

Rhys Price-Robertson

# anti-feminist men's groups in australia

an interview with Michael Flood

Michael Flood is one of Australia's most eminent voices on men and masculinities. His research and advocacy on issues such as domestic violence, male sexuality and pornography has attracted many admirers, but also the ire of anti-feminist men's groups. Rhys Price-Robertson spoke to Flood when he was in Melbourne presenting a critique of the ways in which some men's groups interpret—or rather, misinterpret—domestic violence data.

RP-R: You've identified anti-feminist men's groups as being advocates of gender-neutral approaches to domestic violence. Can you tell me what some of their main concerns are?

MF: There has been in Australia, for a long time, a kind of network of anti-feminist men's groups. Some men's rights groups focus on general issues of gender and violence and so on, and some have a particular focus on fathering and family law. And those men's and fathers' rights group overlap. I've described them as an anti-feminist backlash because of their views on women and gender and because of the political strategies they adopt.

And one of the issues they've taken up is the issue of domestic violence. Because it's been a focus of women's movements and feminist actors for a long time, it's also been a focus of backlashes against those movements. These groups incorrectly claim that domestic violence is gender-symmetrical or that men are a large proportion of domestic violence victims and women are a significant proportion of perpetrators.

RP-R: What kind of understanding do you think these groups have of feminism?

MF: I think they have an understanding which is, in fact, fairly widespread—that feminism is defined by a hostility towards men, and a kind of unreasonable and irrational desire to put women on top. I think fathers' rights and men's rights groups, to some degree, simply repeat the negative stereotypes about feminism that are part of popular culture and part of the media. They extend them and intensify them, in terms of seeing women as malicious and hostile and devious and so on, and in attributing great power to feminism—feminism now dominates our political agendas or dominates our culture. I think they exaggerate the extent to which men are now victims in our culture.

I mean, they point quite rightly to some areas of male discrimination or male disadvantage, in terms of men's health, boys' education, and so on. But they misdiagnose the problem. They see the problem as women or feminism, rather than, for example, narrow models of manhood, or patterns of gender inequality that constrain men and oppress women. And as a result they mis-prescribe the cure—the cure is get rid of feminism, or to put men back on top, or something.

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RP-R: They're talking about really important issues around men's health, but the discussion is retrogressive—they just reinforce traditional ideas of masculinity.

MF: Yeah. The way in which issues of men's health are framed by men's rights activists ends up painting it as a zero-sum game, painting attention to women's health as the problem, blaming women and feminism for the poor state of men's health—all of which seems profoundly misguided. And some of their efforts actually end up harming men. For example, there was a prominent effort by some men's health advocates to sue women's health centres for sex discrimination. It just seemed like madness: let's promote men's health by attacking women's health!

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RP-R: My understanding is that you advocate a form of feminism that's based around ideas like gender equality, respect and justice. But there are more radical forms than this. I'm wondering to what extent you think these men's rights groups can be seen as a kind of flipside, or reaction to, radical feminism.

MF: Well, it depends what you mean by 'more radical forms' of feminism. More radical forms of feminism see gender inequalities or patriarchal inequalities as the most fundamental oppression, or as having a kind of all-pervasive impact on women and men. And I think that's not necessarily true.

But I don't agree with the analogy. The problem with the analogy is that these anti-feminist men's groups and feminism (or radical feminism, in particular) are in fundamentally different positions, because of the wider structures of gender inequality. We live in a gender unequal world, where, in general, women are disadvantaged as a group in various ways, and men are advantaged in various ways. And feminism is a social movement and a body of scholarship dedicated to critiquing and changing that. And anti-feminist men's groups seek to defend that; they're a response


to a critique of their privilege. And so they're not the flipside of feminism or radical feminism. They're in a fundamentally different position politically, in the same way that a race-hate group, like the Ku Klux Klan, is in a different position from the civil rights or Black power movements that seek to undermine racism and inequalities that people of colour experience.

RP-R: Feminist writings have often emphasised that we live in a gender-unequal society, and women's personal experiences would often confirm that. But I imagine a lot of the men in these anti-feminist groups feel quite powerless, too. So it wouldn't ring true to them when they hear about this theoretical framework that says they're meant to have access to all this power and privilege. Do you think the discrepancy between the ways in which men's and women's personal experiences match-up with feminist theory has informed the views of these men's groups?

MF: Yeah, but it's also more complicated on the women's side, because of the emergence of a critique from women of colour, lesbian women, working-class women, and so on, in the 1980's. We now have this kind of intersectional feminist analysis, which recognises that women's lives (and men's) are shaped not just by gender, but by race and class and so on. And it recognises that some women, in fact, are enormously privileged, including over particular groups of men. So it's not the case that women in general are powerless or experience powerlessness; it's a bit more complex.

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But to take your second point: yeah absolutely, many men don't experience themselves as privileged or powerful at all. There are two things going on there. One is that privilege is often invisible. And there are ways in which I and other men experience privilege in routine ways—you know, we're perceived as competent, our voices are heard, we're safe in various social contexts—



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and we don't see that as privilege, we see it as normal life. It's only when that's questioned or taken away that we start to feel defensive or hostile. So one reason many men don't feel powerful is because privilege is invisible and taken for granted. The other reason is that there are important areas of male powerlessness or male disadvantage. Many men experience a kind of gulf between public, confident masculinity and private anxieties and insecurities. And I think feminism, at least historically, has not been very good at speaking to those forms of male disadvantage. I don't think that explains the rise of anti-feminist men's groups, but it certainly feeds into some men's sense of distance from feminism, their feeling that it doesn't speak to their lives.

