

MASCULINITIES: IDENTITY REDEFINITION AND CHANGE ALTERNATIVES

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE BRIEFLY DESCRIBES THE HISTORY OF THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING AND REDEFINING MALE IDENTITIES AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON. IT ALSO INVOLVES A CRITICAL AND PROACTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF MEN IN THE REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOCIALLY ESTABLISHED GENDER ORDER.

KEY WORDS: MASCULINITIES, MALE IDENTITIES, HISTORICAL MASCULINITY FORMS

INTRODUCTION

Masculinities could be defined as the practices and descriptions associated with the different forms of being a man, established—or to be established—by men and women in their daily life, incorporated through the relations we build in our socializing spaces. Their development is characterized by limitations associated with their scope aimed at overcoming the current gender status as an alienated form of social relations.

HISTORY OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HEGEMONIC MALE IDENTITY

Moving from Matriarchy (or more properly said the matrilineal descent systems) to Patriarchy meant a sudden turn in the concept of family life since, besides woman's

withdrawal in the broadest sense of the term and the consolidation of man's power, it brought about the establishment of strict and differentiated behavior patterns, which also took expression in the roles of the chief family members.

Historical and social practice reinforced such differences not only in the specific sex-related activity or role within and beyond the family framework but also in the representation of such roles that society hold. That is how the abnormal (not in the Durkheimian sense) became normal and morally accepted: the maternal-paternal-filial family model.

In this model, women carry the burden of responsibility at home and, consequently, children are affectively closer to their mothers. Men, on the contrary, lost their physical presence in the family when the latter was an economic unit for material production. His status and prestige in this model are totally dissociated from the role he plays in the family.

Man has been assigned the supposedly omnipotent role of "great hero," lord of the economic, political, and social domains; master of his wife and of the latter's presumed power, though he gets to make the decisions. This "virile" and authoritarian role also hides his guilt and suffering. The historical construction of the hegemonic masculine identity was structured on the basis of these and other characteristics befitting a man. Today, the concept of being a traditional man entails and masks a wide range of aspects which, first and foremost, "reproduce and perpetuate inequalities" (1).

The construction of the hegemonic male model highlights a specific concept of power among men, which is dichotomic (power or no power with no in-between alternatives), excluding (either you have unilateral power or you do not) and hierarchical (implying a control-subordination relationship in which some win and others lose). This concept of power has permeated both institutions and subjectivities of men and women alike. This also affects other men as reflected in the violence among men and affects their corporal (I can), intellectual (I know),

economic (I have), emotional (repression of his emotions), and environmental (control over and exploitation of the environment and nature) lives. These elements make up the so-called masculine armor aimed against men themselves, at their control, with serious consequences for them and for everybody. The worst part is that it is not visible (2).

The traditional man lives out his condition surrounded by pressures and repressions imposed, inherited, incorporated, and legitimized at all levels and strata of society and in all periods and ages. In this context, the traditional man does not only become a static and statistical element, but his lack of prominence will encourage future generations to maintain the system legitimized by the large number of individuals who agree with inequalities and are indifferent to the discomfort and contradictions established by and derived from the social division of labor and the unequal distribution and possession of the means of production characteristic of the capitalist system (3).

Today, the crisis of masculinities, and particularly hegemonic masculinity, is marked by the following aspects:

- The transformations of capitalism (technology monopoly, control over the financial markets, monopolistic access to natural resources, monopoly of mass media and weapons of mass destruction) affect men (family providers and decision-makers) bringing about depression and violence;
- Male authority, particularly paternal authority, is no longer taken for granted as it conflicts with State authority;
- Women emancipation;
- The number of divorces, separations and second marriages has increased;
- It is increasingly recognized that the ways of being masculine vary according to culture. A masculine identity different from male-chauvinism is emerging.

