

2. Introduction

Men and masculinities: the UK context

Popular psychology⁸ and science⁹ have repeatedly asserted that men and women are innately different in terms of how they think, feel, communicate and act – and that pervasive inequalities and differences between them are therefore somehow ‘natural’. Yet the weight of evidence from the social sciences suggests men’s and women’s cognitive and linguistic capacities are very similar.¹⁰ And rather than inequalities and differences being biologically determined, they are actively produced by a range of social and economic processes, and in particular by inequalities in power relations between men and women.¹¹

Men’s and women’s lives, and the gender relations between them, change over time, across cultures and within particular societies.¹² In Britain over the past 40 years, for instance, patterns of male – and especially female – participation in paid work have shifted as the economy has been restructured. Many men are spending more time with their children, and voicing a desire to be more involved fathers (although men’s move into the domestic sphere has not matched that of women’s into paid work). Other forms of masculine identity have emerged; most notably, the lives of gay men have become much more visible (although many still expect, and experience, discrimination in their daily lives¹³).

These shifts undermine any crude notion that there is one universal form of ‘masculinity’ (or ‘femininity’) applicable to all societies at all times. But some features of men’s experiences are common to all men. All of them benefit, but to greatly varying extents, from the fact that they belong to the dominant group in society; for instance, they generally have higher incomes, and undertake less unpaid caring and household work than women. Yet men are often unaware of these advantages they derive as men; their ‘gender’, and gender issues, are usually invisible to them.¹⁴

However men’s lives and identities are rich and complex, and they do not benefit equally. Connell’s influential theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity’¹⁵ describes the dynamic processes through which some groups of men – in Western countries, often those who are white, university-educated and on high incomes – establish and wield enormous economic, social and political power over other men, women and children. This dominance becomes built into social relations and structures so as to make it appear normal and natural for male superiority to be maintained.

Other men react in various ways to this dominant masculine ‘ideal’. For example, many accept and participate in this system and enjoy the material and physical benefits. Some are attracted by the simplistic explanations of extremist groups that appear to promise them power and certainty.

8. The best-known example is John Gray (1992) *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, New York: Harper Collins. In relation to men specifically, Robert Bly (1990) *Iron John*, Reading, MA: Perseus Books, has idealised a mythical pre-industrial past where men were supposedly more connected with their inner selves, justifying for Bly a return to more traditional gender relations.

9. E.g. Anne and Bill Moir (1999) *Why Men Don't Iron: The Fascinating and Unalterable Differences between Men and Women*, New York: Citadel

10. Cameron D. (2007) *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do men and women really speak different languages?*, Oxford: OUP

11. Kimmel M. (2000) *The Gendered Society*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press

12. For example, historians have identified parallels between shifts in gender relations in Britain in the 1890s and those today, including an emphasis on women’s rights, a rise in female employment, a shifting balance within marriage, and the emergence of issues around sexualities. See Tosh J. (2005) *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire*, Harlow: Pearson

13. Hunt R., Dick S. (2008) *Serves You Right: Lesbian and gay people's expectations of discrimination*, London: Stonewall

14. Kimmel M. (ibid.)

15. See Connell R. (1995) *Masculinities*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Some turn their dissatisfaction on themselves, or lapse into passive acceptance of economic inactivity. For some, whether they are powerful or feel powerless, their different relations to power can also be a cause of frustration and hostility, and sometimes violence and abuse, towards other men, women and children.

There are, therefore, significant differences between men (as there are between women), and the term 'masculinities'¹⁶ has been coined to reflect the many possible ways of 'being a man'. The notion of 'masculinities' is linked to social divisions such as class, race, faith, age, disability and sexual orientation – or a dynamic combination of these. For example, African Caribbean working-class boys may exhibit a 'cool' masculinity, based around style and fashion, which is different from (but often imitated by) white working-class boys.¹⁷ Men who are disabled often define their identities in relationship to the 'ideal' models of masculinity based on bodily strength and performance.¹⁸ Men from conservative religious groups have to make sense of their experience within an increasingly sexualised mainstream culture. The lives of gay men are structured by their experiences within a dominant heterosexual culture, and in particular by homophobia.

Geography matters too. The transnational processes associated with 'globalisation' are increasingly impacting upon men (and on gender relations). Forms of exploitation such as pornography, prostitution and trafficking have expanded rapidly over the past decade, fuelled by the growth of communications via the internet, by poverty and inequality, and by an apparently increasing male demand for sexual services. And whereas flows of global capital and shifting investment patterns have enabled some men to accumulate huge wealth, others have experienced a massive decline in jobs in former industrial areas and regions (both in the UK and elsewhere).

