

# Straightjacket

**Men who question masculinity are often called "poofers". What's the connection between homophobia and masculinity, and where do gay men fit in to the men's movement? Michael Flood has some answers.**



The power relations between men and women are often the focus for feminist and pro-feminist thinking, but what about the power relations between men? Gay men suffer oppression at the hands of heterosexual men similar to those inflicted on women; they are bashed and killed by heterosexual male gangs and mocked for their "effeminacy". More generally, heterosexual men receive social status and approval as heterosexual men, while gay men do not (at least in the straight world).

Contemporary gay and lesbian politics

**H**OW OFTEN have you heard "What are you, a poofier?" How often have the names "faggot", "poofier" and "queer" been hurled at you as terms of abuse?

Growing up, men are faced with the continual threat of being seen as gay and the continuous challenge of proving that they are not gay. In short, boys and men are kept in line by homophobia. Step outside the boundaries of masculine behaviour and you're immediately faced with verbal and physical attack.

Masculinity is strongly molded by homophobia, the widespread fear of and contempt for homosexuals. Homophobia leads men to limit their loving and close friendships with other men. The fear of being identified as a "poofier" leads men to behave in hypermasculine and aggressive ways and to close up emotionally.

"Real" men are heterosexual men. The dominant model of masculinity is of a heterosexual masculinity.

Gay issues are therefore relevant for all men. Fear and hostility towards gays and

lesbians is a key part of what it means to be masculine. If we want to understand how boys and men are kept in the masculine role, how men become isolated and emotionally shut down, then we have to look at homophobia. If we want to understand the diverse realities of men's lives and the power relations between men, then we have to look at homophobia.

## Gay and masculine?

GAY MEN have a different experience of masculinity to heterosexual men. While gay men get some of the privileges of being male, they also suffer oppression and discrimination because of their sexual identity. Ours is a society in which heterosexuality is the institutionalised norm, enforced by families, schools, government policies and the media. As Gary Kinsman writes in *Beyond patriarchy*, "while we [gay men] share with straight men the economic benefits of being men in a patriarchal society, we do not participate as regularly in the everyday interpersonal subordination of women in the realms of sexuality and violence."

began in about 1970 in the United States, Canada, Britain and Australia. The most important precondition for their emergence was the expansion of gay and lesbian networks and sub-cultures—the development of communities, beginning after World War II. The short-term context also included the "sexual revolution", the counter-culture, liberal sexology, intensified policing of sexual behaviour, and the existence of other social movements. Thus, in 1970 there was an explosion of lesbian and gay political activity in several Western capitalist countries, which is now well documented.

What is gay and lesbian politics about? Gay liberation groups aim to end the whole system of sexual categorisation, the rigid division into homosexual and heterosexual. They wish to create sexual diversity and plurality. Secondly, lesbian and gay groups aim to defend and assert their communities and social spaces and to resist various forms of social and cultural oppression. They've challenged state policies that organise sexual policing and institutionalise heterosexuality as the norm. (continues on page 8) ◆

## *Many gay men defiantly embraced gender non-conformity and effeminacy.*

◆ (from page 7) Finally, gay and lesbian groups aim to gain equal rights with heterosexuals, in such areas as the law, employment, custody and immigration.

Gay and lesbian movements are not homogenous. The aims listed above have received varying degrees of emphasis, and the Australian movements are typical in displaying both reformist and radical strands.

The early emphasis on challenging the whole system of sexual categorisation into homosexual and heterosexual has been replaced by an emphasis on securing rights and legitimacy as a minority group.

Gay men in Australia have had a long history of resistance to conventional masculinity. In the early days of gay liberation, many gay men defiantly reversed

the dominant idea of gender, embracing gender non-conformity and effeminacy. There were experiments in "radical drag" or "gender confusion", such as combining a dress with a beard. The gay movement spoke to far more than homosexual people only, for example in the slogan "Every straight man is a target for gay liberation."