LANDMARKS IN THE REDEFINITION OF MALE IDENTITY

Several historical moments have been a landmark in the attempt to redefine male identity and the gender relations on which it is based. One of those moments is the so-called courteous love, which Norbert Elias calls civilization process and consisted in the rewarding tactic of 12th-century noble French women, which brought them a more refined masculine treatment (4). Thus, a more emotional link was introduced in the practice of gender relations expressed in the *modus operandi* of the “gentlemen,” though the feminine and women remained subordinates.

Another historical moment favoring a redefinition of gender relations in the 19th century was the romantic love. It involved reinforcing the affective, sentimental component of social life, covering almost all fields of interpersonal relations and, hence, influencing gender relations, particularly, male identity. Till the 1960s male identity was constructed in a context in which the masculine and the male hegemony was guaranteed. Therefore, the gender identity of the heterosexual male—for which subordination of woman and the feminine is a *sine qua non* condition—was not at stake nor questioned (5).

A historical moment in which a particular context to redefine male identity was created was the so-called sexual revolution. In the words of Jeffrey Weeks, it is obvious that there were very vivid eruptions of sexuality in this stage, from the erotic dances of rock stars to the development of despicable areas for commercial sex in many important cities of the metropolitan West (6). There is proof, writes Jeffrey Weeks, that attitudes gradually became more or less tolerant regarding birth control, abortion, divorce, premarital and extramarital sex, cohabitation, and homosexuality. From that moment on, two big social movements emerged: the feminist movement and the gay movement.

In the feminist movement, there was a transition from a policy to support women (equal opportunities) to a policy that considered women as subjects of law (empowerment of women) evolving to gender democracy, which includes men. Feminism has undoubtedly been an important contribution to the democratization

processes of the global society, with a positive impact on the lives of women and of all persons at large.

Literature on the relation of this movement with men problems carries some interesting reflections. Referring to gender democracy in Latin America, Silke Helfrich, Director of the Central American Office of the Heinrich Boell Foundation, asserts that mechanisms other than those used for the empowerment of women are required, since gender equality is not the task of women alone but of society at large. Men must also recover lost ground so they need to be brought in to share responsibility. However, in daily actions the gender issue is associated with women's problems. This, the author states, is a fatal confusion with far-reaching consequences for defining target-groups for projects, selecting groups invited to gender-related meetings and debates, and drawing up a strategy for projects. Gender actions only have a meaning if they involve the whole family (7).

The foregoing shows that the segmented, fragmented and unilateral way in which women's struggle has been organized under the slogan of gender equity, has probably become a conditioning factor in men's inertia regarding the efforts to transform established structures and functions relating to sexual rights and gender identity.

In his article "Los hombres: ¿dispuestos a cambiar? ¿No tienen más remedio? ¿Podrán frenar el cambio?," Enrique de Gomáriz Moraga provides an analysis of the different feminist approaches to the role and potential reaction of men and states his view:

if we want men to change, it is not advisable to abandon them to their fate or wait till they are left with no other choice due to a war of the sexes or forced by regulations and social pressure [8].

Everything seems to indicate that the most reasonable attitude is the one stated by German representatives in a letter to the Federal Minister in charge of gender

policies: "a new policy aimed not only at women but to society at large is required."

And they add:

this will certainly imply new challenges, particularly for the feminist movement, but also for those working with men. In reference to the feminist movement, regarding the decision to keep looking inwards or towards global change. In any case, assuming the challenges in terms of unity of the movement and capacity to convince others [8].

It is also a new challenge for those working with men, since generally they deal with groups of men who are uncomfortable with the mandates of hegemonic masculinity or who want to revise their gender identity, who are not a majority and who are often reluctant to operate in the political dimension of change. This corroborates the hypothesis regarding the social transformation inability evidenced in groups of organized men.

In "El proceso de incluir a los hombres. Notas para un debate," Eduardo Liendo reiterates the idea that even though studies of gender have included both women and men, they have mainly focused on women issues (9). The consulted bibliography allows us to assert that there is a certain degree of devaluation together with indifference and ignorance in using the conceptual tools of the gender approach in studies of men. Furthermore, the so-called masculinity studies have been characterized by some weaknesses—like the repeated search for generalities hiding the differences between men—and their lack of articulation with gender discrimination and other discriminations on the basis of race, ethnic group, sexual orientation, age, and so forth.

