

The Role of Men and Boys in Preventing Violence against Women

A Speech by TOM HEATHFIELD SPEECH

What causes men and boys to act violently against women?

Is it the newly recognised *need* for equality between the two sexes that threatens a man's traditional role as breadwinner?

Or, is it that the embedded social conventions of today promote violence?

In order to re-establish a patriarchy, some men seem to use violence as a tool to assert their authority and dominance over women. The issue is that a patriarchal society has become ever more irrelevant post emancipation. We **must** find a solution that dissolves the perceived threat to a man's status - his masculinity; and which allows women to thrive in a society which isn't compromised by men trying to establish dominance. Rather than trying to reverse social conventions, I believe that it is more productive to celebrate them, and to use elements of these norms to the advantages of both men and women.

I would like to encourage role models within a group of men and boys to set a standard which encourages the rest to follow and sees the "pack mentality" actually promote a non-violent policy towards women.

Today's society demands, from men and boys, a social convention which embodies the "machismo" image, better known as the "macho" stereotype. Look at the figure of James Bond for example. Daniel Craig plays a rugged, muscular and masculine MI6 spy who is renowned as being a sex symbol, and thought by many women to be the aesthetic ideal.

Before addressing ways in which we can use this stereotype in preventing violence against women, we must first look at the misled mentality which some men and boys adopt in trying to achieve their desired image; and consider the connotations of "machismo" and its consequences in real life, rather than in film.

Evelyn Stevens, an activist commenting on gender roles, epitomises the machismo image, claiming that it is the "exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male to male interpersonal relationships, and arrogance and sexual aggression in male to female relationships". Stevens suggests that, in some cases, aggression towards women is a façade which men adopt in order to achieve their desired image; to impress fellow men, and to exert authority and dominance over women.

On a more extreme, sinister note, the "Mexican cultural code" depicts "Machismo" as the ability to "lie without compunction, be suspicious, envious, jealous, vindictive, brutal, and have the willingness to fight and kill to preserve a masculine image". Here, the brutality of this façade is exposed.

It is evident, given the instances of brutality against women, that men get it wrong. In an effort to appear *macho*, to emulate the Bond-like ideal, men enhance their physiques in order to adopt a strong, powerful physical presence. Yet they get the fundamental attitude terribly wrong. Physical prowess and sexual attractiveness all - too easily turn into misogyny, sexual aggression, violence and physical oppression. When the balance, where men aspire to physical attractiveness **to** women, turns into physical aggression **against** women, the stereotype becomes wholly destructive.

The aim therefore, is to amalgamate the "macho" culture, with the recognised need for equality between men and women.

Traditionally, in the Western world, and currently in the world of moderate Islam, the women in a man's family are associated with family values, and the protection of women and children is a matter of honour amongst men. The expectation is for men to shield and protect the women in their family, and in doing so, draw attention to their masculinity and how it upholds the role of a woman as fundamental to a family. It is counterproductive then, for a man to betray this unspoken expectation, this code of honour and inflict aggression or violence. Instead, a masculine, macho image can be seen as a necessary tool, utilised in order to fulfil what is clearly honourable; namely, the protection and preservation of all women.

So, given that the protection of women is honourable – to go against this convention is unorthodox and unacceptable. Ironically, a man's violent acts bring about his own downfall, given the stigma that his violence invokes. Yes, he may well be flexing his muscles, inflicting

damage upon women, but he is also bringing about damage upon himself and his own reputation; his own position in society. It becomes then, the responsibility of society as a whole to ostracise such behaviour.

Let us look at projects which encourage these values and serve as a model:

The "*Boys to men - building true strength*" programme in Maine, New England, hosts sporting events for boys and seminars which discuss the need to protect women; where their vision is that:

- All boys have the opportunity to develop into healthy men, supported by adult mentors who model healthy masculinity and respectful, nonviolent relationships.
- The absence of violence and fear frees all people to be caring and productive members of society.

More of such education needs to take place, where the cycle of abuse can be broken; where children, sons, brothers and grandsons of abusers are re-educated so that they can avoid perpetuating the violent cycle. The pattern of learned behaviour **can** be changed as long as the will to do so prevails.

