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# **Political Connections: Men, Gender and Violence**

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*“We must always make connections, since they are not already given.”* John Rajchman

This paper looks at the connections that need to be made between men, gender and violence in order to more clearly articulate men’s roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence. It explores the discourse of masculinity/ties within which these connections are currently interrogated, and highlights the kinds of questions that the discourse asks and does not ask of these connections. The paper notes that the psychological and behavioural emphases of the discourse tend to de-politicise discussion of these connections, confining attention to the gender questions of what it means to be a (non-violent) man, neglecting the political questions of what it means for men (and women) to create a less violent and more just world. The argument of the paper is that these latter questions open up new possibilities for locating men’s relationship to gender based violence within the context of the violence of social injustice within which most men live. The paper explores these political connections between men, gender and violence and discusses the tensions that arise when making such connections in working directly with men to end their violent behaviour. It looks at how specific programmes have tried to negotiate these tensions, and suggests future directions for work with men on ending gender based violence.

## I QUESTIONS

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, a woman is battered by a man every 15 seconds in the USA. The same report notes that 78 women are raped by men every hour.<sup>1</sup> A summary of twenty studies from a range of countries 'document that one-quarter to over half of women in many countries of the world report having been physically abused by a present or former partner' (Heise 1997). At least 10-15% of women in the world report being forced by men to have sex, according to a UNDP report on violence and the global HIV epidemic (Gordon and Crehan 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics are taken from the Violence Against Women Fact Sheet (1995), which itself is based on the redesigned and updated National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.

After centuries of silence and neglect, there is now a growing and diverse global movement to both name and end the violence that women suffer at the ‘hands’ of men. For many years, and in most places, this has been largely a movement of women. In the feminist analyses that have guided and inspired this movement since its beginnings in the early 1970s, men were not seen as potential allies in a movement whose aim was to dismantle the patriarchy that produced and was produced by men’s violence against women. Men and women’s gender interests, in this view, were, by definition, in conflict with each other. As Connell (1995) has written:

*“A gender order where men dominate women cannot avoid constituting men as an interest group concerned with defense, and women as an interest group concerned with change.”*

The fact that questions are now being asked of men’s roles and responsibilities within a movement to end gender based violence is thus politically significant. It suggests a shift from the feminist analyses of patriarchy and violence within which men’s only contribution to ending the violence appeared to be “refusing to be a man”. Understanding the politics of this shift is critical to understanding the implications of the questions about men’s roles and responsibilities currently being asked, and those questions that potentially could be asked. A part of this shift, at least in the USA, has been produced by the politically conservative backlash to the gains of the women’s movement. The conservative political analyses of gender roles in the family, the community and the economy that underpin this backlash explain men’s violence as the result of a crisis of gender role confusion, in which men can no longer fulfill their proper gender functions because of changes in economic, political and social life. In their frustration, men turn violent. The way to tackle such violence, it is argued, is to restore clarity to these gender roles which have become confused in the wake of women’s liberation and to enable men to reclaim their ‘true’ roles and responsibilities *as men* in the family, community and economy.

Posing questions about men's roles and responsibilities may, wittingly or unwittingly, result in compromising the hard-fought successes of the women's movement in naming and challenging the oppression of women. There is an understandable fear that by placing men at the centre of the analysis, women may once again be marginalized, not least at the material level of diverting the scarce funding, that was previously available to women's programmes, to new initiatives focused on men. This makes it all the more important to be conscious of the political dimensions of the space within which questions about men and gender based violence get discussed, and the ways in which men enter this space to explore these questions.

Increasingly, this space is dominated by the discourse of masculinity/ties. Within this discourse, it has become possible to ask questions about men and violence that move beyond the abstractions of Patriarchal Man to explore the ways in which men's lives, like women's, are produced by gender. This exploration has been driven by both operational and theoretical considerations. At the operational level, for example within the domestic violence movement in many countries of the industrialized North, it has been increasingly acknowledged that working with women as the victims of violence is not sufficient to stopping the violence, and that this requires direct work with the men who are responsible. At the theoretical level, it has been recognized that feminist insights about the social construction of women's femininity, as a set of prescribed gender roles that shape women's attitudes and behaviours, applies also to men and their masculinity.

