

International Men's Day: An open letter of rejection

Michael Flood, 25 October 2004

This is an open letter concerning International Men's Day. A men's organisation in Canberra, Australia, is proposing to commemorate this day as part of its efforts to promote awareness of men's issues.

As someone who has been involved in men's issues and men's activism since the late 1980s, I am fully supportive of efforts to improve men's health, encourage fathers' positive involvement in families, prevent men's use of and exposure to violence, and so on. However, I do not believe that an International Men's Day is an appropriate or effective way to help achieve such goals.

I argue below that men's organisations should not support this event. But before spelling out my concerns, I give some background on the day itself.

Background

International Men's Day was founded in 1999, in Trinidad and Tobago. It continues to be observed there, on November 19th each year.¹

International Men's Day does not have any kind of significant international presence. A Google search for this event finds very few examples of any other countries or organisations acknowledging this day. Instead, its internet presence is primarily in commentators stating, in response to International Women's Day, "Why isn't there an International Men's Day?"

In Australia however, the Men's Health and Wellbeing Association of the Australian Capital Territory (MHWA ACT) initiated the first celebration of IMD in Australia in 2003. As Phil Gouldson of the MHWA ACT writes, "We are keen to build on this locally and nationally. The Association is contacting men's organisations around Australia to encourage them to undertake their own local celebrations."

I do not know to what extent other men's organisations have taken up this event.

Some discussions of IMD can be found here;

<http://www.geocities.com/jtluxing/intmensday.html>

<http://www.menstuff.org/calendar/workshops/awareness.html#imd>

http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg_id=002hYy

<http://www.tcmc.org/index.html>

Concerns about International Men's Day

There are a number of important problems with International Men's Day. In summary;

IMD offers a false parallel to International Women's Day.

IMD invites a conservative understanding of gender relations.

IMD potentially alienates services and organisations that might otherwise support measures aimed at improving men's wellbeing or service responses to men.

There are better ways to achieve the same goals.

IMD may be ineffective at engaging men.

¹ Source: <http://members.tripod.com/cbtt/specialarticles.html>. Accessed 25 October, 2004.

False parallel

The most important problem lies in the very notion of an “International Men’s Day”. It offers a false parallel to International Women’s Day, false because the context and the meaning of the two days are fundamentally different.

International Women’s Day began in 1908 in New York as a protest by women against intolerable working conditions and lesser wages. It was taken up in the 1920s in Australia as part of a protest by women again against unjust and unequal working conditions. International Women’s Day continues to be celebrated each year, on March 8th, as part of protests against the many forms of discrimination and injustice experienced by women.

The notion of an “International Men’s Day” implies that men, like women, are a group systematically disadvantaged or oppressed by gender inequalities. There is no denying that men do suffer limitations and harms under the current gender order, e.g. poor physical and mental health. But it is simply false to claim that men as a group are disadvantaged by gender relations.

In response to some men’s question, “What about International *Men’s Day*?”, some women have responded that every other day *is* International Men’s Day. In other words, on every other day, gender inequalities are taken for granted, the achievements of (privileged) men in politics and culture are routinely celebrated, and women’s lives and concerns are trivialised and marginalised. While this is simplistic, it does point to the ongoing gender inequalities that characterise our society.

Some advocates of IMD may believe that IMD can embody this recognition, i.e. that IMD can invite men to challenge the gender inequalities that disadvantage women *and* the gender norms that limit men. But even if the actual agendas of IMD are not based on anti-feminist and conservative understandings, the notion of an “International Men’s Day” itself invites this reading. This is my next point.

Invites a conservative understanding of gender relations

Because of the false parallel in the name “International Men’s Day”, this invite invites people into a common conservative complaint about services and events directed at women. This complaint goes as follows: “International Women’s Day?! Why isn’t there an International *Men’s Day*?” Or, “Women’s refuge?! Why isn’t there a *men’s* refuge?” And so on.

There are several problems with such complaints. They fail to recognise that the specific injustices and situations faced by women require responses that also, at least sometimes, are women-specific. They assume that there is a level playing field between men and women, such that any service or resource dedicated to women represents an injustice. They assume that this injustice must be remedied either by generic services for women and men, or by parallel services and resources for men.

This kind of simplistic “You’ve got it, we want it too” logic will not provide the most appropriate services for men. 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. (This is a lesson that the advocates of men’s health have learnt. They argue that we shouldn’t simply model men’s health on the early development of women’s health, because of crucial differences between them. For example, setting up men’s health centres might not be the best approach, because there is some evidence that men are more likely to go to generalist medical centres.)

In other words, “International Men’s Day” smacks of the “me-too-ism” that has dogged the men’s movement since its beginnings. And this me-too-ism does men no favours.

Potentially alienates services and organisations that might otherwise support measures aimed at improving men’s wellbeing or service responses to men

If people disagree with the arguments made so far, there is a further argument against IMD that may be more persuasive. This is the point that IMD is bad strategy. IMD is likely to alienate women’s services, women’s organisations, and other women and men who might otherwise be supportive of the causes (men’s health, fathers’ positive involvement with children, etc.) associated with IMD.

Calls for an “International Men’s Day” will be understood by many women and women’s services as at best misguided and ill-informed, and at worst as anti-feminist backlash. It is poor advocacy to antagonise the individuals and agencies that are potential supporters of efforts e.g. to improve men’s health. It is these same agencies that a men’s organisation would need to work with in developing local initiatives on these issues, as they share the same field of community work and service provision. Attempting to address issues such as men’s health through an “International Men’s Day” gives these issues the taint of backlash.

I am not arguing that men’s organisations only can organise events or advocate policies that would be supported by all women’s organisations. First, women’s organisations themselves may disagree about the merits of a particular event or policy. Second, men’s organisations at times may need to argue for events or policies with which some women’s organisations are uncomfortable. But it seems crazy to advocate an event that is very likely to antagonise or alienate the majority of women’s services and organisations. Particularly when there are other ways to achieve the goals with which the IMD ostensibly is associated. This brings me to my next point.

There are better ways to achieve the same goals.

There are other, safer and more effective, ways to achieve the IMD’s goals. If the goal is to ‘raise men’s issues’ in the community, then there are any number of ways to do this that do not have the same risks associated with the IMD. For example, if the goal is to improve the ways in which services respond to and engage men, this could be achieved by promoting or providing training to service providers, producing or promoting resources for service providers, running an event on how to engage men, and so on.

In addition, there are a range of special days and weeks that already serve as useful organising points for work on men’s issues. These include Fathers’ Day, Men’s Health Week, and others.

May be ineffective at engaging men.

Finally, an “International Men’s Day” may be ineffective at engaging men. Men too may be uncomfortable with the me-too-ism it suggests. On the other hand, such an event may attract only those men who *do* believe that ‘feminism has gone too far’ and ‘now men are the real victims’.

An “International Men’s Day” may attract media attention, and such attention is usually desired by community organisations attempting to attract interest and support. However, because of the reasons already outlined, this media attention may focus on the ‘competing with women’ angle, again detracting from the positive significance of the event. In other words, an IMD may get media attention, but for the wrong reasons and with damaging effects.

Conclusion

“International Men’s Day” is at best misguided and political naïve, and at worst hostile and anti-feminist. Men’s organisations should not promote nor support an International Men’s Day. Nor should other organisations offer their support to such an event.

Please feel most welcome to circulate or publish this letter.

Sincerely,

Michael Flood.

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Further reading

For further reading on men’s issues, see the articles collected here: <http://www.xyonline.net>

For academic references, see The Men's Bibliography: <http://mensbiblio.xyonline.net/>