

## "GENDER POLITICS FOR MEN"

by R.W. Connell

### Introduction

When I was about 10 or 11 years old I played in a school rugby football team for a short time. Rugby is a game where you clasp a pointed ball to your chest and try to run through a wall of opposing players to put the ball on the ground behind them. They attempt to throw you to the ground, seize the ball, and run through a wall of your players in order to put the ball on the ground behind you. When half the game is over, everyone turns around and runs the other way.

This is the most popular sport in Sydney, my home town, and rightly so. It is closely related to great art. Each half of the game runs for about the same length of time as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The ball weighs about as much as a hardcover edition of Dante's *Inferno*. And at the end of the season, each player's face resembles a portrait by Picasso.

So, as a lover of the arts, I joined the school rugby team. Being a slow runner, I became a forward. This gave me the right and the duty to join in "scrums", where the forwards link up in a phalanx and try to push the other team off the ball by weight and strength. Those at the back of the scrum place their heads among the other players' buttocks to get leverage to push, and cannot see very well (though they can still smell). So I don't know who it was that – in a scrum during my second game – pulled out a tuft of my hair. I hope it was a member of the opposing team.

I changed to soccer the next week. This was a serious decision. In Australia in the 1950s soccer players were known to have limp wrists, and were thought to wear frilly nighties to bed. Even today soccer players in Australia are suspected of dilettantism. Now that my hair is coming out for quite different reasons, 40 years later, I still remember the incident and in a sense I am still living with its

consequences. It was one of the moments when I began my dissent from hegemonic masculinity.

There is, at present, an international questioning of the kind of masculinity I met on the rugby field and that others meet in the military, in corporate boardrooms, and in most governments in the world. "International" is no overstatement. Some of the best historical research on masculinity has been done in New Zealand, and some of the best sociology in Australia. Some of the best theory has been done in England, some of the best field observation in the USA. Some of the best youth work has been done in Germany, and some of the most important political work in Canada and South Africa.

This questioning has been provoked by an international feminist movement, which brought to light the oppression of women and the patriarchal character of major institutions and dominant forms of culture. It became clear that the questions politicians classify as "women's issues" are also issues about men. Men are gendered too. Once this is acknowledged, hard questions arise about how men become gendered, how masculinity is related to gender inequality, and how men can become part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

### **Men's Interests**

In the days of the attempt to set up a "Men's Liberation" movement, in the 1970s, it was assumed that feminism was good for men, because men too suffered from rigid sex roles. As women broke out of their sex role, men would be enabled to break out of theirs, and would have fuller, better, and healthier lives as a result.

The failure of any large number to sign on as the men's auxiliary to feminism, in the years since, suggests a flaw in this analysis. Men's dominant position in the gender order has a material pay-off, and the discussions of masculinity have constantly under-estimated how big it is. In the rich capitalist countries such as the United States, men's average incomes are approximately double the average incomes of women. Men have ten times the political access of women,

world-wide (measured by representation in parliaments). Men have even greater control of corporate wealth (looking at top management in major corporations). Men control the means of violence, in the form of weapons and armed forces.

I call these advantages the "patriarchal dividend" for men, and this dividend is not withering away. The gender segregation of the workforce in the rich countries has declined little in recent years. Men's representation in parliaments worldwide has risen, not fallen, in recent years. As corporations have gone multinational—under the aegis of corporate hegemonic masculinity—they have increasingly escaped the national-level political structures through which women press for equal opportunity and for an end to discrimination. The new international garment manufacturing and microprocessor assembly industries, for instance, are arenas of rampant sexism. Violence against women has not measurably declined.

Yet not all men are corporate executives or mass killers. Though men in general gain the patriarchal dividend, specific groups of men gain very little of it. For instance, working-class youth, economically dispossessed by structural unemployment, may gain no economic advantage at all over the women in their communities. Other groups of men pay part of the price, alongside women, for the maintenance of an unequal gender order. Gay men are systematically made targets of prejudice and violence. Effeminate and wimpish men are constantly put down. Black men, in the United States (as in South Africa) suffer massively higher levels of lethal violence than white men.

