

Raising Feminist Sons: Part 1  
Jill Kuhn

Patriarchy as an institution damages girls and women and boys and men. Without denying that men clearly maintain privilege in our society, and thus women and children suffer dreadfully from oppression within this system, it is still useful to think about how we can raise boys into men who equally share in economic, political and social equality. That is, to change the very roots of an oppressive system. In her anthology, *What Make a Man: 22 Writers Imagine the Future* (2004), feminist Rebecca Walker argues that, “This war against what is considered feminine that is wounding boys and men, is familiar to women, but now we see that it is killing that other half of the planet, too. (p. 4)” Instead of struggling against rape, unequal pay, domestic violence and objectification, boys and men are struggling against squashed emotions, the fear of being “weak,” the pressure towards materialism, the push to fight wars (always the push to fight in one way or another) and the need to always be strong (even as children).

There is no dearth of research on the male gender role and its negative impact on boys and men. In *Real Boys' Voices* Pollack (2000) talked with numerous boys about what he calls “archaic ideas” about what boys and eventually men should be. They talked about the pressure to maintain “male stoicism” and to appear strong and unemotional. He noted that boys are highly aware of how society limits them in these ways. Research on men who have grown up with these “ideals” of manhood reveals striking, although not surprising realities. For example, in heterosexual relationships (it is different for same sex couples), when a strong woman and a strong man are together, problems are likely to ensue. If the woman continues to remain strong (which in itself is not that common) then the couple either typically fights unremittingly or the man becomes quiet (er) and withdrawn within the relationship (Pleck, Sonenstein, and Ku, 1993).

While there are more men, in the post-boomer generation, that work towards egalitarian relationships than in other generations, most women and men typically agree that men are still not doing their share at home. So, some men are in denial or just outright endorse stereotypes of female gender roles. This leaves women disproportionately responsible for home and childcare. Positive relationships necessitate emotional reciprocity, give and take and shared power, which are in direct opposition to the male gender role (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2001). These problems result because of what Goldberg (1977) identified as the “male harness.” This is the pressure to conform absolutely to the male role, which includes men being successful, emotionally restricted, aggressive and independent. This stereotype is ultimately detrimental to boys and men and is correlated to emotional problems (O’Neil, Good, and Holmes, 1995), violence, substance abuse (Addis and Cohane, 2005), illness and early death (Courtenay, 2000). In spite of these negative outcomes, this role is strongly enforced, starting in infancy.

Pollack (2000) has expressed concern that our boys “are simply not receiving the consistent attention, empathy, and support they truly need and desire (p. xx).” In the limited research on pro-feminist men (Vicario, 2004), men are more likely to espouse feminist ideals and engage in egalitarian relationships, when they have a close relationship with a woman, strongly identify with women’s disempowerment through their own marginalization and have strong male pro-feminist behavior models.

These facts would suggest we must do something differently with our boys. So, how do we as feminist mothers (and fathers) try to instill the values of equality for both genders and break away from the archaic male gender role? How do we teach boys to respect and value their female peers and grow up to be nurturing and highly involved with their own

children. These questions were posited to numerous mothers\* of boys and they came up with a wide range of concrete ideas to do just this. In Part II of this column, these suggestions will be explored.

Please feel free to contact Jill at [kuhngale@earthlink.net](mailto:kuhngale@earthlink.net)

## References

- Addis, M.E. & Cohane, G. (2005). Social scientific paradigms of masculinity and their implications for research and practice men's mental health. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 61*(6), 633-647.
- Courtenay, W. (2000). Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being. *Social Science Medicine, 50*(10), 1385-1401.
- Goldberg, H. (1977). *The hazards of being male: Surviving the myth of masculine privilege*. New American Library; New York, NY.
- O'Neil, J.M., Good, G.E., & Holmes, S. (1995). Fifteen years of theory and research on men's gender role conflict: New paradigms for empirical research. In R.F. Levant and W.S. Pollack (Eds.), *A new psychology of men*, 164-206. Basic Books; New York, NY.
- Pleck, J.H., Sonenshein, F.L., & Ku, L.C. (1993). Masculinity ideology: its impact on adolescent men's heterosexual relationships. *Journal of Social Issues, 49*(3), 11-29.
- Pollack, W (2000). *Real Boys' Voices*. Random House; New York, NY.
- Vicario, B.A. (2004). A qualitative study of profeminist men. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences (64-11A)*.
- Walker, R. (2004). *What makes a man: 22 writers imagine the future*. Riverhead Books; New York: NY
- Whithead, B.D., & Popenoe. D. (2001). The state of our unions: The social health of marriage in America. Produced by the National Marriage Project [online]  
<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/about.htm>