

# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

## *Backlash: Angry men's movements*

by Michael Flood, Ph.D.

Men have responded in complex and contradictory ways to the profound changes of the last three decades, changes set in motion by the women's movements, changes in family organisation, economic and social shifts and other forces. Small numbers of men have responded by mobilising in support of feminist goals, changing their own behaviour and working with women to shift gender relations in progressive directions.<sup>1</sup> Yet other men have mobilised in opposition to feminism and the changes in gender with which it is associated, forming "men's rights" and "fathers' rights" groups. An organised backlash to feminism is now visible among men in Australia, as in most other Western capitalist countries.

Organised resistance to feminism has existed for over a century, but anti-feminist groups of men organised specifically on the basis of their position as men (or as fathers) are more recent, appearing only in the last 30 years. Such groups in Australia include the Lone Fathers Association, the Men's Rights Agency, the Men's Confraternity, Fathers Without Rights, the Shared Parenting Council, Dads Against Discrimination, and many others. "Men's rights" groups overlap with "fathers' rights" groups and with non-custodial parents' groups, whose members are often fathers. These groups sometimes also have female members and even co-founders, including 'second wives' and other family members of men who have had some engagement with family law.<sup>2</sup>

## *Men as “victims”*

Men’s rights men focus on the costs and destructiveness to men of masculine roles. They dispute the feminist idea that men (or some men) gain power and privilege in society, claiming that both women and men are equally oppressed or limited or even that men are oppressed by women. Men are “success objects”<sup>3</sup> (like women are “sex objects”) and burdened as providers, violence against men (through war, work and by women) is endemic and socially tolerated, and men are discriminated against in divorce and child custody proceedings. As far as “men’s rights” are concerned, these men believe that men’s right to a fair negotiation in child custody settlements, to a fair trial in domestic violence cases, and to fair treatment in the media have all been lost. Responsibility and blame for these problems is attributed to women, the women’s movements and feminism.

Men’s rights and fathers’ rights advocates identify a wide range of injustices and harms suffered by men. Males have been displaced from the labour market, schools and universities, deprived of their role as fathers, and are now regarded only as ‘gene pool and cash machine’.<sup>4</sup> Men are subject to discrimination in health and government policy, boys are marginalised in a feminised schooling system, and ‘misandrist’ (man-hating) depictions are rife in popular culture. For some men’s rights men, feminism has largely achieved its goals and women have more choices, while men are still stuck in traditional masculine roles. Thus feminism was once a ‘human liberation’ movement that now only looks after women. For others, it never tried to liberate men, it has even tried to keep men in their traditional roles e.g. as providers, and “feminazis” are involved in a conspiracy to discriminate against men and cover up violence against them.<sup>5</sup> Men’s rights men share the goal of removing the social and legal injustices faced by men, and for most the main obstacle to achieving this is men’s unjust treatment at the hands of women and feminists.<sup>6</sup> For example, a submission to a recent government enquiry by the “Institute of Men’s Studies”<sup>7</sup> states that women have “become the ruling elite” and that education “must be freed from feminist shackles”.

Both cultural and biological explanations are offered in the discourses of men's rights and fathers' rights. For example, the absence of male role models, particularly fathers, is offered as critical in explaining boys' poor academic performance and problematic behaviours among adult males. But biological arguments are also used to explain gender differences, male violence and aggressiveness, and boys' learning difficulties. Either biological differences explain male behaviour, or the failure to recognise and cater for them accounts for poor outcomes for example among boys.<sup>8</sup> Some men's rights advocates also argue that greater male power is natural, but it has been usurped by women.<sup>9</sup> As Alan Barron's "Men's Manifesto" (2001) states, "We must vigorously defend the concept that male domination/patriarchy is part of the natural order of things."

The men in men's rights and fathers' rights groups are typically in their forties and fifties, often divorced or separated, and nearly always heterosexual. Participants often are very angry, bitter and hurting (with good reason, they would say), and they often have gone through deeply painful marriage breakups and custody battles. Research among divorced men finds that some respond to the stresses and turmoil of divorce by adopting a masculinist discourse: they focus on their 'rights' and their victimisation, attempt to retain control over their former wives, and respond to the undermining of their paternal authority with strategies of parental and financial withdrawal.<sup>10</sup> (On the other hand, some divorced fathers prioritise relationships with their children, and set aside differences with their ex-wives to ensure good co-parenting.) Fathers' rights groups make claims to a victim status, downplaying any sense of men's or non-custodial parents' agency, making analogies with oppressed groups such as Aborigines, and painting their opponents as possessing enormous power.<sup>11</sup> Research among Australian men's rights groups finds that participants have adopted a collective identity in which they are "wounded by an aggressive feminism and the loss of [their] place in the world, yearning for a 'true' masculinity in which [they are] both in touch with [their] feelings and in control."<sup>12</sup> Ideas of "a damaged masculinity and unappreciated fatherhood" become central to their identities.

