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Masculinities, power and change

Abstract

We have had 25 years of research on men and masculinities. The relationship between men as gendered beings, power and change has been central in this research. This article presents some of the main findings that most researchers within critical studies on men will agree on, and then it discusses how to better understand men's relationship to power and marginalization, change and gender equality in future research. It is explorative in its style, and an invitation to further debates on these important questions.

Key words

masculinities, gender and power, gender and change, gender equality

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Change is eternal. Nothing ever changes. Both clichés are ‘true’. Structures are those coral reefs of human relations which have a stable existence over relatively long periods of time. But structures too are born, develop, and die. (Wallerstein, 1974, 3)

We have had 25 years of research on men and masculinities. Even if we, who are conducting this research, often say that very little has been done and very few areas of men’s practices have been studied, we have gained some important ground in the understanding of men as gendered beings and the significance of critical reflections concerning masculinities. But at the same time we are still struggling with some key concepts within masculinities – and gender – studies, like for example how to understand men’s relationship to power, change and gender equality. In this essay I will first present some of the main findings that most researchers agree on, and then I will present what I think should be cornerstones to better understand men’s relationship to power and marginalization, change and gender equality.

Understanding men and masculinities

This essay is based on three fundamental assumptions. First, as long as women do not have access to capital and money to the same degree as men, gender equality will not be fully achieved. Second, changing cannot only focus on structures, but must include attitudes and emotional aspects. Third, both men and women are part of the existing gender system and are responsible for reproducing it, or changing it. We must give attention to both men and women, and both men and women are able and willing to change.

We could summarize a general, theoretical understanding of masculinities cross-culturally developed within critical studies on men and masculinities as follows:

Men are not neutral. Men are no longer objective, neutral beings (Kimmel 2000). Historically, both in traditional research and politics, men were looked upon as non-gendered; they were the speakers of truth and objectivity. Research on men has shown that men are embedded in gendered systems to the same degree as women. They are gendered. This means they have interests as gender, they are subjected to power because of their gender, and they are performers of power in a gendered way. Men must therefore be understood not outside of and above gender structures or gender politics, but within and as a part of the circulation of gendered ideas in a culture.

Masculinities as plural. This has been one of the main areas of interest within critical studies on men and masculinities (Connell 1995). We can no longer speak about masculinity as if all men wear the same masculine clothes. Men's attitudes and practices are vastly different and must be understood as such. Masculinity therefore varies from culture to culture, from one historical period to another, within a man's life and between men within the same culture at the same time. This means that we have to gather knowledge about men and masculinities related to a defined and specified time and place, and be careful with generalizations, such as 'all men are aggressive and violent'.

Masculinities as stereotypes. At the same time we have learned to know the strength of collectivity within masculinities. George Mosse (1996) in particular has studied the stereotypes and the vigour of these stereotypes when it concerns masculinities. Mosse tries to capture the growth of over-individual and homogenized structures of ideal masculinities in Europe from the 18th century onward, characterized by bodily strength, self-control, independence and character. Stereotypes have their antagonism in counter-types, and stereotypes will always be measured against these counter-types. One of the strongest collective institutions in modernity with enormous imperative for men's self-understanding is the military, and the idea that men at any time must be able to act violently.

Not only men are masculine. It is easy to think that only men are bearers of what are perceived as masculine traits or masculine behaviours. Masculinities are not necessarily connected to men only; women can also practise 'female masculinities' (Halberstam 1998). This implies that we cannot speak about men and women, or masculinities and femininities, as opposites, but in a continuum with multiple possibilities and differences. Even though, when we study masculinities, we mostly study the subject as a way for men to show their manhood or cultural ideas of being a man. It is of course also important to be aware that studies on men are not identical to *men's* studies. Both male and female researchers conduct studies on men and masculinities.

Masculinity is not identity. Masculinity cannot be used as a question of identity or something inherent in men (Hearn 1996). There is no masculine role or essential form of masculinity (nor is there a feminine role). Masculinity is a critical, analytical term, which means it can be difficult to define. Performances of masculinities are always contextualized, and when we study men in a specific setting, we often find that these men understand themselves in a fixed or distinct way often related to stereotypes of ideologies of men. This is what we would call their performance of masculinities – how they see themselves as men in a defined culture. Because of the difficulties with a definition or agreement on what masculinities are, Jeff Hearn (1996) suggests that it is more appropriate to talk about 'men' instead of 'masculinities'. The problem is that we then will lose the ability to grasp the different cultural conceptualizations of what it means to be a man, stereotypical ideas concerning men, and men's emotional and psychological struggles to become what they think embodies a real man. This is all about apprehensions of masculinities.