These operational and theoretical considerations are apparent in the history of the founding of Men Overcoming Violence (MOVE) in San Francisco in 1981, which came out of the domestic violence movement of the 1970s in the USA and its challenge to men to end their oppression of women. The movement's feminist analysis of gender, which understood the violence that produced inequalities between women and men to be socially and not biologically determined, also created space for thinking about changing men's violent behaviour. As one of the co-founders of MOVE has noted:

*“An article of faith from the beginning was that men’s violence was learned. Abusive behaviour didn’t come with the plumbing. That’s what made it possible to even think about doing the work. If it was learned, it could be unlearned.”<sup>2</sup>*

This emphasis on violence as a learned behaviour, as an interpersonal act, is in part a reflection of the brute reality of the daily damage done to women’s bodies and lives by male perpetrators. But it is also significant in terms of the politics of masculinity, as a discourse within which structural analyses of the links between men and violence in terms of patriarchal relations of power, have been replaced by an enquiry in to the connections between men’s gender identity – their masculinity – and the learning of violent behaviour.

Such an enquiry is clearly attractive to those thinking about men’s roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence. As a respected researcher on such issues has noted (Heise 1997):

*“The more I work on violence against women, the more I become convinced that the real way forward is to redefine what it means to be male.”*

By posing the problem of men and gender based violence in terms of gender identity and violent behaviour in this way, the discourse of masculinity has a number of important implications. It suggests the need for a more complicated reading of the links between men, power and violence. As Heise (1997) continues:

*“Men in many cultures wage daily battle to prove to themselves and others that they qualify for inclusion in the esteemed category "male." To be "not male," is to be reduced to the status of woman or, worse, to be "queer".[...] It is partly men's insecurity about their masculinity that promotes abusive behaviour toward women.”*

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *MOVEMENT*: Newsletter of Men Overcoming Violence, Autumn 2001

This account of men's violence as a product of masculine insecurity as much as patriarchal authority has proved valuable in speaking to men's own experience of power and powerlessness in their lives. Indeed, 'masculinity' has become a useful 'place' for getting beyond the monolithic categories of Man and Woman in cruder forms of gender analysis, and exploring power relations between men and the role of violence within them. Heise makes the important point that:

*“When masculinity is associated with aggression and sexual conquest, domineering sexual behaviour and violence become not only a means of structuring power relations between men and women but also a way of establishing power relations among men.” (Heise 1997)*

The fact that the links between gender and violence are expressed in hierarchies not only between men and women, but also between men and men, has led many to prefer the plural 'masculinities' rather than the singular 'masculinity'. The term recognizes the heterogeneity of the group of people referred to by the term "men" and suggests that the links between gender identity and violence in men's lives are complicated by relations of power between men, along lines of economic class, social status, race/ethnicity, sexuality and age. Violence is not only used by men to claim and reassert their privileges over women, but is instrumental in enforcing and resisting the intra-gender hierarchy of power among men.

In this way, the discourse of masculinity/ties has created new opportunities for actually working with men to end their violence by highlighting the need to understand men's behaviour in the contexts of their lives. The discourse not only opens up the possibility of changing men's violence, but also offers a programme for doing so, by 'redefining what it means to be male'. In this it focuses on the processes of socialization that produce the connections between masculinity and violence. This has raised questions

about the role of the family and of culture more generally in producing violent men. Pollack (1998) notes that:

*“The trauma of separation is one of the earliest and most acute developmental experiences boys endure, an experience that plays a large role in the hardening process through which society shames boys into suppressing their empathic and vulnerable sides. [As a result] boys are pressured to express the one strong feeling allowed them – anger.”*

Others look to culture to explain how malleable boys become moulded into hardened and violent men. Goldstein (2000) claims that:

*“[C]ultural norms force men to endure trauma and master fear, in order to claim the status of ‘manhood’. [C]ultures develop concepts of masculinity that motivate men to fight.”*

But this emphasis on, and reading of, culture is indicative of the apolitical tenor of many of the questions raised by the discourse of masculinity and violence. These are questions about how to reach men with messages about non-violent masculinities, about how to provide non-violent role models for young men, about how to change cultural norms of masculinity in order to reduce men’s violent behaviour.

