer most of the time is "yes."



And if that brings with it a great sense of guilt, especially for the offenses you may have caused without realizing it, which could also be long-lasting, I think of how easily we gave nicknames in our youth or the many other nasty things we did. Then I also think, again based on my own experience, that there is a fear that this behavior may have compromised relationships, not necessarily romantic ones, but simply relationships between two people, because I was repeating this behavior.

Man 4:

Yeah, still today, because I'm still very far behind on this path, I feel behind. Now I'm exploring it much more, thanks to the birth of my son, and I've had an extra push to learn more, but anyway, now as before, the difficulty is coming to terms with yourself, your past, having lived in privilege and having behaved in ways that you later realize were completely wrong from every point of view, and so you also have to come to terms with your past, and if you're not ready enough, you might have—it happened to me—a moment when you think “okay, I don't feel like thinking about this, so I'll put it on hold for a moment”, with the promise of coming back to it, and then in reality letting years go by. When I felt mentally capable of thinking about this, I began to explore it more deeply, to understand more and to question myself more, coming to terms with my past self. Nothing crazy, but from insults of a certain kind directed at women instead of the non-sexist ones that were available, and therefore choosing a certain insult unconsciously for various reasons, to thoughts or considerations about career women, successful women, jokes from friends in the basketball group... Fortunately nothing from a sexual point of view, in the sense that I have never been in any infamous “soccer chat”, I have never even silently participated, partly because I didn't play soccer, but anyway, the idea is the same. So luckily I don't have to deal with that, but with many other things, yes, with all the other things, yes.

Man 5:

As far as approaching these issues there have been some episodes in the course of my life, some historical moments. The first time was bad because I felt portrayed as a worm as a male, the bearer of a series of intentions that I did not feel were mine, but which were thrown at me. And so it was awful. It was like someone wanted me to pay for a movie ticket for a film I hadn't seen, but they wanted money from me too. But why, I didn't go in to see that trash? Why not, actually you were there, you were there! Oh well.



So the first time was a bit like that. I felt confused, along with many others, because as a male I was lumped together with all those things that I don't agree with and never have agreed with. But as male, I was considered part of that group and therefore an accomplice, let's put it that way. And so it wasn't nice because I didn't feel looked at in the slightest, I felt manipulated like a stereotype, with this prejudice. And since my intention was very important to me, I was very offended. I was very resentful when I felt treated like that, like, what do you know about me? But if you knew me, you would never say such a thing to me. Because as a male, I have to be a, b, c, d... This, narcissistically, in a somewhat self-centered way, I didn't like because I only considered the side, how can I put it, of the accusations that were made against the male world, which I, how can I put it, objectively couldn't agree with because I wasn't there when those things were done.

At first, I couldn't bring myself to think "Yes, it's true, I wasn't there that time, but I was there other times" so when you say "Yes, but Stefano, you should take care of how you behave as a man" well, maybe I should have said "I didn't commit that crime, I didn't commit this, I didn't commit that, but damn me I did commit this, and this, and that". It's a bit like the "not all men". I mean, of course, if I were to find myself in the same room with those guys from the soccer chats who say and write those things and who rape and beat women, it's obvious that I wouldn't feel comfortable in that room.

If someone wants to put me in there, I'll take it out on whoever wants to put me in there. But it's true that I've been in other rooms, not as bad, but I've been there. Why? Because when you're born male, it's hard to avoid all the rooms, partly because you have to visit them before you can tell if they're worth it. I don't know how to say it, there's no key, they don't give you an instruction manual called "Guide to Being a Boy in God's Grace" beforehand, you just have to do certain things. Then you do them and you realize that something was wrong, maybe you can't even pinpoint exactly what was wrong. But you think "there's something that doesn't feel right, now I'll try to figure out what it is". Other times, however, I am absolutely certain that I felt quite comfortable, perhaps not in the right place but certainly not in the wrong place. So when I approached this topic and when I heard some women talk back about all the crap that is in male and sexist attitudes, my first reaction was a bit of outrage because I didn't recognize myself in that group.

It took me a while to realize that you don't have to be in the stands, you don't have to be a hooligan, but I have been to the stadium. I've even insulted the referee sometimes. Then again, I've never punched anyone, I've never stolen the other team's scarf, I've never waited for the other team to beat them up, but I have been to the stadium.



And so I believe that in the end, everyone should try to break out of the stereotype and come to terms with their own behavior, trying to understand which behaviors are best not to repeat, which ones may have generated guilt, which ones may have highlighted responsibilities, and which ones never belonged to me.