Masculinity is not a one-dimensional thing. The complexities of gender become clear to us when we start studying masculinities (Kahn 2009, Mac an Ghail 1996, Whitehead 2002). Men are not one-dimensional. Their lives are often full of contradictions and both their life situation and their emotional situation can be full of differences that can be difficult to grasp. A man can be a wonderful caretaker of his own children and share equally with his wife at the same time as he is against female leadership. A man can be a straight businessman during daytime and a drag artist when darkness falls.

Men are becoming men and therefore subjects of change. It is also very important to apply Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking theory about women and men (de Beauvoir 1959). When de Beauvoir says that women are not born women, but become women through socialization, the same is true for men. Men are socialized to become men. This means that they are also able to change, since learned behaviour can be unlearned. For example, from my own field studies in Burundi, I learnt to know that when men in Burundi tell stories of violence against women, they refer to the *gushinga amashiga*, the practice of beating their wives for the first three years of marriage to show their dominance. They argue that they were taught to do this; if not, their wives would not respect them. I have personally experienced men relating the story of how they change their behaviour after becoming *Abatangamucos*: male and female change agents promoting gender equality in Burundi. Change can be swift or it can entail a lot of resistance and lingering.

These seven points constitute a sort of common understanding today among researchers conducting research on men and masculinities. It is important to mention that these points are not necessarily specific to understanding men only. In some of the points men and masculinities could be replaced with women and femininity. The point is that knowledge and research on men and women have more and more in common, and we see an international tendency that perspectives from research on men and research on women are united in a joint gender research, questioning the way gendered systems mould both men and women. Because of a deeper understanding of how men and women, masculinities and femininities are in relational terms, it is necessary to analyse and understand gender in a relational way.

Power and marginalization

Most feminist studies, including studies on masculinities, have been preoccupied with men's power. This includes studies on patriarchy as well as Connell's studies on hegemonic masculinities (Connell 1995): The relation to power determines men's position and defines the design of the gender theory. Focusing on men and power is understandable, since in most parts of the world and for many centuries it has mostly been men who have been in power and have had a monopoly or a dominant position in both politics and economics.

This way of understanding power follows a classic Marxist scheme where men constitute a dominant class and women are subordinate. There is no doubt that such an analysis is important for understanding the situation of women, and that this imbalance has to change through empowering women and enhance their socio-economic situation. Without a more equal distribution of income and ownership of capital, gender equality will not be fully achieved.

At the same time, a comprehension of power solely based on Marxism omits significant perspectives on both men and masculinities and power. For example, women's power in different settings and in relation to men will easily be lost in the analysis, but also the important interrelation between power and marginalization of men will be forgotten. Moreover, there are important implications for strategies of change concerning what kinds of power analysis are deployed. This third point I will expand below.

From a gender perspective a structural approach to power on a global level may lead to a depressing conclusion and a one-dimensional idea about masculinities. Seen from a different angle the situation looks quite different. As the American sociologist Michael Kimmel (2000) points out, most men do not seem to feel powerful. When asking a man, he will reply: 'What do you mean? Men have all the power. What are you talking about? I have no power at all. I'm completely powerless. My wife bosses me around, my children boss me around, my boss bosses me around. I have no power at all' (Kimmel 2000, 93). Power and gender represent/constitute a sensitive and difficult area where we need to apply both a structural perspective and an individual and more emotional perspective. Most men in the world are actually not very powerful, and on an emotional level they may feel power, powerlessness and marginalization all at the same time.

From a developmental or a global perspective it is important to apply a more sensitive approach to men and power. Lately, there have been some tendencies to analyse masculinities from a global perspective where the result is an even greater abstraction (Connell 1998, Pease and Pringle 2001). Connell uses the term global business masculinities to understand the development of global capital and transnational economy. This may very well be the situation, but leaves us with very little concrete understanding of the life of most men in a globalized world. A quite different picture of men and marginalization is painted in *The other half of gender* (Bannon and Correia 2006), where masculinities are understood in transference because of the effect globalization, economic change, poverty and social change have on local settings and men's life conditions.