Some men's rights and fathers' rights groups have links to conservative Christian organisations and support a traditional patriarchal family as the only real and natural form of family.<sup>13</sup> For example, one of the key groups in Australia currently lobbying for a rebuttable presumption of joint custody is the Shared Parenting Council, a new coalition of fathers' rights groups with links to such conservative Christian groups as the Festival of Light. Another, the National Fatherhood Forum, has close links to the Australian Family Association, a conservative Christian and 'pro-family' organisation. A handful of men's and fathers' rights groups do have more flexible visions of family and gender relations. But most share the common enemy of feminism, as well as gay and lesbian politics and other progressive movements and ideals.

Men's rights and fathers' rights advocates do not accurately represent the views of the majority of divorced and separated men. While many men (and women) find the processes of divorce and separation to be hurtful, only a minority subscribe to the aggressively conservative agendas of anti-feminist men's groups. In addition, there are other fathers' organisations which promote positive and collaborative visions of men's relations with women and children, such as Dads and Daughters in the USA and FathersDirect in the United Kingdom.

In the popular debates which have accompanied the destabilisation of dominant constructions of masculinity, four broad topics are most prominent: men's health, boys' education, interpersonal violence, and fatherhood, family law and child custody. Although men's rights and fathers' rights groups are politically active in all four areas, the last two are particularly important. In fact, the area of family law and custody may be a primary focus above all else, in that it is often concerns related to fathers, families and the legal regulation of divorce, separation and custody which motivate fathers' rights activity on violence.

### *Strategies and successes*

Members of men's rights and fathers' rights groups use strategies of service provision, lobbying and activism. They offer self-help

meetings, provide support for men undergoing separation, divorce and family law proceedings, lobby local and national governments to change policies and laws, and promote their views through newsletters, websites and media campaigns. Fathers' rights groups have made particularly effective use of the public submissions process in periods of family law reform.<sup>14</sup> For example, of the six-thousand or so submissions to the Joint Select Committee on Certain Aspects of the Operation and Interpretation of Family Law on Child Support (1994), 65 percent were by non-resident parents or their spouses.<sup>15</sup> A similar pattern is likely in the current Australian government Inquiry Into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation. Fathers' rights groups also have strong media advocates such as Bettina Arndt with regular columns in the national press.

Some anti-feminist men's groups adopt blunter, more hostile and sometimes criminal strategies in pursuing their political agendas. One tactic is to attack the existence of services for women through legal action and media harassment. For example, individual men in fathers' rights groups in Australia have tried to use sex discrimination legislation to allege that they were discriminated against by domestic violence services. These efforts are motivated by revenge and political hostility, rather than by a genuine desire to establish services for male victims of domestic violence. In Melbourne last year, a militant men's group called the Blackshirts, acting on behalf of men "harshly dealt with" by the Family Court, terrorised recently separated women (and children) in their homes. Wearing black paramilitary uniforms and black masks, the men shouted accusations of sexual misconduct and moral corruption through megaphones and letter-dropped neighbours.<sup>16</sup> The Lone Fathers Association and Parents Without Partners issued a joint press release condemning such behaviour, but some groups go even further. In 1996, a Brisbane newspaper alleged that a men's rights organisation had hired private investigators to track down members' spouses and children hiding in domestic violence refuges, found restricted information about domestic violence workers and revealed confidential financial information about a domestic violence

centre.<sup>17</sup> However, a three-month police investigation recommended no action against the organization.<sup>18</sup>

Men's and fathers' rights networks across the world have made extensive use of the Internet, and their presence is far greater than that represented by the networks and constituencies which oppose them. While this does not necessarily translate into influence on either community perception or public policy, it does mean that anti-feminist men can build substantial international communities of support, have easy access to a wide range of publications ostensibly substantiating their arguments, and can share strategies and tactical tips. Masculinist websites echo the themes in men's and fathers' rights discourses in print media, but also display a more unrestrained "discourse of hate, often violent and unchecked, directed at women and feminists."<sup>19</sup>

