

# Men, Masculinities and Feminism

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## Introduction

In the 1990s, and especially since the Howard government was elected, it seems that social justice ideas are in full retreat. Aboriginal land rights are under bitter attack, public university education is being undermined, the Disadvantaged Schools Program is no more, right-wing intellectuals mount endless assaults on "political correctness", and public racism is spreading.

In such an environment, we must expect the backlash against feminism to be renewed. Men are the "disposable sex", we are now told by "men's rights" advocates. Boys are the disadvantaged group in schools. Feminist elites have foisted unpopular and unneeded affirmative action programs on the long-suffering people, and we can now get rid of them. Men can rediscover their true masculinity. The "new lads" are coming out of the woodwork in Britain. Jeff Kennett is mobilising the petrolheads in Victoria, the Promise Keepers are on the march in America. Feminism is out, testosterone is in, right?

Wrong. It is true that backlash politics have become more powerful. But the backlash is not the only show in town. A great many men, especially young men, now accept principles of gender equality. Some are active in support of women's advancement, or against male-violence - such as Men Against Sexual Assault in Australia. Other men, while not campaigning on gender issues, are in alliance with feminism in other ways - supporting anti-discrimination laws, for instance, or equal pay campaigns in the workplace. There is a broad spectrum of men's gender politics, not just the one kind.

Men who do undertake action in support of feminism are not in for an easy ride. They are likely to be met with antagonism and derision from other men, picturing them as eunuchs, queers or sell-outs to "political correctness." They will not necessarily get warm support from feminists - some of whom are deeply suspicious of all men, most of whom are wary of men's power, and all of whom make a primary commitment to solidarity with women.

Taking on feminist principles means reconstructing personal relations as well as public life. This offers endless opportunities for hurt, mistaken judgments, and mistrust. Indeed, it is often easier to acknowledge women's rights to fair and equal treatment in the public world than to confront sexism at the personal level. This is the response of some powerful men in the professions, in bureaucracies, in universities and in politics. Labor governments in Australia, both at federal and state level, provide clear examples. Such men may find it easy to support equal opportunity and anti-discrimination programs, which correspond with their own agendas for efficiency and modernity. They are less likely to

change the power structures of their own personal relationships.

## What Are Men Afraid Of ?

In 1989, a man massacred fourteen female students at the University of Montreal, in the process making abundantly clear that a hatred of "feminists" was his reason for shooting the women. He was, certainly, mad; but his madness was not random. It drew on a widespread sense of dislocation in gender relations, on a narrower but vehement ideology of men's supremacy, and on a festering fear of women's gains.

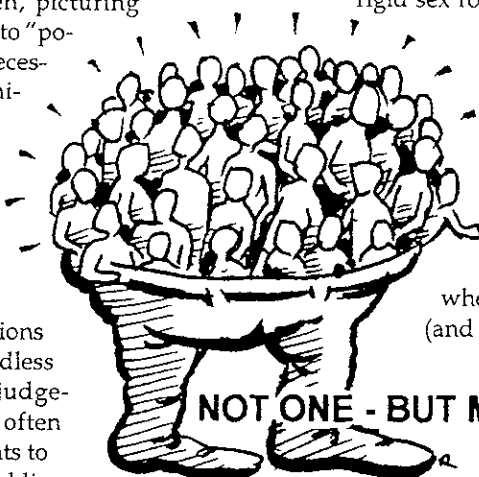
**Feminist elites have foisted  
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masculinity.**

Why this fear? What are men afraid they will lose? In the early 1970s, it was argued that men had a lot to gain from women's liberation, which could lead to men being freed from their rigid sex roles too.

The problem is that rigidities of "sex roles" are far from the whole story. Men's dominant position in society has an economic pay-off. The statistics usually show women's incomes as a percentage of men's, but think of it the other way around - in terms of the dividend for men from current social arrangements.

Men's average income in Australia is approximately twice women's average income, when all men and women are taken into account (and not just those in fulltime work).

