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Neoliberal Globalization, Masculinity and Gender Justice



By [Raewyn Connell](#)

“A relatively new field of social research has documented the diversity of masculinities in the world. Globalization is not a separate issue from this; it grows out of a history of imperialism in which gender hierarchies were embedded. Organizational life embeds gender relations in ways that make equality difficult to achieve. Struggles for gender justice arise from many different starting-points and the role of men and boys in changing existing patterns is now acknowledged.”

What does the new globalization mean for men and boys? And what role do men and boys have in achieving gender justice, in the contemporary world?

There is a relatively new field of social science that is relevant. Studies of masculinity in the world’s richer countries crystallized in the 1980s as a research field. By the 1990s, fields such as health, social work and education were being

informed by the new research. A theoretical debate arose about the nature of masculinities, the relation between masculinities and society as a whole.

This research documented specific patterns of masculinity revealed in culture and social relations in a particular time and place. It proved that there is no single masculinity, but rather multiple masculinities, both locally and on a world scale. It also showed that masculinities can and do change.

This was important in getting beyond the tendency in the mass media and popular culture to treat 'men' as a homogenous group and 'masculinity' as fixed by nature. It was particularly important for the development of *applied* forms of knowledge, based on the new masculinity research.

Work on boys' education was one important example, given urgency by a media panic about boys' 'failure' in schooling, and the resurgence of unscientific beliefs about boys' different ways of learning. Work on violence prevention was another. Programs for violence prevention, both at the level of domestic violence and at the level of civil conflict and war, drew for guidance on the new masculinity research.

A discourse about men's health developed, in which masculinity research provided a counter-weight to the simple categoricalism predominant in biomedical sciences when they spoke about gender. Psychological counselling practice directed towards men and boys also spread widely.

The new research field was rapidly transformed into a worldwide field of knowledge. It is a notable fact that the most sustained research and documentation program on men and masculinities anywhere in the world was launched in the mid 1990s, not in the global metropole, but in Chile, led by José Olavarría. We now have not just individual studies, but bodies of research for practically every continent or culture area, including African masculinities, Islamic masculinities, changing masculinities in India, and more.

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With this expansion the diversity of masculinities became even more striking. The need for concepts of social change to contextualize them has become more apparent. Sometimes this is supplied by a story of progress. A 'traditional' masculinity (often understood as patriarchal and perhaps violent) is contrasted with a 'modern' masculinity (often understood as more expressive, egalitarian and peaceable). Mass media are often happy with this schema. Something like it underlies the journalistic concept of the 'metrosexual'.

The most familiar contemporary version of the progress story is the 'globalization' story, in which we are all being swept up into a homogeneous global modernity spreading outwards from its North Atlantic core. Or – according to taste – global postmodernity, global risk society, or global network society, all following the same track.

This story, however, is looking increasingly old-fashioned. Some social scientists think here are multiple modernities, not just a North Atlantic one. Some think there is indeed one modernity, but it is global, and the European story has only ever been one element in a much larger whole. In such a perspective it is imperialism, not capitalism or the industrial revolution, that is the historical framework for understanding modern society. And the power relations of contemporary globalization have to come into focus.

In the second half of the twentieth century, after a series of crises and convulsions, capitalism was re-established under US hegemony as a global system of economic relations. Transnational firms, at first called 'multinational corporations', became the key institutions in production and marketing. A new body of stateless capital became visible. By the 1980s there was growing integration of the capital and currency markets of major economic powers, and multinational corporations had adopted strategies of international sourcing of components, which amounted to a global decentralization of industrial production. Low-wage economies and development zones in Mexico, China, south Asia, and elsewhere were suddenly important in the strategies of major corporations. De-industrialization appeared in the old centres of heavy industry in Europe and North America, such as the Ruhr and the north of England.

Business journalists in the 1980s began writing about 'globalization' as a way of summarizing these changes. The idea was given force by the rise of neoliberal ideology and politics, from the late 1970s, which drove the growth of international trade and to a degree standardized the policy regimes of different countries. Deregulation in the global North, structural adjustment in the global South, changed not only the conditions of business but also the context of gender relations.

Research began to appear about globalization and gender. The main concern of this research was documenting the impact of globalization processes on the lives and political struggles of women. But these concerns also entered the field of

masculinity research, and a discussion of 'masculinities and globalization' began in the late 1990s.

These discussions were not just in the capital-rich countries of the global North. Latin American researchers examined the impact of neoliberal restructuring on traditional models of patriarchal fatherhood. Researchers in the Arab world explored the cultural turbulence about masculinity resulting from Western cultural and economic domination and local resistances.

The transformation of men's lives in global restructuring is evident in relation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Some of the best ethnographic research on masculinities, sexuality and violence has developed in response to the AIDS crisis. Local action is vital, not only around prevention but also around treatment and care. So local studies of injustice and violence in local gender orders, and local gender arrangements' role in creating vulnerability among women, are important.

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Yet HIV/AIDS is a world issue. The danger to women comes not so much from the 'traditional' forms of men's gender privilege as from post-colonial *changes* in gender relations. Risk of infection may be created by attempts to reassert men's power in changed circumstances. Yet sexuality can be negotiated. More equal relationships may emerge in contexts of poverty as well as relations of domination and exploitation. Recent research with youth in South Africa shows change and resistance to power in gender practices is influenced by wider cultural and economic change.