Where anti-feminist men's and fathers' groups in Australia have had most policy success is in the area of family law. While overall assessments of the influence of fathers' rights groups vary, even among fathers' rights advocates themselves,<sup>20</sup> there is no doubt that fathers' rights groups have achieved important changes in both the practices and popular perceptions of family law. Changes in family law made in 1995, particularly the enshrining of children's "right to contact" with both parents, were driven by persistent lobbying by fathers' rights groups. At the same time, in part because of efforts by such groups as the National Women's Justice Coalition, aspects of the final version of the Family Law Reform Act 1995 were not to the liking of the fathers' rights groups.<sup>21</sup> Over the last few years there have been policy shifts in the distribution of family tax benefits for shared care, advantaging non-resident/access parents (usually fathers) at direct cost to the resident parents (usually mothers).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, major changes to the child support system have disadvantaged resident parents and increased the control exerted by the non-resident parent.<sup>23</sup>

Since the 1995 changes in Australia, there has been no increase in shared parenting among separated partners. On the other hand, the 'reforms' have created greater scope for abusive non-resident parents to harass the child's primary caregiver and generated increased disputes. An uncritical 'pro-contact' discourse pervades

the courts (and the media). It has meant in practice that children's interests and welfare are being compromised, through heightened exposure to domestic violence by fathers and more awards of joint custody orders in the context of distrust and hostility between ex-partners. The legal changes also have intensified the pressure for shared residence arrangements, motivated by non-custodial parents' desire to reduce child support liabilities.<sup>24</sup>

Fathers' rights groups also have been relatively successful in attracting informal government support and direct funding. In 1999 the federal government granted ongoing operational funding to the Lone Fathers Association, while defunding the National Council for Single Mothers and their Children. The latter was only reversed after significant public outcry.<sup>25</sup> Over the last five years, the national President of the Lone Fathers Association has had contact with powerful political figures of the kind only dreamed about by women's groups, such as the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Family and Community Services and a range of Senators. Similarly, prominent politicians have participated in events at Parliament House this year held by the National Fatherhood Forum (dedicated to "Turning the Tide of Fatherlessness in Australia").

Men's and fathers' rights groups have had less success in their attempts at direct participation in parliamentary politics. A cluster of political parties asserting the politics of 'angry white men' were evident in the 1998 federal (national) elections in Australia, including fathers' rights parties, right-wing parties opposing gun control, and racist parties opposed to immigration and multiculturalism, and these parties tended to support each other in their group voting tickets.<sup>26</sup> While men's and fathers' rights parties won little of the vote, their platforms also received support in the platform of the highly conservative One Nation party (which gained 4.3 percent of the national vote in 2001).<sup>27</sup>

### *Revolts against justice*

The political strength and influence of fathers' rights groups have been boosted by their confluence with socially conservative

government agendas. In Australia, the Federal Liberal government has adopted tax, child support and other policies which provide incentives for women to stay at home full-time and raise children, while making participation in the paid workforce more difficult for women.<sup>28</sup> It has made it harder for maternity and paternity leave, flexible working arrangements and protections against sex discrimination to be included in workplace awards, removed subsidies for community-based childcare centres and frozen childcare assistance, and attempted to amend the Sex Discrimination Act to allow discrimination on the basis of marital status in granting access to in-vitro fertilisation. Prime Minister John Howard has cultivated divisions between women in the workforce and women at home, exploiting both ‘wedge politics’ and appeals to a ‘mainstream’ Australia.<sup>29</sup>

Discourses of fathers’ rights rely in part on the symbolic capital generated by images of the “new fatherhood”.<sup>30</sup> Fathers’ rights advocates are able to draw on images of the nurturant father or ‘new dad’, as well as social scientific and legal support for the benefits of paternal involvement in families (although the relationship between father absence and children’s well-being is far more complex than fathers’ rights groups claim<sup>31</sup>). But while the culture of fatherhood has changed radically, the conduct has not, and traditional divisions of labour persist in both parenting and domestic work.<sup>32</sup>

