



## **It's not easy to be a man**

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The article seeks answers to questions: what does it mean to be a man? and what does masculinity mean? These categories are so broad and open that each individual defines them independently for his own self and identity. In this paper those issues are presented using Bourdieu's, Connel's and Arcimowicz tools. Moreover, Polish scholar Melosik writes about a masculinity crisis which might prove a phenomenon which enables discovering new ways of understanding what it means to be a man. Men must become aware of a regularity that an obstinate adherence to outdated rules will be frustrating and destructive for them.

Masculinity. Man. Masculinity crisis. Gender. Two paradigms of masculinity.

When a man ventures into the topic of masculinity, internal anxiety and objection rise in him. After all, it is not manly for a man to discuss masculinity. Such things should be mentioned in a narrow circle of friends, and disguised as jokes or anecdotes. When a man deals with the subject of masculinity, this can lead to over intellectualisation of the problem, as the researcher will not remain fully objective.

Since the dawn of time, history was made by men: they asked questions about the essence of human life, deliberated on natural laws and the possibilities for the development of humankind. Yet since the 1970s, far-reaching changes have taken place. Man's position in the postmodern world has altered due to feminist pressures. Feminists attacked the old hierarchy, according to which man was the sovereign, the unquestionable hegemon, and woman was considered inferior and unable to live without man. In her *Dictionary of Feminist theory*, Maggie Humm defined the notion of 'man' as a synonym of a human being in opposition to other living creatures. "Man's identity is built on negation..., it is not based on reality and real gender differences, but rather on the ideal model of gender difference, constituted during the cultural process"(Humm, 1993).

Men tend to have a negative attitude towards women's empowerment, which they consider as more of an ideology, threatening their dominant position. Due to a concurrence of different events, "slowly but persistently, man is growing to be a scientific problem"(Frevert, 1995), becoming the object of reflection in social, psychological and historical sciences.

In the face of a strongly emphasised masculinity crisis, a very difficult question arises, namely, Can masculinity be treated as a concrete object of analyses aimed at investigating existent theories about men and placing them in the context of the current gender studies discourse?

Gender makes an interesting research topic. Rather than being monolithic, masculinity is a dynamic phenomenon, which has to be discussed in relation to different time periods and historical or cultural contexts. The categories of masculinity are not so obvious that their unquestionable superiority should not be open to debate. In the 1960s, with the emergence of gender studies and feminism, the notion of masculinity started to draw increased attention. The feminists took up the topic.

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Unable to base their identity on stereotypical beliefs or identify with traditionally ascribed roles, men had to rise to the challenge and try to adapt themselves to the new reality. Men identified themselves through “professional activity and the opposition between the masculine and the feminine...” (Chofuj, 2004).

One cannot give a straight answer to the question, What does it mean to be a man? This category is so broad that every individual has the right to define it. It is worth noting that in the postmodern world gender is not treated only in strictly biological terms; more and more often a culturally-determined gender is taken into consideration. This is because everyone can influence gender but cannot influence the biological sex.

A dynamic concept of masculinity was proposed by Robert Connell. From her viewpoint, a frequent mistake is to perceive masculinity in isolation from femininity, which should not be the case, as these two categories are mutually interdependent and complementary. The Australian sociologist leans towards perceiving masculinity and femininity as “gender projects”, which influence women and men and force them to activities and behaviours subjected to the category of gender. According to Connell, it is difficult to give a clear-cut definition of masculinity, as it is usually described as a „position in gender relation”(Connell, 1995).

Masculinity is a cultural construct, described separately from the concept of biological sex, and also from queer theory. In Connell’s theory, there is no room for the ideal masculinity type; actually, one can speak of multiple masculinity models, appearing in different historical and cultural conditions, and merging with one another, changing and developing. One cannot, however, forget about their crises.