There are, then, divisions of interest among men on gender issues. I would also want to emphasise that not all interests are egotistic. Interests are also relational, that is, constituted in the social relations one shares with other people. Most men have relational interests that they share with particular women. For instance, as parents needing child care provision and good health services for children. Or as workers, needing improved conditions and security. Gay men share with lesbians an interest in fighting discrimination.

When we look at men's lives concretely, we regularly find dense networks of relationships with women: with mothers, wives, partners, sisters, daughters, aunts, grandmothers, friends, workmates, neighbors. Very few men have a life-world that is blocked off from women, that is genuinely a "separate sphere".

Each of these relationships can be the basis for men's relational interest in reform. For instance, I have an interest in my wife's being free of the threat of intimidation or rape, in her having job security and equal pay, in her having the best possible health care. I have an interest in my daughter's being free of sexual harassment at school, in her having access to any kind of training and to all occupations, in her growing up a confident and autonomous person.

Men's interest in gender hierarchy, defined by the patriarchal dividend, is real and large; but it is internally divided, and it is cross-cut by relational interests shared with women. Which of these interests is actually pursued by particular men is a matter of politics-politics in the quite familiar sense, of organizing in the pursuit of programs.

Men who try to develop a politics in support of feminism, whether gay or straight, are not in for an easy ride. They are likely to be met with derision from many other men, and from some women—it is almost a journalistic cliché that women despise Sensitive New Age Guys. They will not necessarily get warm support from feminist women, some of whom are deeply distrustful of all men, most of whom are wary of men's power, and all of whom make a political commitment to solidarity with women. Since change in gender requires reconstructing personal relations as well as public life, there are many opportunities for personal hurt, mistaken judgments, and anger.

I do not think men seeking progressive reforms of masculinity can expect to be comfortable, while we live in a world marked by gendered violence and inequality. Masculinity therapy offers personal comfort as a substitute for social change. But this is not the only use for emotional support. As shown by John Rowan in the U.K. and

Terry Kupers in the U.S.A., therapeutic methods and emotional exploration can be used to support men, as feminist therapy supports women, in the stresses of a project of social change.

### Political Purposes

Given the difficulties of the project, what might motivate men to press on into the flames? We need some conception of where the politics should be headed, a vision of the world we are trying to produce. Other forces certainly are making choices, which children and youth face here and now in a barrage of advertising masquerading as sport, militarism masquerading as entertainment, commercial sex masquerading as personal freedom.

The goal defined by sex role reformers in the 1970s was the abolition of masculinity (and femininity) by a movement towards androgyny, the blending of the two existing sex roles. This grasped the fact that we have to change personal life, but underestimated the complexity of masculinities and femininities, put too much emphasis on attitudes and not enough on material inequalities and issues of power.

We might better think of the goal as "recomposing" the elements of gender; making the full range of gender symbolism and practice available to all people. Though this may sound exotic when formulated as a strategy, bits of it are quite familiar in practice. In schools, for instance, it is quite a common goal to "expand the options" for girls, by trying to make science and technology courses more available to them; and for boys, by encouraging them to learn to cook or to sew.

It has been argued that the most effective form of sex education with teenagers is "learning to be the opposite sex", i.e. trying to get girls and boys to think through heterosexual relationships from the point of view of the other party. (Most school sex education is forbidden, however, to go beyond heterosexual thoughts.) Bronwyn Davies, an Australian feminist educator, wryly suggests that children

are good poststructuralists, and readily learn to move among different gender positions in culture.

The bodily dimension of gender is often thought to be the absolute limit of change. When I am interviewed about these issues on radio, interviewers often seem to think that bodily difference (either in sport, or in reproduction) is a knock-out question. But if we understand gender as being about the way bodies are drawn into a historical process, then we can recognize contradictions in existing embodiments and can see enormous possibilities of re-embodiment for men. There are different ways of using, feeling and showing male bodies.

