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Issues for Men in the 1990s

Michael S. Kimmel

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Issues for Men in the 1990s

MICHAEL S. KIMMEL*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Consider the following: The Roper Organization conducted surveys in 1970 and 1990 in which they asked 3,000 American women and 1,000 American men a set of questions about their perceptions of men.¹ In the 1970 survey, two-thirds of those questioned agreed that men were basically kind, gentle, and thoughtful.² In 1990, only fifty-one percent agreed.³ In 1970, forty-one percent of those surveyed thought that all men wanted from a date was to go to bed;⁴ in 1990, fifty-four percent reached that conclusion.⁵ In 1970, thirty-two percent believed that men were basically selfish and self-centered;⁶ in 1990, forty-two percent agreed.⁷ In 1970, forty-nine percent believed that men's egos require that they put women down;⁸ in 1990, fifty-five percent agreed.⁹ In 1970, thirty-nine percent believed that men were

* Associate Professor of Sociology, State University of New York, Stony Brook.

1. See ROPER ORGANIZATION, *Opinions About Men*, in THE 1990 VIRGINIA SLIMS OPINION POLL: A 20-YEAR PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN'S ISSUES 54 (1990). This study covered a variety of women's issues, seeking opinions on such topics as how far women believe they have come in the last 30 years, whether they are personally satisfied with their lives today, their opinions on men and relationships, their attitudes regarding today's workplaces, the role of women as workers, mothers, and wives, and their views on women as leaders. In questioning women on their opinions on men, the study gave various descriptions of men and asked whether they were mostly accurate or not. Then the results were contrasted with a similar 1970 Roper study.

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

interested only in their work, and not really interested in their families.¹⁰ By 1990, after two decades of a fatherhood revolution, fifty-three percent of those surveyed believed that men were only interested in their work, a fourteen percent increase.¹¹

What is going on here? After two decades of sexual liberation, the collapse of the traditional macho paradigm—the real and symbolic death of John Wayne—and the birth of the “sensitive New Age guy,” have men actually regressed? I think not. Rather, the statistics changed because women’s expectations of how men should respond and behave have changed.

Some men are reacting sharply against women’s heightened expectations. Anti-feminist George Gilder, for example, urges women to return to the home where they “belong” and leave the public sphere to men.¹² Others, like Robert Bly, have urged men to retreat from the world of women to temporary male sanctuaries in order to recapture some “deep” or “wild” masculinity that has become dormant in today’s modern technological society in which women actively participate.¹³

These proposals, of course, are false solutions. The changes in the lives of women in the past two decades makes a return to the traditional model impossible. The sexual revolution, the women’s movement, and gay and lesbian movements have so utterly transformed the field upon which women and men play out their relations that we need to re-survey the land and get a feel for the new world in which we live. Women’s lives have undergone a revolution; men instead have experienced what we might call a stalled revolution. As a result, men today feel confused, like foreigners on a new planet with no map to get around. This Essay attempts to sketch such a map and to illuminate some of the road signs on a changed landscape.

II. THE WOMEN’S REVOLUTION

Changes in women’s lives have affected men in at least four areas. The first area is so obvious it hardly needs defining. The women’s movement has made gender visible. Indeed, women have demonstrated the centrality of gender in social life. In the past two decades, gender has joined race and class to form the three primordial

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. GEORGE GILDER, *MEN AND MARRIAGE* 153-54 (1986).

13. ROBERT BLY, *IRON JOHN: A BOOK ABOUT MEN* 6, 222-37, 244-49 (1990) (advocating the rediscovery of the primitive male psyche within each man as an indispensable yet neglected side to their personalities).

axes around which social life revolves. Issues of gender have also permeated many institutional levels in recent years. Today, virtually every curriculum has a women's studies program, and many university presses boast a women's studies book list.

Second, women's relationship to work has changed markedly. Women are permanently in the workplace. Almost half of the labor force is female. I often demonstrate this point to my classes by asking the women who intend to have careers to raise their hands. All do. I then ask them to keep their hands raised if their mothers had careers outside the home for more than ten years. Half put their hands down. Finally, I ask them to keep their hands raised if their grandmothers had a career for ten years. Virtually no hands remain raised. In three generations, they can see the large difference in women's working lives.

