EDITORIAL

Rethinking masculinity to transform society

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Illustrator: Lara Lars

After centuries of struggle, the successive waves that have arisen since the late 19th century and the cultural change that has come about in recent years, the feminist movement has managed to place its demands at the centre of social and political debate in the liberal democracies. Critical analysis of patriarchy and the incorporation of a gender perspective in the different fields of the social sciences have established a theoretical basis to assess the structural inequalities between men and women and define and develop political tools to remedy them. Despite the enormous challenges of the discrimination that exists and the many ways in which inequality persists, the political, social, economic and cultural programme of feminisms are currently at the cutting edge of democratic struggles and their proposals form part of the public agenda. Progress and strength focused on the subordinate position of women but which aspire to completely transform our societies. The changes proposed by feminisms, as profoundly transformational projects, not only appeal to and affect women; they are aimed at society as a whole, and therefore also at men.

In recent years, as the importance of the feminist movement has progressed, the importance of one question has become increasingly clear. What is the place and the role of men in this struggle which sets out to change everything? Are men passive subjects, no more than collateral allies of feminist struggles? Or are they also an essential part of the structural changes proposed by the feminist agenda?

The importance of this question, one of the major issues of our time, is clear because some are answering it in a reactionary way. Along with the recent conquest of many areas in society by women, there has also been a proliferation of neo-sexist discourses revealing a masculine unease in different social segments. Many men have difficulties with the changes proposed by feminisms, are uncomfortable in their roles and relations or are unwilling to give up certain positions of privilege and dominance. They are the target of the reactionary, far-right projects that place safeguarding traditional masculinity at the core of their discourse.

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In this context it is essential to ask ourselves what other ways of addressing masculinity do feminisms have in order to be an alternative to this regression in identity terms and this return to traditional masculinity. What do feminisms propose to men who do want to change and form part of a profound social change? What feminist proposals can make men want to change? The debate about how feminism is to address and engage men is still at an early stage in social terms. While it is true that gender studies have progressed in the analysis of masculinity over the decades, this debate has reached beyond the academic sphere or been popularised as much as other topics involved in feminism and gender studies.

There are probably several reasons why discussion of masculinity has up to now remained in the background. Firstly because men themselves have not pushed strongly for a debate that means questioning their own identity and placing their role open to public discussion. Men, accustomed to occupying as subject the place from which things are viewed, are now themselves becoming an object to look at, analyse and question. This means vacating the centrality, the neutrality and the so-called universality upon which androcentric, patriarchal culture have been constructed, placing masculinity under the spotlight as something special, and this must certainly cause profound discomfort. Secondly, because the feminist struggle has largely focused on the position of women and because it has exclusively made women its political subject, reserving a subsidiary, collateral role for men. As a result of all this, nor have institutions been willing or able to involve men, who in many cases still do not form part of their policies, remaining outside them, and therefore not playing an active part in transforming gender roles and inequality.



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The social changes proposed by feminism will not be fully possible or attainable without a simultaneous change in the values and roles of hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity, an essential part of the patriarchal system. Assuring women's rights and freedoms is inseparable from combating male privilege and prerogatives, and means cutting the bonds between masculinity, violence, domination and the exercise of power. It means making gender dissidence possible and visible. All this means politicising masculinity. And women certainly have good reasons for wanting these changes. But what part can men play in deconstructing patriarchal masculinity?

The question of men's involvement in feminism and their active role in the struggle for equality can be seen from several different viewpoints. One of these consists of thinking of men as beneficiaries of an unfair system and understanding that male subjects are ethically obliged to collaborate in social and political changes to bring about the loss of their privileges. While this is part of the reality, it is not all of it. Because do men really only stand to lose? The approach that any gain or expansion of freedom for women necessarily means a retreat or concession by men rests upon a zero sum logic: when one gains the other must lose. And this is precisely the framework within which masculine doubt, fear and even anger can proliferate, whipped up by reactionary projects that point to feminism as an attack on men. Without forgetting that the conquest of social spaces by women has in fact often led to a loss of power, status or control by men, we also have the chance—and the political need—to ask ourselves how many positive potentialities could it mean for men to combat the obligations, mandates and prohibitions of traditional masculinity.

In recent decades critical studies of masculinity have shown that women are not the only subjects harmed and blighted by the system of patriarchal virility and gender, and there is a set of masculine prescriptions, standards and imperatives that also turn men into objects of domination. Moreover, masculinity has winners and losers and there are many men who swell the ranks of subordinate masculinities, excluded and inferiorised by a hierarchic system that obliges men to compete with one another. But we might even ask ourselves whether everything is fine for those who supposedly reach the podium of "real men". Are

there many winners? Or for those who supposedly achieve the goal of masculinity, might it not involve costs, sacrifices and discomfort for them too?

