

3 principles for men



Three terms have become the guiding principles for anti-sexist men in Australia, but what do they mean? Michael Flood pins them down.

MALE-POSITIVE. PRO-FEMINIST. GAY-AFFIRMATIVE. These three terms have become the guiding principles for a substantial section of the men's movement, including this magazine and Men Against Sexual Assault groups around Australia. What do they each mean, and what should they look like in practice?

But first, where do the three phrases come from? The fact is, they were borrowed from overseas. When I founded *XY* back in 1991, I wanted some way of defining what it was that *XY* stood for. The solution was simple: I borrowed the three phrases, and the idea of affirming a "healthy, life-loving, non-oppressive masculinity", from *Changing Men* magazine in the US.

The three principles have for a long time been the guiding principles of the National Organisation of Men Against Sexism in the US. When MASA groups met nationally for the first time, in Melbourne in 1992, we adopted the three principles as part of MASA's aims and objectives.

I have long believed that to change the

world you need both good strategy and good theory. You need strategies that are effective and empowering, and theory that is credible, coherent and applicable. What's more, strategy and theory should reflect and build on each other.

All movements for social change adopt ideologies and beliefs as part of their struggles. I passionately believe that these three principles should guide the men's movement. They should guide what we say, the sorts of strategies we pursue, and what newsletters and magazines such as *XY* publish.

But the three principles have a far wider application, in the development of an alternative masculinity and an alternative masculine culture. Individual men, in working out the sorts of men we want to be, need terms of reference, hooks on which to hang our hopes and dreams. The three principles can provide precisely those terms of reference, forming the framework of men's personal philosophies and visions, as well as the texture of a new culture.

Given all this, it seems a very good idea

to attempt to outline each principle. Below I describe what I see as the core of each principle, its bottom line, and then comment on the difficulties embedded in each. My hope is that this will encourage the further development of our politics.

Male-positive

TO BE male-positive is to be affirming of men and optimistic about men; to believe that men can change; to support every man's efforts at positive change. To be male-positive is to build close relations and supportive alliances among men. It is to acknowledge men's many acts of compassion and kindness. To be male-positive is to resist feeling hopeless about men and writing men off, and to reject the idea that men are somehow intrinsically bad, oppressive or sexist.

To be male-positive is to realise that individual men are not responsible for, and can't be blamed for, social structures and values such as the social construction of masculinity or the history of women's oppression. This has to be balanced with the recognition that individual men are responsible for their oppressive behaviour (such as violence) and can choose to change it. If a man displays sexism or homophobia, a male-positive response is to help him in trying to change this, to affirm the man and challenge the behaviour, instead of attacking that man.

Male-positivity is also about recognising and praising the positive aspects of masculinity. Strength, determination and courage are all aspects of traditional masculinity, and yet they are useful traits for men's ability to change society.

Male-positivity is balanced by pro-feminism. Being male-positive of course doesn't mean supporting whatever men do. We have to retain a sense of ethics or values, and to assess men and masculinities accordingly. To give a simple example, a violent masculinity is unacceptable, because violence is ethically unacceptable. And being male-positive is compatible with criticising oppressive or destructive aspects of men's groups or the men's movement.

Pro-feminist

AT the core, to be pro-feminist is to be committed to challenging women's oppression, sexism and gender injustice. It is to be aware of women's experiences, and to be informed by feminist analyses of society. For men in particular, being pro-feminist means trying to develop non-oppressive forms of masculinity and non-sexist relations with women.

If men are committed to pro-feminism, then we will challenge men's sexist attitudes and behaviours, and try to shift our own sexism. Pro-feminist activists may also

Photo: David Houlder

support women's campaigns or work with feminists, and may consult with or hold ourselves accountable to feminist groups.

The term "pro-feminist" is almost equivalent to "anti-sexist", and I often use the two terms interchangeably. But I like the term pro-feminism because it suggests an explicit and ongoing commitment to support feminism. Without this, men may drift towards an understanding of sexism that neglects men's power over women.

One of the real pleasures of having a closeness with feminism is enjoying women's culture—the fantastic, inspiring and often challenging literature, film and ideas that have flowered in the last three decades. My own sense of the society I strive for, my utopia, has been inspired for example by Marge Piercy's book *Woman on the edge of time*, and my sense of passion has been formed partly by feminist films and of course women themselves.

Being pro-feminist does not mean feeling guilty or ashamed because you are a male. (But feeling shame at for example having hurt someone can be a healthy part of a process of change.)

