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See also: child abuse; domestic violence; fatherhood, fathering; sexual violence; violence

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FATHERS' RIGHTS

'Fathers' rights' refers to organised groups or networks of fathers who act in support of the collective interests of fathers, especially separated fathers whose children do not reside with them. Fathers' rights (hereafter 'FR') groups are active particularly in lobbying for changes in family law.

FR is defined by the claim that fathers are deprived of their 'rights' and subjected to systematic discrimination as men and fathers, in a system biased towards women and dominated by feminists. FR groups overlap with men's rights groups and both represent an organised backlash to feminism. While other networks also promote fathers' involvement in families, the FR movement is distinguished by its anti-feminist discourse of men or fathers as victims. At the same time, FR perspectives do have a wide currency across the political spectrum.

FR groups have emerged in most Western countries over the past three decades (Collier and Sheldon 2006), in the context of profound shifts in gender, intimate and familial relations. More men are living separately from their biological children, fathering outside of marriage, having parenting relationships with children who are not biologically theirs, and being custodial single fathers. Cultural definitions of fatherhood also have

changed. The notion of the nurturing and highly involved father now exerts a powerful influence on popular perceptions. However, the culture of fatherhood has changed much faster than the conduct (Flood 2003).

Two experiences particularly bring men into FR groups. First, many heterosexual men experience considerable emotional difficulties in the wake of separation and divorce. FR groups are characterised by anger and blame towards ex-partners and the 'system', and such themes are relatively common among men who have undergone separation (Lehr and MacMillan 2001). While some men respond to divorce by making a priority of relationships with their children, others withdraw from parental and financial involvement (Arendell 1995). Second, separated fathers often are dissatisfied with their lack of contact with their children. While most children's living arrangements are finalised without the need for a Family Court order, over time many non-resident fathers have increasingly distant relationships with their children.

While FR groups purport to act on behalf of separated fathers, many in fact stifle their healing processes, constrain their parenting involvements and directly compromise the wellbeing of children themselves.

Some men do find solace and support in FR groups. At the same time, many groups offer their members subject positions based only in victimhood, and centred on hostility towards and blame of the legal system and their ex-partners. Such approaches fix men in positions of anger and hostility.

While many of the individual men in FR groups do desire greater involvement with their children, FR advocates have done little to foster fathers' positive involvement in children's lives, whether before or after separation and divorce. The FR movement focuses on gaining an equality concerned with fathers' 'rights' and status rather than the actual care of children (Rhoades 2000).

In their public rhetoric throughout the 1990s, Australian FR groups had emphasised issues of 'rights' and discrimination, but by

the early twenty-first century their rhetorical strategies focused on the need for 'equal parenting', emphasising that this is what is best or children. However, they continue to ignore actual gendered divisions of labour in families prior to separation, and give no attention to the practical realities of shared care after separation. Some FR groups seem more concerned with re-establishing paternal authority and fathers' decision-making related to their children's and ex-partners' lives than with actual involvements with children (Stacey 1998).

FR groups have neglected the primary obstacle to fathers' involvement with children after separation, their lack of involvement before separation (Flood 2003). Groups in Australia and the US have focused on achieving a rebuttable presumption of joint child custody or residence in family law, but the lack of such a presumption is not a significant barrier to men's involvement in post-divorce fathering. The parents to whom a presumption of joint residence would apply are least able to set up shared parenting arrangements, because of conflict, violence and lack of social and material resources.

FR groups have attempted to force parental contact on to children regardless of children's own desires and regardless of potentially negative effects on children's wellbeing. The influence of FR agendas in family law has meant that fathers' contact with children is privileged over children's safety from violence, and children now face a greater requirement to have contact with abusive or violent parents. By depicting women as parasitical, mendacious and vindictive (Kaye and Tolmie 1998b), FR groups have intensified interparental conflict, with negative impacts on children's wellbeing. They have worked to reduce the obligations of non-resident fathers to provide child support, leaving children and their resident parents with fewer financial and material resources. At the same time, aspects of the existing child support system have imposed unjust financial penalties on some non-resident parents.

FR groups have been able to increase community acceptance of several myths: that women routinely make false accusations of child abuse or domestic violence to gain advantage in family law proceedings and to arbitrarily deny their ex-partners' access to the children, and that domestic violence is gender-equal. The FR movement has sought to wind back the protections available to victims of domestic violence, and to increase the protections available to alleged perpetrators.

References and further reading

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See also: fatherhood, fathering; masculinity politics; men's movement; men's rights

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FEMALE MASCULINITY

'Female masculinity' refers to traditionally masculine traits of character or appearance occurring in biological women. *Female Masculinity*