Men, masculinities, and the politics of development

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Widening the gender perspective to include men and masculinities should broaden and deepen our understanding of power and inequality, not only between men and women but in other social relationships, and thus increase the effectiveness of development interventions.

An NGO in the Philippines was doing a study of household budgeting. Raul, a male group member, was asked about his household’s finances. The income came to only half of the expenditure. Cautiously, the NGO worker suggested that perhaps his wife Anna also earned some income. Raul was enraged: he was the man of the house, he was the sole provider. He was the only one with capital — water buffaloes and coconut palms — with which to support the family. Anna, sitting nearby, signalled to the NGO worker to let it go. A few days later, the worker returned. This time Raul was absent. Anna spoke to him. She had been thinking about how the family managed. Up to then, she also had believed that her husband provided most of the family income. But when they had done the accounts, she had seen it was not so.

Each morning, Anna said, she took on credit 1 kilo of flour and some sugar from the co-operative store. She made some cheap bread, shakoys, and took it to the school gates to sell. In the evening she returned the flour and sugar to the store, and kept the income for housekeeping. Twice a week, on market days, she took two kilos of flour, and sold the shakoys in the market place. She had no capital, so had not thought of the income as significant. Now she realised that in fact it came to as much as her husband provided. None of the income from the coconut wine came to the housekeeping anyway, he kept that for his own gambling and cigarettes. (White, 1994:103-4)

Examples like this are common in the Gender and Development (GAD) literature. They are usually used to show the significance of the ‘invisible’ contributions of women to family livelihoods. But they can also be read in another way. Certainly the story tells us something about women. But it also, very importantly, tells us something about men. Raul’s sense of himself as a man required that he be the main provider for the family. This was also the role prescribed for him by his society. The sensitivity of this issue is shown in his anger at the mere suggestion that his wife might also be earning. Anna signalled the worker to be quiet and chose to speak only in her husband’s absence because she knew how central the idea of
himself as the ‘breadwinner’ was to his self-esteem. Peace at home and the family’s status in the community depended on this. Even when Anna saw that her income was just as important as her husband’s, she chose not to confront him.

Gender identity is clearly as much an issue for men as it is for women. This is just beginning to be recognised in development practice, with men’s groups organised to discuss fatherhood or tackle issues of alcoholism or violence in the home. These are, however, very marginal initiatives. Mainstream development takes men’s gender identities for granted, and even the move from ‘Women in Development’ (WID) to ‘Gender and Development’ (GAD) did little to shake the overwhelming preoccupation with women. Despite this, men throughout the world are behaving in ways that conform to their sense of what it is to ‘be a man’ in their context; and women throughout the world are manoeuvring within or contesting this. In this paper I argue that agencies and analysts should take seriously how this everyday practice affects development outcomes, and suggest some of the challenges that this involves for our existing approaches to work on gender issues.

**Gender as relationship**

The example of Raul and Anna makes it very clear that gender identities affect relationships. For Anna’s contribution to the family livelihood to be recognised openly, Raul would need to accept a more flexible model of male/female identities. His refusal to do this meant that she had to work a ‘double day’, taking on part of ‘his’ responsibility for earning as well as all the child-care and domestic work. This is just one example of a much more general rule. Change in gender relations cannot take place in a vacuum. This is the foundation for believing that men and masculinities must be made an issue in gender planning:

if positive changes are to be achieved for women, men must change too.

This does not, of course, necessarily mean that issues of masculinity need to be tackled directly. Perhaps the most sustainable kind of change comes from the ‘bottom up’, as men are confronted by their women’s new assertiveness. A challenge from Anna would force Raul to respond either defensively with anger, violence or withdrawal; or by welcoming the change in their relationship and re-working his sense of himself as a man within that. The difficulty is that gender does not belong only to the particular relationship between husband and wife, but to much broader patterns of relationship between men and men, and between women and women. If Raul decided to give up cigarettes and gambling, he might well face ridicule from his male smoking and betting partners. Anna might find support from her friends, but she might also find that they, or other women in the family, counsel her to keep quiet, calling on ideals of feminine submission. If Raul’s male peers were already questioning the conventions together it would be much easier for him to change. Similarly, a male culture which condemns violence and values flexibility makes a positive response to women’s challenge much more likely.

