

# Men's Violence

*A Conversation with Michael Kaufman and Eimear O'Neill*

**M**ichael Kaufman, educator on men's violence and a professor at York University, talks with Eimear O'Neill, psychotherapist with survivors of violence at the Brief Psychotherapy Centre for Women in Toronto.

*Eimear:* Why are you personally working in the area of men's violence against women?

*Michael:* Part of my experience growing up as a male in our society was violence at the hands of other males.

*Eimear:* In your home?

*Michael:* No, not beyond the usual, a spanking every year or so. I consider that violence, but it's on a pretty small scale. It was more in school and on the playground. From an early age I had the sense there was this link between a capacity to be tough, to be violent, to fight and to be a man. It was never my thing. I never excelled in "Fighting 101."

*Eimear:* When did you start working actively in the area?

*Michael:* I never had a political or intellectual interest in violence until the early 1980s when I began some personal exploration and thinking about my life and the lives of men. It occurred to me that the important attention given to men's violence against women addressed just one aspect of men's violence. We see around us what I've called a triad of men's violence, that is, men's violence against women, against other men and what we can think of, perhaps metaphorically, as violence against ourselves, as internalized violence.<sup>1</sup> It seemed that men's violence against women wasn't isolated, but was part of a package of what so many men consider normal masculinity.

*Eimear:* When you put it like a triad, it sounds like you disguise the fact that most of the violence is against women and children. Men might internalize violence but they do so in ways that get turned out back towards women and children. Think of Marc Lépine, it was his father who abused him, but his mother and "the bunch of feminists" against whom he turned his anger. Without men in the room making any protest. That's my horror.

*Michael:* I don't talk about the triad of men's violence to take attention away from men's violence against women. It's not to reduce the urgency of the problem, it's not to excuse any men, or to tell women "Calm down girls, we're the real ones with a problem." It's to try to understand why men are violent. I don't think we're biologically cued to be violent. I don't think there's a violence gene. I don't think we should talk about "male" violence, as if it was biologically given or inevitable, but "men's" violence, something more socially constructed.

*Eimear:* So why a triad?

*Michael:* The idea of the triad is that men's violence takes three legs to stand on. The solid ground that supports this triad, the context you know, is the nuts and bolts of a patriarchal society. The way these legs combine with the societal underpinnings can help us understand how violence against women has to do with the way masculinity is constructed, the way it's partly based on men's internalization of violence, including the violence done to them by other males.

*Eimear:* Why? Why is it the men who feel entitled to dominate, to own 99 per cent of the world's property and take 75 per cent of its output, while women do 75 per cent of the work, according to World Health Organization figures.

*Michael:* There are two ways to go at that. Each man comes into the world and is given the opportunity to dominate because men have set up societies where we have that privilege, that capacity and the belief that that's just how things are. Why we feel we are entitled also raises a psychological question. There's terrific work done by feminist psychoanalysts and psychologists like Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Alice Miller that gives us some clues to that question. It seems to me that the young boy develops a strong fantasy image of his potential power as a male. What is his view of power? Well for him, as for adult men in male dominated society, it's a capacity to control and to dominate. Who and what? Women, children, men, social resources, nature, you name it. All the superhero stuff starts happening, you know, you can fly, you can do everything. I remember having wonderful dreams after seeing Peter Pan of being able to fly upstairs through my house. All these things represented the power that, without knowing it, I felt was mine because I had this passkey to the world of power. I had a penis. Now this thing was a pretty small affair at the time, but it was my link to the world of male power. But you see how, as a part of a fantasy image of power, it's an awfully fragile and tiny connection.

*Eimear:* However, it's a real key, a key to real "power over" someone else. I have a problem with the concept of the fragility of masculinity. I'm not that hopeful. Far from being fragile, masculinity is firmly, immutably entrenched. It's not fragile at all.

*Michael:* Oh, it's very firmly entrenched in our society and it's very firmly entrenched in the individual. But there are two voices inside men's heads. One is about men's power. I'm not saying all men are brutes. For those of us who hang around universities there aren't many fist fights at departmental meetings, but that same power is exercised through a competitive power over words. You have these guys strutting their intellectual stuff, see-

ing who has the longest CV, all of that sort of thing.

*Eimear:* So masculinity is about winning? Having the longest CV?

*Michael:* Yes, it's about winning. It's about dominating, it's about controlling and it's about having power over others. But this type of power is something that has to be attained. It's something we have to struggle and fight for.