But I realized later that when a woman looked at me and saw me as a man, she couldn't know if I was one of those men who etc., etc. As a man, I was suspected of having the wrong attitudes. I'm 62 now, and I can say that I understand this today. It still doesn't apply to me, that accusation still doesn't refer to me, but it applies to my gender, so playing innocent... maybe not.

Man 6:

The difficulty is that you always make mistakes, error is right around the corner. By mistake I mean falling into certain dynamics. You don't even realize it, but you always fall into it, continuously, constantly. Apart from the fact that it's not very popular, I mean... Why should you do it? As a man, I mean, why should you do it? It's almost like thinking "Excuse me, but will you shut up? Are you anti-male? You're shooting yourself in the foot". It's a bit difficult, also because it's tiring. I mean, it's generally more common to hear people say "What a pain in the ass, damn it, have a laugh," so you take some steps backward without realizing it, also because you're surrounded by other things.

Man 7:

The difficulty lies in the fact that I didn't think it concerned me. Quite simply. On the one hand, I've always been very interested in underdogs stories, ever since I was very young, so part of me was naturally drawn to these issues, but not because of their specifics, simply because I felt that by addressing the needs of a minority, I would have done the right thing. It was a bit of blind faith in that sense. On the other hand, as I said before, I felt that it didn't really concern me, and if you feel that something doesn't concern you, you don't invest in it. Certainly, following the content of certain content creators made it much easier to understand, comprehend, and become passionate about it for personal interest and also, I won't deny it, for affection. I think I've made great progress. However, I think that in the back of my mind there is always 'you're safe, you're fine', and so I think this is still a difficulty. In the sense that, for example, I feel very strongly about racial issues and I feel sorry, I get angry, I get passionate, but in the back of my mind I know I'm white, so it's always a bit like a seesaw going back and forth. I get closer, I get angry, but then I get scared, I pull away because I'm in my safe space.



Man 8:

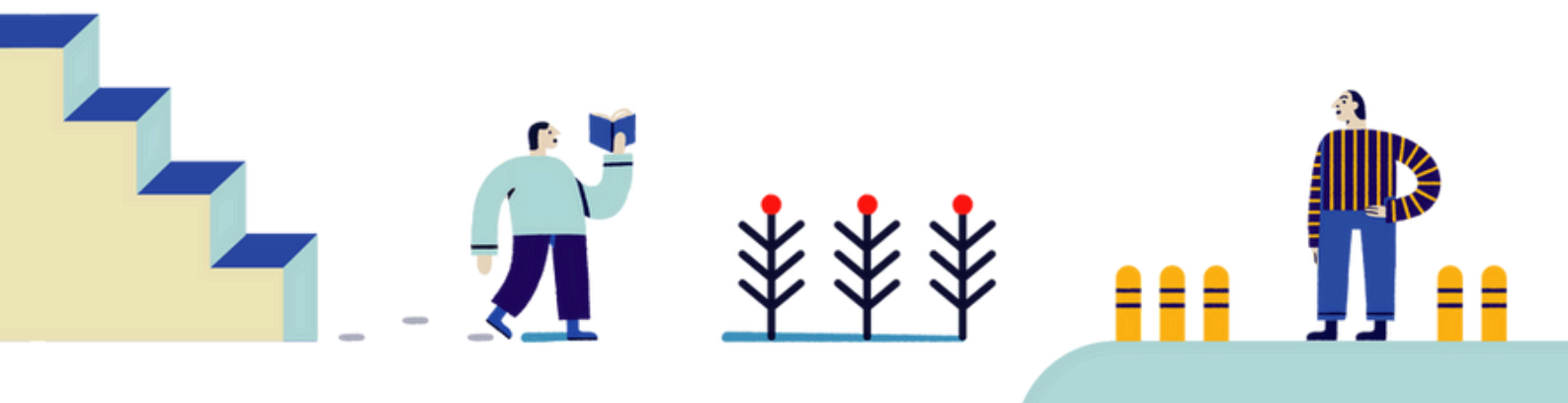
Approaching the topic wasn't actually difficult for me personally because it's always been a topic that has interested me, the whole issue of gender equality, diversity, etc. My main difficulty, which I think is due to my ADHD, is staying focused on a topic and then actually taking it apart, dissecting it, and I'm always afraid of coming across as superficial when maybe I have a thought that is very clear in my head, I want to express it, but I'm not able to express it because in my head there's a puzzle of information that I've put together, so that's simply my difficulty in approaching the topic, not the topic itself. Because fortunately, even in my family, meaning the family we have built now, there are no taboo topics. In the sense that we talk about everything, there are no topics that you say "No, come on, maybe this is a little difficult to address," so we address everything calmly. And I repeat, I've always found the topic very interesting, perhaps from the beginning, that is, from when I began to understand that there was a difference.