This change in women's working life has led to a third area of change for women, change thrust upon them through their efforts to balance work and family life. Currently, women must choose to put career or family first. "Having it all" has become a symbol of the modern woman—she can have a glamorous career and a loving family. (Of course, until now men have always "had it all." Women have done the homework. Men have had it all because women have not.) Women have now begun to question the "second shift": the household shift, traditionally their task after the workplace shift ends.¹⁴

Finally, women have changed the sexual landscape. Although men like to think of themselves as the sexual pioneers, women (and, of course, gays and lesbians) have *really* revolutionized and transformed sexuality during the past two decades. Women now feel empowered to claim sexual desire. For instance, twenty years ago, sociologist Lillian Rubin found that seventy-five percent of the women she interviewed had faked an orgasm; last year, less than two in ten had.¹⁵

Women's lives have changed enormously in the past two decades. Though some men have changed, most men have not undergone a comparable revolution. The results of the poll indicate not that men have become worse; instead, women's expectations have risen dramatically. In the growing gender gap, men lag increasingly behind

14. See ARLIE HOCHSCHILD, *THE SECOND SHIFT: WORKING PARENTS AND THE REVOLUTION AT HOME* 4 (1989).

15. LILLIAN B. RUBIN, *WORLDS OF PAIN: LIFE IN THE WORKING-CLASS FAMILY* 138 (1976) (examining the effect of class differences on influencing the behavior and attitudes of middle-class families, based on an intensive study of 50 white working-class families). See generally LILLIAN B. RUBIN, *EROTIC WARS: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION* (1990) (discussing the impact of the sexual revolution in altering the sociology and psychology of sex on generations before, during, and after the sexual revolution).

women in feeling empowered to implement change in their lives. As a result, many men are confused about the meaning of masculinity.

III. THE RULES OF MANHOOD

It used to be easy to be a real man. One had only to follow the four basic rules of masculinity, as elaborated by psychologist Robert Brannon.¹⁶ First, and perhaps most important, *No Sissy Stuff*. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of femininity;¹⁷ a man can do nothing that even remotely hints of the feminine. Second, *Be a Big Wheel*. Masculinity is measured by power, wealth, success; he who has the most toys when he dies wins.¹⁸ Third, *Be a Sturdy Oak*. Real men show no emotions, and are thus emotionally reliable by being emotionally inexpressive.¹⁹ Finally, *Give 'em Hell*. Exude an aura of manly daring and aggression. Always take risks. Go for it.²⁰

These dicta contain internal contradictions. Being a "sturdy oak" demands prudence, while "giving 'em hell" requires that one take risks imprudently. Traditionally, society has managed these contradictions as easily as those that lie within any set of moral epigrams (as in "look before you leap" and "he who hesitates is lost"). Today, their lack of reference, not the contradictions themselves, makes American men confused about what it means to be a real man.

The 1990s will find men increasingly bumping up against the limits of traditional masculinity, yet unable to replace those archaic constructions with coherent new models. It is not that Alan Alda has replaced or will replace Rambo, but rather that neither provides an adequate role model for today's men. These limits will become most visible around the four areas in which women have changed most dramatically: making gender visible, entering the workplace, balancing work and home, and transforming sexuality. The changes among women will raise new issues for men to confront in the coming decade. The remainder of this Essay presents some issues that American men face in the coming decades as a result of the changes in women's lives and the traditional dictates of masculinity.

16. See generally DEBORAH S. DAVID & ROBERT BRANNON, THE FORTY-NINE PERCENT MAJORITY: THE MALE SEX ROLE 49-232 (1976) (analyzing the male sex-role and its impact on societal attitudes as a means of changing these attitudes).

17. *Id.* at 49.

18. *Id.* at 89-90.

19. *Id.* at 161-62.

20. *Id.* at 199-200.

