

Men's movements

What is the men's movement? Who joins it, why and what kind of movement is it? Michael Flood has the story.

ABSTRACT: *The men's movement is a contradictory phenomenon, involving both the defence of men's privilege and efforts to undo it. It incorporates diverse strands — men's liberationist, pro-feminist, spiritual or mythopoetic, and men's rights and fathers' rights — with differing agendas, emphases and understandings. While personal growth and therapy have been important focuses, increasingly these are being complemented by public political activism.*

Editor's note: although this article does not make explicit links to community development, the editorial board felt that understanding men's movements is important for community development and this article makes a valuable contribution to this understanding.

The men's movement now has a presence in Australia's cultural and political landscape. Its ideas, issues, images and agendas are in the media and policy-making. At the same time, the general public has very little idea of what this movement is. Here then is an outline of the character of the men's movement and its groups and participants. As I comment in detail later, this 'movement' is also an unusual one in that it has had a largely therapeutic focus, it is small, and in particular, it represents a collective mobilisation by members of a privileged group.

The backbone of the men's movement in Australia is the various men's groups. They include support groups, well-established organisations with

offices and staff, activist groups, private groups meeting in somebody's lounge room and men's phone helplines. Depending on what you include, there are somewhere between 50 and 200 men's groups in Australia, with an estimated 500 to 2,000 men directly involved in these groups.

Men's gatherings and festivals are an important part of the movement. Important annual events include the Sydney Men's Festival (which began in 1985), the Australian and New Zealand Men's Leadership Gathering, and annual or semi-annual men's festivals around the country. A host of other men's events also occur, including spiritual or mythopoetic men's and boys' camps, mini-conferences of Men Against Sexual Assault activists, and so on.

There is now a huge literature on men and masculinity, with my own bibliography listing over 5,000 books and articles. [available from internet; see Net Notes page 59 – Ed] Some academics in Australia are at the cutting-edge of this work, including (in alphabetical order) David Buchbinder, R.W.

Connell, Mike Donaldson, Gary Dowsett, Ron Frey, Rod Gilbert, Pam Gilbert, Bob Lindgard, Wayne Martino, Anthony McMahon, Bob Pease, Graham Russell and others. There is relatively little overlap between academic discussions and the perspectives in the men's movement itself. However, pro-feminist men's groups and individuals tend to be more influenced by academic work than other participants, with XY magazine and pro-feminist men's discussions routinely drawing on academic literature and some masculinity academics such as Bob Pease themselves involved in activism.

Other activities connected with men's issues, although not necessarily part of the men's movement, include health programmes for men, counselling and crisis services for both male perpetrators of violence and male survivors (especially of child sexual assault), fathers' groups, education programs and curricula directed at boys. "Men's issues" are now regular parts of courses and programs in counselling services such as Lifeline, in drug and alcohol programs and in many other sections of health and welfare provision and family support. Men's movement numbers and activities have swelled especially in the last three or four years. This is particularly evident in such areas as men's health, boys' education, men's violence, and family law and custody.

Which men?

Who are the men involved in this 'movement', and what do they do? Typically, the men involved are in their

thirties, forties and fifties. They are from all classes and ethnic backgrounds, although my impression is that they are only very rarely from the highest socio-economic strata of society (what some call the "ruling class"), more usually from white-collar and lower middle-class backgrounds, and occasionally from blue-collar or working-class backgrounds.

Men's movement participants are usually from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, at least judging by appearances and surnames, although Aboriginal and Maori men play important roles in some men's events. Most participants are heterosexual, and from my own attendance at men's movement events I estimate gay and bisexual men's involvement at anywhere from 10 percent through to 30 percent. These comments on class, ethnic and sexual makeup are my impressions only, and no-one has done the research in Australia to examine them. Finally, the profile of the men involved varies with the type of men's group they are in. For example, men in pro-feminist groups such as Men Against Sexual Assault tend to be younger and tertiary-educated, while men in fathers' rights groups tend to be older.

Why do men join?