These are important questions. But the politics of the discourse of masculinity/ties is evident in the kinds of questions it does not tend to ask. These are questions about the structural violence of gender, as a social construct that determines unequal and oppressive relations between people. These include questions about the connections between gender and other forms of structural violence, around sexuality, race and class, and differing men’s roles in and responsibilities for such violence. Crucially, these are questions that work both within and beyond concepts of gender to explore the

connections between men, gender and violence in the context of structures of inequality and oppression. Making these connections is essential in order to expand an understanding of men's possible roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence.

## II CONNECTIONS

*“Violence in couple relationships is a problem of power and control. [...] It is maintained by the social structures of oppression in which we live—based, among others, on gender, class, age, and race inequalities. A national history of wars and a culture of settling conflict through force also maintain it. Colonialism and imperialism have had a role in intensifying this violence. Both men and women learned and practice this logic of human relations based on power and control over others; however, for men the exercise of this power-over-others model becomes almost an obligatory criterion to our male gender identity.” (Montoya 1999)*

Making connections between violence and its contexts is critical in order to open up new possibilities for ending gender based violence, and men's roles in this. Montoya connects interpersonal violence between men and women with “social structures of oppression”, both contemporary and historical. Such a connection not only serves to explain men's individual acts of violence, but also to understand these acts as expressions of violent social structures. In her work on experiences and narratives of rape in South Africa, Moffet makes similar connections in arguing that:

*“...there is a link between the violently enforced hierarchical structures of apartheid and our current levels of gender violence.[...] A pattern (admittedly one among many others) seems to be emerging in which rapists choose victims because they "dare to" practice freedom of movement, "hold their heads up", make eye contact, are "cheeky"*

*and so on. These are exactly the reasons given in cases of unprovoked attacks by whites on blacks over the past five decades.”<sup>3</sup>*

Making connections between individual and structural violence has significant implications for working with men on their roles and responsibilities. The first relates to understanding the functionality of violence. Paul Kivel, the noted educator and activist on men’s violence in the USA, has acknowledged after many years working in this field how he...

*“...realized again how fundamental male violence is as a force which keeps systems of exploitation and violence in place.” (Kivel 1992)*

This realization reminds us that efforts to end gender based violence will face resistance. In part, this resistance will come from men because of the political interest men will have in defending the benefits and privileges that they get from the ‘system of exploitation’ that is the gender order. Connell (1995) characterizes these as the ‘patriarchal dividend’ when he writes that:

*“To speak of a patriarchal dividend is to raise exactly this question of interest. Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command. They also gain a material dividend.”*

A common approach in working with men to overcome this resistance is to contrast this ‘patriarchal dividend’ with the ‘costs of masculinity’, often expressed in emotional and psychological and even spiritual terms. This approach has proved effective in getting beyond simply blaming men for their violence and in opening up discussion of a

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<sup>3</sup> This quote is taken from one of Helen Moffet’s contributions to the Virtual Seminar series organized by INSTRAW. See also Helen Moffett’s “Entering the Labyrinth” INSTRAW working paper, no. 5 in this series.

cost/benefit analysis of their attitudes and behaviour, and of the choices that they have to be different. This is critical in working with men individually on their violent behaviour, but is more problematic in addressing the violence of gender itself, in the way that it structures oppressive social relations. The binary logic of gender (masculine/active vs. feminine/passive) is inherently violent in the way that it creates social hierarchies and legitimizes inequalities in power. Its logic is evident in the way that we think about identity as the definition of self through negation of the Other, given that the masculine is, by definition, the un-feminine. The same logic shapes the way that we think about social relations as necessarily relations of superiority and inferiority, of the power that some people have over other people. Gender roles powerfully influence other kinds of social roles, and such roles are policed by violence.

