

## **Destructive Masculinities – Points to consider. By Damian Carnell**

I think it's unfortunate that we have to talk in terms of masculine and feminine characteristics. Keeping to those limitations I believe gets in the way of true equality and significant change. But there's no avoiding it at present. There's no getting away from the fact that we have those clearly defined divisions and stereotypes, so we have to address them if we are to dismantle them.

When I do workshops I try and avoid asking men or boys to define the qualities of positive masculinity, rather explore qualities of a healthy relationship and positive parenting and that these be qualities both partners can develop, therefore challenging gender stereotypes that don't fit with these qualities, and these are usually the negative attitudes and expectations of women and girls – like, *“women are better with kids and ironing so why try and interfere with what they do best”*.

There are a great many pro feminist men's groups in American and a 30 year history of joint work by women and men to challenge male violence and destructive masculinity so I do find it depressing to think that even with all this effort, male violence, especially against women and girls is not yet decreasing and porn, prostitution and other forms of exploitation and abuse against women and girls are still increasing. Is something being missed? Are we concentrating our energies in the wrong place or in the wrong way?

With the development of pro-feminist work in the UK at least a decade behind what's happening in America it highlights the scale of the journey ahead and the level of work that needs to be put in place for any significant change to happen, as well as the recognising the energy and patience needed by those involved. A great deal of progress has been made from a great deal of women's hard work, courage and loss of life, and I don't ever want to dismiss any of this. Quite the opposite, I worry that the progress that there has been with women's rights and equality remains vulnerable to being taken away again if some men get their way.

Although not on the scale of work being done in America, there have been and are a lot of men's groups being set up in the UK to address supposed masculinity issues. So should we be excited or worried, should we be letting them get on with it or should we be involved? I believe that we should not assume that because a project might call itself 'caring dads' or about changing masculinities that it must be doing a good job. I also believe that men's groups, because of the context of their work, should be open to scrutiny. So I want to spend a bit of time today scrutinising some of what a sample of these groups are saying about men and women's roles and on what kind of masculinity they are promoting.

By the way, you are welcome to come and scrutinise my work for that same reason. We learn from each other from this process too, so it's got to be a good thing. I think we are all familiar with the problems the male gender is creating, especially the gender violence against women and girls. Male centred and male dominant structures within cultures, religions and traditions are at the heart of the problem. So it is these structures that have to be dismantled – the very privileges that most men don't want to give up.

When we witness feminist surges and progress in challenging these structures we also witness men's movements creating a backlash, setting in place new strategies to, as implied in the words of UKMM, reinforce male supremacy.

Ladmag's were an 'effective' response launched in the early 90's in turning men away from the progress of feminism and from the progressive developments to break the mould of macho masculinity. Lap/table and pole dance clubs as well as the promotion of porn to children in the form of playboy stationery are all part of this strategic drive to keep the heterosexual sex roles in place. There is clearly a purpose other than making a quick buck behind Playboys decision to target young girls.

We can look at the characteristics of masculinity that Jackson Katz focuses on in the video we've just watched, and make progress in encouraging men to be more nurturing, sensitive and thoughtful of others. But the roots of destructive masculinity are engraved in the male negative attitudes and expectations of women and girls, carved out by and serviced by the social branding of gender division. Both heterosexual and gay men commonly have these attitudes – it is not solely an issue with heterosexual men.

Yes, we do need to be challenging the mould of men as being tough, self-centred and emotionless, that is true. But there are plenty of men who don't act macho, and who appear to be able to express their feelings in a sensitive way, who appear to take an interest in women's issues, who appear to come across as 'decent' men who don't use violence against other men, who don't have drink, drug or gambling problems, who don't hang around in testosterone induced male bonding groups, but who use violence against women and girls. They do this because at some level they believe in and want to protect male privilege, male superiority and male power, the privileges for them as individual men. So lets be careful we don't get diverted away from the root of the problem.

I constantly experience this in the domestic violence sector, where on the issue of *why are men violent against women?*, groups and communities, the media, professionals and survivors are more willing to accept that it is men's insecurity, men's childhood experience of abuse, men's stress, drink and drug problems and men's loss of direction because gender roles are supposedly less clearly defined than they used to be, as being the cause. How often will a court be told that *'he was violent to her because of his sexist beliefs your honour, and that is the root of the crime'*

It is men's negative attitudes and expectations, their degrading beliefs about women and girls that need to be tackled and the structures in society that support these. This is what I focus on in my work with children and adults.