Pro-feminism should not mean men claiming to know all about feminism or doing things because we will get approval from feminists. And I don't think men should, or indeed need to, call ourselves "feminists". Terms such as "pro-feminist" and "anti-sexist" are clear and can be claimed with pride.

Gay-affirmative

THE third corner of this holy trinity is "gay-affirmative". To be gay-affirmative is to be committed to challenging anti-gay prejudice, oppression and homophobia. It is to be aware of gay men's (and lesbians') experiences, and to be informed by gay analyses of society. For men in particular, to be gay-affirmative is to recognise the role of homophobia in the operations of masculinity, and to forge intimate and supportive relations with men, whether straight or otherwise.

Men who are gay-affirmative will not assume that everyone is heterosexual, and they will accept and welcome (other) gay men. We will work on our own homophobia or heterosexism, and challenge that of other men and institutions. Being gay-affirmative means being supportive of the expression of gay and other non-heterosexual sexualities.

Gay-affirmative men in the men's movement may support struggles against sexual oppression or work with (other) gay men. And we should be conscious of how our campaigns on men's issues may affect gay men or gay culture in particular. (For example, anti-pornography campaigns may lead to the banning of safe sex literature or gay pornography.) Straight men may

Encourage new heroes, new role models and new images of men and masculinity.

build friendships and alliances with gay and bisexual men, and may themselves explore the possibilities for same-sex desire and sex.

As with the other two principles, there are some traps to avoid. Gay men can teach straight men a lot about male/male intimacy and about the possibilities for a sensual, expressive and egalitarian masculinity. But gay men and gay culture can also be sexist and even misogynistic (woman-hating), and this should not be tolerated because its source is gay.

Heterosexual men who are gay-affirmative should not take on the idea that heterosexuality is somehow fundamentally unsound, oppressive or just plain uncool. We may be critical of aspects of heterosexual culture and heterosexual sexual behaviour (such as coercing women into sex), but we can also practise self-acceptance and explore a positive and non-oppressive heterosexuality.

Difficulties

EACH of the three principles embodies complexities and contradictions, and their intersection itself throws up further tensions. While it would be interesting to assess the

extent to which the men's movement in Australia has adopted each principle, I will leave that aside for later.

The difficulty in being male-positive lies in the tension between, on the one hand, a critical analysis of men and masculinity, and on the other, the necessity to be positive about men and the possibilities for change.

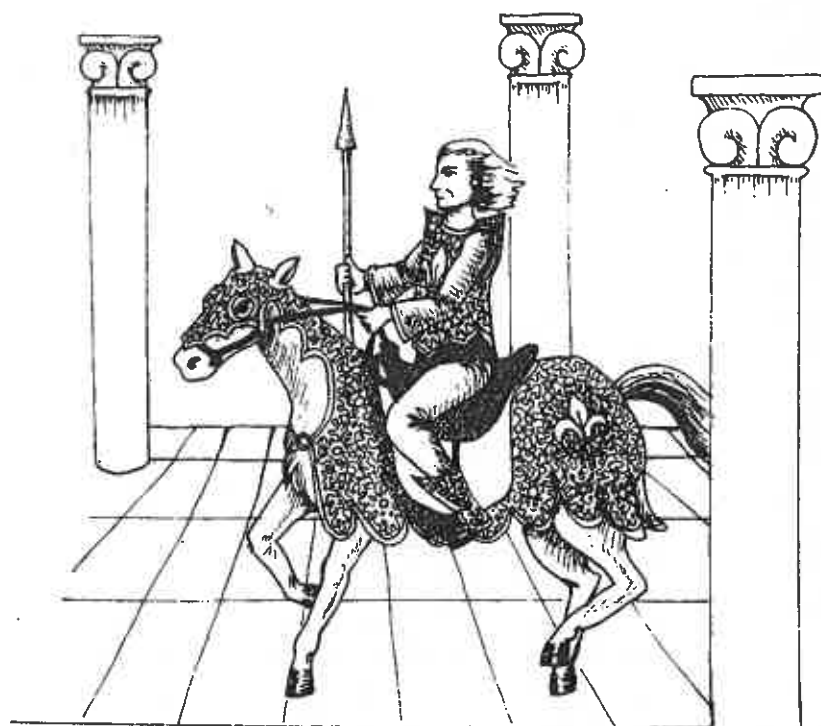
It should be an article of faith in the men's movement that men are not essentially oppressive and are perfectly capable of being loving, caring human beings. The idea that men's behaviour is biologically determined can not be justified intellectually, and this sort of essentialism or biological determinism has been widely discredited in academic circles. But for us as men, it is also pragmatically or strategically necessary to reject such an idea.