*Eimear:* It seems to me that, in a male dominator culture, power gives access to resources and a capacity to self-define. You get power over decision-making affecting daily living, by virtue of being male.

*Michael:* There's no struggle to be male. The struggle is to become a *man*. But those images differ from class to class, religious and ethnic groups, by sexual orientation and age. The images differ, but the dominant image is that manhood is something you have to struggle to become. You can't just *be* a man. It requires control over the surrounding world so it's pretty impossible to be permanently clear that you've made the grade. These two voices — one of power, one of self-doubt and pain — make up a dialogue of self-doubt.

The combination of the rigid structures of male power and the fragility of masculinity is what I think of as part of men's contradictory experiences of power.<sup>2</sup> Men do have power and privilege in a patriarchal society. Men's power is built into the fabric of our society and is internalized into the texture of our souls. Yet the way we construct that power in the world and in our lives brings enormous pain not only to women but, in a very different way, to men. That's the paradox of men's power: sure we have "power over" women, we control the structures of social power, some men do have power over other men, but all at a high cost. The cost to men of men's power can be seen in different ways. Most basic is a definition of power that says you have to have the capacity and the right to control and to dominate. Well none of us controls and dominates all that much, most men don't have full power over their own lives. But that means you can't be a man. We experience this pain in a sense of alienation from ourselves. We suppress our emotions. To be men we have to bury a whole range of emotions, sensitivity, connectedness, capacity to nurture, whatever. We do this

to exercise a certain type of power, but also so we don't experience our pain. We've constructed a society so that men don't have to take on the work of child care, most men can take off at night, or pursue a career. We can see that as a privilege, but I feel we pay a price for that. We miss some of the richest stuff of existence. I hear a lot of older men who have worked all their life for a company to succeed and to get ahead, doing it they'll say, for their family. Suddenly they're retired and they look around and they don't even know

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their kids and they say, "Well, what do I have?"

*Eimear:* Exactly, their focus is on possession, control over, though, in fact, nobody on their deathbed says, "I wish I'd spent more time at the office."

*Michael:* So the guy had a privilege in pursuing a career and worldly fame and fortune, but it's a pretty tragic story. I don't know how it would compare to a woman who is stuck with domestic work or limited in what she can be. Both options are miserable.

Now in all this I'm not saying that men's power and pain are equal chunks because traditionally, the benefits of men's power have greatly outweighed any experience of pain. What's happening now, since the massive impact of feminism over the last two decades, is that there are real challenges to men's power. The equilibrium has shifted. Even though we have a long way to go, men's right to power has been questioned and in some spheres men's real power has been reduced...

*Eimear:* And the results have been...

*Michael:* A shift in a social fulcrum. As men's power is reduced, men are experiencing the pain more and more. Many experience this as a threat, some are acting it out against women and children even more. Others see it as a tremendous promise.

This whole business of men's power and pain is a real mess. What a combination: Self-doubt combined with power — power over women and children, control of the structures of power, maintained through relations of power among men. Manhood is defined as having power, but no one has that absolute power — we even tried to set up male gods but that hasn't really kept us satisfied. It's a nasty situation. And that's how we get to the violence.

*Eimear:* Why is men's response violence?

*Michael:* If you're living in a society where men have power, but if there is also this internal dialogue of self-doubt about making the masculine grade, how better to show yourself and the world that you have power and control than by exercising it over those human beings who are defined as not having power, not having control, that is, women and children. Violence, let's say in the home, becomes a terrific means for some man to say to himself that, yah, he is a man because he can dominate someone who clearly isn't.

Some men do it in relation to other men. There the logic is the same: Hey that guy's obviously a man and I can dominate him; I must be pretty powerful.

I'm not just trying to explain violence at this individual psychological level. The reason men are able to act out this violence in the home or in the street is because the structures of our society give men power over women and, in many ways, sanction men's violence.

*Eimear:* Robin Morgan calls that the sexualization of terror.<sup>3</sup> What male violence...

*Michael:* ...men's violence...

*Eimear:* ...does it establish fear about certain things, not just assault but also fear of lack of protection or the economic fear that you won't survive. Part of the reason why men can exercise violence is that they corral the resources of society.

*Michael:* And what's the definition of someone who needs to do that? The violence and power of individual men is

based on the social power of men, but also on the very real terror of men, *real* isolation, *real* alienation and *real* fear, which recreate the need for them to control others. The social power of men creates the possibility to act on that need.