A way of meeting this demand for new theoretical understanding of masculinities, where we are more sensitive to local conditions and both structural and emotional issues concerning men, can be to employ the dynamic relationship between manliness and unmanliness (Liliequist 1999, Lorentzen and Ekenstam 2006). Along with Mosse's aforementioned concepts of stereotypes and countertypes, one may speak about the relationship between manliness and unmanliness. Manliness will always be measured in relation-

ship to what is unmanly, and in danger of being emasculated; men will struggle to fulfil the cultural understanding of manliness within their culture. Therefore manliness is not something to achieve once and for all. It is not static. Men have to struggle throughout their lives to prove their manliness, which can be difficult because the cultural idea of what is manly and unmanly may shift. Erica Jong wrote once upon a time about women's fear of flying (Jong 1973). With men we may talk about men's fear of falling – falling into unmanliness (Ekenstam et al. 1998). However, unmanliness is never one thing. It may vary between cultures and in time. Feminization might be a typical pronunciation of unmanliness in many societies today, but may be understood differently in different cultures.

Operating with unmanliness as a critical concept helps us understand the dynamic power relationship between men (within masculinities) and between men and women at the same time. Criticizing men for being too feminine or womanish may reflect the cultural apprehension of women at the same time. A negative or depreciatory attitude toward women makes feminization something that is threatening for men. For women it can be the opposite, being manly is often equivalent to pursuing power, but it can be threatening when a woman loses contact with the cultural and subordinated idea of femininity.

Unmanliness may be used as an equivalent to demasculinization (Lorentzen 1998), which underlines the *processes of* being unmanly more than being unmanly in itself. The fear of doing something feminine may be a more powerful factor on men's performance of masculinities than anything else.

In the much acclaimed novel, *Things fall apart*, Chinua Achebe (1996) writes about the immense emotional borders limiting the movements of the hero, Okonkwo, in the novel. 'Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength' (Achebe 1996, 27). These sentences present to us some of the most important aspects of masculinities: weakness versus strength, being in control versus losing control, and aggression as the prime sign of manliness. It is first and foremost the emotional imbalance and narrowness that leads Okonkwo into trouble. His emotional attitude is primarily to keep femininity at bay, clearly articulated when he later speaks to his sons: 'I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck' (Achebe 1996, 162). Femininity is so threatening to Okonkwo that there is no alternative to femininity but death.

It is necessary to understand the fear of falling into unmanliness and men's emotional imbalance to get a grip on what is happening with masculinities in a globalized world where many men are increasingly experiencing marginalization. This holds true for young

men (especially in urban settings) as well as adults experiencing unemployment and older men confronted with becoming degraded. To be a man and act like a man according to cultural representations seems important for many men across the world, as it seems for many women, and these men seem to react with a male hysteria against change (Anderson 2009). The fascinating paradox is that even within a patriarchal society these representations do not necessarily lead to a good life for men – or for women and children.

Change

In much of feminist thinking men and women are often perceived as oppositional. ‘Men are oppressors’ while ‘women are the oppressed’. As a consequence of the growing focus on men’s violence against women in the late 1970s and early 1980s men became the enemy. When men are seen as the enemy or the oppressors, it is not easy to find strategies for engaging men in gender equality. The stereotypical idea about change is that women are pro-change because they are women, while men are against it. Some would say that only men who are or feel marginalized, like women, may be open to change. This is reflected in Bob Pease and Keith Pringle’s (2001, 8) foreword to *A man’s world* where they write that ‘because hegemonic masculinity can also be oppressive to those men who either refuse or fail to conform, women’s liberation can also benefit men’, and only those men can ‘embrace change and be allies’. This is an all-too-narrow and limited way of thinking about change.

In the late 1980s and the 1990s several different theoretical criticisms within feminist research made such dualism troublesome. This criticism came from non-western and not-white feminists criticizing the idea that all women have common interests, as well as from a growing poststructuralist approach focusing on difference and diversity (hooks 1981, Spivak 1987, Butler 1990). Lastly, studies on masculinities that build critical knowledge on masculinities, based on the assumptions mentioned in the beginning of this article, made an earlier dualistic theory difficult.

These theoretical modifications have opened a new gateway to understanding men and change. One does not necessarily need to be oppressed by someone to change. One can change by learning, by experience, by relationships with others, by failing, and because one sees the possibility for a better life through change. For most men around the world the last point may be seen as quite important because of the poor living conditions for so many men.

Different European studies have also shown that men are not only changing because they want to show solidarity with women or want to be aligned with the women’s liberation, but because they enjoy and embrace the new possibilities for being a man in a more gender-equal setting (Olsen 2000, Puchert, Gärtner and Höyng 2005, Aarseth 2008). They are actually doing it for themselves.

