Gender, Sexuality & Feminism

GSF Conversations

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Michael Kaufman

with

Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila (*GSF* co-Managing Editor)
and Nata Duvvury (*GSF* Editorial Board)

For almost 35 years, Michael Kaufman has been an educator, writer, and activist focused on engaging with men and boys to promote gender equality and end men's violence against women. He is the co-founder of the White Ribbon Campaign, the largest effort in the world of men working to end violence against women. He has worked in more than 45 countries, within the UN system—including with UNICEF, UNESCO, UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA, and IFAD—and with governments and numerous local and international NGOs, including Save the Children, OXFAM, and Amnesty International. He is the author or editor of six books on gender issues, democracy, and development studies, and is also the author of an award-winning novel, *The Possibility of Dreaming on a Night Without Stars*. His most recent book is *The Guy's Guide to Feminism*. His articles have been translated into Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Italian, Turkish, Estonian, Persian, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese. He previously taught at York University in Toronto where he was Deputy Director of the Center for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean. He lives in Toronto, Canada, is married, and has a daughter and a son.

GSF: How did you become involved with ending men's violence against women and the White Ribbon Campaign?

MK: In 1980 I started doing research on men and masculinities and leading men's support groups, that is, counseling-based discussion groups that gave the participants their first opportunity to explore their lives as men. One of the first articles I wrote in the field was called "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence," in which I looked at the relationship between men's violence against women, men's violence against other men, and what I referred to as men's violence against men—that is, the internalization of violence.

Michael Kaufman: www.michaelkaufman.com

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All this was pretty abstract for me until several years later when 14 women students in Montreal were murdered by a man who blamed feminism for his inability to get into engineering school. This, the 1989 Montreal Massacre, galvanized Canada. Overnight, it created a national discussion on men's violence against women and, for the first time, I was asked to speak in the media about violence against women.

But it wasn't for another two years that three of us realized we needed to do more. Two men, Jack Layton and Ron Sluser, approached me with the idea of replicating an effort I had been involved in a couple of years earlier called "Men for Women's Choice." But I felt we needed more than a vehicle for a few good men to sign a public statement against men's violence. I felt we needed a way for men in our millions to speak out about violence against women. So, I came up with this idea for a campaign that the three of us, in tandem with men in several Canadian cities, quickly developed into the White Ribbon Campaign.

It swept across Canada and now has spread to more than 75 countries. At the time of this interview, I've just heard about new campaigns using the white ribbon symbol in Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia, and Vanuatu.¹

GSF: What are the challenges of integrating your academic work with your more activist work?

MK: It shouldn't be a challenge, but of course it definitely *was* in the early 1990s when the idea of men doing pro-feminist work and working publically as allies with women to end men's violence against women was still seen as either a novelty that would prove to be short-lived, or was treated with suspicion by some women's organizations. I left York University in Toronto, where I was teaching, to work independently as a writer and what you might call a public educator (both things being my paid work), and my activism with White Ribbon, which was always a half-time, and often a full-time, unpaid job.

Since I'm not an academic now, my challenge is how my writing, my public speaking, and my research can intersect with, inform, and be informed by the work both of scholars and of activists. I do know that many activists aren't sufficiently in touch with ongoing research. And I do think about the challenges my academic colleagues face: how to bring scholarly work and insights to a broader audience, and, especially, how we find language that will connect with the mass of people who, for reasons only they could reveal, don't spend their time reading French deconstructionist theory. Let's face it, most humans, even the very well educated, wouldn't have a clue what many academics are talking about. Sure, we need to speak to each other, but we also need to understand that life isn't a big word game and that scholars have a role—as that bearded guy in the nineteenth century said—not simply to understand the world, but to change it. Sorry to be old-fashioned in this belief, but there you have it.

GSF: How do academics inform their scholarly work about the lives of men?

MK: This is a critical question. For me, it's best done through active engagement in the wider community. This means not only reaching out with your knowledge and expertise, but doing so with humility—understanding that there are *ways* of knowing things and understanding reality that aren't organized and codified in scholarly terms. Working to engage men as fathers, or in campaigns or programs to end men's violence, or working in schools to introduce discussions about changing our norms of masculinity, give us instant feedback—in a sense, a ready-made qualitative data set—that has no equal.

