

WHAT'S WRONG WITH FATHERS' RIGHTS?

Michael Flood

Twenty years ago I joined my first anti-sexist men's group. I've had a passionate commitment to profeminism ever since, nurtured through men's anti-violence activism, women's and gender studies, editing a profeminist magazine, and now pursuing a career in feminist scholarship. Men's violence against women is an obvious area for anti-sexist men's activism, as it's one of the bluntest and most brutal forms of gender inequality. I've organized campaigns in groups like Men Against Sexual Assault, run workshops in schools, helped run a national White Ribbon Campaign, designed violence prevention programs for athletes and others, and done research and writing on violence against women. But I've also been forced to critique and confront anti-feminist men in so-called men's rights and fathers' rights groups. Their efforts are having a growing influence on community understandings of, and policy responses to, gender issues.

MEN'S RIGHTS AND FATHERS' RIGHTS

Any man who publicly supports feminism will find himself up against negative stereotypes of, myths about, and hostile responses to feminism, feminists, and the men who support them. "Men's rights" and "fathers' rights" groups represent this in concentrated and toxic form.

The fathers' rights movement argues that fathers are subjected to systematic discrimination as men and fathers, in a system that is biased toward women and dominated by feminists. Fathers' rights groups overlap with men's rights groups and both represent an organized backlash to feminism. Fathers' rights and men's

rights groups are the anti-feminist wing of the men's movement, a network of men's groups and organizations mobilized around gender issues.

Two experiences bring most men (and women) to the fathers' rights movement. The first is deeply painful marriage breakups and custody battles; the second is when non-custodial fathers are dissatisfied with loss of contact with their children or with regimes of child support. Fathers' rights groups are characterized by anger and blame toward ex-partners and the legal system, believing that both have deprived men of their rights to contact with their children and to be free from financial child support obligations.

LIES AND DENIAL

All this matters to profeminist men because men's rights and fathers' rights advocates and organizations are doing harm to the causes in which we believe. They are our political opponents. These anti-feminist networks are hindering progress toward gender equality, and in some cases, they're even making things go backward. Fathers' rights groups are well-organized advocates for changes in family law, and vocal opponents of feminist perspectives and achievements on interpersonal violence. And they're having some successes. I'll return to this in a moment.

I try to push feminist and profeminist perspectives in the public domain, by giving media interviews, writing op-eds, making speeches, and producing accessible information like fact sheets and articles for the lay reader. As part of this, I've critiqued the claims made by anti-feminist men's groups. I also monitor their activities and agendas, by checking on their websites and reading their literature. And sometimes, I've engaged in direct debate. I used to go to the mainstream men's movement events around Australia, large men's festivals and men's gatherings of 100 to 200 men. Committed anti-feminist men are regular participants in these. Profeminist men are a much smaller minority and anti-feminist or, at best, non-feminist notions are part and parcel of the men's liberation perspectives shared by most participants in the men's movement. More recently, I've posted comments on fathers' rights websites, and responded to others' postings on the blog of the Australian White Ribbon Campaign.

I don't think that every profeminist man has to engage in direct debate with men's rights and fathers' rights activists. But we all have to deal with anti-feminist reactions and beliefs in society in general, as well as the pernicious influence of these more organized agendas. We should know what they're saying, what's wrong with it, and have other ways of responding to the issues they claim to address.

So, what's wrong with men's rights? Above all, anti-feminist men's perspectives are based on a profound denial of the systematic gender inequalities

which privilege many men and disadvantage many women. Yes, some men are disadvantaged and some women are privileged, but these have more to do with other social divisions—class, race, age, and so on—than they do with gender. Yes, there are times when individual men are harmed or cheated by individual women—we are all human, after all, but such instances do not support anti-feminist men's claim that men are the "new Jews," suffering under, what they call, a global, "feminazi" regime. Men's and fathers' rights groups offer a bizarre and fundamentally inaccurate portrayal of feminism as anti-male and fail to see the enormous hope for and goodwill toward men which it embodies. Fathers' rights groups tell lies about the extent of women's false allegations of abuse or domestic violence. And both men's rights and fathers' rights advocates make dodgy claims of gender symmetry in domestic violence based on studies using problematic and much-criticized tools of measurement and highly selective readings of the literature.