Man 9:

Well, actually, the difficulties weren't a lot. I mean, for me, feminism really meant salvation, because it gave me the chance to understand that there was another way, another possibility of being a man different from the various examples I had when I was young. So I had another path. Above all, it gave me the tools to understand how to deconstruct gender and therefore helped me to construct a gender that resembled me, that is, something I felt closer to. And indeed, at a certain point, it even helped me to almost stop giving importance to gender, in the sense that I am perhaps at a point in my journey where I am almost not interested in being defined as male. If you don't want to define me as male because I have a vagina, that's fine, it's your fucking problem, I don't care. It says more about you than it does about me.

Man 10:

The difficulty for me was acquiring and maintaining that sensitivity to understand the forces at play, to understand what forces are now at work in this conversation, in this situation, in this environment. It really is a continuous training that you have to practice every day. Otherwise, it's a bit like confidence with a language: if you don't use it, you lose it. So, if you stop paying attention to these things, then you have to train yourself again, which is a sign that there is a culture that unfortunately continues to hide them, continues to disguise them, and continues to misrepresent them. So you have to train yourself to keep them awake.



What does training mean? Always comparing yourself with other people, understanding what is happening and what is not, keeping up to date, perhaps discovering how certain problems have affected the younger generations, how they interpret them, how they talk about them. This is a continuous training for me, because I understand very well that as soon as you stop or, in a certain sense, try to relax, the rest of the culture, which is still full of patriarchy and oppressive powers, ultimately prevails, at least from a quantitative point of view, overwhelming you.

Man 11:

One of the biggest difficulties for me is constantly having to be aware that I have significant blind spots when it comes to reality and the perspective from which I view things, because of a number of privileges that I don't see because I have them, I was born with them and therefore I don't realise I have them. Being gay doesn't help in this, because even from a relational/emotional perspective, my partner is another man, so there is another gender that coincides with mine. This makes it a little more difficult, or you run the risk of finding it a little more difficult to gain a broader perspective. In this regard, it always helps me a lot to talk to the women in my life, starting with how sanitary pads work, the difficulties women have in returning home in the evening, and this magical and terrible world I have discovered of beauticians. All things that may seem absolutely silly, trivial, obvious, but which make me truly realize that I lack perspective.

And having continuous contact with the women in my life helps me fill these gaps, helps me get closer to them, helps me with my blindness to these issues.

Man 12:

At first, it wasn't difficult because I'm a very curious and enthusiastic person, so whenever I discover something that allows me to see a little bit more of the world, of the universe, I get really excited and want to tell others about it. When I started talking to other people and then on social media about a series of feminist views that questioned some things we take for granted or don't realize and therefore unconsciously take for granted as well, on the one hand I got "likes" from those who agreed, but on the other hand, a little more subtly, I sensed an "ok, what is this telling us? Why are you questioning the rules?". One of the things that didn't come across directly, but I perceived indirectly, was that a certain way of talking about and experiencing feminism was immediately linked to sexual orientation. Therefore I was talking that way and saying those things because I had to be homosexual.



As if defending everyone's right to love whomever they want somehow meant "I'm coming out," as if it were unthinkable to defend a right that you will not benefit from. And this says a lot about a certain individualistic way of being in our society, where I deal with things that interest me, you mind your own business, get on with it, don't worry about others because others don't care about you. And this is something I have always felt since I was a child and I have never appreciated it.

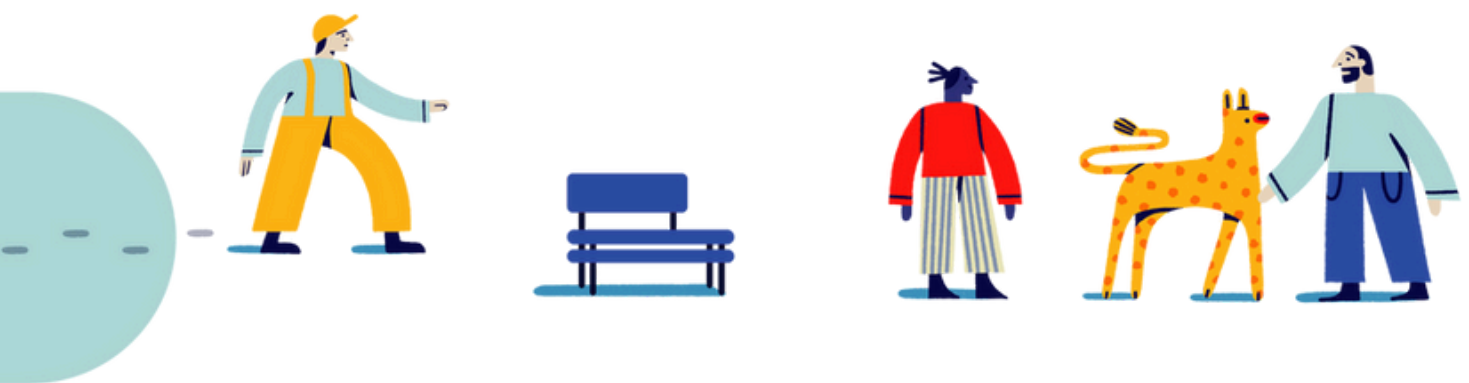
Man 13:

