

The 7 P's of Men's Violence

By Michael Kaufman

For a moment my eyes turned away from the workshop participants and out through the windows of the small conference room and towards the Himalayas, north of Kathmandu. I was there, leading a workshop, largely the outgrowth of remarkable work of UNICEF and UNIFEM which, a year earlier, had brought together women and men from throughout South Asia to discuss the problem of violence against women and girls and, most importantly, to work together to find solutions. (1)

As I turned back to the women and men in the group, it felt more familiar than different: women taking enormous chances – in some cases risking their lives – to fight the tide of violence against women and girls. Men who were just beginning to find their anti-patriarchal voices and to discover ways to work alongside women. And what pleasantly surprised me was the positive response to a series of ideas I presented about men's violence: until then, I wasn't entirely sure if they were mainly about the realities in North and South America and Europe – that is largely-Europeanized cultures – or whether they had a larger resonance.

Here, then, is the kernel of this analysis:

Patriarchal Power: The First "P"

Individual acts of violence by men occurs within what I have described as "the triad of men's violence." Men's violence against women does not occur in isolation but is linked to men's violence against other men and to the internalization of violence, that is, a man's violence against himself.

Indeed male-dominated societies are not only based on a hierarchy of men over women but some men over other men. Violence or the threat of violence among men is a mechanism used from childhood to establish that pecking order. One result of this is that men "internalize" violence – or perhaps, the demands of patriarchal society encourage biological instincts that otherwise might be more relatively dormant or benign. The result is not only that boys and men learn to selectively use violence, but also, as we shall later see, redirect a range of emotions into rage, which sometimes takes the form of self-directed violence, as seen, for example in substance abuse or self-destructive behaviour.

This triad of men's violence – each form of violence helping create the others – occurs within a nurturing environment of violence: the organization and demands of patriarchal or male dominant societies.

What gives violence its hold as a way of doing business, what has naturalized it as the de facto standard of human relations, is the way it has been articulated into our ideologies and social structures. Simply put, human groups create self-perpetuating forms of social organization and ideologies that explain, give meaning to, justify, and replenish these created realities. Violence is also built into these ideologies and structures for the simpler reason that it has brought enormous benefits to particular groups: first and foremost, violence (or at least the threat of violence), has helped confer on men (as a group) a rich set of privileges and forms of power. If indeed the original forms of social hierarchy and power are those based on sex, then this long ago formed a template for all the structured forms of power and privilege enjoyed by others as a result of social class or skin color, age, religion, sexual orientation, or physical abilities. In such a context, violence or its threat become a means to ensure the continued reaping of privileges and exercise of power. It is both a result and a means to an end.

The Sense of Entitlement to Privilege: The Second "P"

The individual experience of a man who commits violence may not revolve around his desire to maintain power. His conscious experience is not the key here. Rather, as feminist analysis has repeatedly pointed out, such violence is often the logical outcome of his sense of entitlement to certain privileges. If a man beats his wife for not having dinner on the table right on time, it is not only to make sure that it doesn't happen again, but is an indication of his sense of entitlement to be waited on. Or, say a man sexually assaults a woman on a date, it is about his sense of entitlement to his physical pleasure even if that pleasure is entirely one sided. In other words, as many women have pointed out, it is not only inequalities of power that lead to violence, but a conscious or often unconscious sense of entitlement to privilege.

The Third "P": Permission

Whatever the complex social and psychological causes of men's violence, it wouldn't continue if there weren't explicit or tacit permission in social customs, legal codes, law enforcement, and certain religious teachings. In many countries, laws against wife assault or sexual assault are lax or non-existent; in many others laws are barely enforced; in still others they are absurd, such as those countries where a charge of rape can only be prosecuted if there are several male witnesses and where the testimony of the woman isn't taken into account.

Meanwhile, acts of men's violence and violent aggression (in this case, usually against other men) are celebrated in sport and cinema, in literature and warfare. Not only is violence permitted, it is glamorized and rewarded. The very historic roots of patriarchal societies is the use of violence as a key means of solving disputes and differences, whether among individuals, groups of men, or, later, between nations.

I am often reminded of this permission when I hear of a man or woman who fails to call the police when they hear a woman neighbor or child being beaten. It is deemed a "private" affair. Can you imagine someone seeing a store being robbed and declining to call the police because it is a private affair between the robber and the store owner?