Men's realisation of the hollowness and corruption of traditional masculinity is a common path to the men's movement. Men in their thirties, forties and fifties become aware that their marriages are collapsing, they lack emotional connectedness, they don't have close friends or their

working lives are grey and cold.

Some men's journeys into the heartland of the men's movement begin when their wives leave. I'd guess that perhaps one-third to one-half of the men in men's groups around Australia have been divorced or separated. Some are part-time fathers and some have sole responsibility for their children. Some men who have gone through deeply painful marriage break-ups and custody battles join the men's movement in search of support, community or justice, with some seeking to change the institutions of family law and child support which they see as having discriminated against them.

The men's movement offers emotional support and friendship. It offers the company of other men, men who understand the pain and confusion for example which attend experiences of divorce, life change or job loss. Groups allow men to share their experiences, of fatherhood, relationships, sexuality, anger and a host of other areas loaded with emotion and history.

Many men are able to develop a positive male identity through their experience in the men's movement. This is an identity built not on toughness and isolation, but on emotional connectedness, groundedness and caring. Men can learn to be playful, open, relaxed and loving. The men's movement offers men an understanding of how they've come to be the way they are: how boys are trained to become men.

Many men come out of a sense of distance from traditional masculinity,

an unease as boys and throughout their lives with the ways in which they have been expected to hold themselves and to interact with others. They have become aware of the toll taken by the dominant models of how to be a man—the toll taken on their own emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing, and the damage done to their relationships, families and communities through violence, self-centeredness, isolation and addiction.

While I've described some common paths to the men's movement, these are not shared by all men involved. Some men come to profeminist and anti-sexist involvements because of other deeply felt experiences—because their loyalty and closeness to a particular woman in their lives—a mother, a lover, a cherished friend—has forged an intimate understanding of the injustices suffered by women and the need for men to take action. Some men come to an advocacy of feminism because of their commitments to other sorts of principled political activism—to pacifism, economic justice, green issues, gay liberation and so on. They have been exposed to feminist and related ideals through their political involvements, their workplaces or their higher education. Others get involved through dealing with their own experience of sexual violence or sexual abuse from other men and sometimes women, perhaps as children or teenagers [Stoltenberg, 1990].

A movement?

So far I've been using the label "men's movement" without comment, but it is worth pointing out that this "movement" is different from others such as the women's, green, gay and lesbian, and labour movements. Much of the men's movement has had an overriding emphasis on personal growth and healing. It has had an important therapeutic emphasis, while other movements focus—either instead of (green, labour), or as well (women's, gay and lesbian) — on social change. I say "has had" because I think that this is shifting, as more and more men realise that personal growth and the reconstruction of individual masculinities are useless without an accompanying shift in the social relations, institutions and ideologies which support or marginalise different ways of being men. Additionally, one wing of the men's movement is engaged in increasingly politicised and often anti-feminist campaigns on such issues as family law and domestic violence. Nevertheless, many participants are politically inexperienced and for many, social change is not an important focus.

The languages and perspectives of therapy, counselling, spirituality and New Age culture have a strong presence in men's movement circles. Some participants are also involved in or have come from 12-step programs, co-counselling groups and psychology. On the other hand, there are men for whom the men's movement has always been a tool for social and political change, whether it be through anti-vio-

lence activism, radical cross-dressing to confuse gender boundaries, or wearing Santa Claus outfits in shopping centres to protest the marketing of war toys to boys.

As far as social movements go, the men's movement is also a relatively small one. It has certainly touched far less lives than say the women's, labour or green movements, and it has so far had far less influence on the character and direction of social institutions, governments and popular culture. Again, this is changing, and there are increasing signs that sections of the men's movement are learning how to flex their growing political muscles.

However, the most unusual aspect of the men's movement is that it represents a movement by members of a dominant or privileged group. It is more typical for people on the subordinate or oppressed side of a set of power relations (such as people of colour, gay men and lesbians, working-class people, or indeed women) to generate social movements. If movements similar to the men's movement existed to do with race or sexuality, they would take the form of a "whites' movement" or a "heterosexual's movement".