IV. MAKING GENDER VISIBLE TO MEN

Most men do not consider themselves gendered beings. This point was illustrated to me about ten years ago when I participated in a feminist theory seminar.²¹ At that seminar, a white woman was explaining to a black woman how their common experience of oppression under patriarchy bound them together as sisters. The black woman demurred from quick agreement. "When you look in the mirror," she asked the white woman, "what do you see?" "I see a woman," responded the white woman hopefully. "That's the problem," responded the black woman. "I see a black woman. To me race is visible, because it is how I am not privileged in society. Because you are privileged by race, race is invisible to you." I groaned, embarrassed. And, as the only man in the room, all eyes turned to me. "When I look in the mirror," I confessed, "I see a human being. The generic person. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, and no gender." On that day in 1980, the category of middle-class white man became operative to me. The privilege of privilege renders the terms of privilege invisible. Only those marginalized by some category understand the power of that category when deployed against them.

The lack of an adequate mechanism for men to experience a secure gender identity makes it more difficult for men to experience gendered self-awareness and the influences of gender in their lives. Specifically, in the 1990s, men will face the problem of developing some mechanism of initiation to a secure sense of masculinity: a rite of passage through which young men can successfully demonstrate their manhood. Masculinity is a public enactment, demonstrated and proved in the public domain before the evaluative eyes of other men. Adolescent men possess no ceremony through which they achieve a secure manhood. As a result, masculinity becomes a relentless test, never completely proven, subject to the nagging suspicion of instant destruction by one false move.

This central theme during adolescence—the transition between childhood and adulthood, and the moment of sexual awakening—inevitably involves the craving for a secure gender identity. Thus, sexuality and gender identity become intimately entwined with one another at this moment, and systematic avoidance of the feminine becomes crucial. One's manhood is at stake.

Without clear and definable mechanisms for boys to feel secure

21. Feminist Theory Seminar, University of California at Santa Cruz (Spring 1980). I attended this graduate level seminar in order to better understand feminism, and to learn more about its history.

in their manhood, they will invent their own dangerous and destructively distorted ways to prove it to others, and thereby, hopefully, to themselves. The two forces that shape and distort everything else in our culture—sexism and homophobia (the power that men have over women and the power that some men have over other men) shape and distort these efforts. Sexism and homophobia become the organizing principles of these distorted initiation processes. Is it a coincidence that adolescent males almost always attack gays in our cities? Douse drunks (failed men) in lighter fluid and set them on fire as sport? Gang-rape drunk, unconscious women at fraternity parties? Attack, gang rape, and leave for dead a twenty-eight year-old jogger in Central Park? Several of the boys involved in that incident talked about it as a rite of initiation, a demonstration of their manhood.

As a culture, we must confront adolescent males' need to develop a secure, confident, inner sense of themselves as men, which, I believe, they can accomplish only by changing what it means to be a real man. If not, the dangerous consequences that come from men's twisted efforts to prove ourselves will continue. Unless society deals with the need of young men to realize a secure identity in constructive ways, the criminal justice system will face the unpleasant consequences of this lacuna.

V. WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

A second arena of change for men in the 1990s will be the workplace. Here, several important issues demand transformation of the meaning of masculinity. These issues will make the legal profession scramble to keep with the enormous social changes they entail. For one thing, we must face the fact that we are a downwardly mobile culture.²² This is counterintuitive and goes against prevailing ideology in the United States. However, the economic reality indicates that "[h]alf the population suffers from falling incomes, and almost one-third plunge far down the economic ladder."²³ What's more, a "very large proportion of the present population cannot expect to grow steadily more affluent as they age. The baby-boomers will not

22. KATHERINE S. NEWMAN, *FALLING FROM GRACE: THE EXPERIENCE OF DOWNWARD MOBILITY IN THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS* 7-21 (1988) (presenting an anthropological study of the prevalence of downward mobility in a society that views such mobility as a rarity, and concluding that by this attitude, society causes self-blame and wastes significant human resources). See generally BARBARA EHRENREICH, *FEAR OF FALLING: THE INNER LIFE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS* 250 (1989) (concluding that the fear of falling into a lower social class drives the middle class in the face of an upper class actively resisting middle class ascendance).