The Fourth "P": The Paradox of Men's Power

It is my contention, however, that such things do not in themselves explain the widespread nature of men's violence, nor the connections between men's violence against women and the many forms of violence among men. Here we need to draw on the paradoxes of men's power or what I have called "men's contradictory experiences of power."

The very ways that men have constructed our social and individual power is, paradoxically, the source of enormous fear, isolation, and pain for men ourselves. If power is constructed as a capacity to dominate and control, if the capacity to act in "powerful" ways requires the construction of a personal suit of armor and a fearful distance from others, if the very world of power and privilege removes us from the world of child-rearing and nurturance, then we are creating men whose own experience of power is fraught with crippling problems.

This is particularly so because the internalized expectations of masculinity are themselves impossible to satisfy or attain. This may well be a problem inherent in patriarchy, but it seems particularly true in an era and in cultures where rigid gender boundaries have been overthrown. Whether it is physical or financial accomplishment, or the suppression of a range of human emotions and needs, the imperatives of manhood (as opposed to the simple certainties of biological maleness), seem to require constant vigilance and work, especially for younger men.

The personal insecurities conferred by a failure to make the masculine grade, or simply, the threat of failure, is enough to propel many men, particularly when they are young, into a vortex of fear, isolation, anger, self-punishment, self-hatred, and aggression. Within such an emotional state, violence becomes a compensatory mechanism. It is a way of re-establishing the

masculine equilibrium, of asserting to oneself and to others one's masculine credentials. This expression of violence usually includes a choice of a target who is physically weaker or more vulnerable. This may be a child, or a woman, or, as it may be social groups, such as gay men, or a religious or social minority, or immigrants, who seem to pose an easy target for the insecurity and rage of individual men, especially since such groups often haven't received adequate protection under the law. (This compensatory mechanism is clearly indicated, for example, in that most 'gay-bashing' is committed by groups of young men in a period of their life when they experience the greatest insecurity about making the masculine grade.)

What allows violence as an individual compensatory mechanism has been the widespread acceptance of violence as a means of solving differences and asserting power and control. What makes it possible are the power and privileges men have enjoyed, things encoded in beliefs, practices, social structures, and the law.

Men's violence, in its myriad of forms, is therefore the result both of men's power, the sense of entitlement to the privilege, the permission for certain forms of violence, and the fear (or reality) of not having power.

But there is even more.

The Fifth "P": The Psychic Armour of Manhood

Men's violence is also the result of a character structure that is typically based on emotional distance from others. As I and many others have suggested, the psychic structures of manhood are created in early childrearing environments that are often typified by the absence of fathers and adult men – or, at least, by men's emotional distance. In this case, masculinity gets codified by absence and constructed at the level of fantasy. But even in patriarchal cultures where fathers are more present, masculinity is codified as a rejection of the mother and femininity, that is, a rejection of the qualities associated with caregiving and nurturance. As various feminist psychoanalysts have noted, this creates rigid ego barriers, or, in metaphorical terms, a strong suit of armor.

The result of this complex and particular process of psychological development is a dampened ability for empathy (to experience what others are feeling) and an inability to experience other people's needs and feelings as necessarily relating to one's own. Acts of violence against another person are, therefore, possible. How often do we hear a man say he "didn't really hurt" the woman he hit? Yes, he is making excuses, but part of the problem is that he truly may not experience the pain he is causing. How often do we hear a man say, "she wanted to have sex"? Again, he may be making an excuse, but it may well be a reflection of his diminished ability to read and understand the feelings of another.

Masculinity as a Psychic Pressure Cooker: The Sixth "P"

Many of our dominant forms of masculinity hinge on the internalization of a range of emotions and their redirection into anger. It is not simply that men's language of emotions is often muted or that our emotional antennae and capacity for empathy are somewhat stunted. It is also that a range of natural emotions have been ruled off limits and invalid. While this has a cultural specificity, it is rather typical for boys to learn from an early age to repress feelings of fear and pain. On the sports field we teach boys to ignore pain. At home we tell boys not to cry and act like men. Some cultures celebrate a stoic manhood. (And, I should stress, boys learn such things for survival: hence it is important we don't blame the individual boy or man for the origins of his current behaviors, even if, at the same time, we hold him responsible for his actions.)