There is no doubt that global experiences in dealing with the gender issue have greatly contributed to human development. They are, however, biased by their unilateral nature (the situation of women as the focus) and have not favored to a necessary extent an integrating and constructive approach leading with realism to:

- a) a will to change regarding gender issues (which is basically a political will) and
- b)

the consideration of the state of mind, needs and motivations of all human beings, particularly of men. This is expressed in the underlying reluctance of some of the parties involved in this issue, affecting the development of policies, programs and services designed for this purpose at the local, national, and international levels.

The epistemological criterion about comprehensive education on sexuality and sexual health also entails, from a conceptual point of view, unraveling the ideology content of the gender construct. In international and Cuban scientific literature there are complementing and/or conflicting approaches regarding the debate on gender construct. These range from the legitimization of the term gender (centered on women issues); the summary of differentiating elements between the dominant masculinity model and the dominant femininity model; the different elements (differences and inequalities) within men and women groups; the relational and multi-condition approach but exclusively focused on sexual differentiation as the focal point for analysis; up to raising doubts as to the foundational nature of sexual difference in light of the transgender phenomena in response to the structural identity crisis of the gender.

Reflections on these aspects, particularly in light of the contributions made by anthropology and sociology, lead us to think that we should not assume a narrow, fragmented and excluding approach regarding people's reality and to consider the relevance of paying more attention to their needs in terms of sexual education and health; the meanings and practices related to gender, gender identity and sexual orientation of people from an ethical, holistic, dialectic and participatory perspective for the sake of human emancipation and personal/social dignity (10).

The main male social reactions to the feminist project can be grouped under three perspectives:

- conservative: men who oppose changing the existing gender relations status;

- pro-feminist: men who focus their attention on the consequences of sexism for them, proclaiming themselves victims;
- defense of male civil rights: men who alleged feminist positions but stress some negative implications associated with this process such as divorce and custody of children.

Quite different is the reaction of men to the right to a free and responsible sexual orientation proclaimed by the lesbian and gay movements, which is openly rejected.

The great contribution of the gay revolution of the 60s and 70s was to do away with the correlation between gender and sexual orientation. After the gay revolution it is not essential to be feminine or masculine to be homosexual or lesbian, respectively (11).

Since those decades there has been a gradual and increasing understanding and acceptance by the international community of gay's demands, and the gay movement itself has increased and consolidated. There are multiple evidences of such assertion. This momentum was favored by the interrelation and complementarity of the characteristics of the global society and the gay culture.

In Oscar Guasch's words, the gay subculture is, first of all, the culture of leisure and party involving a clearly orgiastic life-style, while global society is increasingly less Prometheus-like. It is becoming less centered on work and more centered on leisure. Secondly, society's juvenilization process also brings it closer to the gay subculture, which has always been a subculture thought for the youth. Thirdly, the process of redefining the male gender is no longer exclusive patrimony of gays; society as a whole is redefining male identity. Finally, global society is gradually structuring on the basis of the individual and not on the basis of families, which is precisely the form of organization of the gay subculture (12). As a result of these processes, the mother culture is diluting the gay subculture by reproducing many of the traits distinguishing the latter. The current gay subculture reproduces all the

characteristics that define the hegemonic heterosexual model: coitus-centrism, supporting marriage or stable couple relations, feminine subordination and, to a lesser extent, condemns sexual dissidence. Therefore, it does not overcome male-chauvinism, misogyny or homophobia.

The abovementioned ideas led Guasch to the conclusion (which the author of this article subscribes) that the gay subculture fails to generate and provide its members with a male identity model different from the heterosexual one. The uncritical and apolitical way in which male gays assume their sexual orientation turns the gay subculture into a poor copy of heterosexuality.

In general, we could state that, under these new conditions, the male community did not involve itself in any of these movements. This shows the alienation of men regarding these processes of change, their absence in the social wave questioning the socially established gender order, and their weak commitment to the necessary structural change of the global society in this regard. Evaluations in this direction are mostly found in certain social groups such as intellectuals and the wealthy.