Anti-feminist men’s groups have ridden the wave of right-wing backlashes against “political correctness” and efforts at social justice. In Australia as in other Western countries, the 1980s and 1990s saw the slowing down, or development of obstacles to, progress in women’s equality and gender justice. Australia underwent an economic and social restructuring, involving the winding back of the welfare state and the increasing dominance of market economics and economic rationalism. There have been at least three forms of attack on gender justice, part of the “revolt against behaving fairly”: justifications of social inequalities through biological determinism, social Darwinism and Sociobiology; attacks on policies or principles which have been a central part of feminist agendas such as equal

opportunity and affirmative action legislation; and claims of a repressive ideological regime of 'political correctness'. Anti-feminist men's groups are a fourth, and they have taken up such discourses themselves in asserting pro-sexist agendas.<sup>33</sup>

Men's rights and fathers' rights groups also have capitalised on the growing community and governmental attention to 'men's issues' and the increased willingness of state and federal governments to fund services directed at men. In 1997 the federal government allocated six million dollars to services associated with men and family relationships, intended to "assist men manage a range of relationship difficulties with partners and ex-partners, children and step-children and to help organisations develop more sensitive and responsive approaches to working with male clients". This funding continues at similar levels today, alongside the establishment of a national phone line for men titled Men's Line Australia. However, while some funds address the constituencies for whom fathers' rights groups claim to speak, such as separated men and single fathers, few if any have gone to organisations or services espousing overtly anti-feminist men's agendas. Fathers' rights groups nevertheless have been directly funded and have achieved important policy gains.

### *Pro-sexist*

I've been calling these "men's rights" and "fathers' rights" groups, because these are common descriptions and because some of the groups use them themselves. "Anti-feminist" is also a useful description for nearly all these groups. Another term is "masculinist", popular among American men's rights men but in less frequent use in Australia. More bluntly, men's and fathers' rights forces have sometimes been described as "pro-sexist" or the "angry men's movement".

Men's rights and fathers' rights represent one form of "masculinity politics"—"those mobilizations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue, and, with it, men's position in gender relations".<sup>34</sup> Three other forms of masculinity politics currently visible include men's groups and networks focused

on “men’s liberation” or “masculinity therapy”, spiritual or mythopoetic concerns, and pro-feminist and anti-patriarchal activism. In the past I have described all four forms collectively as “the men’s movement”,<sup>35</sup> but this term is problematic insofar as it includes groups and agendas involving both the defence of men’s privilege and efforts to undo it.

The defence of patriarchal masculinity and the revalidation of male identity are central to men’s and fathers’ rights agendas. However, these projects also are visible in both men’s liberation and mythopoetic men’s discourse, and shared with other reactionary political forces such as white supremacist groups and the pro-gun lobby.<sup>36</sup> These forms of masculinity politics share further commonalities. They offer essentialist and biologically determinist accounts of gender, describe (white) men as under attack and now the “real” victims, complain that men are being demasculinised and feminised (turned into ‘wimps’ and ‘soft men’) by women and feminism, venerate a mythical past, and argue that men must reclaim their masculinity and usurp women’s power.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, there is a general potential for men involved in men-focused therapeutic projects of personal growth and healing to adopt anti-feminist positions as their involvements shift to more public and politicised agendas. This shift is exemplified for example by the trajectory of prominent fathers’ rights spokesman Warren Farrell. He was supportive of liberal feminism when he first became involved in the American men’s movement, publishing *The Liberated Man* in 1974, but by the time of his publication of *The Myth of Male Power* (1993), and more recently *Father and Child Reunion* (2001), his conservative shift had been entrenched. Given that the men’s movement represents a collective mobilisation by members of a privileged group, there is always a danger that this activity will invite men to defend and assert their shared interests and thus entrench patriarchal privilege. At the same time, men can be motivated by interests other than those associated with gender privilege, as men’s anti-violence campaigns and other forms of progressive and pro-feminist men’s activism demonstrate.<sup>38</sup>

### *What's wrong with men's rights?*

In general, “men’s rights” is an anti-feminist and sometimes misogynist (woman-hating) backlash. Its analysis is wrong, its strategies are misdirected and sometimes harmful, and ultimately it does not serve men well. There are legitimate aspects to the issues it raises, but they will not be addressed when surrounded by its hostile and sexist agendas.