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RP-R: How much of an influence do you think these groups are currently having on attempts to establish gender equality in Australia? Do you think they're working against it?

MF: Look, they are. I mean, men's and fathers' rights groups have had some significant policy and community successes. So, for example, there's been an increase in the proportion of people who believe that women going through custody battles often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence in order to improve their case. According to a VicHealth survey published in 2009, almost half of Australians believe that myth. While I don't think that fathers' rights and men's rights groups are the only source of that myth, they've certainly contributed to it. Likewise, I think they've helped to shift community opinion towards the belief that domestic violence is gender equal. So a greater proportion of the community—still a minority, but a greater proportion—believe that than they did a decade ago. Men's and

fathers' rights groups have also had some successes in family law policy, and in various other areas. So I think they are one significant influence on community attitudes towards gender and on policies that relate to gender, violence, and so on. Their numbers are much smaller than they claim, and their influence isn't overwhelming, but I think they're one significant player in the policy and political field.

RP-R: You pointed out that these groups are starting to get a lot more professional in their look, and they're presenting themselves as the leading voice on men's health issues.

MF: Yeah. Look, I reckon it's hard to tell if these anti-feminist groups are getting better organised, or are growing in number, or are more sophisticated. Certainly Men's Health Australia's '1 in 3' website campaign is one of the more sophisticated and articulate campaigns that we've seen in Australia. But that may just reflect the skills of the particular individuals involved—you know, their web skills and writing and research skills—rather than some more general increase in their momentum. Because in other ways anti-feminist men's groups still seem fairly scattered, fairly small in terms of numbers, and fairly disorganised.

RP-R: Speaking of fathers' rights groups, you've said that the ones we should be most afraid of are not the extremists who are overtly misogynistic, but rather the 'seemingly sensible ones'. Can you explain what you meant by this?

MF: It's an interesting comment. I think we should be afraid of them all, really! I had noticed a shift in the rhetoric used by fathers' rights groups early in the 2000s—and some feminist academics had also commented on this, too—that in their submissions and their public rhetoric, they were being careful to avoid the kind of hostile anti-women rhetoric that characterised 1990s efforts. And they were painting themselves overwhelmingly as concerned with the wellbeing of children and children's rights to see both parents. There was a kind of discursive shift. And you could see that as a cynical shift, or you could see it as a genuine recognition that just attacking women wasn't very helpful. But certainly the more 'reasonable' fathers'

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groups have received a greater airing than the ones who clearly are motivated by anger and grief and hostility coming out of ugly experiences of separation and divorce. I think there has been some increase in the political and rhetorical sophistication of some groups.

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RP-R: Some of the media I've been looking at—such as articles that discuss the 'manosphere'—has talked about an increase in the toxicity of the discussion on some the men's rights websites. Have you noticed this?

MF: I think it's going both ways. People have paid more attention, in the last year or two, to anti-feminist men's websites. And some of those websites are incredibly toxic, venomous, and misogynist. That's not new at all; that's been around for a long time. I think there's just been some attention to this as part of more general community attention to trolling and to the standards of political debate in Australia. So, there's some ways in which the toxic tone of the 'manosphere'—to use that term—is more visible than it was, but I actually think there are other ways in which some of those groups themselves are actually becoming less openly hostile in their rhetoric. Men's Health Australia is careful to avoid some of the bluntly anti-woman and anti-feminist rhetoric that other groups—including some of their ally groups—espouse.

RP-R: You're talking about anger coming out of experiences of separation or divorce. What do you think we can do to stop men who have had negative experience with the family courts, for example, from getting politicised into men's and fathers' rights groups.

MF: I think that's a great question, and that there's a really urgent need to respond, in much more effective ways, to men going through separation and divorce. Because certainly it's the ugly experiences of separations or divorce that feed into men first making

contact with some fathers' groups or men's support groups, some of which end up having quite toxic and anti-feminist agendas. And one problem is that those groups fix their members in anger and blame, rather than helping them to heal.

I think there's plenty of reason to think that many fathers' rights groups aren't actually very good for fathers at all. They're not good at helping fathers heal from the profound pain and trauma of divorce and separation. They're not good at helping fathers maintain ongoing and respectful relations with their ex-partners, and all the evidence says that that's a really critical predictor of fathers' involvement with children. And finally, they're not very good at helping fathers maintain parenting roles, and one of the ways they're not good at that is that they typically pay very little attention to the lack of involvement of fathers prior to divorce and separation. Yet the research evidence says that this is a critical factor—if you want to get fathers and kids involved after divorce and separation, get them involved before.

Whereas fathers' rights groups sometimes have attacked the very legal measures—such as maternity leave—that would make it more likely that women would be at work and fathers would be with kids ... which seems like madness. So I think there's a whole lot we can do to respond to separated fathers in a constructive and accountable way. And there are certainly family and parenting services around Australia which are increasingly doing that, through dedicated fatherhood programs and services, and other kinds of responses. But I think fathers' rights groups, in general, do separated fathers very few favours.

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