There is a tremendous drive to see the setting up of men's groups as the way to tackle the problems with men, Government pressure on Children's Centre's to have father's groups. This could be a good plan. Yet all too often, from what I have experienced, all that happens is that these groups of men present themselves as victims of a society that they say puts women first! I am constantly coming across men's groups run by Sure Start programmes or self help men's groups that are simply hives of men criticising women and excusing themselves of any responsibility for problems caused by men. These groups are often facilitated by misogynist men or by men or women with good will but unwittingly colluding with the male victim syndrome. Men with a genuine desire for change will come and go or be sucked into the victim role. So then we will be seeing more harm done than good.

I know I could have chosen to talk about good things that are happening, but analysing the questionable is also important. So the following slides are a quick summary of what some popular men's groups are saying and what we are up against.

UKMM – that says it all doesn't it – campaigning against divorce, feminist employment law (Are they complaining about equal pay and disciplinary action against men who sexually abuse female colleagues?).

Mankind on their own website promote themselves as a solely a support group for male victims of domestic violence from women but on other men's forums they promote themselves as a campaigning group against divorce, feminist employment law, feminist education bias and the male-bashing media!

Angry Harry – Feminists cause traffic jams – and who is it that men say are hysterical, nagging, overreacting, hormonal and crazy?

Fathers 4 Justice – children supposedly see their dads as super heroes! – very egocentric. Most of these men have been violent against women and there is nothing super-hero about that and they should have no right to be with children if this is how they behave

And perhaps the most widely accepted men's movement in the UK today is Fathers Direct (or you might be familiar with the other title The Fatherhood Institute) with their 'fatherhood quality mark' that many organisations are seeking to achieve as a really important step.

So what do Fathers Direct advise us to do in order to achieve this quality mark. Among other recommendations I thought these were quite interesting and enlightening!

- Fathers are more likely to attend services if groups are called clubs, meetings, courses or training days, not coffee mornings.
- Think carefully when designing leaflets. Do not use pink or curly writing, and men don't like tatty products either, they like good quality and the language needs to be punchy.
- Hold meetings in male friendly environments. – I wonder what they are suggesting as male friendly
- On BME issues they will state things like, 'realise that Muslim fathers are strong figures in their household and need to hold onto that respect'!

To me all this is doing is colluding with the tunnel vision of masculinity and male supremacy.

What do Fathers Direct Speakers say in their literature and on their training courses?

- **Women are more abusive to children than men**
- **1 in 4 women do not experience violence from men because that would mean that 1 in 4 men are violent against women and that's not true.**
- **Hurting the mother of his children is something very few men do.**
- **Fathers have always been involved with their children**
- **23% of UK fathers spend at least 28 hours a week with their children.** That's 4 hours a day, including weekends. Is this supposed to be good and something we men can be proud of? It tells us that 77% of fathers don't even try and spend 4 hours a day with their children. Should we be focussing on that too?
- **Fathers do a third of parental care – an average of 2 hours a day.** Does parental care only involve 6 hours a day?

I have reached a point where I'm at a loss for direction. I don't know if the 7 year syndrome really exists, but for 7 years I was involved in domestic violence prevention programmes for men and came out of that believing it was no use and that we needed to work with children and young people to effect change. So for the past 7 years I've been doing that. I work with over 400 children and young people a year in schools and other youth groups.

The projects centre on healthy relationships and the key aspects involve promotion of gender respect and equality, promotion of same sex relationships when exploring the qualities of healthy relationships, and the awareness of the harm and dangers of porn and other sexual exploitation.

Much of the work I do is with 9 – 11 year olds. They find the projects very stimulating and enlightening and for many the projects are enjoyable, empowering and ways to get support.

But it's mainly my generation of men now who are running the ship, who are building in all the new structures to maintain privilege and keep women and girls subordinate. That means another 30 years of us men before the children, we educate, can take over in the positions that can implement real change.

So am I looking in the wrong direction? Is it time to confront the men of my generation again in a much bigger way? I know we really need to be doing both. But the children we are educating are still experiencing a porn influenced new age or music, sport, internet and video games and life styles that my male generation are producing. Would I be better investing more of my time again to try and put a stop to that?

It's time for reviewing our strategies and action plans. Time to feel part of something much bigger, and today is a great forum opportunity so that we can all be coming away thinking about co-ordinated approaches rather than isolated ones. Some of the actions we might want to include are:

- 1) The need to continue to lobby that the pornography and the prostitution of women is a crime (the criminals being both the controllers, producers and the buyers)
- 2) If we are setting up men's groups we need to ensure that pro-feminists are running them and that the issue of male violence and power against women is not avoided, and ensuring that they are not reinforcing the social stereotypes of what men do and how they behave as opposed to women.
- 3) Men who are doing this work need to be open to women challenging them about what they are doing and open to women's involvement.

FEM08 certainly makes me feel a part of a positive movement and provides a recharging of the batteries, so thank you for organising this important day and thank you for giving me a space to talk.

Thank you

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