
January 30, 2012
[English course]
[Professor's name]
Essay #1 Final Draft

In Defense of Men

My fellow peers,

As a woman, I take pride in the knowledge that so much effort is geared toward fighting against female discrimination. When I watch talk shows, I am constantly reminded that I should never have to tolerate ways in which I may be discriminated against because I am a woman. When I walk into a bathroom in my university, I see flyers from support groups for women in abusive relationships. When I sign in to my e-mail account, I read messages containing information about how to defend myself should I find myself overpowered by a strong man with intentions to harm me. Everywhere I go, I am reminded that if ever I find myself in a predicament due to my gender, there is always someone or somewhere I can go to for help.

However, I am saddened that I cannot say with equal conviction that my male counterparts can feel the same security when it comes to dealing with gender discrimination. In fact, from my everyday interactions and observations, it seems that my male relatives and friends actually often feel sidelined, yet they do not feel that they should or can do anything about it. While issues that women face are often highlighted, issues that men face tend to be underplayed or overlooked. Thus, I am writing this letter to you to urge you to consider male discrimination due to societal expectations and to reflect upon our own roles in changing these increasingly prevalent gender biases that have been promoted by the mass media and that have found their way into our homes and even our legal system.

Let's take a look at the entertainment and advertising industries that thrive based on what appeals to their audiences. In movies, TV shows, and commercials, male and female characters are often assigned traits that viewers may come to find predictable over time. This is because scriptwriters and producers tailor their productions to employ certain stereotypes that they assume a majority of their audience will agree with. When viewers keep on watching gender stereotypes played out in the mass media, eventually they will internalize these stereotypes and further intensify the problem of gender biases.

It is now common for me to hear a friend comment "He's just like that because he is a man" while we are watching a movie or a TV show. Men are quite often portrayed as lazy, irresponsible, incompetent, and childish even in family-friendly movies and shows. Male characterization may even border on being stupid at times. Take for example an episode of *King of Queens* in which Carrie, Doug Heffernan's wife, makes him take a night class with her so that they can read and discuss a book together. Due to his disinterest, Doug does not read the book. He then steals answers from his friend Spence to pretend, in a class discussion, that he understands Jane Eyre ("Educating Doug"). Such a portrayal of male characters is not surprising, even expected, in popular sitcoms these days.

Furthermore, in shows tailored for family entertainment, it is common for men to be represented as husbands who are extremely dependent on their wives. They are also portrayed as fathers who shirk responsibilities and who get chastised for their lack of control in the household. Among many popular TV shows that depict this is *George Lopez*. One episode of the show begins with George's mother visiting his house and expressing surprise when she sees him in the kitchen. His son Max responds to her surprise by saying, "Mom's planning a big wedding. So Dad's doing the cooking and laundry. That's why I'm hungry and going commando." Max's

statement is followed by recorded laughter as George shoots his son an exasperated look (“George Vows to Make Some Matri-Money”). This is just one of many instances in which George is made out to be an incompetent father who constantly needs to be reprimanded by his wife Angie who is portrayed to possess better parenting skills.

To make matters worse, a dichotomy exists in men’s roles in the mass media. On the other end of the spectrum of male roles are male characters that are made to be successful, strong, and attractive. While there is nothing inherently wrong with these positive attributes, the over-used formula of a successful man in the entertainment and advertising industries may become, over time, socially accepted as a reasonable standard for men to live up to. For instance, in the Dr. Pepper Ten commercial, it is explicitly stated that the drink is for men only. While the commercial boldly claims that the soda is “not for women” and highlights sexism against women, the commercial also blatantly displays sexism against men. It implies that to be considered a man, one has to be strong and adventurous (like the man who fights off a snake in the commercial) and to revel in the bold feeling of “being a man”. This type of commercial only serves to support the “real men never cry” stereotype that has persisted over time, thereby labeling men who don’t fit the rough and tough label to be weak.

Although on the surface one can argue that these shows and commercials are purely meant for entertainment, there is an underlying effect that cannot be ignored. As people keep watching stereotypical gender roles being propagated, they may be influenced into thinking that men and women are simply born into different roles. The mass media, through its reinforcements of gender stereotypes, has fooled people into thinking that men fall into narrow categories characterized by certain traits. We cannot realistically expect men to fit into the false dichotomy

that the mass media projects just as we cannot expect the “ideal woman” to be beautiful, strong, and independent by society’s skewed standards.

These gender biases against men often reach into our own lives whether or not we are aware of them. Whenever I talk with my friends about divorce and the problem it poses in child custody battles, the responses I often receive seem to lean toward “I don’t think he should get the kids. The woman will probably be a better parent anyway.” As harsh as this statement sounds, it is not an unusual one to hear about a man who is going through a divorce. Even now, the statistics are not in favor of divorced men. According to the United States Census Bureau, 84 percent of custodial parents are mothers. In fact, this proportion has remained consistent since 1993 (Franklin). The notion that mothers are awarded custody of their children more often than fathers are has become commonly known and even accepted in our society today. The common misconception is that women are usually more nurturing, so they should be better parents than men are. This stereotype becomes an easy excuse to overlook the rights that men should have in taking care of their own children. But we must not be influenced into thinking that we can deem a man less capable of taking care of his children simply because he is a man. It is simply wrong for us to assume that fathers are less competent than mothers are in parenting just because the majority of father figures that we see in the mass media are inept parents. A father holds the same parental responsibilities to his children as a mother does, therefore he must be given equal treatment in child custody.