*Eimear*: So why do men in feeling more pain respond with greater violence against women and children. That's the Marc Lépine dynamic!

*Michael*: Yah. The incredible thing about Marc Lépine was that he suffered violence, denial and brutalization at the hands of his father. But his little mind couldn't compute that his father, the person he was supposed to be like, could so violate him that he flipped his hatred around to the other half of humanity who were supposed to be less powerful and desirable. The pain he suffered at the hands of a man was turned against women, particularly women who he saw as challenging his right. Which again goes back to this analysis of the triad of men's violence. Violence of men against other men often reproduces violence against women and children.

*Eimear*: And what about men's violence against other men?

*Michael*: Men's relations with men are based not only on admiration, love and respect, but so often on hatred and fear of other men. You know, it's ironic that one of the bogus charges against feminists is that they're man-haters. The biggest man haters around are men. I mean who is it who goes into the boxing ring to bash the brains out of another man? Who is it engaging in schoolyard violence to beat up another guy? Who is going to war to subdue other men? The immense hatred and fear of other men is related to men's violence against other men and how that gets internalized as violence against ourselves.

You know if you ask men about women you get words like "soft, gentle, good looking, open." You ask them about men and they say, "they're hard, they're tough." You'd be hard pressed to feel safe with such a person. You're not going to really like these guys. You know, there's this image of men as warriors, as distant, as uncaring. What's this all about? Well, it's based on the experience most boys had with their fathers. They didn't get their needs met, they were let down. One thing the boy ends up with is fear of getting hurt, being disappointed, feeling rejected by

other men. Men are not going to come through for you, men are not going to meet your needs, men are going to beat your brains out. What I'm talking about here is homophobia. It's not just the fear of homosexuality, it's the fear of other men. It gets focused onto gay men because those are men who like men, who can be emotionally vulnerable with other men, and all this brings up intense fear in other men. Anyway, that gets into another thing, but I think that we're talking about men's violence against men and the internalization of violence, we're talking about homophobia, of men's hatred and fear of other men.

*Eimear*: It seems to me that the problem is not just the fear and hatred of other men and that being internalized, but the fact that the fear is being denied by most men. The Mount Cashel investigation and others [into the abuse of boys at church-run orphanages] is to a degree just a more public acknowledgement of the abuse of boys by men.

*Michael*: Yah, it's easy to deny this hatred and fear because we've built up these elaborate rituals, sub-cultures and societies of male-bonding, of male unity, of male comradeship. You know it's a great big boy's club out there. Whether we're talking about the church, police force, army, government, media or the corporations, it's a big boy's club. We've got these forms of social structures in male-dominated societies to prevent us from feeling that fear 24 hours a day. You know that they're your brothers, your comrades-in-arms, your friends and associates; we've developed all these forms of social interaction among men that allow us to co-exist without beating each other's brains out. We're able to avoid living in constant terror that the guy next to you is going to beat yours out. It's a nasty business.

*Eimear*: So what do you see as men's role in changing this situation?

*Michael*: Well, there's a lot men can do at a public level — support education programs in schools and communities, advocate better funding for shelters, push for stricter penalties for violence and decent treatment programs, support peaceful solutions to conflicts whether in the schoolyard or between nations, speak out publicly against men's violence. Then there's the larger issues of inequality and men's power that tie in with violence

because, as we know, violence can be a means to enforce privileges and dominance. There's no end to this list.

We also have to see what we can do at the individual level. More and more men are agreeing that men's violence is a serious problem. Men are being pushed to make changes by women in a variety of places, partly because many women simply aren't tolerating being dominated or abused in relationships or at work. These are important, but only first steps. We have to figure out ways that more men can see themselves as allies and beneficiaries of a struggle against men's violence.

*Eimear*: Like what?

*Michael*: This sounds strange, but the key is to break down the isolation among men so we men can learn from each other's experiences that you don't have to do anything to be a man. We need men's support groups for violent men, really for all men young and old, where we can find out we're not alone in our fears and concerns, where we can discover that our pain and self-doubt is shared by our brothers. We discover we can be the men we want to be without having to fight for it, without having to perform. It's our biological reality, nothing we have to struggle for. Remember how the struggle to a man is often facilitated by acts of violence. Part of challenging violence is to develop pride among men. And this seems so bizarre, because here we are challenging what seems to be a puffed-up pride. Yet we need to go for a much deeper sense of pride and appreciation of self, where we can sweep a lot of demons and fears out of the closet.