GSF: Do you think that gender-based violence is different from other types of violence?

MK: I think that most types of violence are actually gender-based violence or at least have a gendered causality or component. It's not simply that most violence is committed by men, either against other men or women; too often we assume that the phrase "gender-based violence" is a synonym for men's violence against women when it's also a description of most violence among men.

When we explore this violence, we start with an understanding that patriarchy is not only an organized system of men dominating women but an intricate system of some groups of men dominating other groups of men. Violence becomes a tool both of maintaining power by some men over other men and also a tool of resistance.

But men's violence is more than an instrument to establish or maintain power; it is also a compensatory mechanism. After all, our hegemonic definitions of manhood are impossible for any man to fully live up to. The use of violence is a tool that some men use to prove to themselves and others that they are "real men." It's a practice that cements their relationship to the structures of men's dominance.

Explicitly homophobic violence has this compensatory character as well and is definitely gender-based violence. But I think that, in a broader sense, most casual or reactive violence among men and older boys is homophobic violence. In this sense, it is based on acting out and actively denying a fear of other men.

GSF: So what's the role of masculinity for you in gender-based violence? Is masculinity a risk factor for men/women as some scholars say? How do you see masculinity, in relation to violence?

MK: The hegemonic definitions of masculinity directly incorporate violence as a key working part. Our dominant constructions of manhood are tightly keyed into the use of

violence, the ability and capacity to use violence, the ability to stand up to violence and take pain, and the stoic internalization of violence. The last two give men's violence a masochistic and even homoerotic quality: think of the physical adoration of the action hero whose chest is cut and bloodied and, in a charming touch, who is unflinching through savage punishment only to wince when the beautiful woman dabs the cut with a wet cloth; her ministrations not only signifying his payoff but allowing the gazing male fan to deny any interest in his body.

GSF: What about power? What's the role of power in violence?

MK: I subscribe to the contribution of feminist scholars and activists in pointing to inequality and the enactment of power as a key driver in men's use of violence. Simply put, individual men or groups of men have used violence as a tool to maintain power and control. Hegemonic masculinities are an individual embodiment of social power; it is patriarchal power at the individual level. Within this, violence is a means of enforcing and maintaining that power within relationships. Hegemonic masculinities are a reified expression, an embodiment and living expression of social power and hierarchy.

But my work for the past three decades has also been hinged around an analysis of a paradox within our dominant gender practices and constructions of masculinity. That is, the very ways we have defined power are sources of enormous fear, pain, alienation, and doubt for men ourselves. As soon as we start working with men, either as researchers, activists, or counselors, we discover this bizarre paradox in the lives of men: yes, our lives are constructed around power, but they are also constructed around fear. To simplify, this fear is about not living up to the expectations and demands of manhood; it is a fear of not being a man but being that which patriarchal societies have simultaneously venerated and despised: a woman.

Again, this is where violence comes in. It can be *used* by a man as a compensatory mechanism. Thus, an individual might simultaneously be *using* violence to maintain power and maintain control in his relationships, but he's also using violence to compensate for feeling that he doesn't have power and isn't a real man.

GSF: In your classic piece about men's contradictory experiences of power, you stated that despite the fact that men are entitled to power in our societies, they feel powerless and alienated in their everyday lives. So, how do you solve this dilemma in your work with men?

MK: Recently I was on a panel at the UN's Commission on the Status of Women hosted by the Norwegian government. It posed the question: Why do we still have men's violence against women in more gender-equitable societies such as the Scandinavian countries? My answer was that ending men's violence required ending gender inequality

and men's privileges, *and also* transforming masculinity, transforming men's relationships with other men, and transforming men's lives as caregivers. You could argue that all this is, ultimately, is one and the same—and might be summarized as ending patriarchy. But it does mean that we must get beyond a discourse on gender *equality* and start talking about social and personal transformation, the ending of patriarchy, and the dismantling of our assumptions and practices about gender.

GSF: How do you address this contradiction in your work with men?

MK: Although men have relative social power and privilege, patriarchy is, of course, also a system of hierarchy and domination among men. Thus, individual men experience particular forms of oppression or discrimination or isolation because of their socioeconomic class, their skin color, their sexual orientation, their physical abilities or disabilities, their immigrant status, their age, and so on. On top of that, most men grow up experiencing violence and the expectation they must engage in violent practices—all of which have traumatic or at least self-destructive implications for men.

