

In the name of the father, the state and the spermatozoid ?

by [Malin Björk](#)

Every year at the meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) there is a follow up on the implementation of the twelve objectives agreed in the World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 – negotiated with sweat, tears... and probably mostly with muscle power. However things evolve and change over time, and new topics are brought onto the agenda – agreed as strategic and important by the UN member countries. One of these topics, deemed strategic enough to be addressed by the UN CSW in 2004, was “Men and gender equality”.

Fair enough, feminist revolution would require significant changes in the way gender is performed, (con)structured, positioned (all depends on your theoretical area) – and consequently also demands changes when it comes to masculinity. One can think of numerous ways that men could play a role in deconstructing destructive and dominant forms of masculinity. There are many challenges to choose from for men that want to contribute – what about men acting against male violence in all its forms... against women, against gays, lesbians and queers, against militarization, nationalism... the list could be long. What about men mobilising to ensure that work in the by-somecalled ‘reproductive sphere’ would be valued, as in having a central place in our societies, even in a monetary sense ?

I wish all that would happen. I would like to see all these men revolting against the dominant forms of masculinity, not only us feminists arguing, demanding, and more often, finally forcefully pushing men to change. I think I wish even more intensely today to see the emergence, the creation of different, more beautiful, more extraordinary, more lovely forms of masculinities than I did before... as I have a son of a few months old, and seeing him, feeling him, accompanying him, becoming this little person that he already is, transforming everyday – it feels even more urgent, it stings me physically even at times. That he must-must-must have more options- space-ways to grow and become, than into the masculinity-ies that are dominating our societies. In this sense, I don’t want a ‘masculine’ son. So, not only am I a lesbian mother – I am a feminist lesbian mother of a son. And I don’t want him to become ‘masculine’. This society in which we live will punish me for that. But it is ok. What is not ok is if people punish this little person, our little U. I will become a feminist lesbian tigress mother of our son – ready to attack each and everyone that does not let him that ‘largeur’ in movement, in playing, in inventing his gender.

There are of course examples of men organising to alter and invent other, new, and interesting forms of masculinities. But most of the time when men in our part of the world organise around their gender with other ‘men’, it seems it is not with the aim to open up spaces, to invent new masculinities, and to break with old conservative ones. Nor do they get organised together to contribute to eradicating (male) sexual violence, questioning the role of the male consumer in boosting the sex industry, or undermining militarism through proposing a different set of masculinities. No, they organise in defense of the same

old 'masculinity' that we as feminists would want to see gone, they mobilise for men's interests and struggle together in order to keep already existing privileges, or in order to regain a few lost ones.

Most of the men's movements that mobilise in defence of existing privileges (or deteriorating ones as they see it I assume), do it around one or the other version of the symbolically 'castrated man'. Claiming, with an overflow of self-pity, that they have become alienated in this world where women (demanding equality) no longer let them be 'men', they argue for a stop to all reforms that could challenge the status quo in power between genders. Some of course even dare to defend the idea of 'reversing' things to an imaginary pre-historical yinyang- cave-cosiness.

However, the groups that seem to have had most success in mobilising a larger number of men are those that focus on advocating for more power of men in matters of reproduction and parenthood. The main arguments in these circles go along the lines that they have been deprived of fatherhood (for a zillion reasons they consider 'unfair' and not really worth listing here). It can be everything from being upset about the fact that men cannot have (biological) babies without a relationship with a woman to perceived unfairness in cases of separations where the biological father does not get equal custody rights. However, the most dominant signal that comes across from these new 'fathers' or masculinity movements is a deep revulsion in front of the fact that women can, and increasingly maybe choose to do so, raise children without them, and more generally – that the 'father' is in decline. One does not have to be Jelineksique to welcome the decline of the classical, repressive 'father', but the men's/fathers' movements, rather than inventing a paternity or parentality that challenges the classical 'father', a parentality that 'materne' children, seek simply to re-establish the 'father'.

The two differences in focus (back to cavecosiness or resurrect the 'father'), do not stop the two tendencies to group together in the same associations, or to come together and mobilise jointly as 'men' for men. The paradoxical (or ironical ?) thing is that they often mobilise and become vocal about their demands flagging the political concept of 'gender equality' ! And since men organising around their masculinity (regardless with what objectives ?) and using the front shield 'gender equality' in doing so oftentimes receive immediate and disproportionate positive response from policy-makers, the thinking elite (academia), and the media in most western countries - so has the men's movement also had quite some success when it comes to introducing more and more parental rights for 'fathers'.

One example is the Swedish law on parental rights, custody rights. Twenty years ago the law on granting custody in case of a separation used to be gender neutral, and in case of a separation, child custody was in practice granted on the basis of who had been the main care-taker of the child. This in turn was judged on the basis of objective criteria such as who took the parental leave (that can be shared equally in Sweden), who took time off when the child was ill, who tried to organise the daily logistics and wellbeing of the child, etc. If both parents had been active as care-takers, shared/joint custody was ruled. However, it is not hard to see that many men had rarely actually chosen to engage in caretaking to a larger extent,

and so less often got custody. And as separations got more to be a rule than an exception, men started to mobilise to get more custody rights. As they could not claim custody on the basis of being equal in the care-taking role, they claimed it on the basis of a variety of other criteria – but basically it always boiled down to the fact that they were to be granted rights on the grounds of being the biological father, and/or the need to re-establish the ‘father’ under the slogan that “children need a father”. The lawmakers, failed to use the potential window of opportunity where an increasing number of men actually started to feel that they wanted to take a role also in case of a separation, to let all men know that should you want custody in the case of a separation, you must be a care-taker from day one. No, instead the law was changed to prop up an essentialist notion of father and mother, and gave the message that having contributed with a spermatozoid is enough to claim custody rights in case of a separation. Today, unless there are cases of incest or other extremely serious reasons, the rule should be to establish shared custody.

This law change also indicates what “paternity” should mean, undermining any progressive moves when it comes to paternity. Instead it institutionalises a patriarchal, essentialist paradigm. What could have sparked an interest to seek out more mothering paternities along lines that feminists have argued for decades, has instead lead to the re-introduction or strengthening of the classical father – or even reduced him to a spermatozoid ?