Of course, men do not do twice as much work as women. "Time budget" studies in modern economies suggest that men and women work about the same number of hours. But most of women's work hours are unpaid - housework, volunteer work, "caring" for children, family and friends. And much of this labour is work done for men: work that keeps men well-fed and properly clothed, their living spaces clean and functional, their social networks in good repair. On top of this labour comes the



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emotional attention and support that men expect from women, and often get, through marriage.

"Masculinity" is, to a large extent, formed around the psychological investment men make in this system of unequal power, income and respect. So any challenge to the system, any attempt to limit the power or reduce the dividend, is likely to be felt as an attack on masculinity. There are real reasons for men to fear feminism!

#### Divisions Among Men

All men do not benefit equally from this system, however. Nor do all men derive from it the same concept of masculinity. A big employer may profit from the depressed wages of thousands of labouring women (as well as the ministrations of a wife and a secretary), while an unemployed inner-city 20 year old may get little material gain from women's work, except his mother's. The poor person's practice of masculinity may thus be significantly different from the big employer's.

Growing up and constructing masculinity in an Aboriginal community in conditions of mass unemployment and racial oppression is a different proposition from growing up in a white middle class.

### **Men who do undertake action in support of feminism are not in for an easy ride.**

On the other hand, gay men, while often economically comfortable, pay another kind of penalty. They are the targets of discrimination, physical violence, and cultural abuse because of their sexuality. The young men who attack and sometimes kill gay men often accompany the beatings with abuse that clearly shows their preoccupation with defending masculinity. This is not to agree with the bashers that gay men are un-masculine. Rather, this is part of the evidence that there are different kinds of masculinity and important gender divisions among men.

The popular ideology of gender assumes that "masculinity" and "femininity" are unchanging, direct expressions of male and female bodies. Male bodies are strong and dominant, female bodies are passive and nurturing.

But there is overwhelming evidence, from anthropology and history, that this is not so. The meanings of male and female bodies differ from one culture to another, and change (even in our own culture) over time. There are cultures where it has been normal, not exceptional, for men to have homosexual relations. There have been periods in "Western" history when the modern convention that men suppress displays of emotion did not apply at all, when men were demonstrative about their feeling for their friends. Mateship in the Australian outback last century is a case in point.

Masculinities and femininities are constructed or accomplished in social processes such as child rearing, emotional and sexual relationships, work and politics. Bodies are involved in all these sound processes. We do experience gender in our bodies, in the ways we walk and sit, in our skills, in our reactions of sexual arousal and disgust - but not because bodies determine social life. Rather, bodies are drawn into social relations, become social actors, become engaged in constructing a social world. It is in this social world that inequality arises, that women are oppressed, that political struggle occurs.

In a patriarchal society, the dominant or hegemonic form of masculinity embodies the currently successful strategy for subordinating women. In our society, hegemonic masculinity is heterosexual, aggressive and competitive, and homo-social (excluding women from its social networks). It emphasises hierarchy and the capacity to dominate other men as well as women.

### **Some Aboriginal men may be recruited to the position of masculine exemplar, as a boxer or rugby star while most black men are denied authority or even respect.**

This kind of masculinity (sometimes misleadingly called "the traditional male role") is not necessarily the reality most men live in. Few men are heavy hitters as corporate executives, or exemplars of masculinity as combat heroes, sport or film stars.

There are also subordinated masculinities, formed at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men. The most obvious example in our culture is the masculinity of gay men, though effeminate straights may also be counted here. There are also the marginalised masculinities of oppressed ethnic groups. Here are found both alternatives to the hegemonic pattern, and specialised versions of it. Some Aboriginal men may be recruited to the position of masculine exemplar, as a boxer or rugby star while most black men are denied authority or even respect.

Finally, there are the forms of masculinity found among men who are complicit in the patriarchal system. They accept the patriarchal dividend, but are not directly involved in wielding power, in personal violence, or in displays of prowess. I suspect this is the largest group in contemporary gender politics.