I am charmed to see, in shops selling artistic postcards and posters, a genre showing muscular male bodies cuddling babies. Why not make this a widespread pleasure? Provided, of course, the men are also sharing the other tactile experiences of baby-care—getting the milk in, wringing out the nappies and wiping up the shit.

But re-arranging elements is not enough. As the American feminist Wendy Chapkis argues, playing with the elements of gender can be benign only if we unpack the "package deal" that, for women, links beauty and status, and for men links desirability and power. We can re-arrange difference only if we contest dominance. So a re-composing strategy requires a project of social justice.

Gender relations involve different spheres of practice, so there is an unavoidable complexity in gender politics. Theoretical work in social science distinguishes at least three spheres: the relations of power, the relations of production, and the relations of cathexis. In each case we can define directions for a politics of gender justice.

Pursuing justice in power relations means contesting men's predominance in the state, professions and management, and ending violence against women.

Some groups of men have specifically focussed on the issue of men's violence towards women. Generally maintaining a relationship

(sometimes tense) with women's groups mobilizing around domestic violence or rape, such groups have worked with violent men to try to reduce the chance of further violence, and have launched wider educational campaigns. The most extensive has been the White Ribbon campaign in Canada, which arose from commemorations of the 1989 massacre of women at the University of Montreal. In this case, mass media and mainstream politicians as well as community groups have been brought into a campaign rejecting violence against women, with considerable impact at a national level.

Pursuing justice in economic relations means equalizing incomes, sharing the burden of household work, and equalizing access to education and training. A key vehicle for such politics is workers' organizations.

While male-controlled unions have often been antagonistic to women, even in totally masculinized industries some unions have taken progressive action. In 1979-80 the United Steelworkers successfully pressed for women to be hired at the Hamilton steelworks in Canada. A serious effort was made to get discussion of the issues by the male membership, and a fair level of support for the change was gained. A few years earlier, the Builders Labourers Federation in New South Wales, Australia, sponsored the entry of women workers on exclusively male building sites. In this case, the women clerks in the union office had challenged the sexism of a left-wing male leadership and persuaded them to change their policy. In another Canadian example, in electrical manufacturing in Westinghouse plants, it was pressure from below that led to the integration of women into formerly all-male shops. Stan Gray, the activist who tells the story, notes that this was only the beginning of the process. A sprawling struggle, in the context of recession and layoffs, nevertheless moved on to campaigns against workplace sexism; some of the men came to see sexism as divisive and against their own interests as workers.

Pursuing justice in the structure of cathexis means ending homophobia, reconstructing heterosexual relations on the basis of

reciprocity not hierarchy, and disconnecting masculinity from pressures towards violence.

The peace movement is perhaps the longest-established forum where significant numbers of men have been engaged in a critique of an important part of hegemonic masculinity, its opening towards violence. Quaker traditions, the Gandhian legacy, and the nonviolent Civil Rights movement in the United States, are part of this heritage. Though the peace movement has not generally defined masculinity as its target (that connection being made by feminist groups in actions excluding men, such as the Greenham Common encampment in Britain), it has provided a forum for political action that in fact contests hegemonic masculinity.

Along these lines we can define an agenda for a progressive politics of masculinity, and can find many examples of worthwhile practice. That still leaves open the question of the overall form this politics should take.

### **A Men's Movement?**

It is commonly assumed that a progressive politics of masculinity must take the form of a social movement. The usual model is feminism; many writers imply a close parallel between the women's movement and a men's movement. More remotely, the labor movement and civil rights movements serve as models.

I would argue that these parallels are not close, and may be seriously misleading. The movements just listed are mobilizations of oppressed or exploited groups to end their subordination. They seek the unity of the group and assert the dignity of a previously stigmatized identity.

"Men" as a group, and heterosexual men in particular, are not oppressed or disadvantaged. (Though that belief is now promoted by right-wing campaigns against affirmative action.) As I have noted, men *in general* gain a patriarchal dividend. Hegemonic masculinity is not a stigmatized identity. Quite the opposite: the culture already



honours it. Seeking the unity of "men" can only mean emphasising the experiences and interests men have that separate them from women, rather than the interests they share with women that might lead towards social justice.

