

TRADITIONAL, ALTERNATIVE, DIVERSE? A REFLECTION ON THE PRODUCTION
OF MASCULINITY IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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ABSTRACT

NOWADAYS, THE EXISTENCE AND PROLIFIC PRODUCTION OF NEW WAYS OF BEING A MAN IS THE SUBJECT OF DEBATE. THIS COMPLEX PROCESS CANNOT BE ANALYZED WITHOUT THE NGOs INVOLVEMENT IN MASCULINITY, SINCE THEY HAVE REGARDED THIS ISSUE AS A PRIMARY OR SECONDARY OBJECTIVE IN THEIR SOCIAL INTERVENTION ACTIONS. THIS ARTICLE ALSO INCLUDES AN ANALYSIS BASED ON THE INFORMATION POSTED IN FIVE LATIN AMERICAN NGOs WEBSITES. THESE ANALYSES DISCLOSE A NUMBER OF RELEVANT QUESTIONS AND DISPUTED POINTS TO BEAR IN MIND WHEN DEALING WITH THE PRODUCTION OF MASCULINITY.

KEY WORDS: GENDER, MASCULINITIES, NGOs

INTRODUCTION

During the last four decades, masculinities and the different forms of being a man have gradually become an enthralling issue for mass media and a relevant subject matter for scholars and for a population group. This issue has also triggered the interest of health institutions and social services. Seemingly, laboratories manufacturing drugs and cosmetics, and the large private health corporations alike have identified men as

consumers of products, technologies and processes. We can also say that masculinities have resulted in the establishment of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a common issue debated in meetings held by international bodies concerned with gender equality and equity,¹ emphasizing their priority in agencies and foundations providing funds for social intervention projects.

Besides, we should not forget that religious and educational institutions have historically expressed their concern, and are still concerned, in how men should be. Consequently, many institutions (and others) are now resorting to medical, psychological, religious, political and other arguments to draw up discourses permeated with “truths”—which have now turned into a political dispute—to legitimize or devalue certain forms of being a man.

Institutions at all levels are actively engaged in different discourses on masculinities. We are witnessing an intense production of several forms of being a man, frequently known as “new masculinities.” And, at the same time, we can hardly ignore how traditional masculinity references are (re)surfacing, such as the Old Spice deodorant propaganda urging men to be real men.²

In this regard, we can affirm that, either to approve or discredit them partially or wholly, the new forms of being a man are, to a certain extent, discussed in such spaces. These new forms are also known as new masculinities, that is, non-hegemonic, emerging, non-traditional, positive, alternative, feminist or dissident masculinities. It is highly possible that these terms relate to theories associated with the existence of a hierarchy defining (dominant, representative, traditional) hegemonic masculinities in a relatively antagonistic fashion with attributes, attitudes and behaviors, which are not necessarily in contradiction with being a man (1).

An analysis of this complex and multiple process of producing new men cannot be separated from the performance of NGOs who incorporate masculinity issues as the main objective or co-narration in social intervention actions. These NGOs have been consolidated as social institutions actively involved in producing male identities, in what

they call "different men." Based on the objectives set forth by these NGOs (their activities, messages, invitations and images), they construct knowledge, concepts, behaviors and representations of what the so-called "new" men should be in our times. Particularly, in the so-called "emerging" countries, and Brazil is one of them, the NGOs have played a fundamental role as observers and critics of public health and educational policies and have proposed social intervention actions. Like in the Brazilian case, the NGOs are actively involved in mass media and consultative councils of governmental organizations to implement public policies. Likewise, they are closely associated with a wide range of social movements, national and international funding institutions, and United Nations bodies.

In this regard, this paper attempts to share some reflections on the production of masculinities, making special reference to some Latin American NGOs engaged in promoting changes in men. For the purpose of our analysis, we have gathered and collected information and images posted in Internet by several NGOs with more than five-year experience working with groups of men in Brazil and other Latin American countries. The information collected corresponds to the first six months of 2012.