Among these forms of masculinity, there are complex hierarchies, exclusions, alliances and oppressions. Recognising the complexity of this picture goes a long way in explaining the variety in men's responses to feminist ideas. It also suggests that different politics can emerge in response to feminism as a movement. What kinds of politics emerge that make masculinities themselves an issue?

#### Masculinity Politics

1. The most conspicuous gender politics among men, in Australia at present, is the "men's movement" derived from American models as promoted here by top psychologists such as Stephen Biddulph. Drum-whacking and ho-shouting apart, what is going on here is a kind of 12-step recovery movement, addressed to the pain that heterosexual men feel and their uncertainties about masculinity. The core of this movement is the "complicit" masculinity just outlined.

The clients are mostly white, middle class, and in their middle decades. They feel they are in trouble but are not to blame. Different gurus offer rival diagnoses of their troubles: Bly thinks the problem is a failure by fathers to initiate their sons into true masculinity; others think it is a failure by women to recognise the true polarity between the sexes. As a result, this men's movement marginalises, or simply ignores, inequality. The practical effect is to turn heterosexual men inward to contemplate their

own troubles and withdraw energy from social change. It offers absolution from the guilt that feminism still seems to arouse.

2. Next there is a politics that exalts hegemonic masculinity, often by creating exemplary images or promoting the idea of male supremacy. Televised sports, Hollywood thrillers, video games, super-hero comics and airport-rack novels all insist on the physical superiority of men and their mastery of technology and violence. The flavour is captured by a current 4WD ad, showing a vehicle on an empty beach; caption: "Park Where You Damn Well Please".

## **It does not require a complete demolition of hegemonic masculinity to democratise gender relations.**

A politics of hegemonic masculinity is also built into the cult of the ruthless business entrepreneur. Exalting technology over human relations - from Star Wars to the Data Highway - and exalting market forces over public responsibility are also ways of promoting masculinity, though they are not often recognised as such. Men control technology and capital, while "economic rationality" and "competitiveness" have been used to roll back the kinds of public spending that most benefit women.

3. The politics of subordinated masculinities is best seen in gay communities. Gay liberation began, twenty years ago, with a vigorous critique of both conventional masculinity and conventional stereotypes of gays. Urban gay communities since then have seen a revival of conventionally masculine styles - for instance, the "Castro Street clone" - and an enormous crisis in the form of the HIV epidemic. Gay men's politics have been reshaped around AIDS, which has obliged them to organise for prevention and care, put a premium on emotional support in the face of illness and death, and has re-emphasised alliances (both with lesbians and with straight men in professions and government).

Some straight men, too, have contested patriarchy and supported feminism. In the 1970s, some men's "consciousness-raising" groups began in the United States and in Britain. Anti-sexist politics among men thrived for some years, declined in the 1980s, but still persist today. The most impressive movement has been in Canada, in the wake of the Montreal killings of 1989. The "White Ribbon" movement about violence against women, which saw men campaigning alongside feminists, gained widespread support and had a considerable impact on mass media and conventional politics. In Australia, groups such as Men Against Sexual Assault, and the magazine *XY*, have pursued a politics of gender justice.

Since patriarchy works in "private" life as much as in public affairs, households and sexual relations also form a political arena. Some men have been part of the reconstruction of domestic life: sharing child care, cleaning and cooking, and decision making. Among some groups of young people this is now common sense: any claim to precedence by men just because they are men would appear grotesque.

A few men have embraced feminism at a deeper emotional level, and have attempted to reconstruct their personality in total to escape conventional masculinity. This has elicited a variety of responses - becoming non-competitive, taking a supportive rather than dominating position in conversations, en-

gaging only in non-penetrative sex, refusing careers and power in organisations. But the numbers trying in these ways to exit from mainstream masculinities are small, and it is difficult to see this approach becoming widely popular. The emotional costs (at least in the short term) are high; the practice provokes ridicule from more conservative men and is not attractive to all women either.

### **Democratic Gender**

It does not require a complete demolition of hegemonic masculinity to democratise gender relations. The many forms of patriarchal ideology point to many ways of contesting it - in sexual life, in mass media, in the workplace, in formal politics, in conversation, in raising children. If conventional gender is, as sociologists call it, an "accomplishment" - something made by the way we conduct ourselves - then we can certainly accomplish something better.