In fact there is a whites' movement, a network of white supremacist groups, dedicated to the defence and extension of its members' privilege and power. And thankfully there are also groups of people who mobilise self-consciously on the basis of their whiteness or their heterosexuality and

attempt to undo the privilege on which such identities have been based. Men's movement activity includes both impulses: both the defence of men's privilege and attempts to undo it. Thus, talking about "the men's movement" in one sense is like lumping together Australians for Native Title And Reconciliation (ANTAR) and Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party and calling them "the race movement". While participants are united by their shared membership of the category "men" and their engagement with men's lives and men's issues, they have differing and indeed opposing agendas and strategies. I return to this issue after a detailed account of these agendas.

Four strands

The men's movement can be understood in terms of four overlapping strands: (1) anti-sexist and pro-feminist, (2) men's liberation (the most widespread one), (3) spiritual or mythopoetic, and (4) men's rights and fathers' rights.

(1) Anti-sexist or pro-feminist

Pro-feminist men are sympathetic to feminist understandings of society. They believe that women as a group suffer inequalities and injustices in society, while men as a group receive various forms of power and institutional privilege. The current, dominant model of manhood or masculinity is oppressive to women, as well as limiting for men themselves. Pro-feminist men also recognise the costs of masculinity: conformity to narrow definitions of manhood comes with the price

tag of poor health, early death, overwork and emotionally shallow relationships. Pro-feminist men emphasise that men must take responsibility for their own sexist behaviours and attitudes and work to change those of men in general. Both personal and social change are vital.

Just as there is substantial diversity and disagreement within feminism, there is diversity among pro-feminist men. One area of disagreement is over the extent to which men are also limited or harmed by the gender relations of society. Some men emphasise the privilege that men receive by virtue of being men in a patriarchal or male-dominated society, while others emphasise the ways in which both men and women are constricted by gender roles. Those who emphasise the latter, or who even claim that like women, men are "oppressed", are seen by some pro-feminist men as not really pro-feminist or not pro-feminist enough. Others such as Clatterbaugh (1990) make a distinction between "radical profeminist" and "liberal profeminist" men, founded on allegiances to liberal and radical feminisms respectively, and emphasise their shared commitments and similarities.

Pro-feminist men typically also recognise the importance of other forms of injustice and other kinds of social relations, such as those to do with class, race, sexuality, age and disability. Men share very unequally in the fruits of male privilege, 'being a man' means different things among

different groups and in different arenas, and some forms of manhood are culturally dominant or "hegemonic" while others are marginalised or subordinated.

Men's violence has been an important focus of action for anti-sexist men, and this is reflected in the formation of Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA) groups in most cities in Australia. MASA groups include men at various points along the continuum between "anti-sexist" and "men's liberation". It is also worth noting that some self-identified pro-feminist men do not consider themselves part of the men's movement. Men both in and outside MASA have conducted anti-violence work with boys and schools and run community education campaigns such as the White Ribbon Campaign, an effort to invite men to buy and wear white ribbons to show their opposition to men's violence. Unlike most other groups in the men's movement, this work has often been in collaboration with feminists and women's services (such as domestic violence and rape crisis centres). Anti-sexist men are also involved in academic study on masculinity, men's health policy, the development of gender equity curricula in schools, the counselling of male perpetrators of violence, and more.

(2) Men's liberation

The men's liberation strand argues that men are hurt by the male "sex role" and that men's lives are alienating, unhealthy and impoverished. Men's liberation perspectives give a

very worthwhile attention to the damage, isolation and suffering inflicted on boys and men through their socialisation into manhood. Men are overworked, trained to kill or be killed, brutalised and subjected to blame and shame. Men's liberation perspectives are shared by many men in the men's movement, and such ideas can be found in any of the strands described here.