This logic gives rise to the second implication for working with men on their roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence. This is that such work should not remain confined within a gender paradigm that seeks to redefine a new masculine identity for men, because this only reinforces the violence that is inherent within privileging the identity of gender. It is true that men all over the world need new kinds of attitudes and behaviours if their violence is to be reduced, but it is not useful to define these as comprising a new kind of masculinity, because that would be to define them in relation to not being feminine and reaffirm the necessity (and violence) of that negation. In fact, the attitudes and behaviours required for less violent social relations are gender-neutral, available and applicable to both men and women.

The challenge is not so much to break the connection between masculinity and violence, as to connect the violence of gender with the violence between individual men and women. Deconstructing gender violence in this way may appear to be an academic exercise, but it is of urgent practical importance in working with men. This does not, as some have argued, entail “refusing to be a man”. Rather, it means working with men to understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to the violence of oppressive social relations, as structured by gender and other ‘systems of exploitation’, based on economic

class, social status, sexuality, race/ethnicity and age. The third implication for ending gender based violence, then, is to make the connections between gender and other forms of structural violence. As Kivel points out:

*“However, we could understand battered women to be the result of the systematic exploitation, disempowerment, and isolation of women in our society, kept in battering relationships by community tolerance for male violence, lack of well paying jobs, lack of decent childcare and affordable housing, and most of all by their isolation from each other and from the information and resources they need to come together to effect change.” (Kivel 2000)*

Making these connections can open new ways of working with different men, as victims as well as agents of structural violence in terms of the racism, homophobia, age discrimination and class-based oppression from which they suffer, for example. Depending on their relationship to oppressive social structures, different groups of men have an interest in challenging the structural violence that oppresses them and all women. Making these connections between gender justice and social justice suggests that men will have differing roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence depending on their experience of oppression. But these political connections are important not simply in order to highlight some men’s strategic interest in ending gender based violence. More fundamentally, they help to move this work with men beyond the gender questions of what it means to be a (non-violent) man, to the political questions of what it means to create a more just and less violent world.

### III TENSIONS<sup>4</sup>

Making these connections and asking these questions at the programmatic level can create tensions in working with men on their roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence. These tensions have confronted many of the programmes working with men on their violence that have emerged in the USA in the last 20 years. These programmes often define their vision and mission in terms of broader social change. The Men's Resource Center of Western Massachusetts (MRC) describes the vision of its work as being, in part, as:

*“...a catalyst to help bring about a more just and peaceful world. We are a network of men and women committed to challenging personal and institutional violence, sexism, homophobia, racism and other forms of oppression and to supporting healing and empowerment for all people.”*

In a similar vein, MOVE in San Francisco states the first part of its mission as:

*“MOVE is dedicated to ending male violence by organizing for social change...”*

Describing how it came to call itself Men Allied Nationally Against Living in Violent Environments, MANALIVE, also based in the Bay Area in Northern California, reports:

*“We called it MANALIVE to reflect its social activism intent.”*

But such intent exists in tension with the funding requirements, organizational constraints and individually oriented educational and therapeutic approaches of such programmes. As programmes have become increasingly reliant on referrals and associated funding

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<sup>4</sup> The quotations in this section are taken from interviews conducted by the author with staff of the four programmes being discussed.

from the criminal justice system, they have necessarily become more focused on changing the violent behaviour of individual men rather than on mobilizing men to challenge the violence of gender and related structures of oppression. The pressure on such programmes to be providers of social services, and not catalysts of social change, is also a function of the very structures of oppression within which they operate. Kivel (2000) has described the ‘buffer zone’ function of the NGO (non-profit) sector in a capitalist economic system as being to take care of those at the bottom of the economic pyramid to ensure that they do not organize themselves and try to claim power from the ‘ruling class’.