Of course, as humans, we still experience events that cause an emotional response. But the usual mechanisms of emotional response, from actually experiencing an emotion to letting go of the feelings, are short-circuited to varying degrees among many men. But, again for many men, the one emotion that has some validation is anger. The result is that a range of emotions get channeled into anger. While such channeling is not unique to men (nor is it the case for all men), for some men, violent responses to fear, hurt, insecurity, pain, rejection, or belittlement are not uncommon.

This is particularly true where the feeling produced is one of not having power. Such a feeling only heightens masculine insecurities: if manhood is about power and control, not being powerful means you are not a man. Again, violence becomes a means to prove otherwise to yourself and others.

The Seventh "P": Past experiences

This all combines with more blatant experiences for some men. Far too many men around the world grew up in households where their mother was beaten by their father. They grew up seeing violent behavior towards women as the norm, as just the way life is lived. For some men this results in a revulsion towards violence, while in others it produces a learned response. In many cases it is both: men who use violence against women often feel deep self-loathing for themselves and their behavior.

But the phrase "learned response" is almost too simplistic. Studies have shown that boys and girls who grow up witnessing violence are far more likely to be violent themselves. Such violence may be a way of getting attention; it may be a coping mechanism, a way of externalizing impossible-to-cope-with feelings. Such patterns of behavior continue beyond childhood: most men who end up in programs for men who use violence either witnessed abuse against their mother or experienced abuse themselves.

The past experiences of many men also includes the violence they themselves have experienced. In many cultures, while boys may be half as likely to experience sexual abuse than girls, they are twice as likely to experience physical abuse. Again, this produces no one fixed outcome, and, again, such outcomes are not unique to boys. But in some cases these personal experiences instill deep patterns of confusion and frustration, where boys have learned that it is possible to hurt someone you love, where only outbursts of rage can get rid of deeply-imbedded feelings of pain.

And finally, there is the whole reign of petty violence among boys which, as a boy, doesn't seem petty at all. Boys in many cultures grow up with experiences of fighting, bullying, and brutalization. Sheer survival requires, for some, accepting and internalizing violence as a norm of behavior.

Ending the Violence

This analysis, even presented in such a condensed form, suggests that challenging men's violence requires an articulated response that includes:

- Challenging and dismantling the structures of men's power and privilege, and ending the cultural and social permission for acts of violence. If this is where the violence starts, we can't end it without support by women and men for feminism and the social, political, legal, and cultural reforms and transformations that it suggests.
- The redefinition of masculinity or, really, the dismantling of the psychic and social structures of gender that bring with them such peril. The paradox of patriarchy is the pain, rage, frustration, isolation, and fear among that half of the species for whom relative power and privilege is given. We ignore all this to our peril. In order to

successfully reach men, this work must be premised on compassion, love, and respect, combined with a clear challenge to negative masculine norms and their destructive outcomes. Pro-feminist men doing this work must speak to other men as our brothers, not as aliens who are not as enlightened or worthy as we are.

- Organizing and involving men to work in cooperation with women in reshaping the gender organization of society, in particular, our institutions and relations through which we raise children. This requires much more emphasis on the importance of men as nurturers and caregivers, fully involved in the raising of children in positive ways free of violence.
- Working with men who commit violence in a way that simultaneously challenges their patriarchal assumptions and privileges and reaches out to them with respect and compassion. We needn't be sympathetic to what they have done to be empathetic with them and feel horrified by the factors that have led a little boy to grow up to be a man who sometimes does terrible things. Through such respect, these men can actually find the space to challenge themselves and each other. Otherwise the attempt to reach them will only feed into their own insecurities as men for whom violence has been their traditional compensation.
- Explicit educational activities, such as the White Ribbon Campaign, that involve men and boys in challenging themselves and other men to end all forms of violence. This is a positive challenge for men to speak out with our love and compassion for women, boys, girls, and other men.

(1) This workshop was organized by Save the Children (UK). Travel funding was provided by Development Services International of Canada. Discussion of the 1998 Kathmandu workshop is found in Ruth Finney Hayward's book *Breaking the Earthenware Jar* (forthcoming 2000). Ruth was the woman who instigated the Kathmandu meetings.

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