The Spectacle of Men Fighting

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There is no political system in which the spectacle of two men fighting is not a striking, if unintended, image of the political impotence of most men.
(Oates 1987: 63)

The meaning of male violence should be a central concern of Gender and Development (GAD) discourse and practice. Patriarchal values and structures are both expressed and maintained by 'men fighting', in both public and private domains. In widely differing societies, male violence continues to distort women's (and men's) lives in psychic, emotional, cultural, political and socioeconomic terms. Men's 'natural aggression' is often invoked as a defining characteristic of an irreducible gender difference and as a explanation for the gendered hierarchical arrangements in the political and economic lives of richer and poorer countries alike. The vision of a world beyond gender hierarchy, implicit in the GAD 'project', must confront the spectacle of men fighting.

Male violence sets and sustains limits on the ambitions of this project. The success of micro-credit initiatives in empowering impoverished women has prompted a violent backlash from some men, as has been reported from Bangladesh among other places. Women's political progress has evoked similar reactions (both in 'developed' and 'developing' countries). In describing the inception of the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) system in India, by which the Indian constitution was amended in order to mandate the reservation of seats for women in local government, Devaki Jain (1996) notes:

Women's empowerment challenges traditional ideas of male authority and supremacy. It is unsurprising, then, that PRI has been opposed by some men. Ratanprabha Chive (Ratna) is the sarpanch (head) of the seven halets (hamlets) that comprise the Ghera Purandar Panchayat. Ratna was beaten up as soon as she assumed office by her rival who could not accept the fact that a female had outwitted him.

Understanding development as freedom means recognising that men's violence restricts women's development by curtailing their freedoms and restricting their rights. Heise (1997: 414) reports on a summary of twenty studies from a wide variety of countries that 'document that one-quarter to over half of women in many countries of the world report having been physically abused by a present or former partner'. She concludes that the(Heise 1997: 414): 'most endemic form of violence against women is wife abuse, or more accurately, abuse of women by intimate male partners '.

In terms of sexual health and reproductive rights, such abuse diminishes women's capacity to express and enjoy their sexuality and to control fertility, while increasing their risks of pregnancy complications and of acquiring sexually transmitted infections. A recent report on wife abuse in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh notes that (Martin *et al* 1999):

Abusive men were more likely to engage in extramarital sex and have STD symptoms, suggesting that these men may be acquiring STDs from their extramarital relationships, thereby placing their wives at risk for STD acquisition, sometimes via sexual abuse. These abusive sexual behaviors also may result in an elevated rate of unplanned pregnancies.

Invisible men?

If the effects of male violence on women's advancement and gender-equitable development are clear, the causes of such violence and possible responses to it are less

so. 'Generally there is indignation at male abuse, but it is often accompanied by a sense that the problem runs too deep to be addressed', Heise (1997: 422) points out. Hidden in the depths of a determinism based on biology or evolutionary psychology, the problem of male violence appears to some to be irremediable. But it does so, in part, because of a lack of scrutiny. 'In the gender and development literature men appear very little, often as hazy background figures (White 1997: 16)'. It is as if the gender and development gaze becomes fixed on Man rather than men, on man as an object of blame and not men as subjects of action, simultaneously and paradoxically blaming men but not holding them accountable.

In its preference for seeing man-in-nature rather than men-in-culture, in its reliance on '"[g]ood girl/bad boy" stereotypes' (White 1997: 16), the GAD discourse risks becoming a straightforward story-line of 'saving brown women from brown men'. This drama, with its essentialised roles of perpetrator and victim, cannot hold men accountable because it has no room for men's choices. And in denying men's agency, plurality, realities, GAD deprives women of the same. This manoeuvre also does something else. It averts our gaze from the contexts within which gendered oppressions live, namely transnational capitalism and post-colonial relations which create complex alignments of community and conflict within and between the genders. The challenge for GAD practitioners concerned with responding to male violence is to hold this gaze long enough to engage with differing men's relations to, and responsibilities for, the patriarchy. Connell alludes to the complexity of such relations but prefers to emphasise men's collective interest as a gender-class when he notes (1995: 82) that:

> *A gender order where men dominate women cannot avoid constituting men as an interest group concerned with defence, and women as an interest group concerned with change. To speak of a patriarchal dividend is to raise exactly this question of interest. Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command. They also gain a material dividend.*

In a situation of gendered hierarchy, that privileges male over female, it is clear that men have a different relationship to patriarchy than women. It remains true, in richer and poorer countries alike, that men 'gain a material dividend', for example continuing to earn more than women for doing equivalent work. But it is also true that class, race, sexuality and faith make a difference to the nature and extent of the dividends that men gain. Power and impotence co-exist in men's lives. The spectacle of men fighting is often taken to be emblematic of male power, but its meaning is confusing unless the spectacle is seen within the other sets of oppressive relationships within which men (and women) live. This clarity depends on a move beyond the bifurcation of perpetrators and victims into issues of (men's and women's) accountability, complicity and responsibility in relation to the violence of the hierarchies within which they (we) live.

