



The art of medicine

Gender equality: engaging men in change

I have been working on issues of men, masculinities, and gender for 32 years, and it looks to me like men's roles in building gender equality are now part of the public agenda to an unprecedented extent. Almost every day, there are new stories and initiatives on how men can support women's participation in medicine and science, end domestic and sexual violence, share the load of fathering and housework, and more. This focus has a compelling rationale. Above all, we will not make much progress towards gender equality without change among men—and men themselves will benefit from this progress.

There is a particularly energetic focus on men and masculinities as the subject of popular debate, media commentary, and policy and programming. Recent examples include men and the #MeToo movement and media talk of “toxic masculinity” and its harms. There have been other times in history when men have been seen to be in so-called crisis, and I am sceptical of simplistic claims about such a crisis, but this attention to men is new.

This turn to men is visible too in public health. There is growing recognition that gender should not be code for women, men's lives too are structured by gender, and the social organisation of masculinities is an important determinant of health and wellbeing. There is intensified attention to how the norms and relations of gender and manhood are implicated in violence against women and violence between men, sexual and reproductive health, suicide, alcohol and drug use, mental health, occupational deaths and injuries, and a host of other issues. A wealth of studies over the past three decades have documented that conformity to traditional masculine norms is an influential risk factor across a range of domains. Men who conform more strongly to the beliefs that men should be tough, stoic, dominant, daring, and in control are typically more likely than other men to assault and rape women, assault other men, consider suicide, take risks with sexual partners or at the wheel of a car, avoid help-seeking, and refrain from active fathering. Gender is not the whole story here, but there is no doubt that it is a key part of the story.

There is growing sophistication in research, health promotion, and advocacy on men and masculinities. Greater attention is paid to diversity among men and boys, whether in peer cultures, organisations and institutions, or countries. There is increased use of an intersectional lens, recognising how gender intersects with other social dimensions and inequalities such as ethnicity, class, and sexuality. There are developments in investigations of masculine norms themselves. It matters which norm it is: some elements of traditional masculine ideals undermine men's health whereas others are protective. It matters which outcome it

is: particular masculine norms have more impact on some health outcomes and harmful behaviours than others.

There is now a field of programming and policy focused on “engaging men”. This comprises efforts aimed at men or boys and intended to involve them in progress towards gender justice. The organisations involved are diverse, from small advocacy and service-focused groups running campaigns in local communities to large-scale national organisations and regional and global networks. Their initiatives are diverse too, from local initiatives inviting men to take action against men's violence against women or share responsibility for sexual health to regional campaigns intended to recast masculine social norms or produce change in government policies on parenting. Such efforts are buttressed by a growing evidence base, including a steadily increasing collection of impact evaluations and reviews, syntheses, and meta-analyses of these. These analyses show that if done well, then interventions among men and boys can make lasting change in the attitudes and behaviours associated with gender inequality.

Some men are involved in grassroots advocacy in support of feminism. Profeminist men's advocacy emerged with the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, and there are earlier examples of organised male support for the suffragettes and women's rights to vote. My first taste of this activism was in an anti-sexist men's group in 1987, involving both progressive personal change and political activism. Several years later, I found myself in a march of men on the streets of Melbourne, Australia, under the banner Men Against Sexual Assault. Contemporary profeminist men's advocacy includes local and national groups and organisations in countries rich and poor.

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There are international efforts such as the White Ribbon Campaign to end male violence against women and girls, now in more than 70 countries, and the global alliance MenEngage, a network of community organisations and non-governmental and UN agencies seeking to involve boys and men in efforts to achieve gender equality.

Lifting our heads up to look at communities and societies more broadly, there are signs of progress. In my own country, Australia, community support for norms of gender equality has increased over the past two decades, albeit slowly. Community tolerance of domestic and sexual violence has declined. Norms of sexist masculinity to some extent are up for debate. And there's a growing expectation that men have a role alongside women—indeed a responsibility—to challenge sexism and violence.

All of this is encouraging. Perhaps this reflects my activist bent rather than a careful appraisal of these developments, but they give me hope for long-term progress towards gender equality.

There are, however, good reasons also for concern, and even despair. Gender inequalities that disadvantage women and privilege men remain pervasive across the world. Patriarchal social and religious movements and governments are ascendant in some countries. Explicit attention to men and masculinities in media, popular culture, and government policy is not all good, and sometimes driven by anti-feminist backlash. Progress towards gender equality has slowed or stalled in some high-income countries. Again in Australia, for example, economic decision making by business leaders and executive board members continues to be monopolised by men. Community agreement with some violence-supportive beliefs, such as the myth that false accusations of gender-based violence are common, has increased. And rates of violence against women remain stable. Globally, gradual progress on improving parity between women and men stalled in 2017, when the global gender gap increased for the first time since 2006, and persistent and wide gaps are visible, particularly for economic participation and political empowerment.

Public health's attention to men and masculinities is only nascent and uneven. Its lenses often are insufficiently gendered. WHO's Gender Responsive Assessment Scale assesses how health interventions interact with gender, providing a scale from worst to best approaches. Sometimes public health is gender-unequal, exploiting and intensifying gender inequalities. Sometimes public health is gender-blind and ignores gender norms. Sometimes it is gender-sensitive: it acknowledges gender norms and inequalities, whether or not it addresses them, and it considers women's and men's specific needs. Only rarely is public health gender-transformative: it challenges and redresses harmful and unequal gender norms, roles, and power relations that privilege men over women.

The engaging men field remains small. Many of its initiatives have a short-term project orientation rather

than a long-term social change orientation. And few interventions seek comprehensive whole-of-institution or whole-of-community transformation. This work is also politically sensitive. Women's rights and feminist advocates and organisations have expressed concern that efforts to engage men dilute the feminist orientation of work on gender, violence, and health. There are concerns that such engagement could not only undermine the legitimacy of women-only and women-focused programmes and services, but also marginalise women's voices and leadership. Although these are tangible dangers, most men and organisations in the engaging men field take for granted that they should work in partnership with, and be accountable to, feminist and women's rights organisations.

Men's public advocacy in support of gender justice is smaller still. The vast bulk of feminist advocacy is done by women, and only small numbers of men take part in feminist campaigns, organisations, and movements. Some men-focused campaigns have been criticised for asking too little of men: merely click on a pledge or wear a ribbon, rather than critically addressing their own behaviour, speaking up about inequalities, and taking collective action. Still, there are heartening signs of an upswell in men's participation in feminist activism. Feminist campaigns such as #MeToo have prompted large numbers of men to reflect on their own sexual and social relations with women, although there is pushback and backlash too.

There has also been a surge in popular media discussion of male feminists and men's roles in feminism. On the plus side, this could increase men's engagement in change, bolster feminist advocacy, and help advance gender justice. On the minus side, this discussion has gone along with a depoliticisation of feminism, allowing more men to adopt merely tokenistic support for feminism. Efforts to involve men in advocating for gender equality must be robustly feminist and based on changing structural, socioeconomic, and institutional dimensions of gender inequality. And they should involve men in real personal and social change.

Traditional models of how to be a man have not yet crumbled into dust. They continue to exert a powerful influence on many men's and boys' lives and relations, thus sustaining persistent and pervasive gender inequalities. But their authority is weakening. Women's rights and social justice advocacy, efforts by civil organisations and governments, and shifts in gender practices and norms in communities are all contributing to a questioning of patriarchal manhood. Large-scale social change is necessary to end gender inequality, and men have a vital role to play.

Michael Flood

School of Social Justice, Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane QLD 4000, Australia
 m.flood@qut.edu.au
 @MichaelGLFlood

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