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# The Problem of Being Male

By Dr Steve Kermode

I was asked to offer some observations on the problems facing men in contemporary Australian society. Anyone who has done any reading in the area or been involved with a men's group will know that men are in trouble. Authors such as Steve Biddulph have listed a litany of problems for contemporary Australian men. The data is alarming.

**A**ustralian men, on average, live for six years less than women do. They routinely fail in close relationships; for example, almost half of their marriages break down, and divorces are initiated by the woman in four-out-of-five cases. Over 90% of convicted acts of violence will be carried out by men, and 70% of the victims will be men. In school, around 90% of children with behavioural problems are boys and over 80% of children with learning problems are also boys. One in seven boys will experience sexual assault by an adult or other child before the age of eighteen.

Young males have much higher rates of death from drowning, motor vehicle accidents, and drug dependence. Men comprise over 90% of inmates of gaols. Men are also 74% of the unemployed. Young men are four times more likely than young women to commit suicide.

Men are significantly worse off than women across a whole range of health and welfare concerns. A number of authors argue that aspects of men's socialisation have had a major impact on health-risk behaviour on their mental health and their sense of wellbeing. These factors include excessive competition, unrealistic and unattainable models of masculinity, poor self-esteem, lack of meaningfulness in their lives, poor identity formation and lack of sustainable role models.

The literature all seems to be pointing at the same phenomenon - contemporary social roles for men have changed so quickly, and to such an extent, that many modern men do not know how to behave in the modern world. They are disconnected from their reason for being. They can no longer hunt, fight and conquer in the ways they have previously done, and for which their genetic endowment has prepared

them, and yet they also lack the personal resources to fulfil themselves in other ways. Life's modern challenges are different - they are emotional, technical and financial. Relationships and jobs have become the battlefields that men occupy, and their most powerful enemies are their own expectations. Moreover, they are becoming consistently out-performed in these arenas by their female competitors.

Women's genetic inheritance has given them an advantage in areas where networking, emotional intimacy, communication and social support are useful tools. Men's genetic inheritance, which has programmed them for physical strength, aggression, and rugged independence, is no longer relevant. Rinders University researcher Larry Owens found that girls are socialised into verbal and passive aggressive forms of behaviour, and incorporate them into their repertoire of interpersonal skills (SMH, 30-4-02). They learn the skills of emotional aggression while boys do not. Physical violence is illegal, whereas passive aggression and emotional violence are not. Our society has constructed a powerful set of sanctions which actively encourage female power-seeking behaviour and which actively discourage male power-seeking behaviour.

Our society is being systematically de-masculinised. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a good case in point. The behavioural traits attributed to this disorder are archetypal male. It is the de-masculinised Western cultures that have elevated it to epidemic status. Because testosterone driven behaviour is now a liability in most social roles, men have had to rely on the power of money to maintain their position of social dominance. Economic dominance is the last bastion of patriarchy. It too will crumble as more and more women opt for independent economic security, and as marriage becomes irrelevant as a social institution.

It must be said that the data on suicide in Australia paint it as being predominantly a men's issue. At a global level, studies have shown that countries with high suicide rates also have high divorce rates, high youth unemployment, high female employment, and high levels of alcohol consumption - all are factors which undermine the traditional social roles of men, and are symptomatic of the de-masculinisation process.

There is a problem too in how society and its formal institutions have stereotyped men. Men are, for instance, seen as the prime perpetrators of violence in domestic relationships. This is despite recent evidence from an analysis of over 70 research studies that indicates otherwise. This analysis, con-

## Growing men

ducted by New Zealand academic Garth Fletcher summarises the evidence from 60,000 participants in studies from the US, Canada, New Zealand, Britain, Australia, Korea and Israel. It found that the rates of violent acts by partners in intimate relationships are roughly the same for both men and women. On top of this it found that both men and women reported that women are more likely to be the initiators of such violence.

The stereotype of men as potentially violent and sexually predatory is only now starting to be challenged by serious researchers. While it is clear that the behavioural effects of testosterone can be easily demonstrated in both experimental and clinical studies, this does not take account of the complex social factors that conspire to produce such stereotyped behaviour in real life social situations.

The majority of men are not reported for acts of violence or sexual misconduct. All men, however, are suffering at the

hands of misplaced stereotypes and unrealistic expectations. Masculinity is the poorer for the perpetuation of these stereotypes. It seems, moreover, that the bad press that masculinity has experienced over the last half century has been endured in silence by men, because of fear about challenging gender-based political correctness. Men do not want to be looked at as wife-beating, axe-murdering paedophiles, but they don't know what to do about it.