As our information source, we have selected the NGOs Internet pages because we have found that NGOs working on masculinity issues are characterized by their massive insertion in virtual settings. Therefore, we can affirm that they all have a broad web presence in blogs, home pages, photo albums and in the use of tools such as Twitter, Facebook and Orkut.

We should stress that this is the first article of a Doctor's degree research not yet concluded. For the time being, we are just sharing some impressions concerning an approach. Later on, we will cover other disputed points by incorporating more NGOs to the analysis, interviewing coordinators of this kind of project, and examining their designs and reports.

NGOs CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITIES

Brazilian mass media, and a lot of countries promoting gender equity, are engaged in giving visibility to the “new” men, perhaps because the controversy around this issue signals a profitable possibility. What seems evident is that the press has played an important role in disseminating the idea that men are undergoing an accelerated process of change that must be publicly known. We can easily find a story, press article, magazine cover, soap-opera character, documentary film, movie star, or propaganda representing and highlighting some prevailing patterns defining what a “real” man must be. We can find an emotional and less authoritarian father or a romantic and refined husband; men who share or are actively involved in household tasks; men who wax and take meticulous care of their hair, clothes and physical appearance. Likewise, there are men who identify themselves with women’s struggle and advocate for their labor and social promotion and insertion; others finally accept and promote their wives’ successes; some others acknowledge their attraction to novels, dance and theater; and quite a large number who select traditionally female professions, namely, nursing and children’s education.

Similarly, though to a lesser extent, mass media put before the public men who disclose their homosexuality and manage to be successful in their workplaces. Even in the sexuality field, we have seen men who acknowledge and speak about their bisexual behavior or heterosexual men who enjoy the caress of other men who equally disclose their heterosexuality (2). What is implicit in these masculinities is the detachment from representations identifying men as violent, authoritarian, virile, necessarily heterosexual, bold (and feared), self-sufficient, not interested in household chores, who assume parenthood from a distance, who do not openly express their feelings, in charge of making the main family decisions and who are not highly concerned with their esthetic appearance: a detachment that, in certain moments and contexts, could be understood as fractures in the “creation of a real man” project—a project to design and create desirable hegemonic ideals of masculinity in men themselves (1).

The feminist and LGBT³ movements stand out in denouncing the oppressive masculinity. The male power and the hetero-normative constitute the main sources for their questioning, highlighting that mankind, based on that male power, has witnessed all kinds of atrocities, namely, women who are ill-treated, robbed, locked up, battered, assassinated, burnt, raped, discriminated, punished, and subdued. This list must also include children, homosexuals, transvestites, blacks, elders and all those showing a female or inferiority trait. Therefore, we cannot consider the increasing interest in masculinity as a fortuitous matter, or as a genuine and exclusive concern of men motivated by statements as doubtful as "new times," "new millennium," "wishing to make the most of life," "wishing to be flexible" or "new market demands."

However, in general, magazines and TV programs, when announcing and disseminating the emergence of new men, do not establish a clear connection with feminism, which has been conducting a prominent political activity in favor of women's rights and has been producing "new forms of being a woman" for many years now, thus generating alterations in gender relations.

Critics to oppressing and dominant masculinities and the visibility of "different" men cannot be understood outside denunciations made by the feminist movement and women's studies. Likewise, we cannot ignore the impact achieved by LGBT activities in destabilizing the dominant forms of being a man, and giving visibility to male homosexual actors. Other relevant contributions include the masculinity studies, experiences gained by centers and organizations working with men, and legal reforms implemented as a result of these processes. All in all, there are many intertwined, and frequently misunderstood, interests in projects for the creation of "new men." Men preferred by feminists might not completely fit the forms of being a man advocated by LGBT movements. In fact, each feminist trend construes changes in gender relations with different nuances. Forms of being a man championed by homosexual activists are not necessarily the same as those defended by transvestites, transsexuals and lesbians. Likewise, concerns expressed by those studying male mortality and morbidity and the

changes they propose perhaps have little to do with the new meaning of parenthood promoted by some NGOs.