Men’s rights claims are founded on a systematic denial of the power and privilege which many men receive and exercise. They ignore men’s dominance of powerful institutions and positions (institutional power), men’s power in relationships (interpersonal power), and cultural support for traditional masculine ideals and attitudes and men’s dominance of cultural production (cultural power). The fact is that, as Messner writes, “Men, as a group, enjoy institutional privileges at the expense of women, as a group.”<sup>39</sup> This is not to say all men are powerful and all women are powerless: clearly neither is true, and some men are relatively powerless (Aboriginal men being a good example) just as some women are relatively powerful.

A typical reversal in men’s rights discourse is to recognise aspects of men’s patriarchal privilege but to claim that this social power carries burdens which thus outweigh its benefits. However, “it is a strange twist to argue that men do not really have privilege and power because they suffer from the effects of privilege and power”.<sup>40</sup> Certainly there is a ‘price tag’ for men which comes with the promise of public status and masculine privilege.<sup>41</sup> But men’s pain must be seen in the context of men’s institutional power. Indeed, aspects of men’s pain such as men’s emotional brutality and men’s lives of competition and distrust, confrontation and humiliation in fact are necessary to the operations of this power.<sup>42</sup>

Some of the examples men’s rights advocates give of men’s powerlessness or oppression (being sent off to war or killed in factories) are in fact examples of some men’s powerlessness at the hands of other men. Men’s rights ideologies fail to recognise differences and power relations among men themselves, of race,

class and sexuality, and the crucial role of these in the injustices which they attribute to men in general. Some of the examples given of injustices or discriminations experienced by men (including some at the hands of women) are legitimate examples, which must be dealt with. For example, some men are unfairly treated in custody and divorce matters. But men's rights men wrongly use such examples to make much grander claims, that men are oppressed by women or that there is some kind of feminist conspiracy to cover up abuse of men.

Fathers' rights advocates have co-opted liberal feminist discourse of gender "equality" and "rights", but show more concern with equality of their legal status than equality in their everyday parenting. Their claims of discrimination in child custody decisions exaggerate the disparity in awards of custody to women versus men, neglect the ways in which custody decisions are shaped by divisions of labour prior to divorce and separation, and ignore the fact that in the vast majority of cases mothers end up with responsibility for children by private arrangement with the father.<sup>43</sup> They tend to ignore how work and family institutional relations benefit them, both before and after divorce [and] focus entirely on the economic and institutional costs that are attached to these masculine privileges.<sup>44</sup>

A Canadian study of fathers' rights groups found that while members portrayed themselves as caring, loving fathers who have been denied their rights to equal custody and access to their children, they did not want a larger role in the day-to-day caregiving, but rather a larger role in decision-making related to their children and ex-spouses' lives.<sup>45</sup> Fathers' rights advocates seem less interested in supporting children than in maintaining or assuming control over their ex-spouses and the children.<sup>46</sup> They use the language of "shared parenting", offering an ideal few could dispute, but this goal is undermined by their acrimony towards the custodial parent and their commitments to a patriarchal family structure.<sup>47</sup> In addition, their proposed solutions to child support and contact issues often show insensitivity to children's welfare and involve one-sided restrictions on the custodial parent.<sup>48</sup> Fathers'

rights discourse conflates the interests of children and fathers and ignores the possibility of conflict between them. It even compromises children's interests, in prioritising the prevention of false allegations of child abuse over safeguards for genuine victims of abuse and expressing sympathy for men "who are so distressed by their loss of access to the children they purportedly love that they murder the objects of their affection".<sup>49</sup>

Men's and fathers' rights discourse is often characterised by a blatant disregard for scholarly research and empirical evidence.<sup>50</sup> For example, discussions of fatherlessness in populist texts such as Popenoe's *Life Without Father* are characterised by the confusion of correlation and causation, the reduction of multiple social variables to bivariate associations, the highly selective use of research evidence, neglect of contradictory or competing evidence, and treatment of small differences as if they were gross and absolute.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Hoff Sommers' *The War Against Boys*, a well-known anti-feminist work on boys and schooling, ignores the bulk of contemporary work on boys and gender and bases its entire argument for feminist harms to boys on speculation.<sup>52</sup> In attempting to gain strategic advantage in family law proceedings, fathers' rights advocates have been content to deploy fictional disorders such as "parental alienation syndrome", a "syndrome" unsupported by empirical data, not listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and never recognised by the American Psychiatric Association.<sup>53</sup>