A different perspective was adopted by Pierre Bourdieu, for whom masculinity is connected with the notion of habitus. According to the French scholar, habitus is a system of requirements directed at individuals, which consists of social constructs made for men and women: features, attributes, or even expectations. Bourdieu’s mechanism of gender construction is based on the right arrangement of the body into the system of behaviours in power and authority relations. It exhibits in particular symbolic power, which develops under the influence of habitualised behaviour patterns. From his perspective of habitus and the division of social space, Bourdieu constructs gender through the body written into sexual, cultural and economic practices.

Constructing masculinity in culture has its limitations. Man is the looking subject, gaze belongs to the domain of masculinity as an attribute of symbolic power. Woman has been ascribed the status of the seen, the watched. On this basis, two different perspectives of looking are created. A woman should be feminine – submissive, unobtrusive, withdrawn. She is to attract the eye and manifest her femininity. A man embodies features which underscore his strength, he is to be the conqueror and hero, at whose side she stands his chosen woman. Masculinity is not always the same; Bourdieu concludes that it is created in a particular sociocultural context.

Connell and Bourdieu emphasise the difficulty of the situation in which man has found himself: he is treated as a prisoner and a victim of ideas dominant in culture. It is increasingly challenging to meet the basic standards required of men; usually, men are torn between fulfilling traditional roles and pursuing individual objectives. Regardless of his decision, the postmodern man is in an inconvenient situation, as his real masculinity is open to challenge.

Over the centuries of its existence, European culture has undergone changes. Every age was characterized by a particular approach to the body and to individual freedom, and created its own norms and models of conduct, so that cultural demands placed on the sexes also changed with time. In this context, there appeared individuals who opposed the accepted norms and mores; it is worth mentioning a couple of examples. George Sand (the source of gossip and scandal in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris) ignored the common social norms and thus provoked, offended and fascinated the society. She was the first woman to rebel against the cultural norms of her time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the situation of women in Europe got considerably worse than before.

In the 1930s, Rudolph Valentino became the pop culture icon. He enhanced his good looks with the help of make-up, which was unheard of at that time, as make-up was considered an element of the female habitus.

All such changes stimulated reflection on the social order. They took place concurrently with the birth of a new paradigm in science: postmodernism, which sanctioned pluralism and relativism, blurring borders between notions, also between masculinity and femininity.

Since the 1960s and 70s, we have witnessed an increasing discussion about men and masculinity. The discourse has taken place in the context of violent changes initiated during the sexual revolution. It was due to the sexual revolution that we hear everywhere so much about the masculinity crisis, or, to be more accurate, the fall of the patriarchal paradigm. As a result, men are offered new patterns of behaviour and new roles which they should play on the stage of everyday life.

The traditional paradigm of masculinity ceases to be legitimised. Both men and women fell prey to patriarchy. With the breaking of status quo, masculinity and femininity patterns turned out to have been merely social and historical products, unable to stand the trial of changes which take place in the postmodern world. Thus, femininity and masculinity should not be discussed only on the basis of gender stereotypes; their complexity escapes such a simplifying approach. Gender remains one of the most important categories against which people define their identity. What has to be taken into account, however, is the fact that in the age of broadly understood globalisation, the individual identity has been shaken. A far-reaching change is currently taking place, shattering the binary view of man and world, as gender and all that comes with it is created by socio-cultural factors. The old world order is in crisis and is slowly receding before new, unknown attitudes.

In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu writes: „Male privilege is also a trap, and it has its negative side in the permanent tension and contention, sometimes verging on the absurd, imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances” (Bourdieu, 2001). According to the French sociologist, the obligation to assert their manliness has had a negative influence on men and has made them feel lost. Men have been entrapped in the changing reality and the insecurity it brings. This problem does not concern only men, though; also women have to cope with it. The traditional masculinity paradigm proved inadequate to the challenges of postmodernity, which indicates that we have presently entered the age of postpatriarchy.

Relevant literature distinguishes two paradigms of masculinity: the traditional one and the new one. Such dichotomy is embraced for example by the Polish scholar Krzysztof Arcimowicz in his book *Obraz mężczyzny w polskich mediach* [The image of man in Polish media]. As he puts it, “man could find self-fulfilment in domains considered masculine, he created culture and ruled over the surrounding reality”. Women we ascribed allegedly less responsible tasks (taking care of the household, bearing and rearing children)... according to the traditional paradigm of masculinity, man was the ideal model, the crown of creation (Arcimowicz, 2004).