23. NEWMAN, *supra* note 22, at 23.

experience the same trajectory of upward mobility as their parents' generation."²⁴ Most of the middle class cannot afford to buy the houses in which their parents raised them. We will also need to change the meaning of success so that retired men do not look back at their work careers and wonder whether it was worth it. Again, we must redefine masculinity to include the capacity to embrace others as equals, and thus provide inner security and confidence for men that can last a lifetime.

I recently watched a basketball tournament on television in which the commentators constantly reminded the viewers that of the sixty-four teams that began the tournament, only one team would "finish the season with a win." Men have constructed the definition of masculinity around wealth, power, and status—whoever has the most toys when he dies wins. As a result, few men are ever wealthy, powerful, or respected enough to feel secure. Someone is always above us on the ladder, making most men feel like failures. Because men drive their masculine identity in the public sphere, and the primary public sphere is the workplace, we must confront this problem quickly. There are fewer big wheels, more and more men who feel that they have not made the grade and who will feel damaged, injured, and powerless: men who need to demonstrate their masculinity all over again.

To complicate matters, women have entered the workplace in unprecedented numbers. It is virtually impossible that a man will go through his entire working life without having a woman colleague, co-worker, or boss. Yet how do men relate to women? As equals in the public sphere? Hardly. When men's economic breadwinner status is threatened, women become easy targets for men's anger. One effect is sexual harassment in the workplace, men's distorted effort to put women back in their place and to remind them that they are not equals. In the 1990s, sexual harassment will become an increasingly visible problem, as was made obvious in the aftermath of the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearing.

Currently, law firms and corporations all over the country scramble to implement sexual harassment policies to ensure recognition and punishment of sexual harassment. The challenge, though, is greater than admonition and post-hoc counseling. The challenge is to prevent sexual harassment *before* it happens. That means working with men. Men must come to see that these are not women who happen to be in the workplace.

24. *Id.* at 36.

VI. FROM ROCKS AND ISLANDS

We will need to sort out the balance between work and family life and to recover our capacities for manly nurture if we are to experience the richness of interior life that we have come to believe is our right, but for which we are ill equipped and unskilled. What has traditionally made men reliable in a crisis makes us unavailable emotionally to others. Paul Simon captured this paradox when he sang mournfully that "[a] rock feels no pain. / And an island never cries."²⁵

Fatherhood, friendship, and partnership all require emotional resources, such as patience, compassion, tenderness, and attention to process, that men have traditionally shunned. Alan Alda once wrote in his brilliant dissection of excessive masculinity—or as he called it, "testosterone poisoning"—a "man isn't someone you'd want around in a crisis—like raising children or growing old together."²⁶

We increasingly find that the things that we thought would make us real men impoverish our relationships with other men and our children. Sexism and homophobia distort our experiences, making us uneasy around other men and fearful of feminization with our children. The emotional impoverishment of our own lives, the demands of women that we participate in child care, and our own desires to do so make it imperative that we deal with these issues.

VII. MASCULINITY AND RISK-TAKING

Finally, we must confront the universal equation of masculinity with risk-taking. Masculinity means always "going for it," taking no prisoners, "giving 'em hell," and living on the edge.²⁷ This presents several issues. First, Operation Desert Storm²⁸ reinforced the view that we have always linked the capacity for violence with manhood. During peacetime, a new generation needs to demonstrate its manhood in ways that its predecessor did on the battlefield. Each generation, therefore, constructs its own fantasy battlefields to prove its manhood under fire. For example, men create individual

