Youth, fathers and masculinity in South Africa today

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abstract

How can men contribute to a human rights culture in South Africa? This is a key question facing not only men themselves, individually and collectively, but also gender analysts. In order to answer this question, we need to understand that men are separated by the different material conditions in which they find themselves, yet they are united by the life challenges that are associated with the transition from boy to man. The process of becoming men involves constructing masculine identities. Young men need to develop masculinities that include self-respect and respect for others. Adult men face similar challenges as they give meaning to manhood. Manhood is often associated with becoming a father, and being responsible for, and loving towards children is one way of contributing to a new, equitable gender order. In this *briefing*, I argue that attention should be given to working with youth and with fathers in order to contribute to a human rights culture in this country.

keywords

masculinity, fatherhood, youth, men

Any consideration of gender, culture and rights needs to take account of men and masculinity. There are good reasons for this. In the first instance, men and particular constructions of masculinity historically have been implicated in inequalities and injustices. These can be found in historical and contemporary patterns in South Africa:

- High levels of violence against women (femicide, murder, rape, domestic violence);
- Domination of certain spheres of public life – corporate and state – by men to the exclusion of women; and
- Physical attacks on outsiders and minority groups (frequently other men) – including homophobic, xenophobic, racist and ethnic violence.

It is not all men who threaten peace, democracy and harmony, but rather, particular constructions of masculinity that legitimate the use of violence, the undemocratic assertion of power and the rights of men over women and children.

In the last 20 years, issues of masculinity have begun to be included in agendas for peace and democracy. It is recognised that the rights of women cannot be promoted without working with men. The goal of women's liberation is best pursued by working with men. Addressing issues of masculinity can also contribute to a more peaceful world order in which environmental considerations mesh with development agendas for the developing world. If men are now included in international gender agendas, their place in cultural agendas is less clear. Part of the difficulty lies in the relationship of gender to culture or, more specifically, of feminism to multiculturalism. Feminism historically developed in a western context. This has been both noted and objected. Black, third world and African feminisms have all emerged to correct what have been considered as biases in analysing gender relations and defining and working for gender equity. A question that arises from these contestations is: Is there necessarily a tension between women's rights and cultural rights? Some feminists believe that there is. Molyneux and Razavi (2002:13) argue that:

... multiculturalism is 'bad for women' because it subordinates women's individual rights to masculine privilege, enshrined in group rights that are legitimized by 'culture', 'tradition', and religion.

An alternative position recognises diversity and the need to protect collective rights, including women's rights but not excluding other kinds of collective rights. This requires that a balance be maintained between gender rights and those based on custom and tradition and located within indigenous knowledge systems. In Mexico, according to Molyneux and Razavi (2002:34), law now 'recognizes the rights of indigenous people to their own norms and practices but in such a way that the "dignity and integrity of women were honoured"'.

The next challenge in squaring gender with culture is to address issues of masculinity. In the tradition of Critical Men's Studies (Brod, 1987; Connell, 1995; Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Kaufman, 1987; Kimmel, 1987; Seidler, 1991) the critique of hegemonic forms of masculinity has established connections between men and private and public power. This power is exercised to the detriment of women, children and minorities including men who are unable to satisfy the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. In reaction to this, models of masculinity that have stressed tolerance, peace, democracy, domestic responsibility, sensitivity and introspection have emerged, ushering in a new form of masculinity. The 'new man', however, is a model generated in the well-resourced context of the developed world. The extent to which it can serve or will suit men in poorly resourced contexts is debatable.

In the African context, models of masculinity which stress responsibility, protection, provision, wisdom and communal loyalty may well be better suited to sustain life and generate harmony (Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005). Over the past half century, economic forces have wrought havoc on labour markets. Unemployment levels are very high and subsistence agriculture remains largely the preserve of women. Men have often not responded well to these challenges, with alcohol and women all too often being their refuge. In the process, relationships with family, spouses and children have been neglected. Amongst the many points that African feminists have made, is that men and women depend on one another and that efforts should be put into creating healthy bonds between men and women. In this context, the model of a desirable masculinity may look different from that of the 'new man' (Morrell and Swart, 2005).

Masculinity is fluid, has been changing, and can be the object of social, political and personal work. All around us, there is evidence of men trying to change. This is in response to: personal challenges or anxieties (eg death or worries in the workplace); social pressure (as a result of new laws and policies which promote gender equity); and domestic need (tackling issues such as the division of labour at home).