Some advocates for fathers' rights use bogus statistics, with no basis in fact, in asserting their political agendas. For example, the idea that "Boys from a fatherless home are 14 times more likely to commit rape" is one of a collection of claims about the consequences of father absence repeated across men's and fathers' rights websites. This "statistic" was constructed from the finding in a 1987 journal article<sup>54</sup> on typologies of rape that eighty percent of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes. There are five problems with the statistical extrapolation being performed here. First, "80 percent of rapists" does not translate into boys being "14 times more likely".<sup>55</sup> Second, the statistic shows correlation, not causation. Both the absence of a father in a

household and children's rates of rape perpetration may be shaped by other factors, such as poverty, violence and drug use. Third, this study among 108 convicted prisoners in Massachusetts cannot be extrapolated to the population at large. Fourth, even if this extrapolation were plausible, the claim takes no notice of changes over time in fatherlessness, rape and a host of other social factors. Fifth, according to the text, it is not 80 percent of all rapists, but 80 percent of rapists with a particular motivation. Thus, the source for an alleged statistic endlessly circulated in 2003 turns out to be an inaccurate and misleading extrapolation of a figure from an article written a decade and a half ago.

Feminism is a movement and set of ideas to which many men's rights men show venomous and semi-hysterical hostility. They mistakenly hear feminism's anti-sexism or anti-patriarchy as anti-male or "misandrist" (man-hating), and oddly enough, they fail to hear the enormous hope for both women's and men's futures which feminism embodies. Men's rights men in fact offer a bizarre caricature of feminism, a highly ignorant and selective misrepresentation. It is based on gross stereotypes and long-standing sexist images of women as ball-breaking and malicious. Most men's rights writing shows almost no acquaintance with the huge and diverse feminist literature now available and with the feminist women and organisations in existence. Sexist stereotypes also appear in fathers' rights depictions of women as ripping off men financially and as lying and vindictive mothers.<sup>56</sup>

Men's and fathers' rights men also respond with great hostility to men supportive of feminism, typically accusing them of both homosexuality and emasculation, in a neat illustration of the assumptions about masculinity shaping men's rights discourse. For example, in response to my articles on the pro-feminist website XYonline, one advocate wrote by e-mail that I was a "fucking faggot, feminazi pussy licker".

### *Hey presto, manifesto*

How can we respond to men's rights groups? While the standard battery of political strategies is relevant, here I focus on the particular role which pro-feminist men can play.

- (1) Assert a feminist-supportive men's perspective.

Men with a concern for men's issues and a sympathy for feminism should be trying as hard as possible to take up space in the public arena and to affect social and political relations. We should be writing letters to the editor, lobbying politicians, sending submissions, being interviewed, phoning talkback, holding meetings, forming alliances, getting funding, doing deals and shaking hands. One point of all this is to create an alternative voice on gender issues that is specifically male. We need to show that anti-feminist men do not speak for all men. Of course it is essential that women take up as much space as possible too. Indeed, men's efforts should be conducted in partnership with women, in part as a powerful and practical demonstration of men's and women's shared interest in building gender justice.<sup>57</sup>

### *Speak to pain*

- (2) Take up men's rights issues, but differently.

Men's rights men so far have been far more effective than pro-feminist men in speaking to certain aspects of men's lives. They rightly identify the pain, confusion and powerlessness which many men experience, although they misdiagnose it and thus misprescribe the cure. Let us acknowledge and tackle the ways in which men are hurt and disempowered, but not do this, as men's rights does, at the expense of women or gender justice.

We need to take up the issues about which men's rights men are vocal, offering an alternative analysis of their character and causes. We have to try to reach the men who otherwise might join men's rights organisations and in some cases who have their pain turned into anti-women backlash. Doing so will be challenging, and it may involve questioning aspects of the feminist-informed analyses we have held so far. Yet a recognition of areas of men's pain and even disadvantage is compatible with a feminist understanding (that is, an understanding based on a commitment

to gender equality and justice), but it may take some reworking for this compatibility to be realised.

Domestic violence for example is a crucial area for men's rights men. We have to acknowledge that yes, men are the victims of violence. Women can and do perpetrate violence, and feminist scholarship shows a growing attention to violence by women. But boys and men are most at risk of violence from other boys and men. Men's rights men typically claim that men and women assault each other at equal rates and with equal effects, and that an epidemic of husband-battering is being ignored if not silenced. The information with which to disprove these claims is readily available,<sup>58</sup> and we should have it at our fingertips.