As presented by Arcimowicz, the traditional paradigm defines masculinity as domination, the source of power, strength, winning autonomy and independence. It is based on dualism, the binary opposition of gender roles, asymmetry of masculine and feminine features. Strength and charisma are required of men, so that they are able to subordinate others.

On the other hand, Arcimowicz introduces a new paradigm of masculinity, shaped in opposition to the traditional one. The new paradigm emphasises the equality and partnership of man and woman, so that the woman becomes man's partner, not property. The change that has occurred influences the development of a new social order, which contains the concept of androgyny and self-fulfilment; it is about a humanity which is no longer identified solely and exclusively with men. The new paradigm allows both masculine and feminine features to be manifested, which enables further evolution and changes, though their direction is still uncertain. It is worth quoting from Arcimowicz's definition of the new masculinity paradigm: “men's dominance over women was rejected and replaced with the slogan of partnership and equality... A man can find self-fulfilment in roles regarded as feminine, a woman can take on masculine roles. Men's behaviours alternative to the traditional ones is promoted” (Arcimowicz, 2003).

The two paradigms of masculinity presented by Arcimowicz constitute merely an ordering of knowledge on the problems of masculinity. In the early 1990s, men attempted to answer the question What is masculinity and what does it mean to be a man? An interesting answer was provided for example by Robert Bly's best-selling *Iron John*. The book thematises the problem of male nature, which is woven into Grimm brothers' fairy tale of the Iron John; this is to additionally elevate the status of masculinity as an age-old traditional foundation.

In the postmodern world one has to follow a postmodern life style. As Zbyszko Melosik put it, “radical changes in the socialisation of contemporary women make the dominant... category of gender roles seem to lose its meaning...”. Today, the situation has changed dramatically, due to both the effacing of gender difference and the confusion of answers to the question, What does it mean to be a man or a woman and

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which roles are right for different genders? (Melosik, 2006) There is no simple answer to the question What do masculinity and femininity mean? These categories are so broad and open that each individual defines them independently for his or her own self and identity. Thus, these categories are not stable, but rather dynamic and ever-changing.

Speaking in metaphorical terms, one could say that women fiercely attacked men, who had not been expecting such a mass attack. Women triumphed over the traditional male bulwarks of social and professional roles. They liberated themselves from stereotypical thinking about gender and rose to the heights of their own identity, which allowed them to conquer the world that used to be reserved for men only. The male-female war awoke in men capacities of strengths and instincts never known before. Unembarrassed, and not fearing that they would be deemed effeminate, men are happy to discover in themselves resources of love, care, and tenderness for their children. The family model underwent transformation: man no longer perceives woman as his property or as an object used to satisfy his desire.

In connection with the changes of the traditional paradigm, we hear about a masculinity crisis. This is not, however, a crisis of masculinity itself, but rather a revision of what used to be familiar and clear. The crisis should not be immediately defined as a failure or pathology; it should constitute a point of departure for development. The present situation causes anxiety in men. Nevertheless, they should look at their own image holistically and try to see positive aspects. In the words of Zbigniew Miłunski, "it is very good that we have a crisis of traditional masculinity models, as I see how destructive they are, not only for men and women, but also for the world. We need to get to know ourselves, change the models, expand our self-awareness" (Miłunski, 2004).

