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Toughness, Sensitivity Not Mutually Exclusive in a 'Real Man'

By **Leandra Preston-Sidler**
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My Facebook page has been laden with recent activity around something I am deeply invested in: the issue of masculinity.

As a Women's Studies instructor, I am familiar with the association of feminism with man-hating but am equally familiar with the mythology of such assumptions. As a feminist, I care about masculinity for many reasons—for one, I have a husband who is also the father to my child—but most notably because I care about the prevalence of violence in our culture and see connections to social constructions of masculinity.

If you have ever watched professional wrestling or even an action adventure movie, you have seen how popular culture represents masculinity and the role of violence in constructing manhood. While there are many complex factors, I believe that social constructions of gender heavily contribute to incidences of violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, hate crimes, and male-on-male violence.

It is largely understood but highly contested that there are differences between sex and gender. We are typically born sexed—male or female—and gender is created through socialization via family, culture, education, media and sports, and reinforced in just about every avenue in our lives. Whether sex determines gender is not agreed upon, as many folks believe that sex and gender correlate naturally, while others argue that we shape and perform gender based on sex. This is the crux of many discussions in my Women's Studies classes, including my Theories of Masculinity class.

Theories of Masculinity was motivated by my domestic-violence activism, as I see masculinity's association with violence and femininity's association with passivity contributing to the perpetuation of interpersonal violence. This is not to say that all men are violent and all women are weak, but to acknowledge the way that "maleness" and

“femaleness” are linked to such traits in popular culture and other everyday institutions. This issue demands a longer discussion than a short article permits but the currency of “masculinity,” especially on my Facebook page, demanded I write about it.

A friend recently posted an article on Facebook titled “Are Feminists and Wussy Men a Threat to National Security?” Without even summarizing the article (which reads like a parody but sadly is not), I want to unpack the concept of the “wussification” of men in American culture. To refer to men who may not embody typical toughness as “wussies” reinforces the association of manliness with violence and seeks to deter men being not-tough or sensitive lest they be termed “wussies.”

The same week, I posted a video about how we raise boys to be “real men,” and someone commented about how men today are expected to act like women. The next day, another friend posted a series of Facebook posts complaining about the stripping of men’s rights by feminism. He berated his mother for leeching off his father without acknowledging the role she played in their family business or the fact that she raised six children.

This broke my heart as a new mother who works and struggles to keep house for one child. I have help from my husband, who also works, parents and helps keeps house with me. He fits the mold of masculinity with his muscles and tattoos but is also sensitive and a hands-on father. I consider him a “real man.” I consider anyone who identifies himself as a man “real” regardless of how they practice or resist manhood or masculinity.

The notion of a “real man” as one who is not a wussy—one who does not cry or express himself except through violence—is one of many complex ways that masculinity is related to violence. Toughness and sensitivity are not mutually exclusive as human beings are much more complicated than simply one or the other. There is not one type of “real man” and if/when we raise our boys to “be men,” we should expand notions of what this means.

I understand why some folks are so invested in the existence of clear-cut boundaries for men and women. According to traditional or “old-fashioned” ways of thinking, gender roles establish and maintain order in the home, workplace, place of worship, and politics. But whose order?

Challenging masculinity is good for men because it enables them to be who they wish to be outside of prescribed roles.

Some individuals fit into their gender boxes more neatly than others and we should not privilege one over another. We should probably discard these boxes altogether. However, to discard “sex” or “gender” eclipses the reality of our embodied experiences because, after all, our physicality generally still determines our experiences, as unfortunate as that might be.

Ultimately, the uniqueness of human beings and our richness of character rest on our differences—or at least it should.