Programmes working with men on their violence often fall within this buffer zone and are further constrained in their potential for social change by the educational approach to dealing with men’s violence as a learned behaviour that most of them follow. However, within this approach programmes have found different ways to push the boundary between individual and social change. MANALIVE uses:

*“...a peer group modality and an each-one-teach-one system of instruction since it reproduces the peer group settings where men learned their controlling, coercive behaviour growing up.”*

In describing the group-work curriculum developed by MANALIVE for violent men, its founder Hamish Sinclair says:

*“We wanted a programme that briefed men on the politics of men’s violence, gained their alliance with women to stop the violence, and recruited and trained them to go out in their neighbourhoods and workplaces to spread the word to other men.”*

Men Stopping Violence (MSV), based in Atlanta, Georgia, has also sought to ‘spread the word’, but does so by requiring men participating in their anti-violence groups to bring in

male friends from their communities to create a support network for the personal changes being attempted by the group participants and build a greater constituency for change outside in the community. In this way, the programme is beginning to articulate the roles that men can play in not only ending the gender based violence in their own lives, but also in addressing the violence that affects the communities in which they live. Ways in which men can be supported to take on these roles are being explored by MOVE as it seeks to more fully integrate intervention and prevention work, and shift from a behaviour modification model to a community organizing model, in which the focus of change is the community and not merely the individual.

The challenges of this shift are significant. MRC (Men's Resource Center), a largely white organization, tried an outreach strategy to take its programme to communities of colour in its area, but had difficulty gaining entry and establishing credibility. Instead, it has now changed strategy, and is seeking to work through established community organizations and build their capacity to take on issues of gender based violence in their own work. MANALIVE prefers to work through specific institutions (schools, prisons, probation departments), and places graduates of its group-work curriculum in these institutions as 'community activists', whose role is to recruit more men to the programme, facilitate its classes in these institutional settings and make public presentations on men and violence. MSV offers trainings on gender based violence to a range of often male-dominated institutions (for example, the police and the court system) as part of its effort to change the social norms that create the context for men's violence.

In these different ways, programmes working directly with men are attempting to broaden the understanding of men's roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence to encompass the need for social-structural as well as individual-behavioural change. They do so as well, in the kinds of political connections that they make between gender, oppression and violence in their group-work and individual casework with men. MSV, working with large numbers of African-American men, emphasizes the connections between racism and sexism in its educational curriculum, builds their

empathy for women's experience of men's violence by connecting it to their own experience of the violence of white racism. In working with large numbers of participants who are court-mandated to attend their programme, MANALIVE helps:

*"...our men to understand that the crisis in their life upon arrest results from the profound change in social values that women's political struggle has brought about in the last twenty years."*

In offering this historical context, the programme is clear that it does not seek to:

*"...excuse men for being violent to their partners but places their violence in its historical context of male-role superiority so that each man sees that he can make the decision to change."*

The possible tension between explaining and excusing men's violence is apparent in these attempts to make connections between behaviour and context, between interpersonal and structural violence. This tension has been resolved through a programmatic emphasis on simultaneously challenging and supporting men to act differently in the world. MANALIVE describes its programme as:

*"a man-affirming programme challenging the notion that men have a natural right to oppress women."*

MRC is also clear about the importance of this combined approach, in stating its mission as being:

*"...to support men, challenge men's violence, and develop men's leadership in ending oppression in our lives, our families and our communities."*

Programmes have also come to recognize that the need to both challenge and support applies equally to themselves and their own staff, as it does to the men with whom they work. As programmes take on a political analysis of the connections between men, gender and power, tensions become apparent within staff teams struggling with oppression in their own lives and in the workplace. Steven Botkin, Executive Director of MRC, talks of “learning to trust” these struggles as signs of a maturing organization coming to grips with its own sexism, racism, homophobia and class biases, and the importance of the agency being a strong enough “container” to hold the conflicts that arise. Significantly, he identifies class issues as the “next frontier” for MRC as it takes on still further the implications of its political analysis of gender based violence.

The ability of programmes to support their own staff in challenging the ways that structures of oppression express themselves in the organization has been aided by a clear commitment to accountability to the communities and other stakeholders served by the programme. Such accountability has been demonstrated in staffing policies, which insist that staff teams reflect the communities with whom they work – for example, MSV has significantly increased the number of people of colour on its staff to better reflect the communities of colour with whom it works. The boundary between staff and community has also been blurred by an emphasis on hiring men who have been clients of a programme to become staff with the programme, most notably in the case of MANALIVE, and to a lesser extent MRC.