When we are discussing men and change, it must be clearly expressed that it is not men as such who are the problem, but certain ways of being and behaving, and when we promote change we have to be both specific about this and about what men will gain with a different type of behaviour. Survival is always a strategic choice, and good alternatives to changing strategies are needed. Andrea Cornwall (1997, 11) is very precise on this when she writes: 'If certain ways of being a man are culturally valued, then asking men to abandon these identities altogether without having anything of value to hold on to is clearly unreasonable.'

Giving men something to hold on to is precisely what is done when men are engaged in Village Saving and Loan (VSL) groups through CARE programmes in Rwanda. When I talked with men who are participating in VSL groups, their stories were all the same. They had moved from extreme poverty, violence and abuse into cooperation with their wives, being able to buy new clothes and some schoolbooks for their children. As one man from the Nyagihanga district, whom I interviewed, stated: 'Before I couldn't buy anything, all the money went to drinking beer. When you are a man you have to drink beer and buy for your friends. And when I came home I was very violent to my wife. She couldn't say anything.'

After being part of the VSL for one year he stated that he had changed what he was doing. Since he and his wife could now afford to buy a cow together, and since they were working together to save money, they were able to improve their life quality substantially. He argued that he had stopped beating his wife as a result of participating in the programme, something that later was confirmed by his wife. He basically changed himself and his behaviour because another way of being and behaving gave him, and his wife and his children, a better life.

This story also dilutes another strong belief within feminist thinking: men have to give away economic power to make a gender-equal society achievable. I will argue that most men will not have to give away economic power along the path to gender equality. They will actually gain economic sustainability through gender equality. What they will have to give up is the *idea* of being the only provider for the family, and, through experience, learn that four hands produce a better result than two. This learning process can be tough because in many societies the male role of provider is strong, and in many societies we will find vigorous resistance against change. Often this resistance will follow the line of demasculinization of men, and men will feel threatened and in danger of falling into being unmanly.

It is important to recognize, though, that resistance does not only come from men. Both men and women are bearers of tradition and reproduce established gender roles or gender behaviour. In studies of private life, for example, we see that women can also be the aggressive parties in the relationship (Sogn, Lorentzen and Holter 2006). A gendered system is kept up by both men and women, and often both men and women can feel in-

timidated by change. This was very clear in the case of the changes for the men in Rwanda and Burundi. Both men and women related how women and men became very suspicious when men changed and started doing traditional women's work, like fetching wood and water, or cooperating with their wives and discussing the use of money with them. Both men and women accused the wife of having bewitched her husband, and they talked about the man as becoming a woman. This means that changing masculinities needs to work with both men and women's traditional (and often patriarchal) attitudes toward men and masculinity.

Most men in the world are aware of the fact that there is a gender-equality wind blowing across the globe, to a large extent because of the *Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women* (1979), now signed by ninety per cent of UN membership states. Men's participation in building gender equality was included in the Cairo meeting (1994), where the programme of action states: 'Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality since, in most societies, men exercise preponderant power in nearly every sphere of life, ranging from personal decisions regarding the size of families to the policy and program decisions taken at all levels of Government' (*Program of action of the UN ICPD*, Ch. IV, C). Engaging men then became one of the two thematic issues at the 48th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2004, with an agreed conclusion on *The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality* that clearly states the need to involve men in creating gender equality. Moreover, in 2009 there was the Rio Declaration on engaging men, where all the different issues around men's involvement are included (*Global symposium on engaging men and boys on achieving gender equality*, Rio 2009).

Men are more or less touched by this wind of equality, and more or less engaged in it. Within state politics, research and development programmes, gender, women's empowerment and gender equality play an important part, and men are aware of this. Therefore we have to take a step away from a dualistic model of men and change, irrespective of whether this model exists as a duality between the oppressive men and the oppressed women, or the hegemonic masculinity versus the non-hegemonic masculinities. Most gender-equality laws in the world, for example, are voted through by male-dominated parliaments, and presumably most people would call men in parliament representatives of hegemonic masculinities. In the name of democracy, gender equality and women's representation play a crucial part.

Instead we could divide men's (and women's) attitudes toward gender equality into progressive and anti-progressive. The progressive comprise men who support empowerment of women and gender equality either passively or actively. The passive are the men who actually do not care very much, but would answer positively in surveys about gender equality and often change both their attitudes and practice slowly according to changes in the culture. The active are different groups of men either engaged in democratization of the society or taking part in personal and/or politically gendered activities. The anti-pro-

gressive could include either traditionalists or anti-feminists. Traditionalists value traditional gender roles and think of change in these roles as a decline in values. They do not argue aggressively against gender equality, but consider it a loss of natural distribution of gendered practices. The anti-feminists are openly aggressive to women's liberation, and blame women, gender research and gender equality for everything bad in society.