Male socialisation
Explanations of the nature, and limits, of men's responsibility for such violence increasingly centre on their socialisation into a masculine identity. Whether as a performance or as a construction, metaphors of 'masculinity' have become a site for discussions of how men come to be, rather than are born to be, violent. The ensuing explanations differ markedly in their historical and cultural specificity and political sophistication. At their most ahistorical and acultural, such explanations tend to locate men's socialisation into the violence of masculinity within the family, and sometimes more precisely within the parent-child relationship. 'I believe the trauma of separation is one of the earliest and most acute developmental experiences boys endure, an experience that plays a large role in the hardening process through which society shames

boys into suppressing their empathic and vulnerable sides (Pollack 1998: 40)'. As a result '…boys are pressured to express the one strong feeling allowed them - anger (Pollack 1998: 44)'.

This theme of pressure, under which malleable boys become moulded into hardened men, recurs with varying psychological and sociological emphases. Heise suggests that men are under pressure to prove themselves to '…a gendered system that assigns power and status to that which is male and denigrates or subordinates that which is female. Men in many cultures wage daily battle to prove to themselves and others that they qualify for inclusion in the esteemed category "male." To be "not male," is to be reduced to the status of woman or, worse, to be "queer" (Heise 1997: 425)'. In this view, men's precarious claim on the power offered by patriarchy produces insecurity and '…it is partly men's insecurity about their masculinity that promotes abusive behavior toward women (Heise 1997: 425)'.

This 'gendered system' is, as Heise implies, a gender-sex system which creates hierarchies of power, in part, by disciplining sexuality. But the mutual embrace of misogyny and heterosexism that performs and constructs masculinity, and the violence within masculinity, is not explored. Nor does Heise investigate the notion of male insecurity, and the many factors that mediate both its sources and its effects. The linked history, economy and psychology of such insecurity merit further work. Montoya (1999) begins this work by locating male domestic violence and men's contests over power and control with women within the specific history, economy and culture of Nicaragua.

> *Violence in couple relationships is a problem of power and control. […]It is maintained by the social structures of oppression in which we live—based, among others, on gender, class, age, and race inequalities. A national history of wars and a culture of settling conflict through force also maintain it. Colonialism and imperialism have had a role in intensifying this violence. Both men and women learned and practice this logic of human relations based on power and control over others; however, for men the exercise of this power-over-others model becomes almost an obligatory criterion to our male gender identity.*

Montoya (1999) is also clear that 'it is at the point that the man feels the least powerful that he tends to be violent'. The connections between male 'impotence' and the spectacle of men fighting are further developed by Segal who asks, with reference to contemporary Britain, '… why a type of working-class aggressive masculinity seems such a perennial feature of the social environment, a feature which feeds today's feminist imagination in its equation of violence as male (1997: 264)'. The answer lies in the widening social, economic and political inequalities of the UK. '[W]hat we are confronting here is the barbarism of private life reflecting back the increased barbarism of public life, as contemporary capitalism continues to chisel out its hierarchies along the familiar grooves of class, race and gender (Segal 1997: 271)'.

These 'grooves' move us closer to an understanding of why some men, in some places and at some times are more violent than others. But Segal rightly questions whether our gaze should remain on those men '[o]r those who may never directly engage in acts of violence or physical force, but orchestrate the degradation and brutalisation of others? (1997: 270-271)'. This question creates an opportunity to explore violence as a structural phenomenon, inhering within racism, sexism, homophobia and class-based oppression, and not only as a behavioural quality of (some) individuals. But Segal does not take the opportunity, in part because, as her contrasting of 'public' and 'private' indicates, she remains attached to the separation of 'individual' and 'society' as discreet bodies existing

in relation and reaction to one another. This separation is the dominant motif of the divergent range of explanations of (some) men's violence in terms of their socialisation into masculinity.

This motif suggests that socialisation is the action of society, whether through structural pressures or cultural messages or parenting practices, upon individual men that produces male violence. The political implications of this are worth noting. By monotholising society 'out there', it becomes difficult to take ownership of questions of responsibility and complicity or to think in terms of the inter-penetration of the personal and the structural and to what extent this can be negotiated. And by specifying individuals as the locus of analysis, it appears simpler to particularise the resistance to socialisation as the actions of 'exceptional' men rather than mobilise a resistance around a set of values or ideas that challenge the premises and effects of such socialisation. Above all, by positing the separation of individual and society, attention becomes fixed on identity as the surface that connects these two bodies on which is inscribed the masculinity of men. The task of responding to the spectacle of men fighting then becomes one of re-inscribing a new masculinity, etching the outlines of a new non-violent identity for men.

