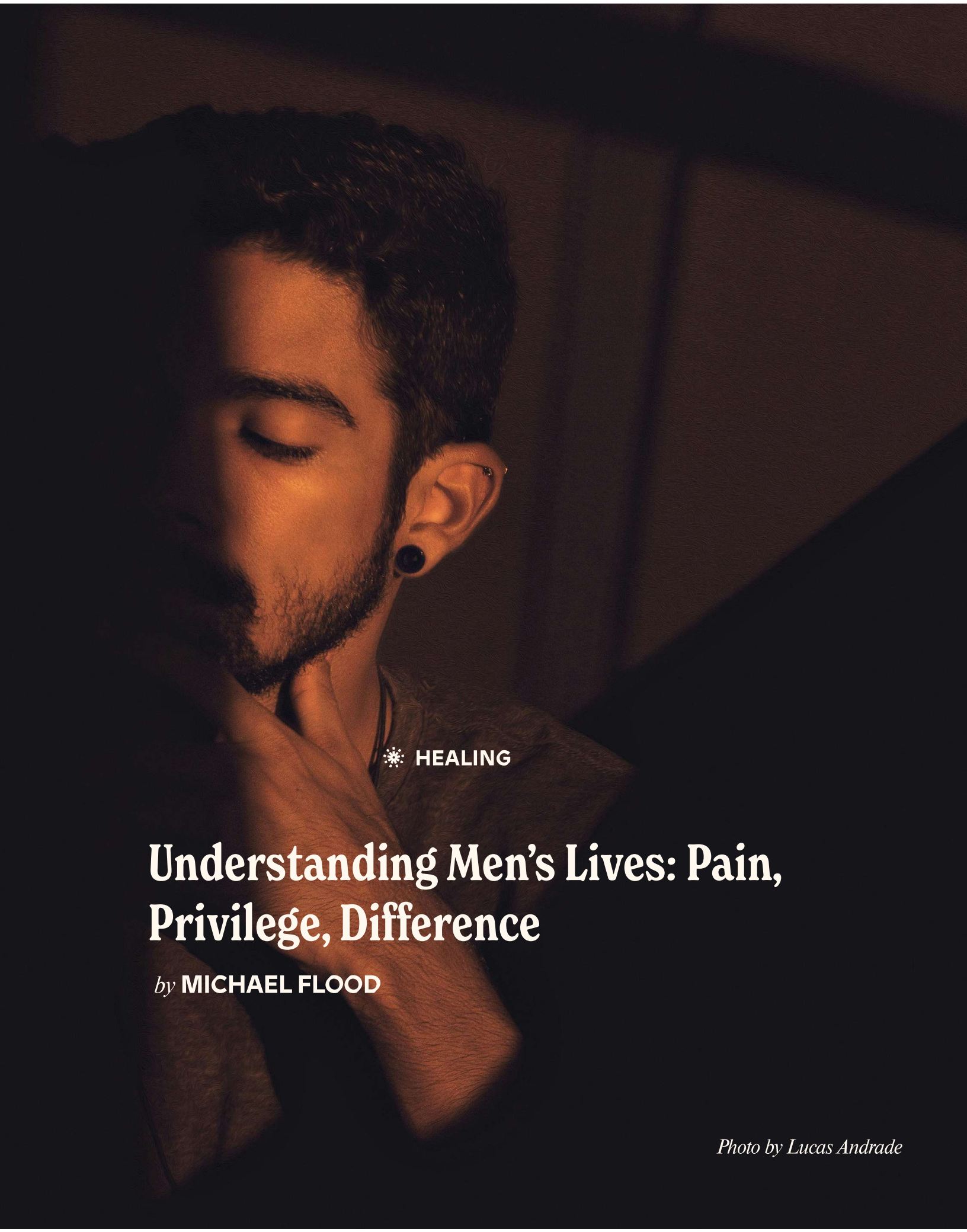

HEALING

Understanding Men's Lives: Pain, Privilege, Difference

by **MICHAEL FLOOD**

Photo by Lucas Andrade

The tension between attention to men's privilege, on the one hand, and men's disadvantage, on the other, is fundamental in efforts to understand and work with men and boys.

Debates over how to understand men's and boys' social positions have been part of self-conscious attention to men and masculinities since the beginnings of this work in the early 1970s. There have been competing understandings of men's social situations in different strands of men's organising (pro-feminist, men's liberation, mythopoetic, and anti-feminist), and these disagreements persist today.