Both the progressive and anti-progressive attitudes are in principle distributed among men irrespective of class, ethnicity or interest group. Strategies of change always have to be inclusive and open for all men to be able to participate in democratization of society, and gender equality is a fundamental part of this democratization.

Men and gender equality

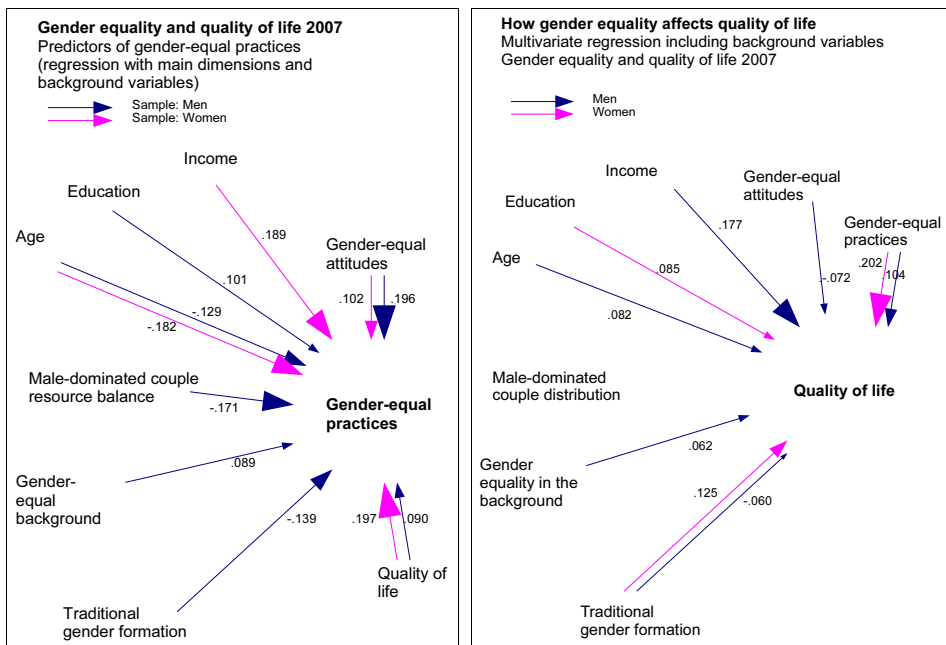
Achieving gender equality is not an easy task. Building democracy is not easy. Most countries in the world still have a very weak democratic ground structure. Another problem is that gender equality can mean different things depending on what kinds of theoretical standpoint one has for understanding difference and sameness. One way of creating gender equality is based on an idea of natural gender difference. One example is the way Norwegian marriage law was restructured in 1928 (Melby, Pylkkänen, Rosenbeck, Wetterberg 2006). The law made both parties in the marriage equal so far as rights of inheritance and capital are concerned, but it was at the same time based on differences in gendered roles in the family. Based on a traditional nuclear family idea, women's roles include caregiving and housekeeping, while men's roles include providing financially for the family. They were equal partners within the law, but different in the roles to fulfil it. We find the same philosophy in the first 'gender equal' school books in Norway in the 1970s, which required an equal number of pictures of girls and boys. The result was pictures of girls performing 'girly things' while boys engaged in 'boyish stuff'. Evidently, equality based on difference does not necessarily challenge the gender order or traditional notions of women and men's 'natural' roles. It is about gender equality as an outcome and not as a possibility.

A different understanding of gender equality negates the idea of naturally gendered behaviour, gendered intelligence and gendered roles. This we might call degendering gender equality. Such a strategy is much tougher and more difficult to achieve, but more consistent when it concerns accepting real gender equality. For hundreds of years, gender has been equivalent to difference and inequality. Degendered gender equality plays on difference, sameness and equality: biological differences, but sameness in intelligence, emotions and behaviour and equality in education, choices, caring, economy, politics and so on, which means a non-deterministic understanding of gender. Biological gender does not determine the kind of limits one has, how one's behaviour should be or what one should do in life. This is gender equality as universal equal possibilities.

For a long time there has been a presupposition that gender equality is a woman's thing and that men are against it. In a Norwegian survey from 2007, *Gender equality and quality of life*, we can clearly see that this is not the case (Holter, Svare and Egeland 2007). In this study men are almost as positive to gender equality on the whole, and in some of the cases they are even more progressive than women; this especially concerns the question about caring for their own children.