SOME ELEMENTS INFLUENCING MEN'S REACTION TO THE PROPOSALS PUT FORWARD BY THE FEMINIST AND GAY MOVEMENTS

1. The essence of capitalism and its globalized expression

On the one hand, "modernization" in economy and politics (the instrumental rationality)¹ led to assume that only scientific and technological development and the accumulation and improvement of instruments to control nature would lead automatically to human happiness; and on the other, "modernism" in arts, culture, and sensitivity (the subjectivity)—which, as Alain Touraine asserts, is fundamental for the expansion of capitalism, since "to maintain a wide reproduction of value it must generate a wide reproduction of human subjectivity while maintaining a permanent control over it and channeling it through the narrow lane of commodity production . . ." (13)—results in men leaving their empirical local existence (that of traditional societies, communities closed to the "stranger" for being different) to

place them in a universal relation (that of the market, exploitation, wage labor, and sales), turning them into historic-universal individuals, in this case, also empirically universal (13).

The main precedent of this situation was the unstoppable expansion of the bourgeois society (its plus ultra), an economic need inherent to its mode of production that was early perceived by the most enlightened minds of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Economic and social changes promoted by enterprises, transnational companies and financial institutions have expanded political, economic, and social actions beyond borders to the extent that developments, decisions and activities taking place in a region significantly determine the ways of life of people in other regions.

Globalization is an asymmetric and unequal phenomenon, since while some regions and social groups are empowered, others are weakened and collapse, thus increasing existing inequalities and bringing about new asymmetries. Current globalization is grounded on specific values such as consumerism, individualism, market glorification, exoticism and commodification of all aspects of life, since inter-subjective links fade away behind such values.

In my view, these anti-values are closely linked to masculine stereotypes, the emergence of social relations based on the struggle for power, overvaluation of public over private, competition and, therefore, subordination of some persons to others and lack of human solidarity. The consequences of this process have turned against Humanity by making human beings dependent on the market, technology and minority control.

2. Gender public policies

It was not until the World Population Conference held in Cairo in 1994 that the topic of working with men was introduced in the plan of action and became a guideline for signatory States. This program of action expressed the need to incorporate

men's responsibilities and participation in sexual and reproductive health. The stated aim was to promote equality of the sexes in all spheres of life, including family and community life, and to encourage and enable men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behavior and their social and family roles (14).

Measures to be taken by governments also include: a) to promote and encourage the equal participation of women and men in all areas of family and household responsibilities, including family planning, child-rearing and housework (C 4.26); b) make special efforts to emphasize men's shared responsibility and promote their active involvement in responsible parenthood, sexual and reproductive behavior, including family planning; prenatal, maternal and child health; prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; prevention of unwanted and high-risk pregnancies; shared control and contribution to family income, children's education; and place special emphasis on the prevention of violence against women and children (C 4.27).

This document is the cornerstone for including men in a group of general topics of social interest. However, despite its programmatic nature and that it is a responsibility of the state, there has not been enough progress in attaining its stated objectives. A hypothesis could be that such policies stemmed from women's interests and motivations in improving their status and men were invited to join in. It could be that there is no policy involving men's needs, based on their demands as to rights to be attained and that men do not consider as alien to them or as tending to "help" women, as it is usually understood. Probably there has not been enough research about needs—other than those included in these political agendas—men have or if they require special attention to be paid to problems which are still not part of political agendas.

Likewise, the UN Special Report on the Evaluation of ICPD 94 (Cairo + 5, UN, 1999) states that leaders at all levels, as well as parents and educators should promote positive models enabling boys to become adults sensitive to gender issues allowing

them to support, promote, and respect sexual and reproductive health and the reproductive rights of women, in acknowledgement of the dignity inherent to all human beings.