This is not an abstract theoretical point. It has happened in practice in the history of some anti-sexist men's groups, such as the American group MOVE studied by Paul Lichterman. Initially involved both in anti-violence work with batterers and in raising public issues about masculinity, this group gradually moved towards a therapeutic ideology, developed a concern with being "positive" about men, and moved away from public stands and issues about the structure of power. What happened in this specific case also happened much more broadly in the transition from "men's liberation" in the early 1970s to masculinity therapy in the 1980s.

The evangelical Christian "Promise Keepers", and the African-american "Million Man March" of 1995, both follow the model of a social movement and both have been vehicles for promoting patriarchal understandings of masculinity—in the context of the pursuit of evangelical religion or racial justice. The idea of a husband as the responsible "head of the family" has proved attractive in mobilizing middle-class men (and has proved attractive to many women, too, where the alternative is abandonment or violence). The definition, and the movement, are carefully policed against homosexuality (gay men, but not their gayness, are welcome in the Promise Keepers—they are seen as potential converts).

To fight for justice in gender relations often means, paradoxically, doing the opposite of the things that would create a "men's movement". That is, tackling issues that inevitably divide men rather than unite them: issues like homophobia, affirmative action for women, equal pay, sexual harassment and violence.

This is not for a moment to doubt the importance of solidarity among the men, and the women, involved with these issues. Indeed, I would emphasise this point strongly. Experience has shown that

work on these issues is stressful, often painful, and difficult to sustain without support. This points to the importance, for men engaged in such struggles, of networks such as the National Organization for Men Against Sexism in the United States. Journals such as *Changing Men* in the United States, *XY* in Australia, and formerly *Achilles Heel* in Britain, are key elements in anti-sexist networks.

Rather than a grand "men's movement", we should be thinking of a variety of struggles in diverse sites, linked through networking rather than mass mobilization or formal organization. Men are likely to be detached from the defence of patriarchy in small numbers at a time, in a great variety of circumstances. So the likely political pattern is one of unevenness between situations, with differently-configured issues and possibilities of action.

The examples discussed in the last section, the White Ribbon movement, the union movement, and the peace movement, illustrate these points. What is involved in all three cases is not a social movement of men focussed on masculinity, but some kind of alliance politics. Here the project of social justice depends on the overlapping of interests or commitments between different groups. The overlapping may be temporary, but can be long-term (a perfectly familiar situation in politics). Existing power resources can be used for new ends. We do not have to start from scratch all the time.

It is often assumed that alliance means compromise and therefore containment. The familiar militant gesture of insisting on revolutionary purity is not unknown in men's counter-sexist politics. The chances of actually changing the world this way are slight.

Pluralism in alliance-making is necessary, but containment is not a necessary result. Given that patriarchy is a historical structure, not a timeless dichotomy of men abusing women, it will be ended by a historical process. The strategic problem is to generate pressures that will culminate in the long run in a transformation of the structure; and any initiative that sets up pressure in that direction is worth having. Lynne Segal, in the best feminist appraisal of issues about

masculinity, is cool about the pace of change; her book is called *Slow Motion*. But she is in no doubt about the possibilities of change, through hard work in familiar institutions such as workplaces, unions and political parties.

In the long run, as Keynes remarked, we are all dead; and while we are still alive, we want to see something more than a rise in the probability of social justice in the distant future. So, as well as long-term educational strategies, we also need what British feminists called "prefigurative politics"—at least samples of paradise, at least little bits of justice, here and now.

Again, this is familiar in principle. Progressive education hoped to prefigure the good society in democratic schools; industrial democracy hoped to prefigure a democratically-controlled economy in each workplace. In my household (like many others) we hope to prefigure a society in which gender equality and sexual tolerance is routine, a bedrock of civilization.