So while it's true they are not oppressed "as men," (and it's important we assert this against the claims of the men's rights' ideologues), this isn't much more than an academic nicety. An individual man doesn't separate his experience as a man from his experience as white or black, gay or straight, and so on.

This has practical implications for those of us engaged as activists or practitioners. We may be working to challenge men's violence or men's privileges, but if we're going to actually reach the men we want to change, if we actually want to understand their lives and their place in the reproduction of the complexities of patriarchy, then we best be guided by empathy and compassion: empathy and compassion because we know that *all* men are affected by homophobia (although the impact varies); empathy and compassion because some men face specific forms of oppression and discrimination; empathy and compassion because we know of the trauma and hurt some men inflict on boys and men; empathy and compassion because the very ways we have defined and constructed men's power actually sets up the vast majority of men for failure.

We are guided to do so not just because we want to be "nice" (although that wouldn't be such a bad thing!). Rather, if we want people to change, we have to create safe environments for change. If we just point a finger at men and say "stop being this and stop doing that," all we will do is trigger a defensive response. But if we create a safe and nurturing environment, we recreate the conditions in which children learn. We know from the emerging neurosciences that in situations of personal safety, children's brains develop in healthier ways. We actually produce the hormones that allow us to lay down new neuropathways, whereas if we feel threatened, we release a flood of cortisol that triggers fight or flight responses and literally stops us from learning.

Overall, the challenge of working with men for change is integrating into our work an understanding of men's contradictory experiences of power. This means we must be relentless in challenging oppressive attitudes and behaviors in others and ourselves. But at the same time we need to reach out with compassion and empathy.

GSF: *When you say that violence is a mechanism a man uses to compensate for powerlessness in society, don't you think that some people might think that this is a justification for men's violence?*

MK: We have to distinguish between an explanation and an excuse. As we've been exploring in this interview, men use violence for contradictory reasons. But none of this is an *excuse*. As adults, we still make choices. These choices may be unconscious, we may feel our actions are out of our control, but we're still making choices. The man who goes home and beats up his wife didn't choose to beat up a coworker or the clerk at a store. He's making choices. Understanding the roots of his actions isn't to justify them or give him an excuse. It's to give us the tools to actually challenge men's use of violence, challenge the ways that patriarchal societies have nurtured cultures of violence, and help individuals change.

GSF: *How do you address the criticism by some feminists that giving attention to men in intimate partner violence in fact diverts much needed resources to support women?*

MK: It's a legitimate concern and one I've listened to carefully over the years. (For example, for our first nine or ten years, White Ribbon in Canada didn't accept a penny of government funding as we were worried it would come from the same budgets going to women's programs. That only changed when some women's groups convinced us this was a ridiculous decision on our part.)

To this concern, I think there are some good responses. First, campaigns like White Ribbon call for more funding and better support for women's services, including independently run shelters and crisis centers.

Second, we know that primary prevention is much less expensive than picking up the pieces afterwards with police services, courts, and prisons. So, if we develop education programs and campaigns that reach out to boys and men that prevent men's violence against women, in the long run there will not only be money freed up to support women's programs but there will be less violence against women and, thus, less need for services for women.

Third, we know that in a male-dominated society, men still control the purse strings of governments, they still have power in the media, and in educational and religious institutions. And so, if we put effort into engaging men, they start seeing themselves as actors for change. So, when it comes to budgeting, they're actually more likely to make sure money is going to the women's causes that are desperate for funding.

Overall, here's my message: some critics say that working with men is cutting up the pie too small. What we're saying is, let's bake a bigger pie. Concretely, the way to bake a bigger pie is not just rhetoric because, after all, everyone says we should have more money for everything. One way we can bake a bigger pie is by engaging men, because as men still have more power, they are the ones who are still able to bake that bigger pie. This is not to take over from women or say that men are going to be the principle bakers, but simply that men can be there as partners with women, right there in the kitchen, both literally and figuratively.

GSF: In your experience, what messages have been the most effective in shifting attitudes of men in terms of gender equality, and particularly in terms of gender division of care work?

