



learning about, for example, the aesthetic, the ethical and the social aspects of life — or choosing to delegitimise learning altogether as their mucking around behaviour suggests — then it is important for both sexes that these boys' choices are strongly challenged, undermined, and if necessary, forbidden. We need to continue to help girls cross the gender divide in the curriculum and extra-curriculum. But we must also begin to insist that boys come the other way and cross the divide into the large (and expanding) swathes of human knowledge, skills and experience which they regard as feminine.

6. One way in which our school would move beyond just pushing girls to change would be in relation to thinking about adult life for both sexes. Our study showed that almost all secondary school students had been taught at school to think about their careers. A much smaller percentage had been asked at school to think about the unpaid work of adult life and their obligations to family and community. In so far as these things are not addressed and adult life is painted only in terms of careers, schools are dishonest with girls about their likely futures and

are also reinforcing by default a gender divide view of adult life. The challenge is to help both sexes to take seriously the breadth of demands on adults and to discuss together how a satisfying and just future for both sexes might be managed.

Gender affects all that students do at school — formal learning, interpersonal learning, personal development. For this reason its construction has to be a matter of direct concern to school staff. It is far too important to be left to kids in the playground. ☺

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CROSSING BOUNDARIES: ENGAGING WITH THE MEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

MEN'S RIGHTS

A forceful and bitter men's rights movement has attracted wide media coverage for its viewpoint and has succeeded in shaping new laws premised on its belief that feminism has gone too far. SARAH MADDISON suggests that a change in attitude on the part of feminists, the offering of an alternative viewpoint counteracting that of the men's rights movement, may be the way to bridge the divide that is growing between women and men in the area of custody disputes.

In March 1996 Hoss Majdalawi shot and killed his estranged wife, Jean Lennon, outside the Family Court at Parramatta. The incident made front page news at the time and was extensively reported on television, radio and in the press. What emerged was a story of violence and abuse; Lennon had been trying to escape her husband for over a year and had used every legal means available to her to do so. Majdalawi had pursued her and their children relentlessly, and finally stopped her permanently.

This was a disturbing story in its own right, but what I found equally disturbing was media coverage of the murder that included comments from men's rights organisations to the effect that if the women's movement hadn't 'taken all the funding' then maybe this man could have been 'helped'. And maybe if the Family Court wasn't so biased against men this man wouldn't have been driven to murder his wife. Basically, feminism was the problem. It was feminism — other women — that had killed Jean Lennon, rather than a disturbed and angry man.

The men's rights movement has been in the news again this year following the trial and sentencing of Robert Clive Parsons for the murder of his estranged wife Angela outside the Dandenong Family Court. The murder occurred during a custodial and maintenance hearing involving the couple's two children. During the attack, in which Angela Parsons was

stabbed repeatedly, Robert Parsons yelled, 'It's over bitch, it's over.' Giving evidence for Parsons, a forensic psychologist said that he had been 'seduced' by the men's rights group Parent (note the singular) Without Rights, and had 'found solace' at their weekly meetings.

These cases are just two of several incidents over the past few years in which men have murdered their wives, former wives or partners during Family Court hearings. In every case their actions have been defended in the media by men's rights groups who argue that these actions are justified by the 'raw deal' that most men get before the Family Court, primarily because this institution has been 'taken over' by feminists. Put in its crudest form, the men's rights argument is that the gender equity pendulum has swung too far and as a result

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The most obvious (and the most understandable) feminist response to the men's rights movement is one of anger and antipathy. Women's groups concerned with family law, sole parents, child support and custody have attempted to combat the increasing success of men's rights groups through the usual methods of lobbying and bureaucratic engagement. There have been some successes and several losses; for the current reality is that the line run by these groups about 'making it harder for couples

to divorce' and their emphasis on the importance of fatherhood fit in very neatly with the Coalition Government's 'family values' agenda, whereas many feminist claims can be seen as a direct challenge.