The logic of this is clear. If women alone work for greater equality in gender relations they will face an uphill struggle. It will be another kind of ‘double day’, where they have to take responsibility not only for changing their own ideologies and practice, but those of their men as well. Changing oneself is hard enough; trying to change someone else often seems doomed to failure. Coupled with this, the intimacy, complexity, and entrenched character of gender relations mean that a sustained campaign, following multiple lines of attack, is called for. Women may need to be the prime movers. But their task will be impossible unless a dynamic
is generated amongst men to question their personal practice and the ideologies of masculinity which it embodies.

**Men’s private stories**

A theme in work on gender is the need to counter the ‘public’ orthodoxy by listening to ‘private’ stories. In the example given above, the public orthodoxy ‘men are the breadwinners’ was corrected by Anna’s private account of her earnings. But to focus only on women leaves intact the ‘public story’ for men, and so perpetuates a series of biases.

In the gender and development literature men appear very little, often as hazy background figures. ‘Good girl/bad boy’ stereotypes present women as resourceful and caring mothers, with men as relatively autonomous individualists, putting their own desires for drink or cigarettes before the family’s needs. The overtones in this of colonial stereotypes about ‘lazy natives’ are uncomfortable, to say the least. Recognition of women’s involvement in the market needs to be complemented by an acknowledgement of the part men play in the family. Emphasis on the opposition between women and men needs to be balanced with investigation of the conflicts and contradictions within and between men. A first step in analysing men and masculinities, therefore, is to explore the ‘private stories’ of men, and how they support or contradict the public ideologies of masculinity.

Studies of boys growing up suggest a considerable struggle to establish an opposition between masculine and feminine out of an earlier experience of gender identity as more ambivalent and continuous. Unlike the imagery of established patriarchal power, most studies show masculinity as rather fragile, provisional, something to be won and then defended, something under constant threat of loss. As Gilmore (1990:11) reverently states, real manhood is ‘a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds’.

From a different standpoint, Deniz Kandiyoti (1994) considers the tensions boys may experience growing up in a purdahah society. She suggests that the strict division between male and female spheres sets up a sharp contradiction for boys, who spend their first years in almost wholly female company and then have to make ‘an abrupt and possibly disturbing entry into the male world’ (ibid:204). She quotes Khan’s (1972) observations on the contradictions of purdah in boys’ development, where the father appears as authoritarian patriarch leading a fearful or resentful son to side with his mother. Something similar is suggested for Indian society by psycho-analyst Sudhir Kakar (1981). The close identification of sons with their mothers in the first five years is abruptly severed as they enter the male world. This ‘second birth’ is marked by new, and increasingly stringent, discipline. Unconditional mother love is replaced by conditional approval from men in the family. Kakar sums up this process by quoting a North Indian proverb: “Treat a son like a raja for the first five years, like a slave for the next ten and like a friend thereafter.” (Kakar, 1981:127).

Both authors see this childhood experience as having life-long effects, with Kandiyoti in particular believing that it sows the seeds of later ‘pro-feminist’ sympathies in men. Certainly there is much more affection, support and solidarity across gender lines than much of the literature suggests. Regarding South Asia, for example, great stress is laid on son preference and the economic disaster of having too many daughters in the context of high dowry demands. A small incident demonstrated to me how partial this is. I was sitting with the father of the family with whom I stayed during my research in Bangladesh, and some of his male friends. Another neighbour joined us, close to tears. He explained that he had
had to leave his own home, as they were preparing for his daughter’s wedding and he couldn’t bear to lose her. The sympathy with which the other men received him showed that this was a common feeling they all shared. Nor was this an isolated incident. It was reinforced by the consistently easy and affectionate relationship which my host enjoyed with his six-year-old daughter, which allowed her even to criticise his behaviour within a framework of jokes and teasing.

As noted above, the ideology of male autonomy is a powerful one. Gilmore (1990:223) expresses this in glowing terms:

*Manhood is a kind of male procreation: its heroic quality lies in its self-direction and discipline, its absolute self-reliance — in a word in its agential autonomy.*

Attending to men’s family relationships offers a corrective to this. Countering the tendency she sees to concentrate on solidarity between women, Fonseca (1991) notes that amongst slum-dwellers in Brazil, brothers were the most important sources of external support to women. Where households and families are much more stable, as in Bangladesh, the family is a formidable institution of social control. The relations involved, of course, differ according to gender and birth placing, but the fact of very distinct and demanding expectations is constant. The interrelation of power and responsibility is very evident. An eldest son, for example, has considerable authority over his siblings, but it would be hard to argue that he enjoys autonomy. On the contrary, the demands on him to assume family leadership are often experienced in considerable tensions between the interests of his natal family and conjugal unit. Men may have more room for manoeuvre than women, but the difference is a question of degree.