The study is focused on the relationship between gender equality and quality of life, and it gives us important new ideas concerning gender equality. If the result of politics and democratization is quality of life for the inhabitants, gender equality certainly leads to a better life. This is true to a very large degree for women, as well as for men.

In the Norwegian survey gender equality and quality of life are analysed together to emphasize how they influence each other. The result is shown in the two figures below (Holter, Svare and Egeland 2007, 164, 168).



The arrows show the impact of different measures on gender equality and quality of life. If we look at the first figure, we see that for both men and women attitudes and quality of life have a positive impact on gender equality, while they differ when it concerns education and income. Income is important for women, but not so for men. The correlation between male-dominated couple resource balance and traditional gender formation is strong, and has a clear negative effect on men. Women's economic empowerment seems

to be a clear winner, along with quality of life. Better income for women leads to a less male-dominated couple resource balance that improves gender equality for both women and men.

If we look at the second figure the connection between gender equality and quality of life is even more obvious for both men and women, even though it is stronger for women. There is also a slightly positive connection between education and traditional gender formation, and it seems as if women living in a traditional family have a better life than men. This is quite opposite to what has been considered a traditional family life. It is also interesting that men's quality of life improves substantially with higher income, but women's quality of life does not. The interesting thing here is the strong link between gender equality and quality of life that brings new insight into the understanding of gender equality – it actually improves life for both men and women.

I will also highlight the fact that attitudes and practices are strongly connected. This is different from earlier feminist theory where men's attitudes were thought to be inconsistent with their practices. Working on men's attitudes is therefore important from a gender-equality perspective.

What then is the most important gender-equality measure for increasing men's quality of life? The Norwegian study shows very clearly that the involvement of fathers is the most important factor for men (Holter, Svare and Egeland 2007). This provides an imperative for gender-equality politics and the work with men to focus on involved fatherhood. Fatherhood has been an important factor of Norwegian gender-equality politics the last 15 years (with good results), but in many countries in the world fathers' involvement is still unknown. Since Alexander Mitscherlich's groundbreaking study in the 1960s, research topics have focused on either distant or tyrannical fathers, showing the negative impact fathers can have, especially on boys (Mitscherlich 1963). However, there have been fewer studies on the positive correlations between fathers' involvement and quality of life for men, as well as for women and children.

If we look at the Norwegian study for what has the most negative impact on quality of life, violence is the most important (Holter, Svare and Egeland 2007). All types of violence have a solely negative effect, whether it entails the experience of childhood violence or violence in present life situations.

Strategies for reducing violence and increasing fathers' involvement seem therefore to be two of the most important areas to work on with men if we wish to increase both gender equality and quality of life.

From the Norwegian survey it is also possible to see a tendency where the concept of gender equality itself and the presupposition men have about it result in a more negative attitude toward gender equality. When men are asked specific questions about gender-equality issues they are much more positive. Such questions concern well-established topics within gender equality ideology, including sharing responsibilities in the family,

education, and equal representation in politics and in business. However, if we ask them if gender equality has gone too far, many of the men will say yes. Lack of an updated ideology or philosophy of what gender equality actually is has a negative impact in itself among men. A gender-equality theory where men are included as a positive force, and a gender-equality theory that also includes the improvement of life quality for men as well, will in itself create an important change in men's attitudes toward gender equality.

Conclusions

Change is not linear. Change happens all the time, and change creates resistance. Gender-equality change is one of those types of changes that rock some of the basic structures of society: patriarchy and the idea that there are essential differences between men and women. Gender-equality change therefore includes risks and risk-taking, for both women and men. It is important to acknowledge this fact. Women challenge the established power structure and hence they are at risk, while men can be looked upon as traitors to the same structure and accordingly are at risk. Exclusion and marginalization are possible outcomes for men. Working with gender equality must consequently include a specific awareness of risk for both men and women. However, if we look at the measures of quality of life, we could also say that there is a greater risk by *not* involving men in gender-equality policy.

Changing implies accepting differences and otherness. If a man changes, he will be different from other men. He will be confronted with otherness. He will be the other. Sameness and similitude are significant factors of masculinities within patriarchy – being like the others and adapting to the established system of masculinity. Alterity is difficult and therefore a risk – alterity not only as accepting the other outside of oneself as the other, but accepting alterity within oneself – oneself as the other. Changing embraces the acceptance of alterity both as the other and as one's self. This is risky business, but rewarding.

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