I chatted in Tilleys Cafe with a lovely man from Canberra MASA the other day. As a social worker he is faced every day with the horror of men's violence towards women and children, and he reminded me how easy it is to become despairing about men. Yet I know many feminists who also see this carnage and at the same time choose to love and share their lives with men. If women can do it, so can we—and many men do.

I believe that male-positivity and pro-feminism are genuinely compatible, and that to forsake either would be disastrous. One further comment: NOMAS in the US (where the three principles first came from) have now changed "male-positive" to "enhancing men's lives".

Good men

IF we are to construct an alternative, anti-sexist (concludes on page 22) ♦



Kate Rockpool

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◆ (from page 21) culture, we will need a much stronger expression of the sorts of masculinities we would like to see. That is, we should spell out the qualities that make a good man, a man who embodies a "healthy, life-loving, non-oppressive masculinity" as the XY guidelines state. I imagine that his qualities include pride, sensitivity, care, courage, passion, kindness, strength and humility.

I can't think of many positive and inspiring models of an alternative masculinity. Who would you nominate? Billy Bragg, Dustin Hoffman, Julian Cleary, Gandhi, Sting, Bart Simpson? Who knows. But I'm sure we can come up with a better model than that annoying stereotype of the sensitive new-age guy or SNAG, typically seen as wimpy, guilt-ridden and slightly pathetic.

To build an alternative culture, we will need to encourage new heroes, new role models and new images of men and masculinity.

Feminism and men

MOST men are resistant to a pro-feminist and anti-sexist message. We have grown up in a patriarchal culture and we have been taught a patriarchal worldview, and undoing this is no simple task.

What's more, feminism has a bad name for many men, especially because of its twisted portrayal in mainstream media. Feminism is often portrayed as marginal, out of date, hostile and prudish. It is no wonder that many men are unwilling to listen to feminists.

Which feminism are we "pro"? The fact of a variety of theoretical perspectives within feminist thought presents a further complication for men's practice of pro-feminism. But I don't think this is such a problem, just as long as men are adopting some sort of feminism.

It will be a continual battle to retain and spread a pro-feminist perspective among men in the men's movement and in the wider society. Many sections of the men's movement are not informed by feminist analysis, while others are explicitly hostile to feminism.

Pro-gay trouble

THE greatest difficulty in asserting that we are "gay-affirmative" is that we run smack bang into a great big wall of social prejudice. As I explained in my article "Straightjacket" (XY, Winter 1993), homophobia is a key factor in keeping men in line, within the boundaries of conventional masculinity.

For men to be gay-affirmative, we will have to overcome our deep-seated homophobic attitudes and emotional responses. This will require more than the liberal tolerance and false intimacy that has

sometimes characterised heterosexual men's responses to gay men.

The intersection of gay-affirmativeness with pro-feminism presents some tensions. There are important disagreements in feminist and lesbian/gay theory over pornography, sadomasochism, prostitution and intergenerational sex.

There is no golden rule for how to proceed given these tensions between different perspectives on sexuality and gender. I suppose that the most one can ask is that we proceed in an intelligent and respectful manner.

There is a problem with the term "gay-affirmative" itself. It suggests a simple dichotomy of heterosexual versus gay, whereas the reality is that people's sexual desires, sexual practices and sexual identities lie along a vast and diverse continuum. I feel that we should also be questioning the whole system of rigid sexual categorisation into gay and straight.

Gay-affirmativeness, as I describe it above, is available to both non-gay and gay-identified men. But the work needed and the action taken may be quite distinct for those different men.

So far I've described the three principles, arguing that they must inform men's activism and the development of alternative personal lives and cultures. But I don't think they are enough. I also believe we should be committed to anti-racism and, dare I suggest it, to a socialist perspective. I don't feel very fluent in either politics, but I feel sure that they are both very relevant for men.

In practice

EACH of the three principles, as well as suggesting "shoulds", suggests "should nots". Each principle rules out and renders illegitimate anti-male, anti-feminist and anti-gay beliefs and actions. What is being forged here is a set of criteria for evaluating what we do and how we think. Each of the three principles suggests a political commitment, a personal attitude and a set of strategies that we *should* have, and attitudes and strategies that we should not have.

Beyond all three principles is a deeper sense of ethics or fairness. Whether we are considering the relations between women and men or between men and men, we are evaluating them and shaping them in terms of such values as justice, equality and liberation.

The three principles are a powerful and inspiring statement of belief and intent. I hope that I have been able to offer an outline of what each principle does and doesn't mean, as part of the broader project of developing good theory and good strategy. ●