## **Men can find common cause with feminist women without falling into the "me-too" mould as the Men's Auxiliary To Feminism.**

This is happening in a number of settings where gay or straight men have worked productively with feminist women. Green politics, where there is a strong feminist presence, is perhaps the most obvious case. Similarly, in certain university departments, men have supported setting up and staffing feminist courses. In certain unions, men have allied themselves with militant women to break the traditions of exclusion and male dominance, and have worked for the needs of women workers - equal pay, work-based childcare, freedom from sexual harassment and other issues.

Among the various forms of masculinity, there are complex hierarchies, alliances, and oppressions, which go a long way to explain the variety in men's responses to feminist ideas.

In such work, men can find common cause with feminist women without falling into the "me-too" mould as the Men's Auxiliary To Feminism. What is required is not a yen for self-immolation, but, quite simply, a commitment to social justice. Under our current social arrangements women are, as a group, massively disadvantaged; and men as moral and political agents ought to be involved in changing that.

### **An Agenda for Men**

There are many ways men can do this. Share the care of young children equally, and change working hours to make this possible. Work to put women into office - until at least 50 percent of decision-making positions are held by women. Confront misogyny and homophobia in workplaces and media. Work for pay equity and women's employment rights, until women's earnings are equal to men's. Support the redistribution of wealth, and universal social security and health care. Talk among men to make domestic violence, gay bashing and sexual assault discreditable. Organise political and monetary support for battered women's shelters, rape crisis centres, domestic violence intervention. Change curricula in schools and universities to include women's ideas and experiences, and to open up issues about men.

These are political strategies that can operate on a large scale, although they are based on particular workplaces, neighbourhoods, and other settings. They offer a way past the general interest that men have in defending patriarchy by building on the specific interests particular groups of men share with women - as parents needing childcare, workers needing improved conditions, lesbians and gays fighting discrimination, for example. I find these strategies hopeful, not least because they offer some dignity to men involved in the highly undignified task of dismantling their own privileges.

In the long run, the democratisation of gender will require profound social change, and the dismantling of conventional masculinities. Think, for instance, of the emotional consequences of men's full involvement in childcare. Many of the conventions of hegemonic masculinity, such as restraining one's emotions and always trying to dominate in a conflict, are outrageously inappropriate in the care of young children.

We can recognise this, without expecting most men to swallow the dose in one gulp. The alliance politics that has begun to emerge in some settings has the possibility of making worthwhile gains in the short run, while building up the experience and imagination needed for the dangerous moves that finally have to be made.

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## Chance

She catches six trains a day  
Each time  
she struggles  
with the stroller -  
child on one hip  
rattles falling  
stroller wheels stubborn and  
heavy under her arm

And each time  
someone comes to her aid -  
carries the stroller  
ensures their safety  
and she thanks  
the girl or boy  
man or woman  
for their help/

spitefully -  
wishing next time it will be  
a man that is young enough  
to find her pretty  
mature enough  
to like the child  
nice enough  
to strike up a conversation  
and find they have things in common -  
like loneliness

Amanda Betts

## claytons rendezvous

we theorised  
problematized  
it should have been as spontaneous  
as returning a smile to a child time

spent in air conditioned mausoleums  
critiquing social behaviour our  
own included  
rendered us robotic the

clandestine weekend in a neutral  
state away from current lovers  
complex histories your

weighted analysis and my insouciance  
ended the beginning of a possible  
tomorrow

Lisa Catherine Ehrich

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## Noticing the view

noticing the view

rooms  
windows  
beds

rooms where I made love  
had sex  
with you  
and you  
and you  
and you

windows at which i stood  
with my back  
to rooms  
to beds  
to you  
and you  
and you  
and you

noticing the view  
and rooms  
where love  
sex  
passion  
were too urgent  
or too quickly gone  
for noticing the view

Katherine Samuelowicz