The first time, you feel a bit ignorant or at least that you don't know these things very well, so it's probably a bit more difficult to express your opinion. Because clearly in some contexts (you mentioned this too), there is the fact that you don't feel capable of speaking the same language as people who perhaps talk about these issues with a certain knowledge of the right language.

So, definitely there were some difficulties, because I clearly have my own ideas, which are simple to express, so sometimes you don't even express them because you think they're too simple, too trivial. So yes, I would say that basically, I have a bit of difficulty expressing myself freely in contexts where there are people who know much more than I do. Because you're afraid of saying bullshit. In my opinion, the scariest thing is being too simple and predictable. Because if I say, 'men are worth as much as women, there should be no distinction whatsoever', it's a clear, limpid, crystal-clear concept that gets through to you. But then, even when talking to friends, they say, 'yeah, well, thanks for nothing, you're not saying anything new, the problem lies elsewhere', etc. So yes, I inform myself, I realize that I could do even more to inform myself and to have a deeper understanding of these issues, but I also realize that since I'm not an activist and don't have to speak to certain audiences, I probably don't even need to.

Man 14:

Perhaps the disclaimer I can make is that technically I have never approached these issues in a scientific, reasoned way, etc. For me, gender issues or the relationship between males and females, any discussion of this kind is more a matter of everyday experience, I don't know how to put it. Philosophical moment: there is a phrase by Saint Paul, if I remember correctly, in a letter to I don't remember which Christian community, which says, "Test all things; hold fast to what is good" This is my approach to life. When I am faced with something, perhaps in a sometimes overly rational way, I try to say, OK, why am I faced with this? How can it be useful to me? Why am I carrying it with me? And I try to take home a moral or something from the situations that happen to me.



I think it's a bit of a legacy of the Catholic background that I carry with me and a bit of a legacy of Disney cartoon culture, where there's always a moral to be found in things. So, having had these two models of development during my childhood and adolescence, I've carried this with me.

Man 15:

There are many difficulties, because while it's true that my father is a man who, as Truffaut said, loves women, it's also true that my mother sometimes hated women. So it was very difficult to interpret feminism. They lived through the 1970s, when it was more of a struggle in the streets. Now, unfortunately, almost no one takes to the streets anymore, and you see everything through screens, so you never really know what is right and what is wrong. You never know if someone is exaggerating on one side or if they are exaggerating on the other. It's difficult now to take a feminist stance or be a friend of feminists, if you can say that, because there's so much confusion, and it's not the fault of those who promote this idea, it's the fault of the world we live in now. You read something and then the person who wrote it, who should agree with the other person, finds fundamental points of conflict, and you say, 'How can you be on the same side if you two are butting heads like two goats? I mean, it's very difficult, but I repeat, it's not the fault of those who present this problem to people, the fault lies in the fact that now, unfortunately, everyone can do anything or say anything, because there's the internet, there's social media, everyone does everything, and so you have to find the right way, the right person to read, to listen to, who makes you think... because otherwise you're limited to worthless slogans. This is something I don't like, and so I find it very difficult personally to approach feminism in depth today.

Man 16:

I don't want to praise myself, but for me, when someone makes a rational argument and presents you with the truth, my reaction has often been to try to understand, to listen, to help balance this world. Because I have always been, in every context of my life, on the side of the underdogs, that is, I recognize that the opportunities we men have are not the same as those available to women. In my own small way, I clearly try to weigh this up and create a balance. There are certainly instances where I am wrong, where I say the wrong things, where I make mistakes, and I am a person who has to keep learning and improving myself.

What are the problems? Sometimes it scares me when certain discussions turn into a war between men and women, because if I can make the comparison, I think of racism as a concept.