A further check on the claims of male autonomy lies in the association of masculinities with status. To some extent this is an issue between men and women. Heterosexual performance, for example, appears as a significant area of male anxiety. Nick Hornby’s novel *High Fidelity* is testament to this in contemporary Britain; Gilmore (1990:74) echoes it for Trukese society as he quotes Thomas Gladwin’s (1953) comment that intercourse is a contest in which only men can lose. But the broader context within which men negotiate their relationships with women is their standing in society *with respect to other men*. Tales of sexual exploits are thus common currency in male-male discussions, while conversely, women’s unlicensed sexual expression is a threat to male prestige.

That relations between men and women rest on broader patterns of competition between men is illustrated by Penelope Harvey (1994:76) in an example from the Peruvian Highlands. There, she says, women may use courts against men guilty of infidelity, but a man would never do the same, as to admit publicly that his woman had been unfaithful would be to undermine his authority before the male hierarchical figure of the judge. Masculinity certainly does not appear to be self-reliant and autonomous. On the contrary, masculinity seems to depend chronically on the estimation of others, to be highly vulnerable to attack by ridicule, shaming, subordination, or ‘dishonourable’ female action.

The stress on male status makes masculinity largely a matter of public performance. But the sense of oneself as a man has also a highly intimate dimension. For a man I knew in Bangladesh, his whole sense of self began to crumble when he discovered his wife was having an affair. Theirs had been a love marriage, and in the early years, he said, he considered himself the happiest man alive. His wife stopped the affair, but it then recurred, and her husband never recovered. He suffered a series of mysterious illnesses. He stopped working, stayed lying in the house in a darkened room, and avoided community events in which he used to take an active part. Deeply depressed, he
was no longer able to support the family. He lost the capacity to lead, to take decisions; although the oldest brother in his own family, he allowed the others to determine even major issues. His status fell sharply, as his sons and brothers became irritated and then despising, and respect in the wider community turned to whispers of scandal and then exclusion. While not conforming to dominant gender models, this ‘deviant’ behaviour still makes implicit reference to them (see Abu Lughod, 1986). In a sense he became feminised, as he withdrew from the outside world. But his decline also had a clear masculine script: he punished himself and his family through serious alcohol abuse.

Counting the cost

The costs to men of models of masculinity can be seen at the public level too. Perhaps the crudest indicator in any ‘quality of life’ index is the capacity to survive. The overwhelming recruitment of men as fighters by both state and revolutionary forces puts them in great danger. The highest rates of homicide in the United States are found amongst young black men. Men in the North have a life expectancy consistently several years less than that of women, suggesting the costs of gender-related occupational and consumption patterns. At a less stark level, many men suffer as they try to adjust their sense of themselves with the demands that society makes on them. Many men are unable to build good relationships with their children because they have to spend too much time away from home working. Clearly, the current constitution of gender identities causes problems for men, as well as for women.

Gender, age, race and class

What difference will studying men and masculinities make to the frameworks we use to analyse gender in development? First, the competition between men that masculinity involves raises the question of whether gender may similarly generate conflicts between women. That gender does not provide an automatic basis for solidarity has long been recognised. Molyneux (1985) points out the diversity of ‘women’s interests’: some of which derive from their gender identity, but others from factors such as race and class. She proposes the notion of ‘gender interests’, for those derived specifically from structural inequality by gender. Practical interests lie in bettering one’s situation within the existing system (such as women having access to affordable childcare). Strategic interests relate to structural change of the system (for instance, challenging the assumption that domestic work is women’s responsibility).

This framework can reveal how gender-based divisions between women may arise. Taking the example of Kandiyoti’s ‘patriarchal bargain’, it is the practical gender interests of older women which limit most strictly the gender interests of their younger kin.
The practical and strategic dimensions of gender interests thus set up difference, and the potential for conflict, both within women and amongst them. Common oppression can become a rallying cry for collective action, but by no means always does so. Establishing contradictions of interest within the subordinate group is one way in which dominance is secured.