Violence is a key area of fathers' rights activism because it's a common issue in family law proceedings. We know that the time around separation and divorce is one of the riskiest in terms of women's subjection to violence by an intimate partner or ex-partner. More widely, violence against women is a confronting example of gender inequality and thus central to struggles over the meaning and shape of contemporary gender relations. Violence is one of the most worrying areas in which men's and fathers' rights groups are having an impact.

FATHERS, VIOLENCE, AND FAMILY LAW

There are three ways in which the fathers' rights movement has had a damaging impact on the field of violence against women. These are readily apparent in Australia, and probably evident in the United States and elsewhere, as well. First, fathers' rights groups have negatively influenced laws and policies that affect the victims and perpetrators of men's violence against women, particularly when it comes to cases of separation, divorce, and child custody.

Above all, fathers' *contact* with children has been privileged, over children's *safety* from violence. In large part due to publicity efforts by fathers' rights groups, an uncritical assumption that children's contact with both parents is necessary now pervades the courts and the media. In Australia, the Family Court's new principle of the "right to contact" is overriding its principle of the right to "safety from violence." In short, family law increasingly is being guided by two mistaken beliefs: that contact with both parents is in children's best interests in every case, and that a violent father is better than no father at all. Greater numbers of parents who are the victims of violence are being subject to further violence and harassment by abusive ex-partners, while children are being pressured into contact with abusive or violent parents. The Court now is more likely to make interim orders for children's unsupervised

contact in cases involving domestic violence or child abuse, to use hand-over arrangements rather than suspend contact until trial, and to make orders for joint residence where there is a high level of conflict between the separated parents and one parent strongly objects to shared residence.

Second, fathers' rights groups have had a negative impact on community understandings of violence against women and children. They have discredited female and child victims of violence by spreading the lie that women routinely make false accusations of child abuse to gain advantage in family law proceedings and to arbitrarily deny their ex-partners' access to the children. The Australian evidence is that allegations of child abuse are rare, false allegations are rare, and false allegations are made by fathers and mothers at equal rates. In any case, allegations of child abuse rarely result in the denial of parental contact.

Fathers' rights groups also claim that women routinely make up allegations of domestic violence to gain advantage in family law cases and use protection orders for vindictive reasons rather than any real experience or fear of violence. Again, Australian research finds instead that women living with domestic violence often do not take out protection orders at all, and when they do it is only as a last resort in the face of severe violence.

Another dimension of the fathers' rights movement's damaging impact on community perceptions is to do with men's versus women's violence. Advocates encourage the mistaken belief that domestic violence is gender-equal. I've debunked this claim in detail elsewhere, but here is a lightning-quick critique: It's simply not true that men and women assault each other at equal rates and with equal effects. To support the claim that domestic violence is gender-symmetrical, advocates draw almost exclusively on studies using a measurement tool called the Conflict Tactics Scale. But anti-feminist groups use CTS results only selectively. More importantly, the CTS is a very poor method of measuring domestic violence: it asks only about violent acts, ignoring their initiation, intensity, context, history, consequences, or meaning.

Let's say that I've been systematically abusing my wife over the last year. I've hit her, I've constantly put her down, I've controlled her movements, and I've forced her into sex. And once, in the midst of another of my violent attacks on her, she hit me back. My various strategies of power and control have left her physically bruised and emotionally battered. And her one act of self-defense just made me laugh. But according to the CTS, we've both committed at least one violent act. So the CTS counts us as equivalent. (Note here that, if our positions were reversed and it was my *wife* who'd been systematically abusing *me*, the CTS would still be a poor measure of the violence. It's crappy either way.)

There's a whole mountain of evidence—crime victimization surveys, police statistics, and hospital data—that domestic violence is not gender-neutral. Men do under-report, but no more than, and probably less than, women. Yes, some men are victims of domestic violence, including by female

partners. And there are important contrasts in women's and men's experiences of domestic violence. When it comes to violence by partners or ex-partners, women are far more likely than men to be subjected to frequent, prolonged, and extreme violence, to sustain injuries, to be subjected to a range of controlling strategies, to fear for their lives, to be sexually assaulted, to experience post-separation violence, and to use violence only in self-defense.