The notion of masculinity crisis has a factual significance. The commentators of contemporary culture maintain that socio-cultural changes in Western countries made men go into defensive. In this context, statistics from Europe and the US are quoted, confirming the assumption about the degradation of men. One may take into account data indicating that on average men live seven years less than women. It is emphasized that men constitute less than 40 percent of college graduates. Moreover, 60 percent of crime victims and 70 percent of murder victims are male. Men perform all kinds of worst and most dangerous jobs, and, consequently, constitute 94 percent of victims of work accidents. It is beyond doubt that changes in job market challenged the traditional image of man as the family breadwinner. Man's economic dominance over woman has ended. (Melosik, 2006)

The changes sweeping across the postmodern world influenced the whole system of relations between male and female roles. Professional occupation is no longer an exclusively male domain, and the home ceased to be a safe haven to which the man returns. Women are no longer treated just as hearth and home keepers, but rather as fully fledged members of the society. The changes which we presently observe are not something new, as masculinity crises already occurred before. They usually took place in countries in which the civilization put women on a pedestal and in which they were granted great freedom.

Although the feminist movement became a trigger for the contemporary masculinity crisis, many researchers agree that in fact feminism was of secondary importance in the fall of masculinity. Listed among the main causes of the crisis of masculinity are: the world wars, which devastated the male population and made it necessary to replace the fighting soldiers in many spheres of public life, the structural transformations of capitalism, the development of new technologies, and the emergence of modern contraception methods, which enabled fertility control. To sum up, the postmodern world is not and will not be only a man's world.

Susan Faludi noticed and described the belligerence of women, who posed ridiculous demands. (Faludi, 1999) They did not exactly attack men, but rather the culture which ingrained in men certain standards. With time, these standards changed and the pride of being a man was destroyed. A competition implies the winners and the defeated. This is the case also with the war between women and men, as solving women's problems means creating problems for men. The current crisis is neither the first nor the last one. Looking back at history, one should hope that this crisis is going to be suppressed, as the male pride cannot stay caught in the snare of fear for too long.

In the long term, the masculinity crisis might prove a phenomenon which enables discovering new ways of understanding what it means to be a man. Today men are subject to an increasing feminisation and a new type of man is created, one which embodies a suppressed masculinity. Feminism has won; by that, the arrogant and brutal masculinity was discredited, and brandishing it became stigmatized. In the postmodern world it is hard to tell who a real woman or a real man is. The atmosphere of uncertainly and

threat caused by the cultural transformations is further enhanced by scientific research, which firmly proclaims the end of man. Present-day men have to adapt to changes. They succeed in new roles. Culture got interested in man, who used to evaluate and set the beauty canon.

A fundamental paradox appears here: men still dominate over women, but at the same time they are ever more at a disadvantage.

The existing, increasingly imaginary division into men's world and women's world has little to do with reality. In fact, men's world directly depends on women's world, and unfortunately this dependence cannot be erased. If the relations between opposite sexes are considered from the point of view of culture, it is clear that Western culture always promoted the patriarchal model of family. Imposing and resolute, man was the head of the family; he sustained it and defended his house from dangers. Woman, on the other hand, was to look after children and take care of the *hearth and home*. Over the last two decades or so, stereotypes concerning male and female behavior, which had functioned unchanged for a long time, have begun to transform.

As Wojciech Eichelberger put it, *we are at a sharp turn ... For centuries, the attributes of man's role and identity were defined in the context of a meticulously constructed negative stereotype of woman. We were able to feel good about ourselves, undoubtedly too good, largely thanks to the fact that we taught ourselves to consider women as creatures of an inferior kind* (Eichelberger, 2003).

It is not easy to be a man in the postmodern world. It is not enough to be XY and have a functioning penis in order to feel a man; one needs to have "that something". Elisabeth Badinter claims that it is easier to create a woman than a man. She supports this interesting view by arguing that femininity appears to be a natural state, given and inevitable, whereas masculinity needs to be built, won, and proven. Man, together with his environment, is so indistinct when it comes to gender identity that proofs of masculinity are constantly required. Man is not able to tell what it means to be a man, as he is always taught who he must not be if he wants to be manly; he is never taught who he can be. Masculinity is very important to him, it is his cure-all. As Elisabeth Badinter has it, "to be rough, bellicose, bold, to attract attention, to treat women badly, to seek only male friendship but hate homosexual men, to use offensive language, to talk derisively about women behind their backs" (Badinter, 1993).