Behind male changes, there is a wide range of interests which are often complicated and opposed. These interests derived from multiple controversies that cannot be analyzed without bearing in mind the existing gender-theory differences, political disagreements between feminists and LGBT movements, profitable business interests who identify the new man as a potential consumer of goods, and reluctances commonly found in every transformation process. This reinforces the fact that masculinities are constructed and produced in close connection with the inherent interests of power relations unevenly established in a given historical and cultural context. If in this analysis we include the specificities that can arise from the intertwine between masculinities and the class, race, nationality, sexuality, profession, religion, residence, age, and schooling representations, then we will find a wide range of new men portraying contradictions, fragmentations, ambiguities and indefinable traits. However, there is a well-defined and accepted idea: the overwhelming majority of men must change.

SEARCHING FOR THE NEW MAN IN NGOS

Currently, it is hard to establish clear-cut limits in an attempt to classify NGOs promoting changes in men. Nevertheless, they all have a common element: most of them favor feminism and propose feminist education or changes in men in accordance with feminist principles and aspirations.

The mushrooming of NGOs working with men in different countries is closely associated with the visibility of male change importance in international meetings and debates as a key factor to eradicate gender inequalities. For example, the Plan of Action, adopted at the 1994 World Population Conference held in Cairo, highlights the social and familial function of men and their responsibilities in sexual and reproductive behaviors. Then, the 1999 Review and Appraisal of the World Population Plan of Action Special Report devoted a major space to men underlining that leaders, progenitors, and educators should promote positive models to help boys become gender-sensitized adults (3). It also deals

with the need for men to respect women's human rights, share household chores, participate in child rearing, and eliminate sexual and other kinds of violence. The inclusion of men in these guiding documents as an intervention objective has been decisive to broaden priorities and funding by international and governmental bodies and, consequently, expand NGOs leading projects with men.

Seemingly, the main initial argument for the creation and multiplication of these NGOs was the acknowledgement of the important role of men in eliminating violence against women and other social groups, despite the broadening and diversification of principles, objectives and dimensions achieved in this sphere, as pointed out by Arilha's studies of UN conference documents stating that considerations on men made in development processes have been signed by an instrumentalist character; that is, reference to men is merely associated with the improvement of women's health and rights (4).

The many activities carried out by NGOs working with men (awareness-raising, training, study, education, group work, therapy, public policy promotion, legal proposals, guidance, counseling, organizing demonstrations, meetings or congresses, bibliographic production, newspaper editions, compilation of bibliographic materials, assistance lines, filing denunciations, personal support) are aimed at promoting and creating new meanings and alternative ways of thinking about and living masculinity. The expansion of these NGOs in Brazil and in almost every region in the world can be attested in a brief search through Internet. These NGOs are responding to the imperative need to include men in the construction of gender equity, the promotion of a peace culture, or the prevention of violence. They are also proposing an alternative discourse on how men and women should be. Some of them are aimed at men, but it is also possible to find the inclusion of masculinity in some of the specific objectives of NGOs exclusively working with women or dealing with issues such as violence, drugs, cancer, HIV/AIDS, peace culture, and parenthood.

One of these NGOs displaying an outstanding work in the region is the Masculinity, Couple and Sexuality Institute in Costa Rica, established in 1999 and known as the WEM

Institute. It describes itself as “an organization working mainly on gender with the male population on issues such as violence, equity, promotion of new masculinities, parenthood and sexuality” (5). The violence-masculinity relationship is repeatedly found in the objectives, principles, working sphere and programs of the WEM Institute. The main issue discussed with men at the “Men’s School,” which seems to be the main program of this NGO, is anger control and violence prevention. However, other issues are also included in this school program, namely, parenthood, health, stress, marriage communication, jealousy, infidelity, divorce, and male sexuality.

