

Michael Kimmel is one of the leading researchers and writers on men and masculinity in the world. He is a distinguished professor of sociology and gender studies at Stony Brook University, where he directs the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities, and is the author of more than twenty books on gender issues. Kimmel offers us his unique insight on how he expects gender to play into the upcoming presidential election, given that there are an unprecedented number of female candidates in the race. He shares his thoughts on how the climate for women candidates has changed since Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential bid, and why it is so important for men to support women candidates in the pursuit of gender equality. As Kimmel tells us, "We have been doing ourselves, as a nation, an enormous disservice by denying women the opportunity."

Marianne Schnall: Back when I first began writing my first book there were no female candidates running for president. Now we have Hillary Clinton, we have Carly Fiorina, and Jill Stein, all who have announced their candidacies. Do you see it as a measure of progress to now have three female presidential candidates?

Michael Kimmel: Sure. I see it as a measure of progress that we would have women seeing themselves as potential presidential material regardless of their political position. The three women who have already announced are serious candidates. They are not simply sort of fluffy or symbolic efforts to pander to a constituency, but serious women in their own right, regardless of what you think of their political positions on things.

MS: And I know in our interview for my book you spoke a lot about the very blatant sexism that Hillary Clinton faced during her 2008 run. Do you think the climate for women candidates has improved since then?

MK: I think this is one of those both/and's rather than either/or questions. I do think the climate has changed significantly. But of course, she will be, as all female candidates will be, hounded by questions of women's competence at the absolute top level. Can women do that? Can we trust women to have their finger on the button, so to speak? And I think that those kinds of antediluvian notions were in evidence at the Republican debate in the exchange between Megyn Kelly and Donald Trump.

MK: That is, immediately, to even offer a question to him, he came back with a kind of dismissive, derogatory, anti-women idea. I think that that is going to be hounding women also. No matter how competent they are, the media will report what they are wearing, the media will report how

they are doing their hair, whether or not they are wearing a lot of make-up. I mean, all of these will be part of the conversation.

On the other side, though, I think that Hillary Clinton particularly is actually going to gear her campaign in large part to middle class women as her natural constituency.

MS: And do you also think that there's less tolerance for sexist treatment of female leaders, female presidential candidates? Do you think that we are seeing more of a pushback and a sort of protest when this happens?

MK: Well, one of the biggest differences between the last two campaigns and now is the ubiquity and centrality of social media in the construction of the public conversation. So when something like this happens, the media universe explodes. And that was not the case before. Or if it did explode before, it didn't have nearly the kind of constant, revelatory power that it has today. I think that will be significant.

When, and it's inevitable, people respond with kind of sexist comments, the Twitter-verse is going to explode. There will be tons and tons of outcry against it. So I think candidates are going to be under much greater scrutiny for the kinds of statements that they will make about women.

MS: And apart from what you think of these particular candidates, so individual from that – a female president would be a huge milestone for women. But do you get the sense men would be excited to see a woman president as well? What is your sense of how men feel about supporting a female candidate?

MK: I think that men won't feel emotionally like, "Oh, what a great moment for women." I think most men's response will be, "We picked the best person for this job, and she happened to have been a woman. And well, that's the world we live in. The best person might be a woman." I think we're going to take it far more in stride.

On the other hand I don't think there will be the kind of emotional welling up of tears and excitement, that "Oh, my God, we elected a woman," in the same way that there was for the election of Obama.

MS: That interesting. Do you have a sense of why that is?

MK: I think that we don't feel sexism in the same way as we understand racism. And so, we won't see it as much as a victory for a class. We'll see it as a victory for the best person.

MS: Yeah, that's really interesting. Now, there is a lot of discussion about how important electing a woman is as this powerful symbol for girls. But do you think it would change boys' perceptions of women to have a female president?

MK: Yes, absolutely. You know, this is the motto of Gina Davis' See Jane organization. You know, "if you can see it, you can be it." I think when you have the opportunity to see serious women running for the highest office in the land, young girls are going to say, "Wow! I could do that. I want to be president." But young boys will also see it as a matter of course. So it won't be a surprise to them. They won't have the debates in their middle schools about whether a girl could be president of the eighth grade. They won't have those kinds of conversations any longer.

So, yes, I do think so. I think the more women that we see in these symbolically and, obviously, really important positions, the easier it is to accept more of them.

MS: And there are many wonderful men like you that have felt personally inspired to support women's causes in so many important ways. But do you think men have any kind of responsibility to advocate for women's parity in politics and equality in general?

MK: I think most men who will support one of these women will tell you, "I am not supporting her because she is a woman. I'm supporting her because she is the best person for the job." However, I read that as relatively good news. Because they are also not going to say, "I am supporting her in spite of the fact that she is a woman." Right?

So there's three positions you can take. I think it is important symbolically to advocate for women because they're women. We've been denying these opportunities to half the population for such a long time. So, because they're women, I do think it's important. But I think most men will tell you, "It's not relevant to me if she's a woman. What's relevant to me is she has the best experience. She has the best ideas," etcetera. And what will be nice to not hear is, "Well, I support her in spite of the fact that she's a woman."