A second important implication of ‘counting men in’ is the attention it brings to status, and to the connections between gender, age, race and class. This suggests that all these interests are dynamically related, shaping and being shaped by each other in turn. Considering male gender identities brings out the extent to which the apparently neutral ‘class’ or ‘national’ interest may in fact be implicitly related to male gender stereotypes. An example may help to clarify this. The speaker is Bolai, a Bangladeshi landless labourer. At the time, 20 taka (including food) was the average daily male wage in the area.

Listen, let me tell you something. It was the lean time, and we weren’t getting work anywhere. I’d come back home and my kids were crying: Dad, I’m hungry; and I had nothing to give them to eat. So we went to Fazlur and asked if he had any work. He said he had some earth work that needed doing, how much would we take? So we thought: it’s the lean time, there’s no point in hustling and asking a lot. If we get six Taka we can just about manage. So that’s what we asked for.

So he said: O, my son’s just bought a Honda, six Taka, how can I manage that! So, there we are, listening to the tale of his woes. In the end he says: I’ll give you three Taka. Three Taka for a day’s work! So we thought and said, Give us one Taka more, give us four. And he said: O how can I manage that? I’ll give you three and a half Taka, take it or leave it, that’s my last word. So we took it. What can we do? They know we have no choice.

(White, 1992:47)

The primary context of this interaction is clearly one of class relations. It provides a text-book account of the reproduction of class inequality to the advantage of the rich and the further impoverishment of the poor. But interestingly, both of the protagonists also draw on their gender identities. Bolai’s position as labourer, and Fazlur’s capacity as employer, are both based on their identities as men. Both of them also make reference to their (gender) role as father in mitigating their part in the interaction. Bolai frames his acceptance of the low rates of pay in terms of his responsibilities as father, perhaps thereby reclaiming some masculine honour from an otherwise shaming subordination. Fazlur legitimates his refusal to provide a living wage by reference to his own need to provide his son with a motorbike — itself a totem of masculinity in that village context. Bolai’s bargaining strength is further undermined by his ethnicity — a minority Adivasi — against Fazlur’s dominant status as Muslim Bengali. Class interests are thus expressed in gender-related ways, but the role that gender plays is equivocal: it at once helps structure the system of domination and is used by both actors to bargain over the terms of engagement.

Masculinity and values

Development is concerned with the practical. The great desire is to make a difference. In this context, is not talking about masculinities a retreat into the abstract, a pursuit of academic interest only? To answer this, it is important to review different aspects of gender relations. We tend to see gender in dualistic ways, with men and women as different and opposing categories. But what are considered ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ attributes (and these differ by social context) are found in both men and women. Ian Craib, a British psychologist and sociologist,
states that in the counselling groups with which he has worked there was no simple pattern of men being aggressive or women passive, as the imagery of masculine and feminine prescribe (1994:139). What this means, is that gender is not only to do with persons, but also very importantly, with values. Connell (1995:223) brings these two dimensions together:

Masculinity is shaped in relation to an overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men), and in relation to a general symbolisation of difference (the opposition of femininity to masculinity).

As a set of values, masculinity is available to women as well as men. It was, for example, during Margaret Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister in the UK that the term ‘wets’ was coined for those members of the Conservative Party who did not agree with her hard line. The gender critique of the policies she instituted is familiar with respect to structural adjustment (eg Elson, 1991). What is important to recognise is that these outcomes are not coincidental, but derive from the fact that the economic policies followed were inscribed in a particular model of masculinity. It is also vital to note that this ‘macho’ style of politics did not simply serve to advantage (some) men over (some) women, but to reproduce and intensify much broader patterns of domination by race and class as well. Different styles of masculinity are developed historically, not given for all times and places. Those now dominant are therefore integrally interwoven with ‘development’ — through colonialism, the movement towards modernity, and now globalisation. To explore masculinities therefore represents not only a challenge to gender analysis, but to the power and culture of the development enterprise as a whole.

Masculinity and development practice

If the argument of this paper is correct, it means that treating gender as solely a women’s issue seriously underestimates the scale of the battle to achieve a more just society. This has major implications for the GAD approach, in relation to the issue of ‘empowerment’.