Despite these guidelines, there is an obvious contradiction between what is said and what is done by the leadership who, when talking about these issues, present men as a strategic population but can be seen nowhere in social programs to promote equality. The fact that these policies are not monitored, are assistance-based and visualize women as the only vulnerable group, probably contributes to this.

3. Financing work with men

Except for some financial support, particularly American, to projects involving men and that by the late 1990s had faded and finally disappeared, today there are very few proposals and those in place are characterized by shortage of resources and are quite irregular. It is still not clear if financial institutions must invest in the work with men and if such investment will affect the already low budgets allocated to women.

4. Insufficient critical awareness in men about their need for changes

The social construction of the hegemonic masculinity is an invisible process since qualities and attitudes are "naturalized" and "essentialized" as inherent to male nature and essence. For men, assuming what has been assigned means a set of expropriations that go consciously unnoticed but have a very high cost in terms of health.

Ignoring these functions will have negative effects both for men themselves as for the development of the personality of their children, family harmony and societal health.

Traditional role models derived from this process influence the personality integrity of the subject; create conflicts between what men and women feel, think, and do;

and impose the same constraints on their personal development, placing them in opposite positions with negative consequences for their children.

Something that has hindered the inclusion of men is the fear, in terms of axiological disorientation, to get involved in spaces till now considered feminine spaces like the reproductive and domestic domains, because of the implications in terms of social stigma, the pressure of groups of origin, social sanction by other men, and so forth.

Evidently, the armor of internalized masculine beliefs prevents men from seeing their own needs no matter how obvious these may be. Changing this order of things requires fostering men's critical reflection on their own identity and the ways they relate. Not doing so becomes an obstacle for their effective involvement in the revolutionary transformation of the socially established gender order. According to Judith Astelarra, this implies the challenge of men also rejecting hierarchy between genders in the public and private domains in which they are involved and collectively join the efforts to put an end to it (15).

5. Women's attitude towards a potential change in men

Some women believe that the inclusion of men can become a devaluation of the actions taken by women and a de-legitimization of the experiences of feminist movements. This certainly translates into not inviting them in.

Another aspect that has been argued regarding men's reluctance is the methodologies used in reflection spaces blaming men, which bring about shame and discouragement in the participants and generate behaviors and feelings of isolation.

Some women's fears that certain changes in men will just be a simulation to reproduce authoritarianism and inequity concealed under more subtle intellectual forms, such as help and permissions, have also been a source of reluctance to include men in gender agendas.

6. Segmentation of masculinities

Diversity makes it impossible to cover each of the different ways of assuming masculinity, which in turn leaves many of them outside current categorization of masculinities while others, due to their manifestations, could fall in more than one category, in accordance with the criteria of the person who is doing the categorization.

New forms of masculinities and different social groups portraying them are visible every day, but they not always question the traditional sex and gender structures nor contribute to the meanings of masculinity and femininity.

The truth is that men are differentiated by the color of their skin, ethnic group, age, place of residence, sexual orientation, and gender identity, among other social aspects. Discrimination, marginalization, and social exclusion—with its corresponding disintegrating trends—among men occur and reproduce on the basis of such differences. In its neoliberal functional rationale, global society is increasingly witnessing its own social disintegration processes, a basic condition for dehumanizing phenomena. Economic exploitation, political manipulation, and cultural/spiritual alienation are part of the social contradictions at the root of the struggle for power between masculinities. Loss of purview, loneliness generated by society itself, lack of affective bonds in family structures in particular and in interpersonal relations in general, migratory processes, ageing, and inter-generation, ethnic, and gender identity conflicts, among others, are associated with these social contradictions.

Most governments have not put in place the adequate means and mechanisms for addressing these problems, obviously because they have no interest in reversing the process of capital reproduction. Therefore, these social evils are addressed with targeting, categorizing and assistance-based policies that produce individual culprits, avoid the analysis of the social causes of such attitudes and behaviors, and turn victims of anti-human public policies into perpetrators.