What I am suggesting as an alternative, or at least as an adjunct, to this feminist response is an altogether different approach — one that won't come easily and one that I'm sure many feminists will initially want to reject. It is undeniable that men's rights men continue to make many women's lives more difficult and contribute to a culture of women hating that still pervades our society. But it is precisely because of these facts that I think it is time we developed a better understanding of 'the enemy'. At the moment we make assumptions, and we dismiss men's activism as 'backlash' and misogyny. While there is no doubt that these elements are there, it is important that we understand how they came to be. If we are not assuming an innate hatred of women, how is it that these men have come to take up the beliefs of the men's rights movement?

Addressing this question is crucial if we are to respond constructively, in ways that allow for the possibility of dialogue and greater understanding between genders. Unless we do this, we will be unable to offer any kind of feminist alternative.

What is men's rights?

Broadly speaking, the men's movement can be understood as being organised into four strands: men's rights, mythopoetry, men's liberation and profeminism. When most people speak of a men's movement, it is the mythopoetic or spiritual strand they are thinking of — the popular image of 'wildman weekends' at which men are encouraged to get in touch with their 'deep masculine'. Linked to mythopoetry is men's liberation, a broad movement based on support groups in which men are helped to break out of the alienating male sex role by getting in touch with their emotions and recognising possibilities beyond traditional masculinity. Profeminism stands in opposition to other strands with profeminist men believing they can work as allies with women in a struggle to transform traditional masculinity and our patriarchal society.

Men's rights is widely understood as being the backlash strand of the men's movement. That is to say, there is a widespread belief among men's rights activists that the women's movement has gone too far and has harmed men in profound and fundamental ways. As we approach the end of the 20th century, the issue of men's rights appears to be emerging as a new arena of social activism that is both a part of a broader men's movement and a reaction to feminism. There are groups in every State in Australia that are active on men's rights causes in family law, education and health, and there is some evidence to suggest that these groups are finding a sympathetic ear within government.

The recent changes to the legislation on child support, for example, give paying parents (who are usually men) far greater control over how the money is spent as well as reducing the amount of money that the non-paying parent (women) can earn before the child support payments are reduced. These changes are the direct result of intensive lobbying by men's rights and fathers' rights groups. They make it clear that, in terms

of an ability to attack and even wind back the gains of second wave feminism, it is men's rights activism that is offering the challenge and to which we must direct a productive response.

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Men as fathers

Alongside the belief that feminism has harmed men is the notion of the 'new fatherhood' which promotes the idea that many men are enjoying far closer and more involved relationships with their children. For men's rights men, their roles as fathers are of primary importance. In making this assertion, they are disputing an overemphasis in our culture on the importance of men's public roles, along with a lack of adequate acknowledgment of



the significance of their private, familial commitments in their understanding of themselves as men.

The new debates that are emerging on fatherhood serve to expose the patrifocal core of the men's rights movement. This emotional base, which is fuelled primarily by hurt, anger and a sense of injustice, helps to form a group identity that incorporates ideas of a damaged masculinity and unappreciated fatherhood and which serves to make fatherhood a public issue as the impetus and focus for political action.

The men that I interviewed while researching the men's rights movement last year all stressed the primary importance of their family relationships, particularly with their wives or partners, and their children. At no point did these men define themselves in terms of their occupation or public status. Instead, the focus was entirely on their private lives: the breakdown of their relationships, their roles as fathers and their hurt and sorrow at not having the full-time relationships with their children that they desired. In this sense their masculine and paternal identities were almost wholly anchored in the private rather than the public sphere and they expressed resentment at the ways in which society still defined them by their public roles and economic capacities.

Further reading

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The personal is powerful?

Men's rights men talk a lot about power, and they do so from a distinct ideological standpoint that defines power in terms of personal experience and emotion. This allows them to deny the existence of gendered structural and institutional power that can be referred to as patriarchy. The family becomes a site both of public intervention and activism as well as a private source and confirmation of masculinity.

In the men's rights argument, power holds a central position. The recognition of a contest for power between men and women is an essential element in the claim that men are disadvantaged and oppressed. The argument even goes so far as to deny the very existence of male power and privilege in any area of society.

