

There's no such thing as a 'real man'

by Michael Kaufman

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It's been many years since I've heard anyone utter the words, "Act ladylike." But it's hard to go more than a few hours without hearing some version of "be a man".

I couldn't even escape it this week, seeing a production of Shakespeare's Richard II when a hanger-on tries to cheer up the embattled king by making fun of his enemies as "boys with women's voices [who] strive to speak big." It's been a long, long time since simply being a male was enough to make you a real man.

That's because we give "real men" real rewards.

There's a cottage industry of women and men who now bewail there are no real men left, that men have become feminized, and that men are the real losers in the feminist revolution.

I've spent the past 35 years saying all this is nonsense. After all, we still live in a world where men earn more money and pull most of the political, religious, economic and cultural levers. And when it comes to the exercise of violence, whether against women or other men, men still have the franchise, if not the total monopoly.

The rewards for being "real men" are admiration in the world of men, freedom of movement, a voice of authority, respect, and tangible privileges at work and at play. In fact, we've had a de facto affirmative action program for men that stretches back about 8,000 years — the program known, simply, as patriarchy.

But the astounding thing is that the very ways that men have constructed societies of men's power also bring enormous cost to men ourselves. Men die younger than women, are less likely to ask for help when in physical or emotional need, are more likely to be addicted to alcohol and other drugs, be killed in workplace accidents, and commit suicide. Men live in enormous fear of being exposed as weak. As not being real men.

All this is because our very notions of masculinity are made up, ephemeral. From an early age we bathe boys in notions about a masculinity that requires the suppression of a range of feelings and human possibilities. At a certain age, we require that boys set up emotional boundaries from their friends. Almost from the start, we say that the tasks of nurturing and caregiving are not for them.

Boys and men strive to live up to these impossible ideals. But the more we do, the more we must create an

emotional distance from women, from children, and, in a strange way (since the world is dominated by elaborate men's clubs) from other men. It is a recipe for enormous isolation.

That is why I have long felt that we men have a two-fold task.

One is that, if we want to truly get to the roots of what ails us, we need to embrace and actively support gender equality. We must actively challenge all forms of men's power, whether in the workplace, our places of worship, the sport's field, the kitchen, nursery or our bedrooms. It's not only the right thing to do. Simply put, women's emancipation is also key to our own happiness because the ways that we men have collectively constructed and individually internalized men's power is not only devastating to the women we love but, in a different and paradoxical way, is devastating to men ourselves.

And so we must fight for gender equality and against all forms of abuse and violence against women. This has been an area of my own volunteer work in co-founding White Ribbon, a campaign to engage men and boys to work to end violence against women that has spread to seventy or eighty countries.

At the same time we need to transform what it means to be a man. To embrace the diverse possibilities of manhood...of humanness. To raise our sons to not be afraid of emotions or of being outed as not real men.

Perhaps there is no more important place to start than the transformation of fatherhood. I don't want fathers helping out. I want fathers doing an equal share of parenting. And so, I'm putting time into a new international network, www.men-care.org, which has the goal—dramatic but, I believe, realizable - of men doing fifty percent of the care work on the planet.

Simply to say, yes, let's talk about our experiences of being men. But, actually, let's stop forcing destructive and self-destructive versions of manhood on each other. Women, men, children, and the planet will be much better for it.

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Michael Kaufman, PhD is the author of eight books and has worked with the UN, governments, and corporations for three decades to engage men to promote gender equality. www.michaelkaufman.com @GenderEQ