Irene:

And as we said last time, it's hard to say to yourself, 'I consider myself a good person, yet I've said and done questionable things and didn't even realise it', because you lose your certainties and find yourself having to question your idea of yourself. And sometimes these thoughts become too much and, as a defence mechanism, you give up.

Man 2:

And if you're not ready enough, you might have—it happened to me—a moment when you say, okay, I don't feel like thinking about myself this way, so I'll put it on hold for a moment. With the promise of coming back to it, and then in reality, years go by.

Irene: Then there is the enormous obstacle to overcome, which is why this podcast is called "all men", that is the idea that these issues do not concern you because you are "one of the good guys." I don't harass, rape, or kill, so what do you want from me? Why are you picking on me too? This is the main objection I've heard from men in the 10 years I've been dealing with these issues, and it never surprises me. I mean, I understand it. We live in a society where even when a man rapes or kills, he is described as "the good guy who lost control," so how can the others not be good guys? the ones who would not even touch a woman with a flower? The damage caused by the unawareness of male privilege is extensive, varied in nature, often subtle, and completely normalized. For example when everyone in a meeting is a doctor but you're just a young lady, when everyone is called by their last name but you're called by your first name, when we address everyone formally but it's easier to address women informally, if coffee needs to be made we ask a woman, even if she's working like everyone else. And if she got a promotion, who knows who she slept with, and if she acts badly, she's a whore. And at home, who do we take for granted to clean, cook, and go grocery shopping? Does the man do the shopping in the house? Then who wrote the list? Who has the mental load of always knowing what is missing and what is not? Who buys gifts for the family? Who maintains relationships? Who knows where things are in the house?

Man 3:

At first, I couldn't bring myself to think "Yes, it's true, I wasn't there that time, but I was there other times" so when you say "Yes, but Stefano, you should take care of how you behave as a man" well, maybe I should have said "I didn't commit that crime, I didn't commit this, I didn't commit that, but damn I did commit this, and this, and that"



Irene: There is a whole underworld of less blatant and less physical but equally serious discrimination that is difficult to become aware of but easy to act upon. So yes, most men do not harass, rape, or kill. And for this reason, most men are convinced that they do not discriminate against women, because most men call "culture" what is in fact discrimination. And it's okay to realize this now; that's why we're here. It is also very anxiety-provoking to believe that you are now able to recognize discrimination and question yourself (in jargon we would say: to be deconstructed) and then realize that there are still blind spots.

Man 4:

And every time you think, wow, what a cool guy I've become, because you compare yourself to the worst, then you realize that's not how it works.

Irene:

Obviously, the more you become aware of your shortcomings, the more you know that you know nothing, the more you question the credibility of your behavior and the things you say. It's impostor syndrome. I was so convinced of the things I said, I felt like I was so ahead of the game, and look at me now. So maybe I can't talk about these things, who gives me the right? Every day I realize the mistakes I made just the day before. Please, if you can, don't let the fear of not being perfect prevent you from trying to make a difference. There is an extreme need for men to talk about these issues with other men, and we can't afford to wait for everyone to memorize Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* before trying. (Without sounding like an advertisement, I have written an entire book on the greater usefulness of 100 people trying rather than 10 succeeding. If you are interested, it is called "Noi c'eravamo. Il senso di fare attivismo") Also because talking about it among men is the most immediate way to get those who have never explored these issues on board, and there are many men who have yet to start!

Man 5:

Technically I have never approached these issues in a scientific, reasoned way, etc



Irene:

It's true that there's a lot of material online, but first of all you have to want to look for it, and perhaps without someone you know sparking your interest, it's more difficult. And then...

Man 6:

You have to find the right way, the right person to read, to listen to, who makes you think... because otherwise you're limited to worthless slogans.

Irene: Finally, I don't want you to think that I haven't noticed the elephant in the room:

Excerpts from testimonies can be heard

Man 1:

Feminism

Man 2:

Feminist views

Man 3:

Clearly feminism

Man 4:

Feminism

Irene:

I know that this term has been mentioned several times, not only in this episode but also in previous ones. But it's not the right time yet. We'll talk about it later. As always, I am curious to know how you would have answered today's question. If you would like to do so, simply go to www.irenefacheris.it/tuttigliuomini and fill out the anonymous form. We will listen to some of the testimonials you leave at the beginning of the next episode, in 15 days. Until then, remember, these issues affect all men. Because all men have the extraordinary privilege of being heard by other men, for example those who will never listen to this podcast. Talk to them. Talk to each other. Change things.

