Why is Restructuring Masculinity a Social Justice Issue?

The Problem with Our Traditional Social Construction of Masculinity

The narrow definition of what our society traditionally considers as “masculinity” manifests itself in many of the institutions that are the foundation of our society - in particular, the social, political, and economic institutions which often give definition to what our society is and what it stands for.



Our society regularly supports notions of masculinity that often degrades women and glorifies macho stereotypes. It encourages an overblown sense of entitlement, and justifies violence and aggression as a response to being denied what one wants. We see this definition of masculinity in all aspects of our society. One only has to look at the heroes in any big budget action blockbuster to see the image of what a “real man” should be. Think about it – think of the way we talk about men who are at the top of their profession, whether that be in sports, music, and even business. We refer to them as “alpha males”. The concept of the “alpha male” is held up as the epitome of “manliness” in our society.

This toxic definition of masculinity forces men and boys to try harder to attain or regain a status of “manliness”. This is a challenge for men and boys who may not meet or may not want to meet this standard. Is it any wonder that the constant struggle to “be a man” can lead to low self-esteem and other psychological effects stemming from the pressure to conform?

The Problem with “Boys will be Boys”



At some point in your life, you've probably heard the phrase “*boys will be boys*”. Often people use it to dismiss and even condone negative traits and behaviours, so when a boy is messy, irresponsible, troublesome, insensitive, aggressive, and even violent this is considered *normal*, because this is the *expectation* for this gender. “*Boys will be boys*” dismisses socially maladaptive behaviours as something that boys *just do*.

So what are the long-term effects of using “*boys will be boys*” as an excuse and an expectation? How might this affect boys as they mature? For example, consider how often these phrases are applied to men:

- “He's like a big kid.”
- “He couldn't help himself”
- “He did it because he was pushed too far.”

Each of these phrases suggests that men are not responsible for violent or impulsive actions. They are, in essence, identical to the saying ‘*boys will be boys'*.

The Problem with the Common Media Stereotypes of Men

Stereotypes of what it means to “be a man” are systemically and subtly reinforced in many areas of our daily lives. The most glaringly obvious are those perpetuated by the media.



Depending on whether you have taken previous social science or media studies courses, you may already be familiar with the concept of how the media is the primary agent of socialization. The media disseminates information about gender, gender roles and gender norms that is readily consumed by the public. It has a tendency to reinforce the prevailing gender norms, gender expressions and gender expectations that we experience in our society. For better or worse, the media has a direct impact on our understanding of how society expects things to operate.

Through the media, boys and men are taught that masculinity is – a standard that must be achieved to hold the title of “man”.

What is Hypermasculinity?

Hypermasculinity is a psychological term for the exaggeration of male stereotypical behavior, such as an emphasis on physical strength, aggression, and sexuality.

Hypermasculinity consists of four interrelated beliefs, namely:

- toughness as emotional self-control,
- violence as manly,
- danger as exciting, and
- calloused attitudes towards women and sex.

1. Take a moment and quickly write down the first five things you ***think*** you might see IF you did a Google search of the terms “ideal man”, “real men”, and “masculinity”. What do you ***anticipate*** you would see?

2. Now, actually engage in that search. What were the first five results? Were these results what you expected?

3. Now do the same thing, but this time, search for the query, “what it means to be a man”. Analyse your results by discussing responses to the following questions:

- According to the media, what is this ideal of the hypermasculine male that all boys and men should aspire to?
- How did your internet search results compare to your expectations? Were you surprised by the results of your search? If so, why? If not, why?
- Where did your understanding of “what it means to be a man” come from? For example, did you get your understanding of masculinity from your family, the media, your peers, or your cultural or religious expectations? Would you consider your understanding of “what it means to be a man” to be traditional?
- One of the problems with this ideal of what constitutes masculinity is that it is often “larger than life” and therefore seldom, if ever, fully attainable. So what happens if a man/boy fails to live up to this standard?