In comparative and historical terms, men have responded to challenge in diverse ways. On the one hand, there has been a global 'backlash' movement that ostensibly responds to a 'crisis of masculinity'. This movement brings men together for mutual support, to mobilise in order to present issues of common concern to the media and policy-makers and to assist men to deal with whatever problems they are experiencing. While there is no doubt that men are confronting challenges, feminists question whether these movements (including the promise keepers in the United States and South Africa) are not, either consciously or unconsciously, attempting to turn back legal and socio-economic advances made by women. Backlash organisations frequently demand that the man's role as head of household be respected, a demand which might restore the self-esteem of some men, but does so at the expense of women's autonomy and their attempts to become decision-makers in the family.

On the other hand, around the world, particularly middle-class men have also been responding to challenges by turning inward to

examine themselves. This process does not always result in a more equitable gender arrangement, eg the mythopoetic movement inspired by the works of Sam Keen (1992) and Robert Bly (1992) tends to foster male bonding and introspection rather than engagement with gender inequalities. There is no reason, however, why men inspired by mythopoetic work on the self should not become more open to gender equity, but research suggests that the source of more promising gender work is among men who embrace gender equity in family and relationship contexts with women and children. Identified in the literature as 'the new men', this approach has seen gender hierarchies and rigid sexual divisions of labour begin to break down as men have taken more responsibility in the domestic realm and insisted less on public positions being the preserve of men.

One effect of this model of masculinity has been an increasing realisation of the value of families for men and of men for families. There now exist, around the world, organisations that are working for men to become more involved in the lives of their children, whether this be in the context of nuclear or extended families or whether the children are their own biological offspring or not.

The concepts of father and fatherhood are often used interchangeably, but it is important to distinguish between the idea of (biological) father and somebody who undertakes the fatherhood role. A biological connection with a child is not necessary for successful fathering. More important are love, reliability, availability, dependability and support.

Fatherhood is sometimes understood as a central part of unequal and oppressive patriarchal relations, an estate opposed to motherhood. Instead of engaging in a futile discussion about whether fatherhood is more important than motherhood (or fathers more important than mothers), the approach now is

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to focus on the needs of the child. Here there appears to be unanimity among researchers – that a child benefits from an active father in his or her life (Barker et al, 2004). Fatherhood can thus be a goal for people consciously working to improve society generally and gender relations specifically. When males, appreciate fathers and aspire to fill the fatherhood role, they benefit individually, and society benefits as well. Fathers who are positively engaged in the lives of their children are less likely to be depressed, to commit suicide or to beat their wives. They are more likely to be involved in community work, to be supportive of their partners and to be involved in school activities. When fatherhood is woven as a desirable feature into the fabric of masculinity, everybody benefits.

In South Africa, apartheid and the racially divided workplace has meant that men have very different experiences of and models for fatherhood (Richter and Morrell, 2005). Migrant labourers, for example, see their children infrequently and this prevents their developing close ties. Yet in a recent study, the importance of providing and being a responsible father was a strong feature of migrant labourer opinion on the gold mines. While promoting fatherhood, therefore, sensitivity needs to be shown to the different ways in which it is understood, and a nuanced view taken of how fatherhood is related to a broader commitment to gender equity.

As with fathers, so it is with the youth. International work has for long focused on the youth in both developing and developed contexts. The focus on the youth also recognises that this phase of life is often a turbulent one and that it is therefore important to work with this generation, rather than work on or against it, in order to contribute to healthier gender patterns in the future.

The schooling system offers the best chance to engage with youth and the question of masculinity, particularly in South Africa where schooling is compulsory to the age of 16 years.

It is important to understand how masculinity is constructed in school. Identifying those forces which produce anti-social, irresponsible and violent masculinities must be part of any analysis as must be identifying forces which produce citizens who have the ability to contribute to their own development as well as those of their peers and society more broadly.

The current curriculum offers opportunity to do this, though at present, this is not being realised. Schools should give learners the skills required in adult life. In South Africa today, beyond the education for citizenship which underlies current education philosophy, there are two obvious requirements. One is for skills necessary to enter the world of work, and the other is the skill to care. The latter is particularly compelling in the context of the AIDS pandemic. Deaths have increased by over 50% in the last five years and there are many more people who are sick and need care. The Life Skills curriculum could begin to provide learners with caring skills, not just for the sick, but for children too. Young men increasingly are having to provide care to sick family members. The move of young men into the realm of care challenges both the sexual division of domestic labour and the idea that men are not suited to providing care, sympathy and support.

The fatherhood role is already being discharged by many men who are not the biological fathers of the children they care for. Young men are already taking care of their siblings in cases where parents have died or are, for other reasons, absent. The schooling system should engage with the AIDS pandemic not just by teaching about safe sex, but by preparing young people to care for younger and older people. This will enable new gender roles to be created and will contribute to a more caring and responsible society.

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