25. PAUL SIMON & ART GARFUNKEL, *I Am A Rock*, on SIMON & GARFUNKEL'S GREATEST HITS (Columbia Records 1972).

26. Alan Alda, *What Women Need to Know About Men*, in MICHAEL KIMMEL & MICHAEL MESSNER, *MEN'S LIVES* 295, 295 (1989).

27. DAVID & BRANNON, *supra* note 16, at 199-200.

28. "Operation Desert Storm" was the code name used to refer to the United States-led military operation during which multinational forces enforced United Nations resolutions requiring that Iraqi military forces end their occupation of Kuwait. See Andrew Rosenthal, *War in the Gulf: The Overview—U.S. and Allies Open Air War on Iraq*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 17, 1991, at A1.

skirmishes—on the streets, on the freeways, on the job—or little wars in which victory (and someone else's defeat) is not an effort to seek truth, or even pleasure, but to prove manhood.²⁹

To make this point clearer, I want to discuss the curious construction of male sexuality and its link to risk-taking. Here, men see risk-taking in its purest form. We are always supposed to "go for it," be ready for it, and want it. The relentless effort to get sex most concretely expresses our obsessive drive to prove masculinity.³⁰

Date rape and AIDS are two issues of sexuality that men must face in the 1990s. One does not immediately associate date rape with AIDS, but by exploring some of the commonalities, we can better assess some of the challenges to men.

Date rape has become one of the most important issues confronting men, because women have begun to speak about the ways they have felt pressured, tricked, or forced into sex. To see this as rape, and not as sex, is a crucial step for men. This step is difficult, because society conditions men never to take no for an answer, to hear "no" as meaning "yes," to always escalate an encounter, and to score. Men are victims of a strange hearing impairment—a socialized deafness—and need to develop some adequate hearing aids.

In one recent study, forty-five percent of all college women said that they had experienced some form of involuntary sexual contact, and a full twenty-five percent had been pressed or forced to have involuntary sexual intercourse.³¹ When a UCLA psychologist asked freshmen men over the past ten years whether they would commit rape if they were certain they could get away with it, almost one-half said they would.³²

Ironically, this attitude exists among men just when women are learning to say "yes" to their own sexualities and to their own desires for sexual pleasures. This further complicates the issue for men, who see sexuality as a confirmation of gender identity and scoring as a

29. The popular conception of lawyers is that the ruthlessness with which one attacks one's opponent deals more with gender than justice.

30. The other rules of manhood easily capture male sexuality; for example, the equation of masculinity with aggression and activity (no sissy stuff), the emphasis on scoring (being a big wheel), and the disembodied phallocentrism by which men speak of sexual organs as "tools" (being a sturdy oak). See *supra* notes 16-20 and accompanying text.

31. See ROBIN WARSHAW, I NEVER CALLED IT RAPE: THE MS. REPORT ON RECOGNIZING, FIGHTING, AND SURVIVING DATE AND ACQUAINTANCE RAPE 48 (1988) (citing Mary P. Koss, *Hidden Rape: Incidence, Prevalence, and Descriptive Characteristics of Sexual Aggression and Victimization in a National Sample of College Students*, in 2 SEXUAL ASSAULT (A.W. Burgess, ed., 1988)).

32. Neil M. Malamuth, *Predictors of Naturalistic Sexual Aggression*, 50 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 953-62 (1986); see also WARSHAW, *supra* note 31, at 48.

demonstration of masculinity. Instead of remaining socially deaf, men need to learn to trust women when they tell us what they want, when they want it, and what they don't want. If men listen when women say "no," then women will feel more trusting and open to saying yes when they feel that way. Men must sensitize themselves to their own inner voices, desires, and needs—not the voices compulsively proving something that cannot be proved, but the voices involving the connection with another and the desires and passions that take place between two equals.

Escalating a sexual encounter beyond a woman's wishes is called rape, not sex. Calling this event rape is transforming the sexual landscape among men, redefining what men previously thought of as sex. Changing legal terminology to reflect women's experiences of male sexuality more adequately and actively prosecuting cases as rape cases (not as sexual encounters that might have gotten a little bit out of hand) are crucial legal issues. Consequently, men must re-examine their own sexuality and their definitions of consent, and align these with women's definitions.