*Eimear*: Maybe it's not "pride" but "respect" — a sense of self that honours all aspects of their self including the fear, pain and conflict in their relationships with other men, as well as with women. And a sense of self that acknowledges their need for, and actively fosters close, equitable, empowering relationships. The problem with breaking down the isolation between men is that our only previous models tend to have been men "bonding" in the name of greater violence — in war, in gangs, in locker rooms. Without new models, there's just an upsurge of the same violent behaviour.

*Michael*: Most male bonding has been based on common enemies or differences men create with other men, whether it's your class, skin colour, sexual orientation

or religion. Or it's based on ideas that men share some timeless qualities of masculinity that are out of bounds to women. That idea is as true for the army as it is for the guys getting into all the Robert Bly stuff. No, we don't have good alternative models for breaking down men's isolation without men getting into breaking other people's necks. That's why we have to start with the whole feminist agenda. For example, developing equality in the home is not only critical for women, but critical for men. It's important for the next generation that, in those homes where a father is present, boys learn they can turn to men for care and affection. It's critical for the next generation of men to have developed skills of relationship, of caring, of bonding based on love and connection and not based on common enemies or differences.

*Eimear:* So we need strong responses by men at a social and public level against violence in all its forms, from sexist jokes to incest, men's consciousness raising through groups and individual work, education in schools that not only points out the effects of all forms of violence but does so through a process that is non-dominating, non-punitive, collaborative. And, very important, the participation of men in the reality of caring for children on a daily basis, a role for which they will have to establish some trust.

*Michael:* All by tomorrow. It does seem awesome, but I see it happening. For every judge who lets off a rapist, I see another man struggling against sexism in his own life. Just think of this conversation, it wouldn't have occurred to any of us a few years ago. It's the result of men learning from the struggles of women and also of men realizing we are not only part of the problem but part of the solution.

<sup>1</sup> See Michael Kaufman, "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence," in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Kaufman, "Towards a Framework for Research on Men and Masculinity," *Men's Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989).

## Soldier

1.  
She did not see me  
pretend to smack her ass  
in jest.

As usual  
I pulled my hand back  
in the nick of time.

But, did our young son see?

2.  
The young soldier  
in the never-ending boot camp  
kicks cats  
that don't let him pet them  
The young soldier  
in the never-ending boot camp  
calls girls sluts  
and their mothers  
— whom he does not know —  
whores

It's fuckin this  
and fuckin that  
as means of expression  
will not blossom  
other than through his fists  
his skin still soft with youth

His indoctrination  
has ravaged  
any tears  
any quiet in his heart

He is now equipped  
as a general in training  
giving orders  
enjoying the officer's mess  
the privilege to walk alone in the night  
without fear  
no rape or violation  
to jade the innocence  
no bestial lust  
to ravage purity  
no obscene pornographer in three piece  
suit  
licentious, vile  
how evil is cloaked in the mundane  
"All is fair in love and war."  
speak the masked offenders  
Commanders of the war  
their artillery —  
degradation and rape  
or  
collusion in degradation and rape  
There, that implicates us all.

3.  
There is no time for declarations of  
reprehensibility.

4.  
Some nights I have nightmares

I hope I do not train my son as a soldier

## Gentlemen:

Gentlemen:  
I sit  
at the back of the bus  
alone.  
Women  
look for seats  
eyeing every single man  
as though he is the one.  
My eyes try to catch theirs  
screaming, I am not  
we are not....

Every eye I catch can only think the  
wrong thought  
They are not just looking for the killer  
but searching out oppressors  
if only with their eyes.  
Now  
with a killer on the loose  
the point is driven home  
It is not simply one maniac  
it is...

Gentlemen, you think me a fool?

Gentlemen,  
If in the past couple of weeks  
a few men were found  
dead  
their genitals splattered over their  
neighbours' lawns  
would you be flattered when a friendly  
woman said your hairy  
chest is so cute?  
Or would you check the hatpin in your  
pocket?

*Michael Glassbourg*

*These two poems were read as part of the Healing Images men's panel discussion on men's violence towards women. The poems were interwoven with the presentations of four other panel participants, and a variety of Michael Glassbourg's other writings.*