MS: What can men do to be allies to women in supporting the advancement of women's leadership? What suggestions do you have for

men, advocates looking to get involved, without being part of a community, particularly communities of color. What role do you think men can play?

MK: Well, it seems to me that what we can do is we can say that we support women candidates because we think that they can do the best job. It's not simply that we're doing it because they are women. We are doing it because finally the blindfold is off. We haven't seen women's competencies. We've denied women the opportunity to show how competent they are. So what's exciting about the possibility of supporting women is to make the case that this is really about content and not form.

This is about these women have the best ideas and the best policies and the most experience, and they are clearly the most qualified to lead our country. And we have been doing ourselves, as a nation, an enormous disservice by denying women the opportunity that other countries have figured out how to do. That we have been denying ourselves these opportunities for such a long time that we haven't even known that we've been, like, trying to run with one foot.

MS: During the interviews for my book and finding out about all of the psychological, cultural, structural obstacles that are holding women back in leadership, one of the most common themes that I heard was how hard it is for women to balance work and family—particularly being a female politician in Washington—and how, as Cheryl Sandberg told me, “We can't have equality in the workplace until we have equality in the home.” So how do you see that role in terms of men's role in starting to share in some of those responsibilities to help pave the way for more women leaders?

MK: I think that because they are women, women will be asked the questions that we very frequently exempt male politicians from. We will ask them questions about balancing work and family. We will ask them questions about parental leave. So these are seen, wrongly in my view, as women's issues. Of course balancing work and family is not a woman's issue. It is a parent's issue. And many men are parents. So we will want to think about them.

It seems to me that it will also put pressure on male politicians to start to answer those kinds of questions. So I would amend what Cheryl Sandberg said. Yes, of course, we can't have equality in the public sphere until we also have equality in the private sphere. But we can't begin the conversation about equality in the private sphere until we get male leaders to start seeing these as their issues as well.

MS: I completely agree with that. Now, I asked you before about what men can do to be allies to women in supporting the advancement of women's leadership. But what advice do you have for women leaders looking to engage and activate male allies in their work?

MK: Here's the dilemma I suspect for women candidates. It's a very fine line—and this is true of all women seeking leadership positions in organizations, whether they are the government, a corporation, a university—is balancing the line between I'm a woman and I'm competent—because for so long the competence and the ambition has been coded as male. So it seems to me that women's advocates need to say, "You need to look at the content here. You need look at what my positions are, what my views are, what my values are and make a decision based on that." Now that's the "denial of gender." Like, don't look at my gender. Just look at my content.

And it is equally true that because I'm a woman I represent, symbolically, in the eyes of people's culture and consciousness. I represent a new vision of how to run a society. Let me go back. To the extent to which you believe that women and men are similar, there should be no gender component in your voting. It should simply be based on who has the best ideas. To the extent to which you believe that women and men are fundamentally different, then it's about time that we had a woman. Right?

So either way you want to go—want to say women and men are basically the same? Fine, then look at what I have to offer. To the extent to which you think women and men are fundamentally different, then the qualities that we want in a leader happen to be embodied by women.

MS: And some skeptics of the impacts of increased women's political leadership argue that women in power may adopt the same behaviors as their male counterparts. How do you think we can create space for new leadership styles rather than having women leaders feel the pressure to sort of conform to traditional leadership norms that may not be as authentic to them? Like what are some key ingredients necessary for making room for that type of authentic leadership?

MK: Very often, I begin my classes on gender by asking my students about their beliefs about essential differences, because the fallback position in the United States is that women and men are fundamentally different. So I ask them, how are they different? Everybody believes they are completely different, Mars and Venus, all that. How are they different? "Well," they say, "You know, testosterone. Men are just so much more

violent, so much more aggressive, etcetera. So women and men are completely different because testosterone, men are aggressive," etcetera. That's what they say.

So then I say, "Okay. Now I want to explore that essentialism. I want to explore the fact that you think women and men are so different. So since you believe that women and men are so completely different, if you woke up tomorrow morning and every single political leader at the national, international, local, state level was a woman, would you sleep better at night?" And they say, "No." And I say, "Well, why not? Men are so much more aggressive, testosterone, violence, blah blah blah. You just told me that. So why wouldn't you sleep better?" "Oh," they say, "You know, once a woman is in that position, the position demands that she be really, really aggressive. You know, Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher. See?"

And so my position on this is that my students and I believe American essentialism, this Mars and Venus, is actually quite soft. They actually don't believe it. They actually believe that the position will determine the kind of behaviors that are associated with the position. And that anyone, male or female, who occupies those positions will have to embody those characteristics.

I think it's a little bit of both.

MS: I totally agree with you there. Now, in terms of the sort of gender stereotypes that impact men leaders as well, do you think that having more women leaders in power and having leadership modeled differently – will that benefit the constrictive gender norms that male leaders may feel as well to do leadership in a certain way and maybe embrace different types of qualities?