Patriarchal culture and the traditional masculinization of society are a cross-cutting axis of these social phenomena. Social life complexity and understanding of the conflicting essence of human development, and the alienation-emancipation dialectic are not incidental to the understanding of these social problems or to their formal or informal control. Contextualizing forms of control on the basis of what is really possible provides credibility to its arguments and renders actions less utopic and frustrating.

We need to build institutions that foster the meaning of life and an analysis of these issues with a critical, contextualized, prospective, and proactive approach in light of the prevalence of a categorizing culture rooted in the absolute negativity (risk, vulnerability) of conditions and effects that lead to consider those "categorized" as problems and not as a potential for change and a strength for solving such problems. It is important to promote protective factors and mechanisms, ponder the individualizing treatment of those "categorized by risk," and the positive role of the group with community links.

Stressing the commitment of global society to fight for a revolutionary transformation, dignifying differences with an ethical perspective and social integration for emancipation, instead of legitimizing the categorization of masculinities, we should rather visualize and explain the different ways of being a man in a movement to overturn and overcome the status quo, with the premise of overcoming gender contradictions and achieving human emancipation.

The foregoing analysis shows that the degree of critical awareness, cooperation, and collective projects for the social transformation of the groups of men regarding the socially established gender order are still insufficient.

We are making progress, though slowly, in harnessing the work with groups of men and on the differences and inequities among men in order to attain political positioning and highlight macro-social gender inequities.

The most outstanding contributions of social sciences to the study of masculinities are: Gramsci, with his distinction between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities (16); Foucault, with the study of power as a current asset and the relationship between micro-power and macro-power (17, 18). The categories of habitus, stigma, and symbolic power in the social analysis of masculine dominance by Bourdieu (19) are equally important.

ALTERNATIVES

Though society, community, and family life are an alienation breeding ground for masculine diversities and the singularity of the individual, it should not necessarily be alienated or alienating. In that structure there is always a space, movement and time margin for men and women to express themselves as an integrated essence and existence unit in the multiple daily activities, i.e., eliminating the gulf which exists between the spontaneous production of the humane itself and the active and creative participation of the individual in that production.

All human beings have the right to materialize that possibility. Having one's own life in society means that people individually appropriate themselves of the social reality and give back to social reality the imprint of their own societal, collective, and personal subjectivity. Seizing the generic human essence means to fulfill human socialization, being a full man, a universal man, being a person, which means being aware of the world and oneself, and being ethically free (in the relative sense of liberty) in the relationship with nature, the social world, others and oneself.

To attain higher levels of social development, in terms of liberating human development, involving the alienation-dealienation contradiction and allowing to question the social and political axioms rooted in the categorization culture, dignifying gender differences is not enough. Social integration of that type of diversity is a must.

The profound world transformations that have taken place in gender relations also bring about very complex changes in the practice to which both men and women must adhere to. In this scenario of change nobody remains an innocent spectator. We are all committed to building a world of gender relations. How do we do it, what strategies should the different groups adopt and which will be the effects, are all political issues (20).

Some ideas that could contribute to achieve this purpose are:

- changes in the economic-labor structure of men and women;
- social impact of family planning and sexual education programs;
- greater openness in the socialization of boys and girls, and gradual withdrawal from stereotyped roles;
- open-minded attitude of mass media and cultural and educational institutions regarding the gender controversy;
- political will to respect and accept cultural diversity with an axiological approach, materialized in policies and services;
- eradication of homophobia and dissemination of homo-eroticism as a mechanism for the social redefinition of the male identity;
- critical awareness as a premise for a willingness to change and a new attitude towards reality by both men and women;
- modification of the reality of men and women as a creative act, taking into consideration the circumstances and internal potentials of both individual and collective subjects;
- long-term self-management (autonomy) and sustainability, conceived in a comprehensive manner in the context of the system of contradictions, by harnessing and empowering available material and spiritual resources;

- participatory processes, cooperation, development and implementation of self-development projects with a proper gender approach involving both men and women.

NOTE

1. A reason without any evaluation obligation and solely devoted to providing adequate knowledge to outside goals and that it should and could not discuss: free of values, it was thus pure and neutral.

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