Date rape stems from the same source as men's obsessive risk-taking in other areas of their lives. This risk-taking makes men more vulnerable to stress-related diseases, drunk driving, accidental death, and AIDS. We commonly refer to AIDS as a disease of gay men and intra-venous ("IV") drug users, but we need to see AIDS as a men's disease.³³ Over ninety percent of all AIDS patients are men,³⁴ AIDS is now a leading cause of death for men aged thirty-three to forty-five nationwide.³⁵ AIDS is probably American men's number-one health problem, yet we rarely treat it as a men's issue. AIDS may be the most gender-linked disease in American history. No other disease has ever attacked one gender so disproportionately, except those sex-specific diseases like hemophilia and uterine or prostate cancer. AIDS *could* affect both men and women equally as it generally does in Africa. In the United States, however, AIDS patients are overwhelmingly men.

Engaging in specific high-risk behaviors and activities that ignore

33. This is not to say that compassion is reserved for male AIDS patients. One must recognize that the same high-risk behavior found in men exposes women to AIDS. The point is that women do not engage in that behavior with the same frequency as men.

34. CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL, PUB. HEALTH SERVICE, DEP'T OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVS., MORBIDITY AND MORTALITY WEEKLY REPORT: REPORT ON AIDS 123, 161 (Dec. 17, 1987) (showing an incidence rate of AIDS in men 13 times that of women).

35. *Id.* at 136 (showing the increase of human immunodeficiency virus ("HIV") infection increasing in the late twenties to early thirties, where it peaked, and its decline in the forties and fifties).

potential health risks for more immediate pleasures puts one at risk of contracting AIDS. Sharing needles, for example, both openly flaunts health risks and expresses community among intravenous drug users. The capacity for high-risk sexual behaviors, such as unprotected, anal intercourse with a large number of partners, and the ability to take it, despite any potential pain, further confirm masculinity.

Sociologists have long understood that stigmatized gender identity often leads to exaggerated forms of gender-specific behavior. Thus, those least secure with their masculinity are most likely to enact behavioral codes and hold fast to traditional definitions of masculinity. Social scientists use hypermasculinity, as compensation for insecure gender identity, to explain the propensity for authoritarianism, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism,³⁶ juvenile delinquency, and urban gangs.³⁷

The behavior of gay men and IV drug users is consistent with this phenomenon, although for different reasons. Society traditionally viewed gay men as not "real men." Most of the stereotypes revolve around effeminacy, weakness, and passivity. Following the Stonewall riots of 1969, in which gay men fought back against a police raid on a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York,³⁸ and the subsequent birth of the Gay Liberation Movement, a new gay masculinity emerged in the major cities.³⁹ The "clone," as he was called, dressed in hypermasculine garb (flannel shirts, blue jeans, leather) and had short hair and a mustache. He was athletic and highly muscular. In short, the clone looked more like a "real man" than most straight men.

The clones—who comprised roughly one-third of all gay men living in the major urban enclaves of the 1970s—enacted a hypermasculine sexuality in steamy back rooms, bars and bathhouses where sex was plentiful, anonymous, and very hot.⁴⁰ This involved no unnecessary foreplay, romance, or post-coital awkwardness: sex without attachment. Arguably, given the norms of masculinity (that men are always seeking sex, ready for sex, and wanting sex), gay men were the only men in America who got as much sex as they wanted. Predict-

36. See generally TEODOR W. ADORNO ET AL., *THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY* (1950) (linking authoritarian-type personalities to anti-semitism and societal violence).

37. ALBERT K. COHEN, *DELINQUENT BOYS: THE CULTURE OF THE GANG* 44-48, 121-47 (1955).

38. See DENNIS ALTMAN, *THE HOMOSEXUALIZATION OF AMERICA* 113 (1982).

39. SEYMOUR KLEINBERG, *ALIENATED AFFECTIONS* (1980); Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (1986) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University).

40. See ALAN BELL & MARTIN WEINBERG, *HOMOSEXUALITIES: A STUDY OF DIVERSITY AMONG MEN AND WOMEN* (1979).

ably, high levels of sexual activity led to high levels of sexually-transmitted diseases, such as gonorrhea, among the clones.