These arguments take two main tacks. The first is that male power has never in fact existed, that power has been mistakenly understood as relating to economics and the public sphere but in reality has existed primarily in the private sphere, traditionally understood as being women's domain. The second is the idea that men did in fact once have power in the form of patriarchy, but that the women's movement has successfully dismantled or infiltrated male power structures. Further, women have now created for themselves many more options and life chances while men have remained stuck in traditional ways of being men, and are therefore further disempowered.

As R. Collier points out in his book, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, for many men there is a genuine 'disjunction between the very real *experience* of personal disempowerment . . . and the *facts* of power' (page 35). What is happening with men's rights men at the moment is that as they experience *feelings* of powerlessness they seek out other men to validate this experience, thereby reinforcing an ideological standpoint that represents men as vulnerable and suffering, thereby authenticating their feelings of powerlessness.

Finding a way forward

The problem with men's rights activism is that in coming from anger and bitterness it misidentifies the problem and therefore seeks change in the wrong direction. There is a core of emotional anguish at its heart that is not widely validated outside the men's movement. In fact it may appear to the men who are attracted to men's rights that this is the only place where they can find validation of their emotional experiences of fatherhood, particularly following separation and divorce. There is here the very real possibility that if these men are able to find other sources of validation, they may reject the men's rights position that locates power only in the personal, and constructs feminism as the enemy.

Men's rights groups do not own the only viewpoint on fatherhood, family relations and family law, but there is a significant risk that unless those with other viewpoints can find a way to engage with men's rights, the men's rights position will become dominant, at considerable cost to women and children.

When, following a separation or divorce, men can no longer be the family men they want to be, they must create a new sense



of who they are. At present the men's rights movement offers the most visible alternative identity, and thus it has had measurable success gaining members and generating support. The challenge for feminists is to offer a further alternative that speaks just as effectively to the areas of men's lives that have been damaged, while maintaining an analysis of power that recognises many men's advantage.

How we do this will be difficult to resolve, and will require us to think strategically about how we operate in both our personal and professional lives. Unfortunately it seems that once men have engaged with the men's rights agenda or, as with Robert Parsons, been 'seduced' by a men's rights group, there will be little chance of offering them an alternative. They will have already found a space that validates their pain and anger and which is a fertile breeding ground for hate and misogyny. In part then, I am advocating an attitudinal change among women that enables men's pain to be met with support and empathy rather

than cynicism and derision. It would also be beneficial if women's groups, particularly those working in the area of family law, were able to build some bridges with men's groups working in the same area. Of course this suggestion is absolutely fraught, and may prove to be wholly impractical, but at least it allows for the possibility of some common ground which may, one day, challenge the adversarial status quo.

If we can do this, if we can get beyond our own anger and dismay at the hatred that men's rights seems to generate and offer an alternate understanding, then I think we have real potential for creating a new tool for political effectiveness that can challenge and resist a backlash movement. ☼

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UTOPIA AT WORK: EQUALITY BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN, AND FLEXIBILITY FOR ALL

WORK

How do we organise our working lives in the feminist utopia? There must be a better way than how we do it now, somewhere between the legions of the overworked, the underworked and those without work at all. MIRANDA KORZY went in search of answers.

The story of Laura Gibson, a corporate lawyer who throws in her big city job for life as a magistrate in the small town of Pearl Bay, has captured a commercial television-sized audience for the ABC with its series *SeaChange*. The pace of life as a city lawyer is so intense that Laura leaves for work before her children are up in the mornings, and gets home after they go to bed. Her husband's arrest on fraud charges is front-page news before she knows about it. Then she misses out on a partnership in her firm because she is a woman with a family. In shock, she grabs the opportunity of working short hours, four days a week as a magistrate.

While Pearl Bay is no utopia, *SeaChange* portrays the dream of escape to a gentler life. Such a life is the aim of a feminist utopia, and one of its most important founding principles would be equal employment opportunity. In it, commentators agree, the traditional full-time job would disappear, to be replaced by flexible hours, guaranteed wages or a minimum living allowance, and democratic management. Workers would be supported by childcare and other social assistance allowing