The future for men is bleak unless masculinity can reinvent itself. For many men, this planet has become an alien environment. Many of them feel as though they do not belong here. That's why so many choose to opt out through suicide. It's not because of depression. In fact a study by the Centre for Adolescent Health in 1996 found that teenage girls are more likely to suffer depression than boys, yet it is teenage boys who are far more likely to kill themselves. The problem

## A commentary by the Growing Men department co-ordinator Peter Keil

As the articles for this issue's men's section came in I found myself again confronted with the complex problem of the relationship between the personal and political. Dr Steve Kernode's article confronts us with the disaster that is manhood in modern Australia. And then the rest of the pieces present us with examples of how positive change can occur. The Return by Mohan Clarke presents a beautiful and moving sense of a 'soon to be father' coming to grips with that mystery and I note with pleasure his concern over the 'medicalisation' of birth and his call for men to see this as their issue too. Interviewing Dr Albert Salmons provided the pleasure that always comes when I meet a man who has the courage to pursue his own path with integrity. And finally the work of Forrest James in the Interrelate organisation shows that there are more accessible opportunities opening up for men who are feeling the call to change.

Many, many years ago I ran the Youth Affairs Council of Tasmania, a non-government peak body and was involved in the bizarre world of lobbying, organising, protest and compromise that comes with that kind of work. Then, I believed that the way to

fight for change was to work with the structures of our society. Eventually, I became disillusioned with the cynicism and hypocrisy of our political system (the answers to many social problems are reasonably clear but even though politicians know what they are they will not act). Like many others I started thinking in terms of changing people not the system and the first person to work on was myself, for as Joseph Campbell said, "The vital person vitalises."

If we are to take our place as mature men in this world we must somehow stand up and fight for change both within and without, yet how do we do this? How do we understand the way in which the lives of ourselves, our loved ones and our community are being manipulated by forces that we cannot even see? A tiny and almost untouchable group of people (mostly white males) control the wealth and resources of the world and seem largely disinterested in the consequences of their actions for ordinary people. Steven Kernode's article outlines a grim analysis of just what those consequences are for Australian men.

Power is at issue here, the power to be wise men in a world that wants us to stay ignorant, the power to explore our masculine spirit and rediscover its positive energies, the power to grasp the bigger picture and see how it touches our everyday lives and then decide what we want to do about it—and then do it. There is some-

thing powerful beginning to emerge. The American 50s Christian Anarchist revolutionary Saul Alinsky claimed revolution starts in the middle classes, as they are in a position to see both ends of the spectrum. The English politician Tony Benn argues that the only way that ordinary people have been able to make headway is through organising. Somehow we must learn to make exciting again the idea of equality and genuine democracy, compromise, rights, freedom with responsibility, generosity not selfishness. We can't trust our politicians to do it, for as John Ralston Saul points out they have sold out to the corporate interests who now truly set the agenda for our society.

"How do I translate this to action in my everyday life?" It's a question for all of us but I think especially for men, as we seem to be floundering to rediscover our purpose. I see signs of a gentle men's revolution everywhere. I spent years fighting political fights and then decided to change myself in the new-found belief that from my own growth change spreads—I still believe it, and this I think, our greatest hope—that by men finally confronting the personal pain of being alive and finding their depth and strength within it, they will influence others until it eventually changes the world. In the following articles lies evidence that this might be true. Are we in time? I don't know but I feel hopeful. Enjoy.

for men is what Emile Durkheim first described as 'anomie', many Australian men simply feel disconnected from their social reality. Their jobs have become less relevant and less satisfying (if they are lucky enough to have one) through the process of casualisation and the death of single career work trajectories, and many men cannot sustain relationships because their role in relationships is not clear any more. Many men are ending up isolated and alone because of the changing nature of work and the changing nature of relationships. There are, however, very few isolated women. Women are able to shut men out of social life very effectively. Networking and social support seem to be part of the everyday fabric of women's lives, no matter what the setting is. It is not so for men.

There is a great paradox inherent in this scenario. There is considerable empirical and scientific evidence to support the importance of holism in sustaining health and wellbeing, not to mention the survival of the human species, and of the inter-connectivity of all things as reflected in the principles of biodiversity. Yet so many men feel so disconnected, so alienated and so isolated. Why do they know one thing with their heads, and feel something quite different with their hearts? Why can they not transfer their beliefs into their experience? There is a desperate need for many men to find ways to actively re-engage. Men are going to have to do it for themselves. It is up to men to reconstruct their own social reality. Women are already doing it for themselves and men have been left behind. The project of feminism, at least in the Western world, is well underway. The project of neo-masculinism is yet to begin.

Life has pushed men headlong onto the major battlefields of contemporary life – jobs and relationships, yet they seem

unable to respond adequately to the challenge, because politically incorrect testosterone-driven behaviour has not been replaced with any other primal drives that better equip men for survival in the modern world. Many men are standing transfixed by the spectacle before them, and unable to respond in any way that is safe. While archetypically female hormone-driven behaviour is given either reverent or humorous quasi-mythological status, archetypically male hormone-driven behaviour has been medicalised and criminalised. As a consequence of this, disconnecting is often the only safe response for men. This then is the heart of the paradox. Men are yearning for connectivity in a social context that alienates them, and once alienated, they have no skills to negotiate their way back. They remain disconnected, because in our society it is unsafe to do anything else.



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