At the same time, most men's lives are rooted in their local experiences; the expectations and identity of a young man from the close-knit South Wales Valleys, where work opportunities have changed fundamentally in recent decades,¹⁹ is likely to be very different from that of his counterpart in a more prosperous Home Counties town in the south-east of England.

Masculinities can also be understood as collective as well as individual experiences. The way men think and act is influenced or conditioned by the groups and/or institutions they belong to, be they schools, factories, businesses, banks, the armed forces or the rugby club. For example, fathers make choices about how they behave and communicate about their parenting roles, in part on the basis of the social context they find themselves in (e.g. at work, the school gate, the children's centre). Violence can also be sustained or encouraged by the cultures within particular groups (e.g. among football hooligans) or institutions (e.g. in prisons).

Acknowledging some men's power does not mean ignoring other men's marginalisation. Some men, particularly those at the sharp end of economic and social change, suffer. Men who used to work in manufacturing or the mines may be long-term unemployed, or incapacitated by ill-health or mental illness. Retired men may become socially isolated as work-based networks and friendships recede. Muslim men may encounter suspicion and abuse from non-Muslims as a result of their faith and their practices. Gay men may face hostility and harassment from heterosexuals at work or in the community. Awareness is also growing of the frequency of violent attacks on disabled men (and women).

16. Use of the term 'masculinities' has been criticised for a range of reasons; some prefer the term 'male practices'. See, for instance, Hearn J. (1996) *Is Masculinity Dead? A Critique of the Concept of Masculinity/masculinities*, in Mac an Ghail M. (ed.), *Understanding Masculinities*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press

17. Frosh S., Phoenix A., Pattman R. (2002) *Young Masculinities*, Basingstoke: Palgrave; Sewell T. (1997) *Black Masculinities and Schooling: How Black Boys Survive Modern Schooling*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

18. Shakespeare T. (1999) *When is a man not a man? When he's disabled*, in Wild J.(ed.) *Working with Men for Change*, London: UCL Press; Gerschick T. (2005) *Masculinity and degrees of bodily normativity in Western culture*, in Kimmel M., Hearn J., Connell R., (eds.), *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

19. Scourfield J., Drakeford M.(1999) *Boys from Nowhere: Finding Welsh men and putting them in their place*, Contemporary Wales

It is often argued that economic and social change has hit men so hard that they are 'in crisis', whereas in fact men are experiencing a complex mix of change and continuity. Issues such as the suicide rates among young men, educational 'underachievement' among boys, and male unemployment are often used to justify the view that men are 'losing out' to women and that men are the 'new victims'. But these issues, while concerning, tend to hit the headlines partly because they challenge the unspoken assumption – and the everyday reality – that male dominance is the norm.

Media messages and representations reflect and reinforce this dominance. A cross-national study²⁰ of newspapers, radio and television in 76 countries (including the UK) found in 2005 that four out of five news subjects (i.e. people who are interviewed or who the news was about) were male. Men were 83 per cent of 'experts', and 86 per cent of 'spokespersons' in relation to new stories. They were most likely to appear in stories about politics, government, business or the economy, and women most likely to feature (although to a lesser extent) in health, social issues and the arts. Even in stories that affect women profoundly, such as gender-based violence, it was the male voice (64 per cent of news subjects) that prevailed.

Having said this, the prevalence of the male voice does not necessarily mean that the media reflect the diversity of men's experiences and concerns. Beyond misplaced fears of a generalised male 'crisis' in the UK, it is particular groups of men – especially unemployed and unskilled men (or boys with fathers in these groups) – who face disadvantage and have worse health and education outcomes compared with other men and boys.²¹ These are, by and large, the same men and boys about whom concern has repeatedly been expressed by policy-makers and pundits over the years.

A noteworthy example is in relation to health, where recent indications are that inequalities between different groups of men are worsening. Although life expectancy has risen overall, the gap between men living in the poorest areas of England and the average male is two per cent wider than it was ten years ago.²² Geographical inequalities also persist; life expectancy at birth for men living in Kensington and Chelsea is more than ten years greater than for men in Manchester.

For men who do wield significant power, the traditional gender order appears fundamentally intact. Eighty-one per cent of MPs²³ and 71 per cent of local councillors are male, as are nine out of ten boardroom directors of the top 100 FTSE companies. Men continue to substantially outnumber women at senior levels across business and media organisations, the health service, local authorities and the police and judiciary. And male workers are paid significantly more than female workers – currently 13 per cent more for full-timers and 40 per cent for part-timers. The current rate of progress towards equality in relation to issues such as these is very slow – indeed, across many areas it has recently either stalled or gone into reverse.²⁴ According to government projections,²⁵ it will be 2080 before Parliament has equal numbers of male and female MPs, and 2085 before the gender pay gap is closed. The Equality and Human Rights Commission also estimates that, at the present rate, it will take until 2063 for women to achieve equal numbers at senior levels in the judiciary, and until 2081 for women to achieve parity as directors in FTSE 100 companies.