This lopsided perception affects men even in the legal system. For some men, adding onto the stresses that accompany a breakdown in a marriage and a family is a financial burden that is imposed by laws governing child support. Although child support is necessary as children should not be deprived of financial support due to their parents’ divorce, its requirement by the

law sometimes levies biased decisions onto divorced men. With paternity tests by DNA testing, there is virtually no doubt concerning the identities of the biological parents of a child. Yet, there are men who are forced to provide child support even after finding out that the children whom they have raised are not biologically their children. Consider the case of Mike L., a man who has found out through a DNA test that he has not biologically fathered the girl he has been raising. Even when his ex-wife has later married the biological father of the child, Mike is made to continue to financially support the child (Padawer).

Being a father may hold different meanings for different people. But a man should not be forced to provide financial support for a child whom he did not father, especially if he is purposefully made unaware of his not being the biological father of a child. There are many men who are victims of paternity fraud and who find themselves stuck in a financial rut to support children whom the men have only been made to believe they have fathered. In a prominent case of paternity fraud similar to Mike L.'s, Carnell Smith has thought for eleven years that he has fathered his ex-girlfriend's daughter. When he finds out later on that he isn't the biological father of the girl, it takes him three years and approximately \$100,000 worth of support payments and legal fees for him to be exempted from providing child support (Rawe).

Mike L. and Carnell Smith represent a small population of men who have found themselves victimized by parental fraud and further burdened by unjust laws that do not defend their rights as victims. However, cases such as these cannot simply be kept aside where they do not garner enough attention to bring about positive action. There is no justification to allowing men such as Mike L. and Carnell Smith to suffer from financial burdens after they have been deceived in their personal relationships. These men and those like them should be treated with justice and respect and not with nonchalant dismissal.

The problem of gender biases against men extends into our everyday lives as well. Male stereotypes reinforced by the mass media contribute to the way in which violence against men in heterosexual relationships are often misunderstood or overlooked. Often, when people hear about domestic violence victimizing women, they feel outraged and disgusted even if they do not immediately become motivated to defend women's rights. Yet, the general reaction that follows knowledge of domestic violence against men tends to lean toward dubiousness, or, worse yet, indifference. I am slightly surprised, but more disappointed, when after I have shown my friend an article reporting about a man who has been sexually assaulted by a few women, my friend comments dismissively, "That's ridiculous! A man shouldn't be so easily overpowered by a woman."

There are numerous studies that have shown that women are just as likely as men are to inflict minor or severe assault on their partners (Straus). In fact, according to Murray Straus, a professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire and an author of several studies on domestic violence, there are many studies "including a 32-nation study and about 200 other studies that have found gender symmetry in [partner violence] perpetration and a less, but still large, number that have found similar patterns of motivation" (Straus). However, men are more often easily assigned the label "perpetrator" in cases of domestic violence. This can be attributed to the way in which information about domestic violence is disseminated. While much information about domestic violence against women can be found easily, information about domestic violence against men by women tends to be less readily available to the public. Straus argues that because of this imbalance in disseminated information, it is difficult to persuade our society to recognize that men, just like women, can be victims of domestic violence (Straus).

This problem is exacerbated by the general acceptance of the gender roles in which men are viewed as being stronger and more dominant, therefore more likely to inflict injury upon women (Straus). The common premise of domestic violence campaigns often lies in the portrayal of aggressive men who inflict physical injuries onto their female partners. These campaigns usually appeal to empathy for female victims who need to be heard and protected. While such campaigns do not have wrong intentions, they can also create a false belief that men are always perpetrators, but not victims, of violence. This goes along with the gender stereotype that dictates that men should be dominant as our society has been conditioned to think through internalizing repeated reinforcements of the “strong man” stereotype in the mass media. This view sidelines men who are victims of domestic violence as weak and less “manly”. For instance, the *Brady Bunch* actor Barry Williams, who has been physically attacked by his girlfriend, is mocked and seen as weak even though he has been clearly wronged (Watson). It is simply unfair for men such as Williams to have to bear further humiliation after being victimized by aggressive partners whereas female victims of domestic violence are often treated with respect and offered help. The persisting imbalance in the way in which male and female victims of domestic violence are treated should not be a mark of a society that so strongly advocates for equality and justice.

All these ways in which men are marginalized in our society are formed through skewed messages propagated by the mass media. But ignorance cannot and should not be made an excuse for us to be unconcerned about issues that affect men. We have seen great strides being made in defending women’s rights. It is only fair that we not turn a deaf ear to discrimination against men or assume that sexism affects only women. We should, instead, better inform ourselves and realize that our own perceptions may be reinforcing sexism against men.

We can start by not saying, “That is not what a man should be like.” Instead, we should deny gender stereotypes that we are fed through the mass media. We can start by not saying, “Men are always more violent than women are, so men cannot be victims of domestic violence.” Instead, we should correct ourselves in our beliefs. We can start by not saying, “Be a man.” Instead, we should change our attitudes. Only then can we start to achieve greater equality for all.

Sincerely,

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