There are obvious signs that the fathers' rights movement's attention to domestic violence against men is not motivated by a genuine concern for male victimization. The movement focuses on domestic violence when the great majority of the violence inflicted on men is not by female partners but by *other men*. For example, a four-year study of admissions to the Emergency Department of a Missouri hospital found that among the over eight thousand men who had been assaulted and injured, only forty-five men were injured by their intimate female partners or ex-partners, representing 0.55 percent of male assault visits and 0.05 percent of all male visits. Boys and men are most at risk of physical harm from other boys and men.

In addition, the efforts of the fathers' rights movement to modify public responses to the victims and perpetrators of violence harm female and male victims of domestic violence alike. This is the third kind of impact the movement has had on interpersonal violence. The fathers' rights movement tries to erode the protections available to victims of domestic violence and to boost the rights and freedoms of alleged perpetrators. The Lone Fathers' Association and other groups argue that claims of violence or abuse should be made under oath, they should require police or hospital records as proof, and people who make allegations that are not then substantiated should be subject to criminal prosecution. They call for similar limitations to do with protection orders. Fathers' rights groups also attempt to undermine the ways in which domestic violence is treated as criminal behavior. They emphasize the need to keep the family together, call for the greater use of mediation and counseling, and reject pro-arrest policies.

These changes would represent a profound erosion of the protections and legal redress available to the victims of violence, whether female or male. This agenda betrays the fact that the concern for male victims of domestic violence often professed by fathers' rights groups is hollow. Fathers' rights groups often respond to issues of domestic and sexual violence from the point of view of the perpetrator. And they respond in the same way as actual male perpetrators: They minimize and deny the extent of this violence, blame the victim, and explain the violence as mutual or reciprocal. Fathers' rights advocates have expressed understanding or justification for men who use violence against women and children in the context of family law proceedings. And, ironically, they use men's violence to demonstrate how victimized men are by the family law system. Fathers' rights groups also attack media and community campaigns focused on men's violence against women and harass community sector and women's organizations that respond to the victims of violence.

Yes, male victims of domestic violence deserve the same support as female victims. And we don't need to pretend that they total 50 percent of victims to establish this. And we're certainly not doing them any favors by attacking the systems and services set up to support and protect them or the women who put the issue on the public agenda in the first place.

SUPPORTING FATHERS

Men who are going through a separation or divorce certainly deserve services and support. But they're not well served by fathers' rights groups. Fathers' rights groups stifle men's healing processes, constrain and harm their relations with their children, and directly compromise the wellbeing of children themselves. First, many groups offer their members identities based only in victimhood, centered on hostility toward and blame of the legal system and their ex-partners, and colored by misogynist norms. Such approaches fix men in positions of anger and hostility, rather than helping them to heal. Some groups encourage their members to engage in malicious, destructive, and unproductive legal strategies.

There is no doubt that many of the individual men in fathers' rights groups want a greater involvement in their children's lives, but these groups have done little to foster fathers' positive involvement in children's lives, whether before or after separation and divorce. The fathers' rights movement focuses on fathers' "rights" rather than the actual care of children. It prioritizes formal principles of equality over positive parenting and the wellbeing of women and children. It conflates children's welfare with parental equality, ignores actual caregiving divisions of labor, and neglects the real obstacles to shared parenting both in couple families and after separation or divorce. Many fathers' rights groups seem more concerned with re-establishing fathers' authority and control over their children's and ex-partners' lives than with actual involvement with children. They neglect the real challenges of maintaining or setting up shared parenting after divorce, arguing for one-size-fits-all approaches based on joint custody, which won't work for most families.

Fathers' rights groups also have been willing to compromise children's wellbeing. They've tried to force parental contact on children regardless of children's wishes and wellbeing, to reduce non-resident parents' obligations to financially support their children (although some aspects of current child support regimes *are* unjust), and to undermine the protections and support available to child victims of abuse and domestic violence. Through their hostile and misogynist depictions of resident mothers and their attempts to control mothers' management of finances, parenting, and contact, fathers' rights groups also have fueled interparental conflict, leading to more problems with contact and further stress for children.

BEATING THE BACKLASH

The achievements of the fathers' rights movement are already putting women, children, and even men at greater risk of violence and abuse. The fathers' rights movement has exacerbated our culture's systematic silencing and blaming of victims of violence and hampered efforts to respond effectively to the victims and perpetrators of violence. Fathers' groups have done little to encourage fathers' positive involvement in parenting, whether before or after divorce, and in some ways they've even made things worse. More generally, men's rights and fathers' rights groups are hampering progress toward gender equality or pushing it backward.