Towards a politics of identification
GAD practitioners need to be wary of this kind of politics of identity. Connell (1995), among others, argues that such a politics, and its commitment to change, is not possible for men, whose interest as men is in defence of their privilege. 'It follows that the politics of masculinity cannot concern only questions of personal life and identity. It must also concern questions of social justice (Connell 1995: 82-83)'. But this conclusion is, in fact, a restatement of the falsifying separation of questions of personal life from questions of social justice. An engagement by men with the personal-political nexus is not only possible, as gay men involved in sexual politics have known for some time, but also necessary. The point is that this engagement cannot be fruitful if confined within the static conception of identity, as the boundary between public and private, society and individual, political and personal. Such a conception confines responses to male violence within programmes to re-educate men, to change cultural messages, to find new role models, to 'redefine what it means to be male (Heise 1997: 426)'.

These attempts to 'fix' a masculine identity remain politically problematic because they can make no sense of the dynamic flux of identities-in-the-making, that men are always in the process of becoming themselves. Attending to this process, however, may create political possibilities for rethinking men, masculinity and violence. As Fuss notes in her explications of the Freudian term 'identification', selves continue to 'become' in relation to others in as much as 'identification is the detour through the other that defines a self (Fuss 1995: 2)'. As such, '[i]dentification names the entry of history and culture into the subject….Identification is, from the beginning, a question of *relation*, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside (Fuss 1995: 3)'.

Focusing on identification as relation, rather than identity as boundary, clarifies the violent politics of difference at the heart of masculinity. Consider this account of an interview conducted in the aftermath of the murder of Matthew Shephard in Laramie, Wyoming, USA, a murder that was shocking both for its brutality and its explicit homophobia (Wypijewski 1999: 74):

> "*If a guy at a bar made some kind of overture to you, what would you do?*"

> *"It depends on who's around. If I'm with a girl, I'd be worried about what she thinks, because, as I said, everything a man does is in some way connected to a woman, whether he wants to admit it or not. Do I look queer? Will she tell other girls?*
> *"If my friends were around and they'd laugh and shit, I might have to threaten him.*
> *"If I'm alone and he just wants to buy me a beer, then okay, I'm straight, you're gay - hey, you can buy me a beer."*

This might be read as a conventional account of the 'performance' of a masculine identity, but to do so presupposes a real self behind the performer's mask. It is also possible to hear in this dialogue a story of male selves lived in constant relation to other selves (male and female, straight and gay), a series of identifications and disidentifications, a continuing detour through the other, through difference. Not just difference, but hierarchies of difference in which others become the Other. Misogyny and homophobia and racism constitute and express the violence of the masculine identifications with which GAD must be concerned. Addressing such violence means approaching a politics of difference. This political journey is outlined by Heath as he describes the stages of re-conceiving difference (1987: 22):

> *Difference as social and ideological limitation, the term of patriarchy: her difference gives the identity of the male position, she different is his reality, man and woman, "the opposite sex," everything in place.*
> *Difference as political opportunity, she asserts, gains, realizes her difference, breaks the "his" and "her" identity, its imposition, women away from men, out of their place.*
> *Difference as desire: no difference, only differences, no one and other, no his/her, man-woman, nor hetero-homo (another difference definition drawn up from the man-woman norm), a new sociality, deferring places, in that sense a utopia.*

An acknowledgement of 'no difference, only differences' can help GAD discourse to locate its response to patriarchy within a political engagement with heterosexist, capitalist and post-colonial relations. This requires a politics of alliance and coalition, a transgressing of sectoral and institutional boundaries in recognition of the common bases of oppression and their plural manifestations in women's and men's lives. This is not about losing gender (let alone women) in the mainstream of movements for social justice. Rather, it means embedding gender in an understanding of, and response to, the dynamics and relations of oppression.

A politics of identification, of identities-in-the-making, can mobilise such an understanding and response. The male violence that expresses and sustains (gender) oppression is about identifications not identity, about the violence of masculinity's fixing and hierarchising of difference rather than men's socialisation into a 'violent' masculine identity. GAD mistakes its task if it goes in search of re-formed male identities. Instead, GAD can address the politics of identification(s) by working at 'the point where the psychical/social distinction becomes impossibly confused and finally untenable (Fuss 1995: 10),' and approaching questions of responsibility for and complicity in male violence as personal-communal issues. This is more than a recollection of the politics of the personal. It entails a refusal to demarcate the boundaries between public and private, society and individual, political and personal. Self-consciousness of these collapsing distinctions can release a sense of both possibility of and responsibility for change. Depending on what they choose to fight for, the spectacle of men fighting can be a sight, and site, of real political potency.

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