The protective teaching emphasises the need for two aspects: for protection against **external** threats; for example, sexual aggression from other males; and protection against **internal** threats. Internal threats encompass aspects such as domestic violence.

The boys who attend these seminars are taught that domestic violence towards women in their family is both dishonourable and weak, and contradicts the meaning of true strength. It now becomes clear how the macho stereotype can be adapted for the benefit of women. The ideal is that, in order to be truly strong, men and boys need to utilise their physical presence in order to protect women.

It is vital to acknowledge the futility of attempting to eradicate existing stereotypes which males strive to fulfil. Why? Well, because masculinity is so deeply embedded within our culture, within the media, within film and literature. Society demands strength and manliness in men. But, may we add to this by realising the potential that exists for the protection of women; and capitalise on the positive impact that the macho stereotype could have.

I call upon the revision of the stereotype and implore men and boys to view masculinity as the means by which they can offer protection to all women. And in doing so, may they realise that this is strength as well as a privilege.

Freidric Nietzsche developed the philosophy of the "herd mentality," which is seen today as men and boys operate in large groups - or "packs." As a young man, I have experienced first-hand the formation of cliques in the classroom environment, on the rugby field and in the workplace. This is innate behaviour. Through this mechanism, males deflect attention from themselves as they act violently towards women and behave inappropriately. It appears less conspicuous for a group to be acting a certain way than acting alone, as one individual.

It is clearly weak to hide behind other males, allowing them to absorb, normalise and neutralise bad behaviour. It contradicts the "strength" in mind that the "alpha male" or "macho man" proclaims of himself. Does James bond, the alpha icon, operate in a pack that absorbs his inappropriate behaviour? No. A **real** man, a truly masculine man, would act independently and be held fully accountable for his actions, rather than excusing his actions which his peers mirror his. The words of Sigmund Freud "when a person is in a crowd, they act differently to when a person would be thinking as an individual," encapsulate the situation. More simply, men and boys must ask themselves; "if my friends weren't acting this way, would **I**?" In most cases, I believe a resounding "No" would be the answer.

Again, it is useless to demand men and boys not to operate in packs and groups. It's **innate**, and inevitable. Instead, I call upon role models within a group to lead the way, and who realise where true strength lies, showing the modernised "Macho" stereotype that was mentioned earlier.

It is typical for men and boys to copy one another, and follow their "leader." Again, I know this through my own participation in sport. If a small group of players set a high standard, then you find yourself raising your game in order to match their excellence; and soon, the whole team performs at a higher level. So, natural patterns of male behaviour would have it that the one exceptional individual in a "pack," the one who can make that step towards changing their behaviour, will entice the others, and hopefully they will follow him, pursuing a non-violent policy towards women, whilst maintaining the same "macho" image, but also demonstrates their desired traits - physicality, authority and protectiveness.

There needs to be intervention; a hand needs to be extended to these potential role models. It is clearly too much to ask for them to change on the strength of their own initiative. Schemes across the world are nurturing these values:

Care Burundi in Eastern Africa developed “Abantagamuco” which translates to “Give light to darkness”. The scheme incorporates debate about gender roles, which mobilises men to make a personal commitment to changing their behaviour towards women. It’s clear how projects such as these extend a hand towards that one exceptional individual within a group in order to make change. And, as mentioned before, if one can step outside of their “comfort zone”, the rest will make the changes necessary in order to match them.

Men and boys therefore need to re-evaluate what it means to be "macho". They must display a character which withholds the desirable physical traits and masculine features that society demands, but in such a way that means that their policy towards women is consistent; and is one where women are seen as equal and a symbol of honour which should be protected.

And finally, I would implore men and boys to realise the weakness in hiding behind a "pack" to justify actions of violence and degradation. What is truly strong is accountability; to be responsible for one’s self rather than allowing others to normalise poor behaviour. Let us pave the way for role models to entice other men into being the modern "macho man," and rather than look to eradicate existing stereotypes, may we work with what already exists in an effort to instil a better future for women.

If nothing I have said today is clear, may the words of R. Buckminster Fuller resound among us:

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete"

And, to paraphrase the words of Sampson, the most *macho* of Biblical characters; “out of the strong came forth sweetness.” Judges 14:14.