However, the new politics of fatherhood has not been entirely captured by the fathers' rights movement. There is potential to foster men's positive and non-violent involvement in parenting and families. Key resources for realizing the progressive potential of contemporary fatherhood politics include the widespread imagery of the nurturing father, community intolerance for violence against women, growing policy interest in addressing divisions of labor in childcare and domestic work, and men's own investment in positive parenting.

Responses to separated fathers should be father-friendly, accountable, and oriented toward encouraging positive and ongoing involvement in their children's lives. We should be working to respond to separated fathers, not only because of the emotional and practical needs they have, and not only to encourage their ongoing and positive involvement with children, but also because doing so will lessen the recruitment of separated fathers into the fathers' rights movement. In other words, providing compassionate and constructive services for separated fathers is important in part because it diverts them from participation in fathers' rights networks. And doing this is desirable because such networks are harmful for law and public policy, for women and children, and for separated men themselves.

At the same time, we must confront the dangerous ambitions and dishonest claims of the men's and fathers' rights backlash. We need to directly subvert these groups' agendas, spread critiques of their false accusations, and respond in constructive and accountable ways to the fathers (and mothers) undergoing separation and divorce. We must step up efforts to engage men in positive ways, building partnerships with supportive men and men's groups and with the women's movements. All this is part of a broader profeminist effort to build a world of gender justice.

MEN SPEAK OUT

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Edited by Shira Tarrant
with a foreword by Jackson Katz

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Editor's Acknowledgments</i>	xix
<i>Foreword</i>	xxi
Jackson Katz	
Introduction	1
Shira Tarrant	
PART I: MASCULINITY AND IDENTITY	7
Introduction	9
1 Daytona Beach: Beyond Beats and Rhymes	17
Byron Hurt	
2 The Real Slim Shady	24
Ryan Heryford	
3 The Enemy Within: On Becoming a Straight White Guy	30
Jacob Anderson-Minshall	
4 Redefining Manhood: Resisting Sexism	36
Ewuare X. Osayande	
5 Straight Guys Can Dance, Too	40
Jared Margulies	

6	Stepping Out of Bounds Nathan Einschlag	43	18	Preaching to the Choir Matthue Roth	136
7	<i>Hombres y Machos</i> Alfredo Mirandé	47	19	The Starbucks Intervention Greg Bortnichak	147
PART II: SEXUALITY		57	20	This Is What a Feminist Looks Like Derrais Carter	151
	Introduction	59	21	From Oppressor to Activist: Reflections of a Feminist Journey Amit Taneja	154
8	Just a John? Pornography and Men's Choices Robert Jensen	64	22	It's Just Common Sense Brandon Arber	163
9	Staring at Janae's Legs Hugo Schwyzer	70	PART IV: POINTS AND PERSPECTIVES		165
10	Trying to Be Sexy and Anti-Sexist . . . at Exactly the Same Time Andrew Boyd	74		Introduction	167
11	Bye-Bye Bi? Bailey, Biphobia, and Girlie-Men Marcus C. Tye	80	23	Abandoning the Barricades: or How I Became a Feminist Michael S. Kimmel	171
12	Darker Shades of Queer: Race and Sexuality at the Margins Chong-suk Han	86	24	Confessions of a Premature Pro-Feminist Rob Okun	182
13	Let Us Be Seen: Gay Visibility in Homophobic Poland Tomek Kitlinski and Pawel Leszkowicz	94	25	Learning From Women Bob Lamm	190
14	How We Enter: Men, Gender and Sexual Assault B. Loewe	98	26	A Tribute to My Father Chris Dixon	196
PART III: FEMINISM		103	27	Playground Vertigo Jeremy Adam Smith	202
	Introduction	105	28	Judging Fathers: The Case for Gender-Neutral Standards Donald N.S. Unger	206
15	How Two Aspiring Pornographers Turned Me Into the Ultimate F Word Hank Shaw	113	29	What's Wrong With Fathers' Rights? Michael Flood	212
16	Exposed in Iraq: Sexual Harassment and Hidden Rank Structure of the U.S. Army Marshall Thompson	124	30	Engendering the Classroom: Experiences of a Man in Women's and Gender Studies Kyle Brillante	219
17	Why I Am Not a Feminist Haji Shearer	131			