20. Gallagher M. (2006) *Global Media Monitoring Project*, London: WACC

21. Segal L. (1999) *Why Feminism?*, Cambridge: Polity

22. Comparison of 1995-97 baseline figures with 2004-06 figures. Health Inequalities Unit (2008) *Tackling Health Inequalities: 2007 Status Report on the Programme for Action*, London: Department of Health

23. In the Welsh Assembly elections in 2003, 30 women Assembly Members were elected, giving a 50/50 representation, the only legislature in the world to achieve this. Women currently make up 47 per cent of Welsh Assembly members.

24. According to the annual 'Sex and Power' index, in 2008 fewer women held top posts in 12 of the 25 categories (almost half). In another five categories, the number of women remains unchanged since 2007's index. Women's representation increased in just eight areas. See Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Sex and Power 2008*, available at equalityhumanrights.com.

25. Harman: *Equality essential for Britain age discrimination to be banned*, Cabinet Office press release, 26 June 2008

Many men show little or no desire to give up privileges such as these, and/or are wary of developing new forms of masculinity. To make progress towards gender equality and other social goals, it is therefore essential, as Hearn has written, to *'address the resistance of many men to different forms of involvement in gender equality debates, policies and activities; the responsibilities of men in taking part in the promotion of gender equality; and the process of reaching out to other men who are less interested and less involved'*.²⁶

Not all men resist change. Indeed many are realising that maintaining the status quo has negative consequences for their health, personal lives and quality of life – and for other men, women and children. Many fathers are spending more time caring for their children than used to be the case. Many men support the desire of their partners to have fulfilling careers outside the home. Many men are willing to take more responsibility for their health if they are offered services that meet their needs. Many women also acknowledge the potential of more flexible and less privileged forms of masculinity which place greater value on support and care. What is required is to reach a tipping point, where the majority of men come to recognise the benefits – for themselves, women and children – of greater equality and more flexible and positive forms of masculinity, and are prepared to contribute, in all spheres of life, to its achievement.

Involving men in strategies for gender equality

Progress towards gender equality will not only improve the lives of women and girls, but will also stimulate positive transformations in the lives of men and boys. Below we highlight reasons why some men already act in favour of gender equality – and why more men should do so:²⁷

Gender equality holds the promise of improvements in men's and boys' relationships – not only with women and girls, but also in the relations they often have with other men and boys.²⁸

Men and boys live in social relationships with women and girls, as their wives, partners, mothers, aunts, daughters, friends, classmates, fellow employees and so on and the quality of every man's life depends to a large extent on the quality of those relationships. Kimmel writes that gender equality offers men the possibility of 'richer, fuller and happier lives, with our friends, with our lovers, with our partners, with our children'.²⁹

Gender inequality has damaging effects on the personal health and well-being of men as well as women (though in different ways). As we demonstrate later (section on Health, page 83), men and boys face specific health problems, such as premature death through accident or suicide and higher levels of drug and alcohol abuse. Many of these are linked to attempts by men to live up to dominant notions of masculinity ('be tough', 'compete', 'take risks'). Promoting and nurturing alternative models for being a man can do much to improve men's health and well-being, and reduce the negative impact of their actions – both on themselves and on other people.

Men may support gender equality because they believe it will contribute to the well-being of their community or society. Greater gender equality will reduce the pressures on men to conform to damaging and rigid forms of masculinity. This is likely to, for example, reduce men's 'violences'

26. Hearn J., *Men and Gender Equality: Resistance, Responsibilities and Reaching Out*, Orebro, Sweden, 15-16 March 2001

27. For more detail in relation to the reasons below, see Connell R.W., *The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality*, United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Expert Group meeting, Brasilia, Brazil, 21-24 October 2003, EGM/Men-Boys-GE/2003/BP.1

28. Hearn J., *Men and Gender Equality: Resistance, Responsibilities and Reaching Out*, Orebro, Sweden, 15-16 March 2001

29. Kimmel M., *Gender Equality: Not for Women Only*, lecture for symposium on Women, Business and Society in the 21st Century, Madrid, 18 April 2005

(i.e. violence in all its forms), and help to improve community safety and develop peaceful conflict resolution. It will also contribute to raising the next generation of boys (and girls) in a framework of gender equality.³⁰

Men can be motivated by interests other than maintaining their own privilege.³¹ They may seek to challenge gender inequality for reasons of political or ethical principle, or through their concern for children's well-being or the rights of women. They may see it as part of a wider project of equality and social justice.