These and other issues of accountability Kivel identifies as being central to the vision of social change held by programmes working with a political analysis of the connections between men’s violence and structures of oppression. Speaking directly to programmes, he writes:

*“Your work is part of a much wider network of individuals and organizations working for justice on the outside. To make effective decisions about your own work we need*

*to be accountable to those groups and their actions and issues. This accountability then becomes a source of connection that breaks down your isolation and increases your effectiveness as a social justice activist.” (Kivel 2000)*

But such a commitment to accountability raises questions about programmes’ relationship with centres of power, and the tension between an activist-outsider and a professional-insider approach to their work. This tension has become more pronounced in recent years for many of these programmes working directly with men on their violence, as they have become more deeply embedded within the criminal justice system’s response to this violence. For organizations such as MOVE, this tension has become too great, and it has decided to shift its strategic focus from being a batterers’ intervention programme working for behaviour change to becoming a social justice organization committed to ending men’s violence through social change. But this transition brings its own tensions in terms of the partnerships and coalitions that become easier and harder for programmes to build when they take explicit political positions on issues such as homophobia, racism and class-based oppression in their bearing on gender based violence. Efforts to broaden the coalition of organizations working on issues of men’s violence may be compromised by a deepened and explicit political commitment to working with men on the roles they can play in ending the violence that is based in gender and related structures of oppression.

#### IV DIRECTIONS

This paper has looked at men’s roles and responsibilities in ending gender based violence in terms of the political connections that need to be made between men, gender and violence. In so doing, it has explored some of the questions and tensions that may arise for programmes working directly with men on their violence. Out of this discussion, it is possible to sketch some possible directions that this work might take on the basis of the

political connections that it makes. These directions may be summarized under the headings of *sexuality, community, capacity* and *accountability*.

Much of the work done with men on ending gender based violence is based on a gender analysis that is curiously unconcerned with issues of sexuality. But gender and sexuality are closely enmeshed. The violence that produces and is produced by the gender order is also the violence of the hetero-sexist order that regulates sexuality. Acknowledging this relationship opens up questions about men's experience as victims as well as perpetrators of such violence as well as questions about the different kinds of violence that have a basis in an oppressive gender-sexuality system. Child sexual abuse is an example of violence rooted in the system's logic of power and control over another's body, and yet is relatively neglected in the current literature on ending gender based violence, despite the fact that it constitutes many women's (and men's) first and sometimes primary experience of such violence.

The importance of community, as both site and agent of change, also needs to be more fully recognized. As already noted, the political connections between men, gender and violence require a broadening beyond individual-behavioural to social-structural change in order to end the violence. But mobilizing men around issues of structural violence can be difficult because of their apparent abstraction, unless these issues are made concrete for men (and women) at the level of their community, however it is defined. Such a community focus is critical in being able to work beyond questions of gender identity and toward issues of social justice, and to articulate the roles and responsibilities that men have *as part of* their community in this work.

From the review of programme work in the previous section, it is clear that many programmes currently working with men on their violence need greater capacity to work at the community and not merely the individual level. This would include increased capacities in community organizing and leadership development strategies, that could enable men to take on responsibility for playing their part in ending gender based

violence in their community. Capacity also refers to the skills, support and resources men will need to take on these roles in social change in the face of likely opposition from other men (and women). Building this capacity is a crucial function for programmes working with men to end the violence.

Yet building such capacity is more than a merely technical challenge for programmes working on gender based violence. More fundamentally, it is about re-orienting their work from changing men to helping to build a movement for greater social justice, and this requires accountability. As Paul Kivel (2000) notes, in referring to himself as a professional working on issues of men's violence:

*“I need to be accountable to people who are on the front lines – who are organizing for social justice and an end to male violence”.*

The challenge, then, for programmes working with men ‘on the front lines’ is to make political connections between their work on men's violence and this larger movement for social change.

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