

Men and gender justice: old debate, new perspective

By Emily Esplen,
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The nature of men's involvement in the struggle for gender justice has long fiercely divided gender-equality advocates. After nearly three decades of disagreement this seam of tension doggedly persists, little engaged with and largely unresolved.

Even as the women's movement remains hesitant, often bordering on hostile, to the idea of men's involvement, the "masculinities agenda" is striding forwards with innovative work on men and masculinities - even though it is at times often flawed in its understanding of power and in the way it merely counterposes to the idea of women's empowerment a focus on working with men "for their sake".

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The most promising work in this field is happening at the level of the personal: it concentrates on transforming men's sexual behaviour, challenging violence against women and relations of fatherhood. The pioneering work of organisations like the [Instituto Promundo](#) [2] in Brazil, which supports young men to question traditional gender norms and promote gender-equitable behaviours and attitudes, has shown that, yes, men can change. Other organisations, like the [Sonke Gender Justice Network](#) [3] in South Africa are taking work with men in exciting new directions, reorienting existing projects aimed at individual men and politicising it in order to promote men's broader mobilisation around structural inequities and injustices. Furthermore, organisations working with men are themselves coming together to facilitate sharing and learning, enabling a stronger, more coherent struggle, as with the recently established "[Men Engage](#) [4]" global alliance which seeks to involve men and boys in reducing gender inequalities.

A unique opportunity

This current momentum offers a unique opportunity to advance the common goal of realising gender equality. But while the proliferation of organisations working with men for gender justice is welcome, it is notable that very few of them have close and direct relationships with the women's movement. True, some do have looser connections or networks that include people active in the women's movement in individual countries, but even these are rare. This creates a discernible danger that "masculinities" will become - or has become already - a discrete field of thinking and practice, somehow disconnected from the women's movement and from gender and development more broadly.

Also in **openDemocracy**:

Andrea Cornwall, "[Pathways to women's empowerment](#)" [5] (27 July 2007)

Srilatha Batliwala, "[Women transforming power?](#) [5]" (6 October 2007)

Mulki Al-Sharmani, "[Egypt's family courts: route to empowerment?](#) [5]" (7 September 2007)

Indeed, a depressing reality is coming into view whereby "gender" seems - even among those most committed to the gender agenda - repeatedly to be conflated with women. As long as connections between the women's movement and those working with men remain fragile (at best) to non-existent (at worst), femininities are likely to be rendered invisible in evolving masculinities discourses. The result is that - once again - the fundamental interconnectedness of men and women and the relational nature of gendered power will be lost.

Indeed, I've been repeatedly struck at recent seminars and conferences on "engaging men in gender equality" by the meagre representation from the gender and development field: a couple of us at most, in an audience comprised overwhelmingly of specialists in sexual and reproductive health and rights. In part, this points to one of the weaknesses of the current masculinities field: the overwhelming focus on sexual health and violence, and the corresponding failure to engage sufficiently with equity issues: among them equal pay and leave entitlements, representation in politics, parental rights and benefits, and domestic work/housework. The lack of attention to such issues results in the waste of opportunities to advance shared concerns.

A false equivalence

There are other dangers in refusing to engage constructively with the evolving men and masculinities discourse. While many organisations working with men are deeply informed by feminist thinking and practice, others are less grounded in a pro-feminist framework. As the masculinities bandwagon gathers momentum, there is a temptation to slip into modes of thinking and language that (for example) regard women and men as equivalently vulnerable (i.e. women are harmed by femininity and men are harmed by masculinity), or even describe men as "worse off" than women.

This is reflected in the way that much of the discourse of men and masculinities has been expressed in terms of a "crisis in masculinity". It's certainly the case that many men share with the women in their lives similar experiences of indignity as a result of social and economic oppression. Yet it is important to recognise the real differences in power and privilege experienced by women and men on the basis of gender, and to avoid glossing over men's accountability for the ways in which they choose to act out their privilege. While it's important to engage with poor men's realities, this should be done without positing men as the "new victims".

At a symposium in October 2007 on "Politicising Masculinities [7]", organised by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), it was noted that this issue of false equivalence surfaces frequently in discussions of men's own experience of violence. It is not uncommon to hear the statement that "men are also victims of violence at the hands of women". Such comments can be profoundly unhelpful, not least because this violence is nothing like on the same scale as the many forms of violence experienced by women from men. Alan Greig [8] made clear at the IDS symposium that the mere counterposing of women's and men's experience and perpetration of violence is a trap; the challenge is rather to help illuminate the workings and functions of violence within the systems of oppression that organise our different societies, while holding accountable the individuals and institutions (mostly men and male-dominated) that are responsible for enacting this violence.

But to have some influence over the evolving masculinities discourse and practice in a way that avoids positing men as the "new victims" requires working in solidarity with those in the masculinities field who do understand power and the core issues of gender equality and justice. Now is an opportune time to open up the debate and advance thinking on what it would take to build bridges between the feminist/women's movement and those working with men. The eleventh Association for Women's Rights in Development [9] (Awid) forum in November 2008 is

on the horizon, with a timely focus on the power of movements; Men Engage are hosting their first global conference in early 2009 on engaging men and boys in gender equality; and the fifty-third United Nations Commission on the Status of Women [10] (CSW) will focus on engaging men in caring for people living with HIV.

These spaces offer a much-overdue opportunity for open, constructive dialogue between the feminist/women's movement and organisations working with men for gender justice. It's high time we started to have these conversations - to ask some of the questions people don't like to talk about. It's striking how little we really know or understand about women's hostility towards working with men, or indeed about men's experiences of trying to work with feminist and women's organisations. What will it take to build bridges? How can we promote dialogue and foster greater solidarity? How can we reframe our engagement with questions of masculinities and power so that new alliances can be created, bringing work on masculinities into the heart of movements for social and gender justice?

Also in **openDemocracy**: Jane Gabriel and Zohra Moosa of the 50:50 project [blog](#) [10] from the fifty-second United Nations Commission on the Status of Women [11] (CSW) in New York

I don't have the answers - in fact, I doubt that straightforward or singular answers exist. But I do believe these are questions that badly need to be asked if we are to progress beyond the current polarisation of issues that ought to be everyone's concern. The inadequacies of focusing on women in isolation have long been recognised; if we are really serious about achieving a gender-just world, it's time for a more open debate to begin.

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http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/5050/pathways/men_gender_justice

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[1] <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/ids/index.php>

[2] <http://www.promundo.org.br/>

[3] <http://www.genderjustice.org.za/>

[4] <http://www.changemakers.net/en-us/node/198>

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