However, debates over men and masculinities now have moved into the cultural and political mainstream. This includes an increasingly visible discussion of men and gender in popular culture, the mobilisation by conservative political leaders and parties of a reactionary politics of patriarchal masculinity, and the development of a field of policy and programming focused on engaging men.

In this context, it is all the more important to offer evidence-based, persuasive and engaging accounts of men's lives and relations.

We must start by recognizing that gender shapes everyone's lives, women's and men's. Gender often is used as code for "women," but in fact, men's lives are shaped as much as women's by gender. "Gender" refers simply to the meanings and patterns of men's and women's lives. And we know from five decades of research that gender is socially constructed — that the patterns of men's and women's lives are shaped in powerful ways by society and culture.

This point is definitional of feminism. Feminism, as a social movement, a body of scholarship, and a set of ideals, is defined by three key ideas: that women's social conditions are unfair, that this situation is the result of social forces, and that this situation should be changed.

The most well-documented example of the social construction of gender is in parents' socialisation of boys and girls, but there are a myriad of ways in which the meanings and practices of being a man are shaped by social norms (societal expectations), everyday interactions, media representations, institutional cultures, and policies and laws. Males' biology does play some role too, but far less than is widely assumed.

Beyond this initial insight that men's lives, like women's, are gendered, we can identify three key dimensions of men's and boys' lives and relations: privileges, constraints, and intersectional complexities.

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PATRIARCHAL PRIVILEGES

The first fundamental feature of men's lives and relations is that men, as a group, are advantaged over women, as a group. In every society across the globe, there are pervasive patterns of patriarchal inequality: in political power, paid and domestic work, economic power, media and culture, men's and women's intimate and family relations, and more. There is a systematic pattern of male advantage and female disadvantage in society. "Patriarchy" is a handy term for this pattern or system of male domination.

This does not mean that all men enjoy lives of privilege and all women suffer lives of disadvantage. As noted in more detail below, men in general also are constrained in important ways by the dominant norms and practices of masculinity, and some groups of men are highly disadvantaged.

Gender inequality often has been understood in terms of female disadvantage: discrimination against women, women's exclusion from economic decision-making, women's lower wages, women's absence from political leadership, women's absence from speaking and leading roles in media, and so on. But the flip side of this is male advantage: informal affirmative action for men, men's monopoly of economic decision-making and political power, greater workplace opportunities, and the media favouring men's voices and actions. When we hear, for example, that women represent only 5 percent of the board members of companies, we can flip this, recognising that men are 95 percent of the board members of companies. Of course, these are not just any men: they tend to be white, from economically privileged backgrounds, usually heterosexual.

By most metrics of social status and power and in most societal domains, men are advantaged over women. This pattern is not homogenous across society. For example, in many western countries girls have overtaken boys in levels of participation and achievement as students in secondary schooling and university, although men continue to be advantaged over women in patterns of paid work and wages after education. In addition, there are important areas of male disadvantage (which I'll address below). In short, patriarchy is not absolute across societies or necessarily within any single society. We need therefore always to look at the specifics of the "gender order," the current organisation of gender relations between and among men and women and others in any particular context.

Patterns of patriarchal inequality play out in the everyday fabric of men's daily lives. As a man, when I open my mouth, my views often are given more weight than a woman's views. When I send in my CV or have a job interview, I may be seen as more competent, because I am male, than a woman with the same skills and experience. I'm a father, and if I work long hours at work, it's unlikely that anyone will think I am neglecting my children. If I am in a sexual relationship with a woman, it is likely that both of us will give more primacy to my sexual desires and needs than hers. When I watch TV or read the news, I will often see people of my gender widely represented, their achievements celebrated. If I'm a senior leader, there is no tension between my gender and my role. Sexist double standards shape my life at work: as a man, I'm assertive, but she's bossy; I'm enthusiastic, but she's emotional; I network, but she gossips; and when I make tough decisions, I'm confident or firm, but her, she's a bitch.

Patriarchal inequalities are personal and interpersonal, shaping our identities and everyday interactions. But they are also organisational and structural. They are built into the structures, processes, and cultures of workplaces and other organisations; embedded in the content of media and popular culture; and sustained by government policies and laws. This does not mean that gender inequalities are set in stone. They can change — in good or bad ways — in response to both collective action, whether by progressive or regressive social movements and other actors, and other shifts, whether social, political, economic, or technological.