This perspective has increasingly influenced gender policy. Until fairly recently, policy documents about 'gender' usually concerned the lives of women, and said little about men, except as perpetrators of violence or beneficiaries of inequality. This has now been changing. For instance, in 2003, three United Nations agencies sponsored a broad discussion on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. This initiative resulted in a policy document, 'The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality', adopted at the 2004 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

At the same time, research has been building about masculinity in the dominant institutions of the global economy, among the corporate elite. It is a worrying picture. Media images of corporate masculinity often feature teamwork imagery, plus new-frontier, technocratic imagery. But other sources of information show very different patterns. The very rich, brought up in a context of wealth, are often trained in a defensive and suspicious stance towards the world with little emotional involvement with other people. The search for 'trophy wives' is a sad symptom of this.

Among corporate managers, the neoliberal era has not meant a relaxation of power-oriented masculinities. On the contrary, the immense emphasis on competition, and the steep gradients of income and power in the corporate pyramids, produce a long-hours culture that is destructive of family life, and tension and rivalry as normal expectations of working life. In particular, at sites such as finance-industry trading floors, quite anachronistic displays of exaggerated, dominant masculinities are familiar.

An older generation of research saw the gendered patterns of work life as marginal, not deeply embedded. They were a matter of antiquated 'sex roles' that could be changed if we simply changed the role expectations. This has been challenged both by historical and contemporary research.

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What the historical research showed was that specific masculinities, specifically gender relations, were deeply embedded in colonialism and imperial expansion themselves. There was, for instance, a strongly masculinized workforce of conquest and long-distance trade. The construction of worldwide empires could not be regarded as something that happened before any gender effects were produced. Gender had a part in shaping imperialism, and thus in shaping the global arenas from which the modern world economy has grown.

Contemporary social research sees organizations, too, as inherently gendered. They aren't neutral arenas through which people with male and female bodies are randomly scattered. There is a deep-seated gender division of labour that makes many occupations (management, nursing, truck-driving) strongly gendered. There is a widespread expectation that authority and decision-making go with masculinity; so that the few women who get to the top levels of organizational power have to 'manage like a man'. There are whole organizational cultures that are masculinized (think of armies, modern mining). There are the strongly gendered patterns of relationship between workplace and home that we gesture towards with euphemisms such as 'work/life balance'.

Both historical research and questions arising from the application of contemporary ethnographic research converge on the idea that the arenas of power in transnational space, for instance, the institutions of transnational business, politics and communication, are gendered from the start. And they don't just inherit old gender patterns. They bring new gender divisions dynamically into existence – for instance, the deep gender divisions in ICT, a massive global industry that is

hardly two generations old.

In terms of gender justice, worldwide, the picture is not pretty. Perhaps the best arena of change is education, where worldwide, levels of literacy and access to education for girls and women have increased markedly in the last two generations. Many men have had a role in that, sometimes supporting women's claims for justice, sometimes wanting a better-educated workforce for purposes of development.

In terms of gender-based violence, the story is nowhere near as good. In fact there is not solid evidence that there has been a broad reduction in gender-based violence at all. Domestic violence is found in all social groups in all parts of the world. Rape is still endemic in civil society, and is at crisis levels around warfare. Even without war there are dire concentrations of violence. One is in the northern border region of Mexico, where neoliberal globalization produced social upheaval, and so much extreme violence against women followed that local activists speak of 'femicide'. The unemployment that has come to many men under structural adjustment programmes and the deregulation of labour markets is not a promising context for more peaceful gender relations.

“Increasingly, the strategic questions about change in gender relations involve not only personal relations, identities and intimate life, they also involve large-scale institutions and the structural conditions of social life.”

The hegemonic masculinities in the rich countries of the global North are those of the corporate world. Contemporary corporate masculinity isn't personally violent, as a rule. But it uses, for advertising, for entertainment and for cultural models, combat-style professional sports, especially football. It depends on the existence of a growing 'security' sector of practitioners of violence. It is comfortable with a legal system in which the proof of rape, domestic violence or sexual harassment remains extremely difficult. And whatever individuals do by way of 'philanthropy', collectively, the privileged classes of the world show a callousness towards poverty and social distress that is notably different from the social bargains of fifty years ago. This is neoliberalism, market ideology, in action, and except perhaps for Latin America, there is no visible alternative to it.

It seems to me, increasingly, that the strategic questions about change in gender relations involve not only personal relations, identities and intimate life, they also involve large-scale institutions and the structural conditions of social life. The politics of gender include the politics of corporations, states, and transnational structures of communication, trade and military power.

To recognize that makes the task of achieving gender equality seem harder; and indeed it is hard. But it also prevents gender – including the processes of change in masculinities – from being regarded as a narrow specialist field. Questions of gender justice are connected with the wider issues of change in the world.

About the author

Raewyn Connell is University Professor at the University of Sydney in Australia (www.raewynconnell.net). She is internationally known for research on gender, education, social power and social theory, and her work has been translated into sixteen languages. Her most recent book is [Confronting Equality](#).



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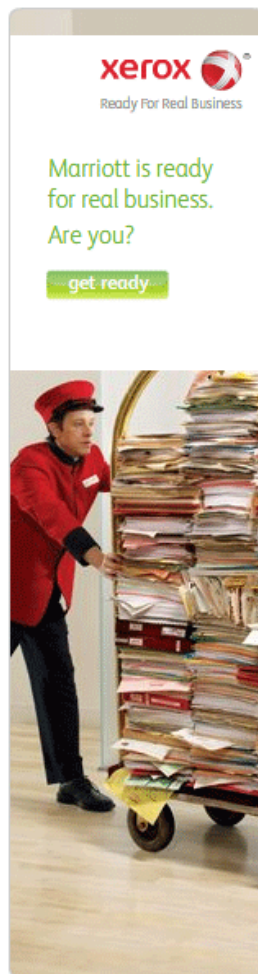
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