Although today man seems to be an unknown creature, the whole heritage of culture shows and depicts how he had been perceived over centuries and how privileged his position was. In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault says that we conceive of ourselves through gender. The body is the primary source of identity for every human being, and gender becomes very important in life, as it determines behaviour. Popular culture has brought on the fragmentation of masculine identity, which is most apparent from the attention paid to body perfecting. The male body ceased to symbolize strength and courage; it became sensual and sexual. The outer appearance has been gaining importance for men. On the one hand, we can admire androgynous men with slender toned figures, and on the other, there is the opposite image of a muscular bodybuilder. In this way, the border between femininity and masculinity is to be drawn again.

Men try to cope with the masculinity crisis. In order to find their place, they put on different masks, more or less fitting. Sometimes they escape into hypermasculinity, which epitomises success, aggression and independence, and in which the man's main life goal is to demonstrate his strength and dominance - to embody perfection. According to Melosik, a venture into this kind of masculinity is just a reaction to the empowerment of women. As it is not possible to return to the macho model, a new type emerged: a man of success, who is strong, active, self-confident, and promotes the old lifestyle refreshed to fit in the new reality.

Building his identity, the modern man found himself in a dead-end street. He cannot create himself on the basis of old ideas, as they are out of date. If he wants to fit in the modern world, he cannot follow old rules, as women set out new ones. Obstinate adherence to outdated rules will be frustrating and destructive for men. Men must become aware of one regularity, namely that the development of women directly influences the development of men. Men have to use it to the full it in order to climb back onto the pedestal which they had occupied for centuries.

### **Nie jest łatwo być mężczyzną**

Powyższe rozważania mogą wydawać się niczym więcej jak tylko przypomnieniem koncepcji, strategii czy też definicji dotyczących płci, męskości i mężczyzn. Niemniej jednak zasadniczym celem jest artykułu jest

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przedstawienie kryzysu męskości, potwierdzanego przez narastającą krytykę słabości i wad mężczyzn. Mężczyźni w ponowoczesnym świecie zatracili własną tożsamość i nie wiedzą kim są.

Pojawia się tu zasadniczy paradoks bowiem mężczyźni, współcześnie, nadal dominują nad kobietami, ale stoją na coraz bardziej przegranych pozycjach. Poczucie porażki wynika z faktu, iż dotychczasowa asymetria między płciami, która do niedawna była wyraźna z roku na rok jest coraz mniejsza. Bez wątplenia płęć męska przechodzi do defensywy, co odciska piętno na samych mężczyznach, którzy nie wiedzą kim właściwie są.

Doskonałym podsumowaniem powyższych rozważań mogą stać się słowa J. MacInnes: „*We współczesnym społeczeństwie cechy, które kiedyś uznawane były za typowo męskie i stanowiły punkt wyjścia opieki mężczyzny nad kobietą, obecnie służą za punkt wyjścia ataku na mężczyznę. Siła, odwaga, niezależność, heroizm w walce, hart ducha (...) uznawane są za przejaw agresji, konkurencyjności, przejaw znieważania kobiet. (...) Kryzys męskości. Nie istnieją żadne pozytywne modele ról męskich. Wszyscy głoszą, iż ostatecznie mężczyzna jest żalony*” (MacInnes, 1998). Mężczyźni znaleźli się w pułapce bez wyjścia. Nie mogą kreować swojej tożsamości w oparciu o dawne wyobrażenia, bo są one nieaktualne, ponieważ kobiety wyznaczyły nowe. Uparte trzymanie się przestarzałych reguł jest i będzie dla nich frustrujące a zarazem niszczące. Mężczyźni muszą zdać sobie sprawę z jednej prawidłowości, a mianowicie rozwój kobiet bezpośrednio wpływa na rozwój mężczyzn, co muszą w pełni wykorzystać. Wtedy będą mogli radzić sobie z kryzysem męskości i emancypacją kobiet, która współcześnie przekracza wszelkie granice. Pozycja mężczyzn została podważona i dlatego bardzo ciężko jest im odpowiedzieć na pytanie co to znaczy być mężczyzną?

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