The WEM Institute bets on the pedagogical perspective, highlighting the learning-teaching rationale and devising methodologies to help in the establishment of gender and sexuality pedagogy (6) to produce better men. In this regard, which men should be improved? The Institute itself affirms that it has been working with male chauvinists who, in some cases, have been violent or prone to an excessive control over their partners. Obviously, the main target population includes: low-income men, apparently heterosexuals, between thirty and forty years old, unconcerned about their bodies, jealous and violent prone. Those who are popularly called “primitive men”: “Men living in traditionally (though not exclusively) male environments (workers, truck, bus and taxi drivers, policemen, football players, among others)” (5). Images accompanying the working spheres and objectives confirm this idea. The terms sexual diversity and gay movement are discreetly mentioned in the WEM website. Seemingly, this promoting alternative for men’s change is mainly focused on those heterosexuals who can be better rather than other possibilities of being men who are not necessarily heterosexuals.

We could say that we are witnessing discrepancies between the new masculinity representations emphasized by mass media and the goals set forth by NGOs. Most of the time, these new men portrayed in the press are represented as young, white, blond, waxed, tall, slim or muscular men, within a middle-class consumption level. However, the change representation proposed by the WEM Institute is closer to what might be a low-

income, basically heterosexual, non-violent, working man, respectful husband, involved in the education of his children, though perhaps homophobic.

The PAPAI Institute⁴ is a Brazilian NGO founded in 1997. Though male issues are at the core of PAPAI projects, they are not explicitly stated in its institutional mission:

our main objective is to strengthen actions by the civil society to achieve equal rights for men and women, thus promoting the formulation and supervision of feminist and gender public policies [7].

In its foundational principles, PAPAI clearly states that it “stems from successful achievements attained by social movements historically organized since the 1960s, particularly women’s and feminist movements, and those advocating sexual rights, particularly of gays and lesbians” (7). This statement defines PAPAI’s political platform in which respect for sexual and reproductive rights, human diversity and eradication of all forms of discrimination and violence, especially those based on gender, race/ethnic, age and/or sexual orientation, lies at the core of its projects. In conformity with these principles, PAPAI website displays images portraying a wider diversity of masculinities, though with a higher prevalence of low-income mestizos and blacks. For example, photos attached to the announcement of the 6th National Seminar “Men and masculinities: Intimate practices and public policies” (2010), jointly organized by the PAPAI Institute and other entities, confirm this idea. However, it calls the attention that Ernesto Che Guevara was the man selected to be portrayed in this NGO home page. Undoubtedly, he was a fighter who advocated many causes and had an ideological concept on the new man (8), but it is hard to assert that he becomes a reference when speaking about the need of a different man, though this does not mean that he was not aware of violations and discriminations of women’s rights.

Another NGO with a great visibility in Brazil is the Promundo Institute, a non-profitable association created in 1997. Promundo’s mission is “to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women, children and youth in Brazil and the world” (9). As this is its main mission, the masculinity issue constitutes one of its main working areas.

Promundo's projects and programs evidence its leaders' concern on "the traditional masculinity." In Program H, implemented by Brazil and other countries, special attention is paid to health care, parenthood responsibility, and respect for women as men's more equitable behaviors. Based on the analysis of objectives, programs and images posted in the Promundo website, we can affirm that this NGO expectation on masculinities is associated with the abovementioned representation of a non-violent, working, respectful husband, good father, though perhaps homophobic man.

In Mexico, Men for Equity foster "gender-oriented public policies to promote citizenship, thus contributing to eradicate gender violence and questioning the traditional masculinity concepts" (10). To this effect, they conduct three main activities: reflection groups, psycho-therapeutical care and courses—the most outstanding one being a Diploma course on masculinities and violent men. In this case, once again we find the reiteration of two issues which seem to be of great interest for NGOs working with men, namely, violence—particularly against women—and parenthood. However, masculinity studies in different countries have contributed to give visibility to other problems, such as traffic and industrial accidents, suicide, unemployment, male leadership, addictions, sexuality, homophobia, and migration (2, 11-15). We can affirm that violence against women and parenthood are commonly present in most of the projects currently developed by these NGOs.