However the prefigurative politics of gender and sexuality are not necessarily rock-like. They may, on the contrary, be scandalous, hilarious or disturbing. Halloween on Haight Street; Cal-PEP, an AIDS prevention program run by prostitutes and former prostitutes; the pleasures and dangers of queer culture; integrated sports. Prefiguration may also be peaceable: fathers taking toddlers and babies in push-chairs for an outing.

Much of the effective work done on masculinity is educational, above all. It involves attempts to reformulate knowledge, to expand understanding, to create new capacities for practice. I think we might value this fact, and build on it. It is in education that we have some of the best chances to prefigure new ways of being men and boys. I will end, therefore, with some remarks on the problems of educational strategies.

## Education

"Gender" in discussions of schools has mainly signalled issues about girls. The recent debate marks an important recognition that boys are gendered too. The commonest error is to assume that a strategy formulated for one situation must work for the other. Given the patriarchal dividend, which gives boys an interest in claiming the gender privilege open to them, a simple translation will not generally work.

Educational responses to issues about boys must have two sides. They must be concerned with the impact of the advantaged group's actions on the least advantaged group. (Thus, the issue of harassment of girls is rightly a major concern of programs concerned with boys.)

They must also be concerned with the *costs* paid for the situation of advantage. (Thus, the impact of harassment on boys, in the form of bullying among boys, and poisoned relationships with girls, is also a major concern.) The long-term costs to boys and men, though often hard to assess, may well be the most important.

Recent discussions of educational strategies for boys have rightly pointed to the negative impact on boys of narrow models of masculinity and obsolete ideas about men's and women's work. Such stereotypes, if adopted by the boys, severely limit their cultural experiences, their vocational choices, and their expectations about future personal relationships, both with men and with women.

These issues go beyond equity policy in the narrow sense to broad curriculum objectives. Educational policy about boys must concern the range of their experiences, and their understanding of life options. Maximizing the range of pupils' knowledge; eliminating barriers to their awareness, interest and tolerance; and widening the range of their own life choices, are general educational goals which have specific applications in the education of boys.

These goals cannot be pursued without making gender itself an object of enquiry and learning. This has been an important trend in

education for girls and women, both in "mainstream" curriculum areas and in the growth of new fields such as Women's Studies. Recent research on masculinity has produced a body of knowledge which makes it easier than before to develop curriculum about gender that is gender-inclusive, and plainly relevant to boys.

This may require programs with a different structure from those most familiar in gender equity work. Gender equity work in English-speaking countries has emphasised *gender-specific* programs addressed to girls. The first generation of school-level programs concerned with boys has followed this logic, producing programs specifically *for* boys.

Youth work in Germany has made an important distinction between "gender-specific" and "gender-relevant" programs. Both in welfare and in curriculum, schools may now have a need for more of the *gender-relevant* type of programs. These take gender relations as the object of enquiry, discussion and learning; and they may be addressed to boys and girls together as well as separately.

Not all education occurs in schools, of course. Some of the most impressive recent anti-sexist work is educational work in difficult circumstances, such as prisons, and around difficult issues, such as violence. An example is the educational program for young men developed by the Australian group Men Against Sexual Assault.

As David Denborough explains the approach, it is possible to find respectful ways of working with young men without shying away from the hard issues of men's violence. Denborough draws on the new masculinity research to develop the strategy, encouraging young men not only to recognize the main narrative of masculinity in their community, but also to search for the counter-narratives, the other possibilities that exist in the same situation. A search for counter-meanings also appears in Don Sabo's work in an American prison. Sabo notes how sport and physical training at one level plays into the cultivation of masculine hardness, at another represents a kind of self-care in a hostile and very unhealthy environment.

Educational work on masculinity is not likely to be easy. People in this field are already aware of a number of problems: resistance by boys and men (including those who may be in most need of new programs), difficulties in defining purposes, skepticism from staff, ethical problems in relation to girls' programs, and shortages of materials and research.

Nevertheless, the expansion of young people's knowledge, and capacity for choice and action, about an important area of their current and future lives, is a coherent and important educational goal. It is an issue where the agenda of justice in gender relations is linked to widely shared social purposes and has immediate practical possibilities.

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## Notes

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