

Martin Robb

Research and teaching on children and families, gender and identities

Men as agents of change: Barclays / Women's Business Council seminar

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Larry Hirst speaking at the Barclays/WBC event (via Dominic Jerney on Twitter)

On Tuesday I was one of the speakers at a breakfast seminar at Canary Wharf, hosted by Barclays and the [Women's Business Council](#), on 'Men as agents of change: engaging men in gender equality'. It was a privilege to be invited to take part in a panel alongside [Jo Swinson](#), the Minister for Women and Equalities (who was on the panel with me at [another event](#) last November), and [John Timpson](#) and [Larry Hirst](#), two male business leaders who have been at the forefront of gender equality initiatives in their own industries.

The seminar was attended by about 80 people, the majority of them from the business world, and more than half of them men. The group discussions after the panel session demonstrated an encouraging level of commitment and interest, and some excellent examples of emerging good practice.



Participants at the seminar (via @Govt_Women on Twitter)

For my own presentation, I was asked to present some 'headline messages' from my research with men and boys, and what follows is the substance of what I said:

1. There's a lot already going on that we can build on in terms of engaging men in gender equality

While there's still obviously a long way to go – we also need to take note of how far we've travelled – and what we can build on.

One of the ways in which men can support equality for women at work – is by taking an equal share in the care of their children, and in domestic responsibilities more generally – which has been one of the main focuses of my own research.

Although the picture is varied and uneven, we've seen an increase in men's involvement in the care of their children in the past 20 years or so. When our own children were small, I was fortunate in having a job that enabled me to work from home a lot of the time – and as a result I did most of the transporting to and from school, nursery, doctor's appointments, and so on. In those days I was often the only man at the clinic, or at the school gate – now, it's much more normal and acceptable to see men taking on these roles – and the number of men involved in their children's care, or even taking the role of stay-at-home dads, has increased tremendously.

Just as importantly, I think we've seen a parallel changes in men's – most men's – attitudes – and in wider social attitudes. Increasingly, being a good man, a good father – maybe being a good manager – isn't just about being the breadwinner – it's about being there for your children and your family. Men who don't pull their weight in the home are increasingly frowned on socially – and among their male peers. That's not to say it's the same in all social groups or every workplace.

At the same time, and again we need to be cautious about this, there's been a shift in attitudes towards things such as gender-based violence and sexist language and imagery. In the last few years we've seen the growth of campaigns that enlist men on the side of gender equality – MenEngage, White Ribbon, and the high profile HeforShe campaign launched by Emma Watson at the United Nations.

Yes, I'm sure we all have our reservations about how widespread these changes are, and I'm sure we can all think of exceptions from our own experience, but there is a shift, I think, particularly among a younger generation of men – and we can build on this in engaging men's support for gender equality.

2. Changing policies and structures can make a difference

In the longterm, we need to work for deeper changes in attitudes, but in the medium term, implementing changes in policies and structures – whether at the societal or the company level – can change behaviour.

I recently attended a Europe-wide seminar in Finland on men and gender equality, where there was a lot of discussion of arrangements for parental leave – and a lot of interest in the example of some of the Nordic countries, which have implemented nontransferable and often paid paternity leave – and we've seen some recent initiatives here in the UK for improving access to shared parental leave. The lesson of these schemes is that structural change can lead to a change in men's behaviour. It can make men realise that this is something they want – and they will take it up with enthusiasm, if the scheme is right.

3. Women play a vital role in influencing men's attitudes to gender equality

My own research shows that men who are what we might call gender equality pioneers have often been influenced by the example of women in their lives. Men that I interviewed who were involved fathers, or opting to work in childcare, talked about the crucial influence of their mothers, grandmothers, or female teachers, on their own values and attitudes.

I think this works in other ways too. Increasingly, men have wives, partners, daughters, who are in the workforce – and are achieving success there. My late father-in-law was very much an old-fashioned male manager – but he became something of an unlikely feminist when he saw his own daughter working to build a career as one of the few women managers in her company.

4. Gender equality benefits men as well as women

More flexible working arrangements and improved access to parental leave mean that men, as well as women, get to spend more time with their families. My own research shows that fathers can care – and many men find that an opportunity to be more involved in their children's care makes for a better quality of life – as well as for better relationships with their partners.

In terms of the workplace, and without falling back on stereotypes, my own personal experience – and it's borne out by my research – is that a more gender equal workplace is generally a better place to be. Not all men are cutthroat and hyper-competitive and many prefer a more cooperative and supportive office or shop-floor. Certainly my own experience, of working in the voluntary sector and now in academia, where the majority of my colleagues and many of my line managers have been women – has been mostly beneficial.

So men have a great deal to gain from gender equality, whether at home or at work – and we can use this to enlist their support.

At the same time, we need to be honest:

5. Gender equality doesn't always benefit men.

We need to admit that there are some costs as well as benefits for men in this process. There may be fewer seats at the table for men, if we achieve greater equality for women in recruitment and promotion. And standing up for women's rights in the workplace may not always be a popular move for men.

But the message of my research, and of my own experience, is that men don't act only out of self-interest – whatever our stereotypical views of masculinity. Most men have a strong sense of justice too – and many men will want to support gender equality simply because it's the right thing to do.

6. What can men do – and what can we do to engage men?

Men should be certainly encouraged to take their caring responsibilities seriously – and managers need to make it easier for men to do this – and at the same time make sure that men and women who take time off for caring responsibilities are not disadvantaged when they return to work.

Managers should also question and challenge the long hours culture that still prevails in many parts of British business – and which while it mostly disadvantages women, who still do the bulk of the caring at home, also discourages men from taking a full part in family life – and thus supporting their partners' careers.

Men should support their female colleagues in campaigns for more flexible working, better access to promotion, taking a stand against discrimination and so on. And managers need to support men who do this – and at the same time think of imaginative ways to involve men in moves to improve gender equality. We need to encourage men to sit on gender equality committees and to take responsibility for making change – and not see it as just a women's issue. We need to involve men in discussions about gender equality – but carefully – without men taking them over – and without playing into the hands of the men's rights lobby.

To conclude: men *can* and *must* be agents for change in achieving gender equality – it certainly isn't going to happen without them.

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