But by the early 1980s, male homosexuality had been masculinised. Many gay men adopted the masculine styles of mainstream heterosexual culture. Gay politics shifted too, and there was less interest in challenging the gender ideology of the wider society.

Lesbian and gay politics is alive and well in the 1990s. Gays and lesbians are involved in a multitude of groups and organisations—immigration and custody taskforces, Queer Nation, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACTUP), Dykes on Bikes, AIDS Councils and bureaucracies, Mardi Gras and numerous others. There has been a degree of participation in electoral politics. It is now increasingly clear that there is no monolithic "gay culture" and no single shared identity. What's more, in the wake

of lesbian and gay movements a variety of other claims to valid sexual identity have been made. Sado-masochists, prostitutes, bisexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, leathermen/women and others have all acted to claim validity and rights.

### **The men's movement**

WHAT ABOUT gay men and the men's movement? People frequently assume that men in men's groups or at men's festivals must be gay. This isn't surprising given the close link between gender definition and homophobia: step out of line and you must be a poofter.

The reality is that there are very few gay men in the men's movement. I believe that, at most, five per cent are gay, and I certainly know of many men's groups without a single gay (or bisexual) man. The typical men's group member is aged 30–60, white and heterosexual. Nevertheless, gay men have been involved in the men's movement since its beginnings in the 1970s.

Gay men have found much support in the men's movement. They can participate in an environment that is far more accepting of male-male intimacy, touch and sensuality. Most participants show at least a tolerance,

## **XY: gay, straight, or brindle?**

**XY isn't a gay magazine, but it is gay-affirmative.**

**Michael Flood explains.**

XY IS OFTEN taken to be a gay magazine. Now we've received a letter saying there is too much gay content. What's going on?

XY is written largely by heterosexual men, and I assume that most of its readers are heterosexual. Much of its content is about men in general, or it speaks about "men" but is more relevant for heterosexual men.

How much of XY's content is gay-related? Gay-related content made up 8.3 percent of the total content (by word count) of the last five issues of XY. However, one of these XYs, the Spring 1992 issue, had a special feature on "Gay lives, gay cultures" and 34 percent of this XY's content was gay-related. If we take out the Spring 1992 XY, the gay-related content of the remaining four issues of XY is only 3.3 percent.

So, XY has far less gay material as a proportion of content than the alleged proportion of gays and lesbians in the population: 10 percent, 12 percent or whatever. But that's not the point. We don't try to include gay content, or any content for that matter, in proportion to the demographic profile of the population. We put it in because we think it's important and relevant.

The idea that XY has "too much" gay content comes at least partly from the notion that gay issues are irrelevant for non-gay men. There's something more subtle too. Most men are accustomed to a world in which gay sexuality is invisible or marginalised. If gay sexuality starts taking up space, they'll perceive it as taking up a lot of space, and it will loom even larger because of the associated fear and contempt of homophobia.

XY is often taken to be a gay magazine. I don't think this is simply because of its small amount of gay content. It's also because of this society's understanding of masculinity. As I spell out in the accompanying article, masculinity is deeply linked with homophobia: to break the rules of conventional masculinity is to be tarred with the brush of a suspect sexuality.

XY's appearance may contribute to the gay perception. All of the front cover photos have been of men, sometimes photographed in sensual ways. The words "men" and "sex" sit together on XY's masthead, further suggesting "gay" for many people.

XY is, among other things, committed to being "gay-affirmative". In my opinion, this means that we should give space to gay experience, include writing on "gay issues" and challenge homophobia in the men's movement and the wider society.

"Gay-affirmative" doesn't mean "gay is good, straight is bad". We will not put gay men on an anti-sexist pedestal or tolerate sexism because it's coming from a gay man. Being gay-affirmative doesn't mean feeling guilty or ashamed about being heterosexual or seeing heterosexuality as unsound, fundamentally oppressive or even just unfashionable. Nor does it mean speaking for gay men.