Empowerment has usually been conceived in terms of women’s growing self-confidence and ability to act (‘power to’) rather than women ‘taking power’ (‘power over’) from men (see eg Moser, 1989:1815). Nevertheless, it is very clear that if women’s empowerment is to be sustained, it must be complemented by a change for men. The scant attention so far paid to male interests or needs has as yet resulted in relatively little fall-out, perhaps reflecting the limited success of many ‘empowerment’ initiatives. Nevertheless, there are danger signs. Probably the most lauded development programme world-wide is the Grameen Bank savings and credit programme for poor women in Bangladesh. While still tentative, there are reports that this programme has been associated with an increase in violence against women in the home (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1994:19). It is possible, that the violence represents men’s ‘struggle for the maintenance of certain fantasies of identity and power’ (Moore 1994:154) in the context of a public assault on established gender norms which has totally failed to take their interests into account. This may be too alarmist, but it is a real possibility. The ‘backlash’ against feminism in the United States and the establishment of neo-conservative men’s groups, both black and white, provide strong arguments for taking this seriously.

Secondly, while gender-oriented programmes broadly aim to make women less poor, as well as ‘more empowered’, they still tend to focus on gender in
isolation from other social relations. Considering masculinity, however, points up how gender also plays a part in the other relations of inequality which structure society. Changes in gender relations should thus be expected to challenge other kinds of power relations, by class, age and by race. This has two practical implications. First, that working for change on gender will meet all kinds of resistance, from men and women defending their status with respect to age, class or race, not simply gender in itself. Second, that working on gender should bring out, rather than obscure, broader issues of inequality: amongst women and amongst men, as well as between the sexes.

To take this on will mean re-orienting GAD practice from assuming gender as the endpoint to making it the entry point for further analysis. As many have pointed out, the price of ‘mainstreaming’ (which is still far from complete) has been a shift from seeing it as a political issue (what had posed as universal excluded the interests of half of the human race!) to a technical one, which could be incorporated within the existing model of development with only major adjustments. What has received less attention, is that the focus on gender also blocked out other considerations. Gender became the justice issue, women the ‘minority’ whose interests should be considered, ‘social development’ became, at least in some agencies, very largely commandeered by ‘gender specialists’. Widening the picture to include consideration of men and masculinities should not simply ‘count men in’, but also broaden and deepen our understanding of power and inequality.

**Ways forward**

What does all this mean for development practice? Does it simply amount to a watering down of the manifesto for change in gender relations, to a weak position which states that ‘men have problems too’? And even if it is accepted that men need to change, how is this to be brought about? Should we be looking to establish men’s groups with a focus on gender, parallel to those which already exist for women?

R W Connell’s review of the experience of men’s ‘consciousness-raising’ groups in the West, suggests that this is not the best way forward. Men do not, like women, have a common structural interest in changing gender relations. Despite the struggles within and between them, they still benefit overall from the existing system. This means that men’s groups are inherently unstable and often short-lived; they tend to retreat from the political into the personal; and can easily shift from being pro-feminist to quite hostile, as men become defensive at having to shoulder all the blame for patriarchy (op cit:235-6). Connell suggests, therefore, that men are more likely to change in ways that benefit women when gender relations are questioned in the context of another shared struggle. The example he gives is the green movement, which is not explicitly concerned with gender, and yet in its methods of organising and opposing the values which threaten the environment challenges men and women to question the way they operate, and to seek alternatives.

Working with men to question their behaviour is one part of the enlarged gender project. But making an issue of masculinity also reverses the strong tendency noted by Robertson (1984:305) to ‘study down’, to investigate marginal groups and filter this information up to those in power. Instead, he argues, it is important to analyse the powerful themselves, those who determine development strategies, and so provide material to those below to inform and strengthen their struggles. Making an issue of masculinity therefore means not only focusing on men, but on the institutions, cultures, and practices that sustain gender inequality.
along with other forms of domination, such as race and class. This will involve questioning symbolic as well as material dimensions of power. It means working on, and recognising the connections between, the personal and professional, the politics of institutions and the global system. It will involve men and women, black and white, rich and poor working separately and together to forge strategic alliances based not simply on where they have come from, but on where they want to go.

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Notes
1 Further examples of this point are given in an earlier paper (White, 1994).
2 This is the way, for example, that targeting women for welfare handouts or credit intervention is commonly justified.
3 This, of course, is open to debate from a woman’s perspective!
4 The association of alcohol (ab)use with masculinity is, of course, a culturally specific one.

References
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