There is also substantial overlap with the anti-sexist strand, and men's liberation is roughly equivalent to the "liberal profeminism" which Clatterbaugh places alongside "radical profeminism" [Clatterbaugh, 1990: 37-60]. Both are pro-feminist, but they draw on different streams of feminism, liberal and radical. For Clatterbaugh, radical pro-feminist men give greater emphasis to the organisation of masculinity and men's lives as privileged over women's lives and as violent and aggressive. Liberal pro-feminist men give greater emphasis to the ways in which both men and women are constricted by gender roles, and some say that men, like women, are "oppressed". And in saying this, some versions of men's liberation slide into men's rights, an anti-feminist perspective.

Men who call themselves "pro-feminist" and "men's liberation" men have been important allies in the Australian men's movement, and disagreements over whether to call men "oppressed" (for example) may obscure their fundamentally shared commitments to goals of equality and justice.

Furthermore, such men are learning from each other, so that pro-feminist men give more attention to men's pain and the damaging effects of masculinity on men themselves, while men's liberation men give more attention to men's power and gender injustice. While I and other men have sometimes claimed the term "pro-feminist" to distinguish ourselves from other participants in the men's movement, including those who espouse men's liberation, I think that this has overlooked our shared political visions and hindered the development of productive alliances.

One of the most important movement activities to embody men's liberation is the men's support group. Such groups are a relatively private aspect of the men's movement, but also its lifeblood, and they are very often a highly formative and profound experience for the men involved. Other activities include therapy and counselling, and involvement in more public efforts on such issues as violence and men's health, for example through Men's Health and Wellbeing Associations.

(3) Spiritual or mythopoetic

The third strand involves particular types of spiritual perspective, emphasising men's inner work and often called "mythopoetic" in involving both myth and poetry. Mythopoetic men derive their thinking from psychoanalysis, and especially the work of Carl Jung (1953) and Robert Bly (1990). Masculinity is seen as based on deep unconscious patterns and

archetypes that are revealed through myths, stories and rituals. Clatterbaugh summarises this perspective as follows: "men start life as whole persons but, through wounding, lose their unity and become fragmented. Eventually, if men probe the archetypes buried in their unconscious, they will be able to heal these wounds and restore themselves to a state of wholeness and psychospiritual health" [Clatterbaugh, 1990: 86]. Personal growth is central and urgent in this strand, and this perspective is not overtly political. It is more symbolic than literal, more therapeutic than theoretical.

Boys must be initiated into manhood by older men, according to this perspective (or at least, to the most Bly-influenced sections). Thus, one activity here is men's and boys' camps, in which fathers and other men take young men through processes of initiation. Male Aboriginal Elders sometimes attend such camps, and Aboriginal culture sometimes is a resource for these processes, much like white North American men's use of indigenous Native American cultures.

For Bly feminism is a mixed blessing: while a positive force for women, it has held back men and made some men "soft". Some of Bly's ideas about men's lives appeal to men's rights adherents, while others appeal to men's liberation or liberal profeminist men. (See Kimmel's *The politics of manhood* (1995) for a range of commentaries on mythopoetic perspectives and movements.)

Other versions of the spiritual

strand are a male parallel to feminist spirituality and the Wicca tradition and are more pro-feminist. In contrast to Bly, they suggest that men are cut off from the feminine and prevented by patriarchy from seeing the feminine side of their nature. Environmental and pacifist agendas are also evident in the perspectives of some men in this strand.

(4) Men's rights and fathers' rights

Men's rights men share with men's liberationists the idea that men's roles are harmful, damaging and in fact lethal for men. But they blame women or feminism for the harm done to men, deny any idea of men's power and argue that men are now the real victims.

Men's rights is generally an anti-feminist perspective, and described by many commentators as representing a "backlash". For some men's rights advocates, feminism has largely achieved its goals and women have more choices, while men are still stuck in traditional masculine roles. For some, feminism was once a 'human liberation' movement that now only looks after women. For others, it never tried to liberate men, it has even tried to keep men in their traditional roles (e.g. as providers), and "feminazis" are involved in a conspiracy to discriminate against men and cover up violence against them. Men's rights men dispute the feminist idea that men (or some men) gain power and privilege in society, claiming that both women and men are equally oppressed or limited or even that men are oppressed by

women. Men are "success objects" (like women are "sex objects") and burdened as providers, violence against men (through war, work and by women) is endemic and socially tolerated, and men are discriminated against in divorce and child custody proceedings. As far as "men's rights" are concerned, these men believe that men's right to a fair trial in domestic violence cases, to a fair negotiation in custody settlements, and to fair treatment in the media have all been lost.