By including gay content, XY risks losing readers and support. The XY last year with a feature spread on "Gay lives, gay cultures" sold poorest of all in the bookshops. But the XY editorial group, all nine of us, is proud to include "gay-affirmative" among our principles. We hope you are pleased to read it. ●

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# What about the power relations between men?

If not acceptance, of gay men. Through the simple fact of face-to-face contact with gay men, non-gay men feel more comfortable and their homophobia is undermined.

Men Against Sexual Assault groups included the phrase "gay-affirmative" in their statement of aims adopted at the 1992 national gathering. This statement also lists "hate crimes against gays, lesbians and bisexuals" as one of a variety of forms of violence opposed by MASA. However, not all of the six or so "MASA" groups have adopted these aims.

Homosexuality is an embarrassment to many sections of the men's movement. To give an example, let me quote from a men's newsletter, in its outline of the decision to change its name from *Alternative Male to Male* (Winter 1989). "If we are trying to reach the "ordinary" man in the street, it is a fair bet that the word "Alternative" will conjure up visions of cosmic hippies, drop-out dole bludgers, free sex, pot smoking, and lots of other undesirable concepts; (even, perish the thought, *homosexuality*). Of course, this is not what the newsletter is about at all—it is about ordinary guys telling other ordinary guys what it is like trying to change along with the world around them, and staying reasonably comfortable in the process."

The prevalence of these ideas is not surprising. Homophobic beliefs are deeply embedded in our society. Even the many

books about men largely ignore the fact that mainstream masculinity is heterosexual. Men's movement literature offers an image of men that is largely white, middle-class and heterosexual.

We in the men's movement face the problem that we don't want to scare off potential participants, and any hint of gayness sends many men running. But the solution is not to perpetuate homophobia and silence gay men, by denying gay men's presence in the movement or staying clear of gay issues. Instead, we have to tackle the fear and ignorance that sends men running in the first place, and reject the idea that if you question masculinity you must be gay.

"Homophobia" is often understood in the men's movement as referring mainly to the fear of intimacy of men, and it is widely accepted that homophobia therefore blocks the development of a healthy masculinity. But less attention is given to other aspects of homophobia—the contempt and attacks directed specifically at gay men because of their sexuality, and the discriminations and injustices that gay men face. Gay politics involves a wider critique of the fact of "compulsory heterosexuality" and the heterosexist ideology that says being straight is "natural" or biologically determined.

## Straight allies

STRAIGHT MEN can only benefit by becoming aware of homophobia. If we are less distanced from gay men and less bothered by the idea that others may see us as gay, then we're far more able to step outside conventional masculinity. We're able to seek greater closeness and intimacy with other men and allow ourselves a more emotional and sensual personality. Like the banner I saw on television said, men can be "straight but not narrow".

Heterosexual men can act as allies to gay and bisexual men. We can acknowledge gay men's existence, affirm the validity of gay sexuality, defend gay men from attack and support gay struggles.

Men and masculinity will not change much until homophobia is radically undermined. The fear of being seen as a "poofter" prevents men and boys from questioning and ultimately abandoning traditional masculinity. Tackling homophobia is therefore a key task for all men. ●



Boxe

## Smile, you!

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Tony Naim

## Dad vs work

CONFLICT between can no longer be s issue. One in five have working pai own jobs are comj life, according to attitudes. The stu parents found that are having difficl demands with a pathetic workplac Adapted from The Age, 11

## Red faces

HAS Paul Keating young politician w included a questi Government was c women back into t a change in all the r the years," says Jeani they get terribly eml sexist language."

Adapted from The Sydney March 1993.

## Discriminator

A NEW adoption bi into law by the ACT has been condemn lesbian community Gay Rights Network the Bill, which allow heterosexuals only, all gays and lesbians. while concerned a considers adoption c "fourth order" issue. what this means we' Adapted from the Sydney Morn