Some men and boys are discriminated against on grounds directly linked to gender,³² including their sexuality and/or association with 'feminine' characteristics or activities. It is therefore in their interests for the current gender order to change.

Beyond these benefits, it has been argued that addressing men through public policy encourages them to take responsibility for change, and can speak to many men's sense of anxiety and fear as 'traditional' masculinities are undermined.³³ Involving men may help to create wider consensus and support on issues (e.g. in relation to family, violence, sexual and reproductive health) that have previously been marginalised as 'women's issues'. Targeting men, especially those who have a powerful role within institutions, may unlock additional financial resources and improve overall funding available to meet the needs of women and girls. And engaging with men may encourage the development of effective partnerships between men's and women's organisations.³⁴

Addressing the risks

Encouraging men and boys towards support for gender equality and the development of more positive forms of masculinity is essential. But there are some risks in involving men in gender equality strategies. Many men will be resistant to change – especially if the proposed changes entail giving up some privileges (e.g. the positions they hold, better pay than women), and result in them having less power at work and in the home. The emergence in recent decades of a range of vocal 'men's rights' groups, both in the UK and internationally, is evidence of this.

It should not be assumed, however, that all men and boys share the hostile approach of many 'men's rights' activists to progress for women and girls. Different groups of men and boys have different, and conflicting, interests – and many are fully supportive of moves towards gender equality. Echoing this reality, there are limitations in approaches to gender equality that fail to take into account the diversity among men in terms of their identities, motivations, attitudes and roles.³⁵

The problems some men and boys experience can be used to justify attempts to shore up male authority and to undermine the important advances that have been achieved in the status and rights of women and children. Frequent calls for more 'male role models' for boys often rest, implicitly or explicitly, on notions of 'traditional' masculinity, and in particular on the desire for men to control boys' behaviour. What is needed instead is a more fundamental renegotiation of men's roles and relationships.

30. Kaufman M. (2003) *The Aim Framework: Addressing and Involving Men and Boys to Promote Gender Equality and End Gender Discrimination and Violence*, UNICEF

31. Flood M., *Mainstreaming Men in Gender and Development*, Presentation to AusAID Gender Seminar Series, Canberra, 8 December 2005

32. Hearn J. (ibid.)

33. Flood M. (ibid.)

34. Kaufman M. (ibid.)

35. Crowley N. (2006) 'Men in Gender Equality', in Varanka J., Narhinen A., Siukola R. (2006) *Men and Gender Equality: Towards Progressive Policies*, Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Report 2006: 75

Attempts to engage men in gender equality strategies are sometimes regarded as a distraction from the fundamental task of empowering women, and as an attempt by men to redirect existing gender work for their own purposes. There is also a risk of diverting resources away from support for women, in a context where such resources (e.g. for refuges or rape crisis centres) are already under threat.

Where men do engage in work to promote gender equality, it is important to guard against the possibility that they may inadvertently reinforce inequality in another way. Saying this does not negate or devalue the vital work of men in promoting gender equality. It just means that strategies must always be in place to ensure the quality of the work.

Engaging men in gender equality should not involve abandoning support for projects and strategies that focus on women. Moreover, the risks of not engaging with men should not be ignored. Focusing exclusively on women can leave them with even more work to do³⁶ and may entrench static definitions of women (e.g. as 'carers') and men (e.g. as 'breadwinners'). Moreover, the vast majority of decision-makers (most of whom are male) will continue to ignore the relevance of gender issues; as a result, gender will remain a peripheral issue and will not be integrated effectively into policy and programmes.

Conclusion

The analysis above identifies key issues in relation to men and boys in the UK, drawing upon the considerable body of sociological research over the last 15 or so years, particularly in relation to home and work, and to violence by men. It rejects the argument that men and boys are 'in crisis', or losing out to women and girls. Rather, it seeks to highlight the problems that men create and the problems they experience, the connections between men's power and marginalisation, and men's potential to contribute to society. Setting out a framework for understanding gender relations and 'masculinities', it draws attention to the commonalities and differences between different groups of men (according to class, race, age, disability, faith and sexual orientation) and the dynamic relations between them.

The section also explores reasons why some men and boys are – and more should be – involved in strategies for gender equality and new forms of masculinity, and the risks in seeking to engage them in these. There are important challenges to overcome here, but these do not provide a justification for not attempting to move this work forward.

In the next section, we explore the international, European and UK policy contexts in more detail, and identify key aspects of the approaches of the main UK political parties.

36. Sweetman C. (1997) *Men and Masculinity*, Focus on Gender paper, Oxford: Oxfam GB