

28 feature men and abuse

One uncomfortable truth about recent revelations of historic abuse against children is that the alleged perpetrators were all men. **Jim Wild** says it's time to take a long, hard look at the male psyche and understand what makes men the way they are



In the opening comments of his 1997 report into child protection in England and Wales, Sir William Utting said “the experience of the review has seemed at times a crash course in human (predominately male) wickedness”. Recently we have heard of high profile examples of this wickedness, with allegations against, and in some cases conviction of, men in powerful positions who have used their status to abuse vulnerable children.

A Government inquiry into historical abuse is to be launched this autumn and no doubt will strike fear in the heart of those who may have concealed or colluded with such abuse. What appears evident is that within some institutions there existed a culture that proliferated over many years in which managers colluded with abusers to ‘look away’ to protect careers or organisational reputations.

The problem of deeply embedded corruption in caring professions needs addressing, but perhaps the greater unexplored issue is the

The trouble with men

relationship between those who abuse and their gender. For it is a strangely fascinating and indisputable fact that most abuse is perpetuated by men. And it remains a quiet, almost silent fact, that this has only ever been asserted by feminist theory.

In mainstream thinking, this reality has been all but dismissed, which is a curious form of defence and denial. Key moments in recent history to explore this were missed, such as the Waterhouse inquiry in the mid to late 90s which examined revelations of male abuse in

the looked after system in North Wales.

I recall going to a range of national meetings in the 1990s to discuss and develop strategies following government responses to reports arising from such inquiries (the *Lost in Care* and *People Like Us* reports). The Government’s solution under then health secretary Frank Dobson was to launch ‘Quality Protects’, an idea based on the notion that ‘standards’ rather than an analysis of what ‘some men do’ was the way forward.

Why was the problem with men not seen as



something worthy of discussion or debate? To answer this was, and remains, a Pandora's Box and requires asking some fundamental questions about men. Yet mainstream services do not entertain or promote radical ideas and critical thinking seems far removed when we attempt to explore the predominance of male abusers. Eminent feminist academics such as Cynthia Cockburn and Ann Oakley do sometimes voice concern about men. In a 2011 *Guardian* article headlined "The Culture of masculinity costs all too much to ignore," they wrote: "The case we are making is that certain widespread masculine traits and behaviours are dangerous and costly both to individuals and society. They are amenable to purposeful change. The culture of masculinity can be, and should be, addressed as a policy issue."

Some suggest the association between masculinity and abuse was lost with a shift in wider society towards neoliberalism in the 80s and 90s and the subsequent decline both in feminist values and alternative pursuits to consumerism. The former is explored by Beatrix Campbell in her book *End of Equality*, where she suggests neoliberalism is inherently sexist and masculine and causes great intentional economic harm to women.

Accountability

Extending beyond these debates, Hanna Rosin suggests in her book *The End of Men* that the male sex will increasingly find itself confused as old ideologies are challenged, forcing men to adapt to a radical new era characterised by greater gender equality and accountability regarding how men present themselves in wider society. There needs to be proactive campaigns challenging men to think about actions, consequences and seeking to align 'the self' with a best possible concept of what that self should be. As a starting point, this could involve public health campaigns devised by the brightest and best in advertising and endorsed by social scientists to challenge men to think about different ways of being.

Currently, thought around this issue remains invisible and there seems no emerging possibility of even a remote or discursive debate about the violence perpetrated by men. It should be part of the historical abuse inquiry.

Violence and abuse are linked to patriarchal and tyrannical forms of control and this in turn creates vast challenges because of the way men demonstrate their absurd legitimacy over others. Dean Whittington suggests we must look at other causes of the violence perpetrated by men lodged in childhood experiences: "Violence marked all of these men's lives, initially as childhood recipients, later as adolescent protagonists... violence they had endured as children, primarily wielded by their fathers through physical and verbal acts..."

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It would seem at critical moments young men perceive these behaviours legitimate while their female counterparts for the most part are more submissive to the patriarchal complexities. We often seem unable to engage in open discussions about masculinity and violence in this context. Instead, we see devils, demonic forces and evil when we attempt to rationalise and find explanations for what some men do. We see this in the media through phrases such as "evil monster" to describe violent male abusers.

Greater urgency is needed by policymakers and researchers to 'join up the dots' when we explore men and masculinity and gain some clarity over causation of horrific and almost inhuman acts of sexual violence. The theory and research is there and we have vast swathes of information about sex offenders, childhood development and how inequality constructs discrepancies in human relationships. But the overlapping theories, ideas and research needs synthesising to understand why men are brutalising men from an early age and why some men consider control and exploitation as legitimate forms of engagement. We also need to unpick the psychopathological and sociological constructs that lead to such a lack of empathy when men isolate others for abuse.

A good starting point would be to ask children questions about masculinity. We need to do this from an early age so we can begin to identify individuals who may be exhibiting troubling behaviour, such as the playground bully or the unassertive child. This, however, requires a cultural shift in what we view men to be. In *The End of Men*, Rosen suggests: "...there have long been theorists who claim that masculinity is entirely a social construct, a kind of warrior mask or armour men have insisted on wearing... maybe we need to approach a time when men stop looking back..."

But it needs more than this. To change men requires resources they can access where they can explore the notion of what being a man means. Ian Harris, in his work *Messages Men Hear*, advocates the creation of men's groups. He says: "Men's groups allow men in modern societies to disclose to each other and make deep contact with other men, over-coming social isolation... [they] allow men to talk to each other about problems they are having living up to the demands of patriarchal society

without fear that men listening will pounce on their weakness".

Social work and allied professions have an important contribution to make in taking up this challenge. Feminist theory is something familiar to the social work profession, but is usually at the margins of informing practice, which seems absurd. We find very few original or interesting developments in the teaching of social work to understand and construct greater clarity over masculinised violence.

Perhaps the vast majority of men have absolutely no desire to explore how they can become allies of feminism and develop critical studies into masculinity, male behaviour and the use of power. Maybe we would rather just demonise those men who commit terrible atrocities against vulnerable people than accept that as men we are all on a continuum of behaviour and that many men are vulnerable to a wide range of negative behaviours.

Complicity

These questions need to be asked by the historical abuse inquiry. What is it that leads some men to be abusive? Why are they so often well protected? How do we create mechanisms to challenge decades of complicity?

In all probability, the inquiry will not look at ideas that have emerged from the insight and legitimate rage of the women's movement. How many social work degrees do we know that make mandatory requests of men and women to critique feminist theory?

The Professional Capabilities Framework also shows little in the way of embedding feminist theory into social work. Its curriculum is based on a legacy of audit obsessed, managerialist ideas and rigid notions of professional development.

Until as a society we acknowledge and explore what drives the male urge to abuse, no number of inquiries and reports will stop it from continuing to happen.

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