Among IV drug users, a different pattern emerged with similar outcomes from a gender perspective. The majority of IV drug users are African-American and Latino. Poverty and racism have traditionally blocked normal avenues to successful manhood. The system has structurally prevented an entire generation from demonstrating their manhood in the most traditional of ways—as breadwinners.

The drug culture offers an alternative. Dealing drugs provides an income to support a family as well as the opportunity for manly risk and adventure. The community of drug users can confirm gender identity. The sharing of needles demonstrates this solidarity. The ever-present risk of death by overdose takes hyper-masculine bravado to its limits.

Two of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of AIDS are using sterile needles for intravenous drug injections and practicing “safer sex.” Sterile needles and safer sex share a basic characteristic: they both require responsible behavior, a heresy to the cardinal rules of manhood. Safer sex programs, for example, encourage men to have fewer partners, to avoid certain particularly dangerous practices, and to use condoms when having any sex involving the exchange of bodily fluids. In short, safer sex programs encourage men to stop having sex like men. To men, “safe sex” is an oxymoron. That which is sexy is not safe; that which is safe is not sexy. Sex connotes danger, risk, and excitement. Safety is about comfort, softness, and security. Seen this way, it is not surprising that between one-fifth and one-third of urban gay men report that they have not changed their unsafe sexual behaviors.⁴¹ Astonishingly enough, slightly more than three-fourths *have* changed and are practice safer sex.⁴²

The gay community’s response to AIDS can teach heterosexual men to eroticize that responsibility—something that women have tried to teach men for decades. Straight men can also learn about caring for one another through illness, supporting one another in grief, and maintaining a resilience in the face of a devastating disease and the callous indifference of the larger society through the gay community’s experience.

To do this we need to transform the perception of what is meant by a “real man.” While AIDS spreads rapidly, date rape and sexual harassment run rampant in the nation’s colleges and workplaces. As

41. Leon McKusik et al., *Aids and Sexual Behavior Reported by Gay Men in San Francisco*, 75 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 425 (1985).

42. See, e.g., CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL, *supra* note 34, at 144.

AIDS spreads and as women vocally confront the issue of date rape, more and more people need our compassion and support. American men, however, possess a relatively short supply of compassion, since it involves the capacity assume the role of another and see ourselves in his or her shoes—a quality contradicting the manly independence men have so carefully cultivated.

The victims of men's adherence to the traditional norms of masculinity—AIDS patients, rape victims, sexual harassment victims, and dead teens in the ghetto—did not intentionally become victims. They do not deserve blame. Our compassion for AIDS patients must not come from a sense of distance—viewing an AIDS patient as a diseased “other”—but from a sense of brotherhood. Our gender and masculinity, not our sexual identity or drug-related behavior, link us to them.

Although tough laws and the vigorous administration of those laws are essential deterrents to destructive male behavior, those who see themselves as morally superior will not blame the men with AIDS, the men who batter or rape their wives or lovers, the men who harass women in the workplace, or male teens who engage in delinquent behavior. These men are not “perverts” or “deviants” who have strayed from the norms of masculinity. They are, if anything, over-conformists to destructive norms of male behavior. Like all “real men,” they have taken risks. Until society eliminates risk from the rhetoric of masculinity, men will die from war, sex, driving fast and drunk, and shooting drugs and sharing needles. Men with AIDS are real men. When one dies, a bit of all men dies as well. Until we change what it means to be a real man, each man will die a bit every day.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The crucial issues that men will face in the 1990s—issues involving health and relationships with women, children, and other men—will push them to define clearly who they are and who they can be. Men have a lot of work to do if they are going to change the definition of masculinity and become eloquent listeners, compassionate lovers, fathers, and friends. To this end, men need a lot of help. I am confident that men will get that help from feminist women and gay men and lesbians, all of whom have argued all along that compulsive, elusive masculinity is a problem. Though sexism and homophobia will continue to obstruct progress, the catalyst and potential for such progress already exists, if we tap into those resources. All men are potential heroes.