If feminisms propose an ambitious political project that involves a profound change in society, if it is a matter of changing everything and changing it to create a better society, then men cannot be mere secondary allies in feminist struggles. Men are not only called on as those responsible for the problems, harm or violence inflicted on others by this masculinity. Their own welfare is at stake, as is their own freedom. The challenge for men is not only to "assist" the emancipation of women, but to build a freer society for all and it is this common goal that requires masculinity to be reconsidered, questioned and transformed.

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The dossier published in IDEES about Feminism(s) looked at different dimensions of feminism's historic struggle and analysed different perspectives and areas to offer an overall, prescriptive viewpoint. It was however a dossier which deliberately set out to let women speak and did not aim to consider men's view of the goals of feminisms. This was not its purpose. Nor was it to discuss how the gender perspective affects the male subject or address his identity or social role, or what changes might be involved for so-called masculinities. This is therefore an area that calls for a debate and further work. With this aim, at IDEES we are returning to the thread of feminisms, returning to this outstanding question, and we aim to supplement the ongoing discussions by offering a series of thoughts that aim to provide a starting point in a crucial part of the feminist debate and gender politics.

In the following pages devoted by IDEES to this issue we publish different texts written by both men and women and divided primarily into two categories.

A series of texts will be devoted to the theoretical analysis of masculinity, posing the big questions and answers that address feminisms and that we believe need thinking about on the basis of dialogue with feminisms if they are to be dealt with in depth. The pieces by Gemma Torres, Pere Almeda, Clara Serra, Javier Sáez and Nerea Aresti will explore some of the theoretical and political perspectives mentioned in this brief introduction in greater depth and between them outline the main approaches from which we propose to consider masculinity. We set out from the idea that masculinity is a collective cultural and historical phenomenon. This means it is not written into men's bodies or genes, nor is it a biological destination, but it has undergone different transformations—and also different crises—at different times in history. Likewise, we believe that knowledge of masculinity and the perspectives from which we have thought about it also have a history, which we want to

reveal.

Some texts set out to analyse the relationship between masculinity and the idea of the eminently autonomous, rational subject that so many modern discourses and approaches have posited. Embedded in our philosophy and our ways of seeing the individual, there is a problematic relationship with the emotions, desire and vulnerability that is masculine and patriarchal and which we need to question, both to think about politics and to rethink masculinity. We also want to include texts that discuss the masculine power and structures of domination that have shaped the patriarchy and the gender order with the support of laws and institutions, but also through social conventions and customs that form the basis of many inequalities. Power relations that feminists challenge and deconstruct, while positing alternative notions based on dialogue and social and political change based on ethics and fairness, and free from any subordination.

In this first part of the dossier we thought it was essential to also include approaches developed within the framework of queer theory and critical analysis of heterosexual normativity. One of the important consequences involved in taking a non-essentialist approach to the question, which is what these texts propose, is that the set of subjects covered by what we call “masculinity” does not exactly coincide with the set of men, as masculinity is also lived and personified by women.

Several of the texts in this dossier explore the idea that, as well as being a social construct, masculinity was not constructed or invented by men alone, but is generated collectively by society as a whole. Because in fact, for men to vacate the position of subject which they have colonised for so many centuries implies, among other things, considering that they are also products of power and not only its agents. Conceiving masculinity in this way means taking on board the difficulty of seeing it through a structural analysis and approach—as something that is reproduced through a range of institutions, collective actions and individual gestures involving both men and women—but also opens the door to important political possibilities: changing masculinity is a way of transforming our society as a whole.

This is why a second set of texts in this dossier—including authors like Laura Macaya, Paco Abril, Ana Rodríguez, Alfredo Ramos and Benno de Kaijzer—is devoted to showing how masculinity is interwoven and deeply involved in different aspects or areas of our society, which are or can be matters of public policy. Even though feminisms have striven to show that the gender perspective must run through all policy—because it has an impact on women’s lives—the perspective of masculinity remains practically absent. However, the idea that a society has to consider what is masculine and what prescriptions our culture imposes on men strongly affects most of the areas public policy has to cover. Questions like the organisation of time, the distribution of spare time, caring for others and the way we look after ourselves—including areas as specific as road safety, health and safety at work or traffic accidents—are inseparable from masculinity. Likewise, representations of gender in the media, audiovisual cultures, in literature or at school are key contexts in which to work on masculinity.

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In this dossier we aim to shed light on some of these necessary relations between masculinity and some (though only some) of these areas of society, and we include these discussions in order to help to define and incorporate a new framework in public relations, one that takes into account the transformation of masculinities. The texts deal with questions concerning health, work, education, violence, art and cultural policy in the conviction that understanding these relations means broadening the possibilities of effective, transformational public policy-making. We think that intervening in all these questions is a chance to dispute or resignify the way in which our society addresses, educates and conceives of men, and that changing masculinity is a possible, probably essential, way of transforming our society.



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