MK: One of the things I've seen around the world, including in programs and campaigns that have been positively evaluated, is that positive messages have a far greater impact on men than simply telling men what *not* to do. The latter might express what we activists and advocates of change know is true and might well express our outrage and anger, but they usually spark a defensive reaction in most men who'll say, "Well I don't do that, I'm not like that, or why are you blaming me for what he does?" But if we find ways to have positive messages, if we appeal to men about the importance of speaking out against violence against women based on our love for women, based on wanting our daughters and our sisters and our mothers, our wives, and our friends to live in a society where they don't have to live in fear, we are much more likely to spark a response.

Similarly, if we say to men that gender equality and transformation is going to immensely improve our lives, we're opening up a rich conversation. So, for example, I say to men who are living with a woman to make sure they're doing half the housework and childcare. That's a lot of work; it can be a drag, it's much nicer if you don't have to clean the toilets, make the lunches and everything. But here's what you're going to get out of it: you're going to be happier, your children will be better off, and you'll have a better relationship. How do I know? Studies—for example in Sweden but also the IMAGES surveys from around the world conducted by my colleagues—have shown that men who do a much higher level of housework and childcare have children who do better in school and have wives or partners who are happier. "That's nice," says a man, "but I'm the one who pays the price." We have an answer for him: the same studies indicate that these men are less likely to have health problems, less likely to have psychiatric problems, less likely to miss days of work, more likely to get help when they

need it, report higher levels of marital satisfaction and, if all of that doesn't convince him, have sex more often.

So we say to men, speak out to end violence against women, do your share of housework and childcare, and so on, because we respect the rights of women, because we love and care about the women in our lives, because we want our children to flourish, *and also because* these things will create a better world for men.

GSF: In your talks and the workshops you facilitate with men, how is male sexuality framed? What are the key aspects of sexuality—partners, practices, pleasure, responsibility—discussed? Are there specific interventions that have been successful in transforming individual men's understanding of norms of sexuality as well as practices?

MK: Not only in workshops or talks to men, but in all the work I do (for example, speaking at universities on healthy relationships), it is of course critical that we have a broad and inclusive understanding of relationships. Sometimes I expect pushback against this. Recently I was speaking at a Catholic university and when I discussed consent in relationships, I started with some photos of men and women, men and men, and women and women. I was expecting some objections, but I had underestimated my audience and the development of more inclusive frameworks among the students and faculty, in spite of the homophobic and homohateful policies and pronouncements of the men who run the church.

Two or three decades ago, I focused quite a bit on men's sexualities—in a chapter in my first book on men, *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays on Pleasure, Power and Change*, and a couple of chapters in *Cracking the Armor*. In short, I explored how our dominant forms of masculinity are constructed through specifically gendered relationships to our own and other men's bodies.

GSF: What is your opinion on the notion of the new man or the new father? Are there any changes in these men's lives regarding gender inequality?

MK: I'm currently doing research on fatherhood as part of work on a book, co-authored with Gary Barker, on the global transformation of fatherhood. We see the growing involvement of men as equal partners—and, I stress, as nurturing and non-violent partners—in caregiving, domestic work, and in looking after our children. These are key for the empowerment of women, important for the health and happiness of our children, and a foundation for gender equality. We also feel it is pivotal to healthier and happier lives for men ourselves.

I'm also involved in a new international network, www.men-care.org, which is made up of organizations and agencies around the world working to engage men as fathers and to transform fatherhood. In some countries, our partners are focusing on

shifting social norms and encouraging a more involved fatherhood; some are focusing on positive discipline and alternatives to corporal punishment; some are running father's groups for new dads; some are working with health care professionals and social service agencies to develop father-inclusive practices; some focus on the policy level, pressing, for example, for the introduction of, or enhancement of, father's leave.

GSF: How do you see the future of the studies on men and masculinities?

MK: I'm incredibly excited. A handful of us independently started our first research in the field in the early 1980s because, literally, there was almost no scholarly work on men and masculinities and very little good popular literature. Well into the 1990s, it was possible to know everyone in the field, at least those who wrote in the languages you knew. How different this is now!

Notes

¹ See Michael Kaufman, "The Day the White Ribbon Campaign Changed the Day" for an exploration of the new approaches the WRC took to engaging men and boys. www.michaelkaufman.com/articles.