MK: I suspect in the long run that that's inevitable. But I also suspect that in the short run men will then be afraid that some of their behaviors might be unfavorably compared to women's: "Ah. You're behaving just like so and so." You know, it's possible. But in the long run, of course, that's true. The question about gender quality is never about whether or not we are going to de-gender people. The question about gender equality is: are we going to de-gender those traits and attitudes that we erroneously attribute to gender.

So we think that being kind, being loving, being nurturing are uniquely and biologically feminine, when in fact every parent can tell you that that's not true. But we believe that sort of thing. We believe that those things

are inherently feminine, or that leadership and aggression and ambition and assertion, that these are fundamentally, characterologically masculine. So my feeling is that what women in office will do is they will further help us de-gender those traits without de-gendering the people.

MS: I agree with you. That's fascinating. Now you and I are obviously working together with the Women and Men as Allies Initiative. And I know from many of my interviews and recent meetings I've been having: there's definitely this growing trend and interest of including men in feminist work and work towards equality and in women's causes, whether it's having a man on a panel. And this reframing that these aren't women's issues, that these are human issues. Do you see a sort of positive trend, in terms of the work that you're doing, of just men's interest in becoming allies and being involved?

MK: I think most of the inclusion of men is coming without a great, ideological fanfare. I think most men are simply far more comfortable with greater gender equality than their parents' generation. I think most of us are comfortable with the idea that we no longer live in the world of Don Draper. And that to live in the world would actually be sort of unhappy. I don't see this being done with great ideological fanfare.

On the other hand, it is true that within the feminist movement, there has been both a recognition that if we want to fully empower women and girls, we have to engage boys and men. And there has been some question, legitimately, about whether engaging boys and men is feminist women's responsibility or whether men need to step up and start doing that work themselves.

I, of course, subscribe to the idea that this is our responsibility, it's our job to do this, that that's kind of the mission of what men who are trying to support gender equality, that is what we're basically trying to do.

MS: And where do you see the most important focus for creating culture change, because so much of this is related to influences in our culture. Is it in education? Is it in media? Is it in parenting? Is it everything? Where do you see the most important places to focus on for creating change that would support women's equality and women's leadership?

MK: I don't know. I mean I suspect I'm a carrot and stick rep person. I think part of the work has to be to make it impossible for us to continue to do what we used to do as a matter of course. So strong laws preventing discrimination, harassment, rape, sexual assault, all of those things are vitally important. Of course we have to have them. We can't

continue to struggle without them. One the other hand, they are not sufficient. They won't, by themselves change people's attitudes and behaviors. They will simply punish people for having the wrong attitudes and behaviors.

So, of course, we also have to be engaging at all levels. So that's the carrot part. We have to make the case to men that gender equality is in their interest, as men. I don't think that's hard to do but that is sort of the work that I've carved out for myself, is to figure out ways to make the case to men that gender equality is in their interest.

MS: And I know that this is a very broad question so probably hard to answer simply, but what are some of those examples? How does gender equality benefit men?

MK: Well, gender equality benefits countries. Those countries that are more gender equal rate the highest on the happiness scale. Gender equality is good for companies, for corporations. Those companies that are most gender equal seem to be extremely profitable. They have much lower labor costs because people don't leave the company that often. They have higher work productivity, job satisfaction. And, of course, in our relationships, the more gender equal our relationships the happier women are, the happier men are, and the happier their kids are.

And you can't tell me that you can't talk to men about supporting their children. Of course, they want to do that. So this is a way to suggest, this is exactly how you can support your children.

MS: And where does your passion for advocating for this work come from? Because you are certainly one of the most active, articulate spokespeople and activists on all of these issues and have been doing this for a long time. Where does that well of passion come from for doing the work that you're doing right now?

MK: There's nothing mysterious about it. There's nothing particular about me. I'm the son of a woman. I'm the brother of a woman. I'm the husband of a woman. Many of my friends are women. And, of course, you know, I love them. I want them to have great lives. I want them to have every opportunity that I've had, that anybody should had. It's not really mysterious. I mean the real question has never been to me: "what would make me special in doing this?" It's: "how come this isn't so intuitively obvious to everyone?"

MS: And last question, do you feel optimistic, you know, in terms of the paradigm shifts that seem to be occurring? And is America ready to elect a female president? Separate again from the specific candidates, are we ready to elect a female president?

MK: Yes, I think we're ready. I'm always optimistic about this because I'm a true believer in the ideas of equality, that it's good for everyone. So, of course, I'm optimistic. I'm optimistic also because I'm a professor, so I have to believe that by helping my students engage critically with their world, their lives will be better. That's optimistic. So, yes, absolutely I'm optimistic. I think this may be the tipping point. I think this may be the time when there is a candidate who is a woman, for some who is a woman, for some who happens to be a woman. And this is a time when it's very possible that we will have a woman in the White House. So I'm very optimistic about it.

MS: Well, thank you so much Michael. You know, as always, you were very inspiring and fascinating to talk to and I really appreciate your time and all the insights that you shared.

MK: Well, my pleasure, Marianne.

MS: Thank you. I'll talk to you soon.

MK: Okay. Bye.