Men's rights claims and agendas must also be placed in their political context. On women's violence for example, men's rights agendas stem as much from political motives as they do from a genuine concern for male victims of violence. These men are using women's alleged violence against men as a way of discrediting attempts to deal with men's violence against women, particularly in relation to family law issues.<sup>59</sup>

### *Win/lose won't work*

- (3) Show that men's rights strategies in fact are harmful to men themselves.

Attacking services primarily for women is no way to gain services for men. Men's rights advocates have attacked women's refuges and women's health centres, simultaneously while calling for either parallel services for men (refuges, health centres, even an Office for the Status of Men and Their Families<sup>60</sup>) or services for both men and women.

There are at least four problems with such strategies. They focus on the wrong target, they antagonise potential supporters, they taint as backlash the need to address such men's issues, and they are based on a simplistic "You've got it, we want it too" logic which may not provide the most appropriate services for men.

For example, when it comes to the poor state of men's health, the problem is not women or the feminist health movement and the organisations it worked to establish. Instead, we should be tackling destructive notions of manhood, an economic system which values profit and productivity over workers' health, and the ignorance of service providers. Women have been central to advocacy for and the promotion of men's health.<sup>61</sup> To try to build men's health by taking away from women's health is to shoot oneself in the prostate, and is a betrayal of the principles on which a concern for health should be based in the first place.

It is striking how often the things men's rights men call for are the mirror image of things established by three decades of women's movements. You've got a women's refuge, we want a men's refuge, and so on. This "us too" approach won't actually get men the most appropriate services they need, because it is motivated more by a knee-jerk logic of equality than by an informed appraisal of the kinds of services men are going to use and like.

#### (4) Set up services.

Whether the issue is divorce or men's health, we need to provide constructive, accountable and professional services and resources for men. If men who have gone through painful divorces and messy custody proceedings, men who are hurting and confused, can find access to such services, they will be able to work through this in ways that are healthy and safe. Let us speak to the experience of boys and men in such situations, but offer a different interpretation of it and encourage a different resolution for it to those in men's rights ideology.

### *Ask not what your country*

I think pro-feminist men (myself included) have been too quick to stereotype as committed woman-haters and sexist dinosaurs all men who raise typical "men's rights" issues. We have been sometimes influenced by the dominant model of oppositional

politics, in which all such men are “enemies”, to be approached (if at all) with disdain, hostility and self-righteous zeal. We have focused sometimes on the negative and we have attributed motives to men’s actions which are not necessarily accurate. Such approaches limit our political effectiveness, making it very difficult for us to reach anyone but the almost-converted.

We will be better able to respond to men’s rights agendas if we have a proper idea of the experiences, needs and fears of the men who support them. This was brought home to me in a confrontation with a very angry and hostile man, a men’s rights activist from Melbourne. After two hours of talking, he told me of the effect on him of having being sexually abused as a child by his mother and another woman. I’ve also heard some men’s stories of their ex-wives acting maliciously or dishonestly and of an unsupportive legal system. I do not accept the wider conclusions that such men drew from their experiences, and I assume too that for any one incident (such as a custody battle) there will be multiple versions of what happened. But if I want to reach such men at all, I have to accept that what they describe is their reality for the moment. I have to show that I have heard them, while continuing to assert an anti-sexist and pro-feminist agenda and act with accountability and integrity.

I am very troubled by the organised anti-feminist men’s groups, especially as they are making themselves heard in an increasingly conservative political climate. It will be a continual challenge to assert a gender-just perspective, in the presence of such groups and of the ignorance or complicity of many men. This is the challenge that faces us at the beginning of the twenty-first. I hope that it can be taken up with passion, pride and courage.

- <sup>40</sup> Nghi Ly and Linda F. McCraig (2002). "National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey: 2000 Outpatient Department Summary." *Advance Data from Vital and Health Statistics*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and National Center for Health Statistics. 4 June.
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***Chapter Twenty-One Backlash: Angry men's movements***  
**by Michael Flood, Ph.D**

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- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 73-74.
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- <sup>8</sup> Bouchard et.al., *op.cit.* 35-36.
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- <sup>20</sup> Kaye and Tolmie, 1998a, *op.cit.* 23-24.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 25.
- <sup>22</sup> Keebaugh, *op.cit.*
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THE BATTLE AND  
BACKLASH RAGE ON

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*Why Feminism Cannot  
be Obsolete*

Stacey Elin Rossi

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