Patriarchal privileges, however, usually are invisible to men. A typical feature of patterns of privilege is they are naturalised and normalised: seen as inevitable, biologically driven, justified, or indeed, not recognised at all. As a result, members of privileged groups tend to think that our achievements are the result of our efforts and skills, not the unearned advantages of an unequal system.

If the first key dimension of men's lives is that men receive privileges over women as a group, the second is that men themselves are also constrained. Men pay some heavy costs under the current gender order, particularly to their health and well-being.

COSTS TO MEN

There are important ways in which men are constrained, as men, under the current gender order.

Dominant masculine norms and gendered social structures shape men's lives. They grant privileges and entitlements to men, but also limit men's personal and relational health.

If men are expected always to be tough, stoic, self-sufficient and in control, and to avoid showing weakness or asking for help, then men who conform to such expectations may suffer poorer health and shallower relationships. While at the same time, conforming to some aspects of traditional definitions of manhood also brings rewards, such as success at work and male peer group status. Yet, a wealth of research shows that men who endorse and conform to such traditional definitions of manhood are more likely than other men to consider and attempt suicide, lack social connections, drink excessively, avoid involved fathering, take risks at work, and drive dangerously.

Men who endorse dominant norms of masculinity are more likely than other men to suffer harm to themselves and to do harm to others. Traditional masculinity also often is based on dominance over women, a disdain for anything feminine, and entitlement. Research shows that men with higher

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levels of support for traditional or patriarchal models of masculinity are more likely to perpetrate violence against women, perpetrate violence against other men, and refrain from intervening in situations of violence.

Men who do not conform to dominant models of masculinity — whether because they are gay, bisexual or trans or they are unable or unwilling to show stereotypical masculine qualities and behaviours — also pay a cost. They may be subject to violence, abuse, marginalisation or stigma. Boys and men are subject to gendered policing and abuse, particularly by other boys and men.

Men and women are not equally disadvantaged in the gender order. Remember the first feature of the gender order: a systematic pattern of male advantage and female disadvantage. Men are limited, but not oppressed, as men. Put another way, women are worse off than men under patriarchy, and both women and men are worse off under patriarchy than they would be in a gender-equitable system. Men suffer too under patriarchy, but less than women.

Furthermore, to the extent that boys and men do suffer, the problem in general is not women or feminism, but destructive and unhealthy models of masculinity. Yes, individual women may do harm to men, but there is not any kind of collective injustice among men perpetrated by women. There are some groups of men and boys who are deeply disadvantaged, and this brings us to the third key dimension of men's lives and relations.

INTERSECTIONAL PRIVILEGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Men's and boys' lives are structured not only by gender but by other forms of social difference and inequality that have to do with ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability. Every man is a member of multiple and intersecting social categories, and the systems of power and inequality associated with each shape their lives.

In practice, this means that men in differing social categories have very different levels of access to social resources, power and status, depending on the patterns of privilege and disadvantage in place. For example, men who are members of ethnic minorities, poor or working class, gay or bisexual, or disabled, typically live more disadvantaged lives than men who are white, wealthy, heterosexual, and/or able-bodied.

Any particular man or group of men is simultaneously privileged on one axis of inequality (gender) and privileged or disadvantaged on each of a series of other axes of inequality. Indeed, some groups of men are deeply disadvantaged — not because they are men, but because of the systems of injustice tied to other social categories to which they belong, while some groups of women are relatively privileged.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

Recognizing these three dimensions of men's and boys' lives can be applied to understanding any of the issues in media and community discussion about men and masculinities, whether domestic and sexual violence, men's health, fathering, or anything else.

Indeed, we need to energetically promote feminist, compassionate, and inclusive perspectives on men and boys in the public sphere. This is a vital counter, for example, to the efforts of various neo-patriarchal political leaders and networks to mobilise some men's sense of disaffection, marginalisation and entitlement.

We can also apply this understanding to working with men and boys. Recognition of each of the three dimensions of men's and boys' lives translates into a key principle for this work. First, work with men and boys should aim to transform patriarchal gender inequalities and promote gender justice. Second, it should be committed to enhancing boys' and men's lives. Third, it must be intersectional, addressing diversities and inequalities among men and boys.

Although there are valuable, longer accounts of the principles that should guide work with men and boys, these three principles provide a useful framework for guiding practice.

Across men's lives there is both pain and privilege, and they are hardly evenly shared. For those of us working with men it is imperative that we speak to their pain, offering more accurate accounts of men's experiences than the anti-feminist and misogynist diagnoses too readily available online. We must speak, too, to men's privilege, calling men into personal and social change in constructive and compassionate ways.

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