Compared to previous cases, the Men for Equity website includes attributes which are not so different from the desired "men undergoing transformations" found in other NGOs interventions. These men ideals are deeply characterized by interests which are, since long ago, feminist demands: non-violent men and parenthood-responsible men. All the more, parenthood expectations were constructed as a result of women's discomforts and not of some men's discomforts, frustrations and barriers. Likewise, note should be taken on the key reference made on parenthood in heterosexual families without showing the huge diversity of family structures. Men for Equity are also conducting a youth course to promote gender equity. Although there are other (family, parenthood, love relations,

male emotional experience) courses, materials on meetings with youngsters include a difference in relation to the website information, namely, the men's possibility to express devalued or non-legitimized identities. The website states that "it is important to work on equity issues with youth, where diversity, dialogue, cooperation and fidelity become new values of their identity . . . the male identity or the one they decide to construct" (10).

Finally, we believe it is important to include the Center for Masculinity and Gender Studies⁵ from Uruguay. This center is made up by a team of professionals in human and social sciences and education, specifically qualified in gender and masculinity issues. The center's objectives are broad, since they cover health, democratic coexistence between genders, promotion of reflection spaces on men's problems, public policies, reproductive rights, male sexuality, and defense of rights and opportunities for gays, transsexuals and transvestites. Based on this information, we can say that this center stands out for the diversity of issues it deals with and the acknowledgement of the different male identities. Its activities focus on men groups and psychotherapy. Reflection groups debate on sexuality, parenthood, power, violence, xenophobia, class, gender socialization and patriarchy, thus promoting non-violence, equal opportunities, creation of non-hegemonic models and eradication of discrimination based on race, class, sexual orientation and religion.

In the Center for Masculinity and Gender Studies website new masculinities are dealt with as a possibility for all men, depending on the qualities most commonly found in each point of time. Images posted in the virtual page mainly portray white men who seem to correspond to the proposal to think of other forms of being a man, that is, men who love their partners, enjoy spending time with their children, feel passion for other men, and those who prefer the experience of child rearing. Though it is evident that these images come from films or other fiction sources, they do reflect the institution's stance and values. Nevertheless, when examining the profile of these images, the Center for Masculinity and Gender Studies reinforces the idea that the happy end of certain male transgressions is nothing but a middle-class white men's "privilege."

FINAL REMARKS

The preliminary website analysis of these NGOs working with men reveals that violence and parenthood are the two main issues behind their activities, followed by health.

It should be emphasized that the “new men” representations are barely disseminated by NGOs working on male issues, though they are established as authorized organizations to speak, classify, propose and represent masculinities in an axiological order through the knowledge contained in texts and images posted in their virtual sites, in reflection groups and in seminars and debates they organize. These practices result in effects, strengthen truths, and shape subjectivities. Their impact is even seen on women, despite the fact that they are not the main objective of these NGOs.

We must stress that our intention is not to devalue the guidelines of NGOs working with men. We simply believe that we must reflect on their characteristics and main activities. As researchers involved in these issues, we acknowledge the struggle for men’s transformation and the wide range of men groups, a key and indispensable action to ensure successful laws and programs aimed at gender equity and equality.

NOTES

1. Though equality and equity are terms indistinctively used, we do not consider them as synonyms. The concept of gender equality is based on the idea that we are all equal in every (political, economic, social, educational, professional) aspect and dimension of life. Therefore, we all have the same rights. Gender equity refers to the differentiated treatment between men and women, bearing in mind the respective needs, specific conditions and difficulties of each group to enjoy access to certain rights.

2. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsTGvy5pc04>

3. Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transsexuals and Transgender.

4. Seemingly, the acronym relates to the NGO main initiative in 1997, the Programa de Apoyo al Padre Adolescente y Joven, a program to support young and adolescent fathers.

5. Available at <http://www.masculinidadesygenero.org/index.html> [accessed November 14, 2011].

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