Men's rights groups have a substantial overlap with fathers' rights groups and with non-custodial parents' groups, whose members are often fathers. Some men's rights and fathers' rights groups have links to conservative Christian organisations and support a patriarchal nuclear family as the only real and natural form of family, while others have more flexible visions of family and gender relations. Most share the common enemy of feminism, as well as gay and lesbian politics and other progressive movements and ideals.

Men in these groups provide support for men undergoing custody settlements, attack the existence of services specifically for women such as women's health services and rape crisis centres (through legal action and harassment), lobby state and federal governments, challenge what they see as the feminist-dominated mainstream media, and so on. I have written in detail elsewhere (Flood, 1997) of how best to respond to men's rights agendas.

Related to this strand, there are also conservative Christian men's organisations, with the best known example being the Promise Keepers. This organisation is huge in the U.S.A., and has just begun in Australia, defining itself as "a Christ-Centred ministry dedicated to uniting men through vital relationships to become Godly influences in their world". Such groups are anti-feminist, primarily evangelical and fundamentalist Christian, and favour a return to traditional gender relations and roles. In the U.S.A. conservative Christian men's groups have important links to the Christian Right, itself a very powerful political force. In Australia they are only beginning and they have relatively little influence in the men's movement, but this may change rapidly.

It would seem that these different strands each have their own pet issues, with men's rights men focusing for example on family law and custody, men's liberation men on men's emotional growth, pro-feminist men on men's violence and mythopoetic men on the initiation of boys. However, there is no issue or area that in itself has to be associated with a particular strand of the men's movement. For example, there is no reason why family law and custody issues cannot be taken up as pro-feminist men's issues too. In fact, precisely this is happening, as pro-feminist men (in alliance with women and other community groups) respond to men's rights campaigns.

Having covered these four

strands, I am obliged to point out that this does not capture all the perspectives and focuses of participants in the men's movement, let alone of the literature on masculinity. Clatterbaugh (1990) devotes chapters for example to the perspectives of socialist or working-class, black and gay men.

Delicate politics

I have always thought that men's politics at the very least was a delicate politics, precisely because of men's privileged position in contemporary gender relations. And I've long believed that it is possible and indeed essential for men to act together to dismantle gender injustice, just as it is for whites and heterosexuals to dismantle racial and sexual injustices. The question is, is a "men's movement" the way to do this?

Perhaps the answer depends on which men's movement we're talking about. One section of the men's movement is already energetically engaged in a conservative and anti-feminist backlash. Another loose network of men, both within and outside this movement, is pursuing an anti-patriarchal politics, sometimes in collaboration with women and other progressive forces. While all pro-feminist men assume that men must act to dismantle gender injustice, some argue that a "men's movement" is not the way to do this. They advocate instead that alliances and coalitions be formed with other progressive groups and movements (such as feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, left-wing and socialist movements, and anti-racist struggles).

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Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that the men's movement is not the only, or even the most important, force for change in men's lives. Men's lives in Australia have already undergone radical transformations in the last half-century, under the influence of changing patterns of work and economy, the women's movement, the sexual revolution, gay liberation and more. Not all the changes are positive—the Federal Liberal government has already begun rolling back some of the gains made, reasserting traditional masculinity through its economic and family policies. While it is easy to point to new media images and styles of masculinity in existence (the “New Man”, the “New Father”), it is more difficult to claim that the lives of men in general have changed. Yes, men can now cry on TV, but the institutionalised power relations between and among men and women have hardly gone away.

At the end of the twentieth century, we will be able to look back and count the men's movement as one of the new movements which sprang out of the upheavals, shifts and blossomings of the last four decades. The men's movement is more contradictory than other movements, and its overall impact on gender relations is so far unclear, but no discussion of men's changing lives is complete without mention of this movement of men.

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