

Boys will be boys

by [Malin Björk](#)

In a short sweet book, the journalist Stephan Mendel- Enk, takes us on a voyage where he pitilessly dissects current, western masculinity. The book starts with a journalistic investigation into the dynamics of a notorious violent football supporter club, 'The Firm' - an exclusively male club, honouring classical 'masculine values'. What disturbed the sports' journalist Mendel- Enk, and triggered his reportage on western masculinity in general, was that he sensed a familiarity with the codes and expectations conveyed by The Firm. As an 'ordinary' man he instinctively recognised the masculine culture that dictates :

- ▶ Never show weakness (despise it !)
- ▶ Be loyal towards the group
- ▶ Control yourself
- ▶ Make an absolute distinction between private and public life
- ▶ Be aware of the internal hierarchy

Interestingly, Michael Kimmel, a researcher on masculinities based in the US, makes a similar list of characteristics of dominant modern, western masculinity. In his book, Mendel-Enk takes us on a guided visit of diverse male environments, contexts, and situations - ranging from professional football players to famous Swedish actors. His main argument is that mainstream, ordinary masculinity is the bearer of a culture of violence. The violence does not necessarily have to be used, just exist as an implicit threat in almost all arenas of society. After women, homosexual men are the most frequent target group for men's violence. Rigorous gender policing underpins this culture, making sure that boys and men stick to these



codes of masculinity.

Boys will be boys Boys MUST be boys

Completely contrary to the common opinion that violence occurs when the mind is tuned out, Mendel-Enk explains why it is actually the contrary. Being a man means being able to fight 'when it is necessary', and virtually all boys are therefore implicitly or actively encouraged to learn to fight, to 'defend' themselves. The definition of 'defence' is remarkably easy to stretch to fit any situation, to the point where it does not carry the slightest meaning any longer, if it is not just to motivate the ongoing violence. Violence is in fact an accepted part of the game, and since this is the case, it is also understood that it will sometimes get slightly out of hand.

In some circles the interest in 'culture' as an explanation for men's violence against women has been quite important - but only when it comes to scrutinising men's violence in minority and migrant communities in Europe. Mendel-Enk challenges this focus. If there is so much interest for 'critical cultural studies', he says, why is there so little interest in looking into how the dominant violence-based culture of the white, heterosexual man is produced and reproduced ?

Men sometimes complain about getting blamed for something only a few men do (abuse women). Mendel- Enk does not accept this attitude, and argues instead that as long as any man let the 'front soldiers' of violent male culture operate more or less without interfering or questioning - they are part of the problem.

However, it is also true that some men 'suffer' from the current state of gender affairs. For example, some men in (relative) power positions, or in the process of climbing for status and power, can find themselves quite isolated and the pressure on the way they are supposed to be (as men) can be felt as limiting. While Mendel-Enk does not question the authenticity of these feelings, he concludes that contrary to people with little power, people in superior/power positions would rarely realise that their difficulties are linked to the their very privileges !?

He also points to one very important development (and non-development). As women, we have had to question our behaviours and ourselves, and how it contributes to reproducing sad clichés about womanhood and our place in the world. Today, girls are quite often allowed and even encouraged to be strong, assertive and to take space ! However, very little effort has been put into trying to make little boys less macho, or less 'masculine' in the traditional sense. There seems to be an implicit understanding from preschool, parents, sports, etc that..."boys will be boys" (read : borderline aggressive, often inattentive, competitive, etc.). The implicit and complicit system, reproducing a destructive masculinity that is ultimately based on a culture of violence, must be deconstructed and torn apart according to Mendel- Enk. Because absolutely nothing good comes from it - on the contrary, it destroys.

I doubt any woman would get away with writing this kind of book on masculinity. Valerie Solanas' critique of dominant male culture was not, and is still not, well received. But I do not think Mendel-Enk's reading and analysis of masculinity is much more flattering. The reader is taken on a short ride -

and as a feminist you can only smile in agreement and sometimes in surprise ! And recommend this reading to you friends !