The High Cost of Manliness

By Robert Jensen / AlterNet
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It's hard to be a man; hard to live up to the demands that come with the dominant conception of masculinity, of the tough guy.

So, guys, I have an idea -- maybe it's time we stop trying. Maybe this masculinity thing is a bad deal, not just for women but for us.

We need to get rid of the whole idea of masculinity. It's time to abandon the claim that there are certain psychological or social traits that inherently come with being biologically male. If we can get past that, we have a chance to create a better world for men and women.

That dominant conception of masculinity in U.S. culture is easily summarized: Men are assumed to be naturally competitive and aggressive, and being a real man is therefore marked by the struggle for control, conquest and domination. A man looks at the world, sees what he wants and takes it. Men who don't measure up are wimps, sissies, fags, girls. The worst insult one man can hurl at another -- whether it's boys on the playground or CEOs in the boardroom -- is the accusation that a man is like a woman. Although the culture acknowledges that men can in some situations have traits traditionally associated with women (caring, compassion, tenderness), in the end it is men's strength-expressed-as-toughness that defines us and must trump any female-like softness. Those aspects of masculinity must prevail for a man to be a "real man."

That's not to suggest, of course, that every man adopts that view of masculinity. But it is endorsed in key institutions and activities -- most notably in business, the military and athletics -- and is reinforced through the mass media. It is particularly expressed in the way men -- straight and gay alike -- talk about sexuality and act sexually. And our culture's male heroes reflect those characteristics: They most often are men who take charge rather than seek consensus, seize power rather than look for ways to share it and are willing to be violent to achieve their goals.

That view of masculinity is dangerous for women. It leads men to seek to control "their"
women and define their own pleasure in that control, which leads to epidemic levels of rape and battery. But this view of masculinity is toxic for men as well.

If masculinity is defined as conquest, it means that men will always struggle with each other for dominance. In a system premised on hierarchy and power, there can be only one king of the hill. Every other man must in some way be subordinated to the king, and the king has to always be nervous about who is coming up that hill to get him. A friend who once worked on Wall Street -- one of the preeminent sites of masculine competition -- described coming to work as like walking into a knife fight when all the good spots along the wall were taken. Masculinity like this is life lived as endless competition and threat.

No one man created this system, and perhaps none of us, if given a choice, would choose it. But we live our lives in that system, and it deforms men, narrowing our emotional range and depth. It keeps us from the rich connections with others -- not just with women and children, but other men -- that make life meaningful but require vulnerability.

This doesn't mean that the negative consequences of this toxic masculinity are equally dangerous for men and women. As feminists have long pointed out, there's a big difference between women dealing with the possibility of being raped, beaten and killed by the men in their lives, and men not being able to cry. But we can see that the short-term material gains that men get are not adequate compensation for what we men give up in the long haul -- which is to surrender part of our humanity to the project of dominance.

Of course there are obvious physical differences between men and women -- average body size, hormones, reproductive organs. There may be other differences rooted in our biology that we don't yet understand. Yet it's also true that men and women are more similar than we are different, and that given the pernicious effects of centuries of patriarchy and its relentless devaluing of things female, we should be skeptical of the perceived differences.

What we know is simple: In any human population, there is wide individual variation. While there's no doubt that a large part of our behavior is rooted in our DNA, there's also no doubt that our genetic endowment is highly influenced by culture. Beyond that, it's difficult to say much with any certainty. It's true that only women can bear children and breastfeed. That fact likely has some bearing on aspects of men's and women's personalities. But we don't know much about what the effect is, and given the limits of our tools to understand human behavior, it's possible we may never know much.

At the moment, the culture seems obsessed with gender differences, in the context of a recurring intellectual fad (called "evolutionary psychology" this time around, and
"sociobiology" in a previous incarnation) that wants to explain all complex behaviors as simple evolutionary adaptations -- if a pattern of human behavior exists, it must be because it's adaptive in some ways. In the long run, that's true by definition. But in the short-term it's hardly a convincing argument to say, "Look at how men and women behave so differently; it must be because men and women are fundamentally different" when a political system has been creating differences between men and women.

From there, the argument that we need to scrap masculinity is fairly simple. To illustrate it, remember back to right after 9/11. A number of commentators argued that criticisms of masculinity should be rethought. Cannot we now see -- recognizing that male firefighters raced into burning buildings, risking and sometimes sacrificing their lives to save others -- that masculinity can encompass a kind of strength that is rooted in caring and sacrifice? Of course men often exhibit such strength, just as do women. So, the obvious question arises: What makes these distinctly masculine characteristics? Are they not simply human characteristics?

We identify masculine tendencies toward competition, domination and violence because we see patterns of differential behavior; men are more prone to such behavior in our culture. We can go on to observe and analyze the ways in which men are socialized to behave in those ways, toward the goal of changing those destructive behaviors. That analysis is different than saying that admirable human qualities present in both men and women are somehow primarily the domain of one gender. To assign them to a gender is misguided and demeaning to the gender that is then assumed not to possess them to the same degree. Once we start saying "strength and courage are masculine traits," it leads to the conclusion that women are not as strong or courageous.

Of course, if we are going to jettison masculinity, we have to scrap femininity along with it. We have to stop trying to define what men and women are going to be in the world based on extrapolations from physical sex differences. That doesn't mean we ignore those differences when they matter, but we have to stop assuming they matter everywhere.

I don't think the planet can long survive if the current conception of masculinity endures. We face political and ecological challenges that can't be met with this old model of what it means to be a man. At the more intimate level, the stakes are just as high. For those of us who are biologically male, we have a simple choice: We men can settle for being men, or we can strive to be human beings. Robert Jensen [3] is a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and the author of, most recently, The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege [4] (City Lights Books).