

## 1. Only for the Brave? Political Men and Masculinities: Change Agents for Gender Equality

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### **Abstract**

This chapter draws on recent debates concerning the concept of political masculinities and its application, including the contributors' work to this volume, to critically consider its definition and use. In doing so, we identify and discuss areas of critique, including: 'a singular or multiple concepts of political masculinities', 'locating political masculinities within a conceptual landscape', and 'understanding power and political masculinities'. We argue that the concept of political masculinities holds continued theoretical and applied value as demonstrated in its use in understanding men and masculinities' contribution as, or in support of, "change agents" for gender equality. An associated literature highlights the specificities and potential pitfalls of political men and masculinities as agents of change. These are very different from the challenges that women face when engaging in the struggle for gender equality. And yet the benefit of men's involvement as, or in support of change agents for gender equality, is clear. The need for critical consideration of these pitfalls and men's self-reflection concerning their contribution toward progressive gender change is necessary. But accepting this, the need for men's pro-feminist engagement remains undiminished.

**Keywords:** change agents, gender equality, social change, political masculinities, men, pro-feminism

## 1.1. Introduction

This chapter serves as an introduction to the current edited volume. It represents an ongoing discussion relating to the broader applied and theoretical utility of the concept of *political masculinities*. This concept has been discussed elsewhere, including focus on literature and culture (Starck & Sauer, 2014); British and American films of the Early Cold War (Starck, 2016); as well as social transitions (Starck & Luyt, 2019). The latter applies to a wide range of contexts, for example, public policing in Turkey (Eksi, 2019); the emergence of the Podemos movement and party in Spain (Caravantes-Gonzales, 2019), and international military peacebuilding interventions (Myrtilinen, 2019).

In addition to furthering discussion of the concept of *political masculinities*, and in order to aid our understanding of this, we turn our attention to another relevant area of focus – change toward gender equality. We are, in particular, interested in the potential for political men and masculinities to act as, or in support of, *change agents* in achieving greater gender equality. In what follows, we seek to discuss and define the concepts of *political masculinities* and *change agents*, as well as the relationship between these concepts, through drawing upon extant literature as well as the contributions toward this edited volume.

### 1.1.1. Political men and masculinities.

Starck and Sauer's (2014, p. 6) original definition of political masculinities is informative. The authors suggest that these:

“Encompass any kind of masculinity that is constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by ‘political players’. These shall be individuals or groups of persons who are part of or associated with the ‘political domain’, i.e. professional politicians, party members, members of the military as well as citizens and members of political movements claiming or gaining political rights”.

As Starck and Luyt (2019, p. 5) note, this definition emphasises what Tosh (2004, p. 48) describes as masculinities “with a sharper political edge”. The authors also helpfully recognise that the definition includes emphasis on political masculinities that are easily identified as such (e.g., professional politicians), as well as those who are less so (e.g., citizens), but nonetheless act on or within the political domain – they distinguish between

political masculinities with an upper case ‘P’ and lower case ‘p’ respectively. Whilst they acknowledge that all masculinities are political in so far as they are intimately involved in the reproduction of relations of power, the authors argue that the concept of political masculinities holds specific theoretical and applied utility. They suggest that this lies in it aiding understanding of “instances in which power is explicitly either being (re)produced or challenged” (Starck & Luyt, 2018, p. 5).

A recent international summer school, titled “Political Masculinities in Europe: New Definitions, Methods and Approaches” (20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> August 2018), took place at the University of Koblenz-Landau (Germany). The organisers, Kathleen Starck (University of Koblenz-Landau) and Birgit Sauer (University of Vienna), centred discussion around the theoretical development of the concept. This, together with the contributions in the current edited volume, provide clear areas for further critical consideration<sup>1</sup> as this relates to the concept thus far defined and applied.

1.1.1.1. *A singular or multiple concepts of political masculinities?* On a meta level, we first need to question the nature of interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches, which rely on commonly defined concepts, such as ‘masculinity’ or ‘political masculinities’. Since differences exist between established Western core theories and non-core knowledge in the so-called ‘semiperiphery’ and ‘periphery’, theories should be empirically evaluated, while not being overgeneralised or essentialised. Theories and concepts often do not include a reflection of themselves as contextually determined.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we should create polycentric knowledge, in the process deconstructing the critical centres, who have the power to define “the other” (periphery and semi-periphery). Although most masculinity studies scholars agree that masculinities are temporarily and geographically contingent (Berg & Longhurst 2010, p. 351), this is not

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<sup>1</sup> Notable contributions to the critical discussion of political masculinities were made by Jeff Hearn and Marina Blagojević during the international summer school, titled “Political Masculinities in Europe: New Definitions, Methods and Approaches”, between 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

<sup>2</sup> In her talk at the summer school, Marina Blagojević impressively demonstrated that masculinity and misogyny in 1990s Serbia did not tie in with notions of women as closer to nature and men being associated with technology and modernity, as proposed widely by feminist research. Exactly the opposite was true, which can be explained by the very specific political and historical context of a post-socialist, transitional society with very strong anti-Western values.

necessarily reflected in the body of theory produced at the ‘centre’. A case in point would be postcolonial masculinities, which through:

“[f]irst World discourses [...] often produce and maintain representations that serve to create, perpetuate, and reinforce First World norms of masculinity and heterosexuality by way of the boundaries and contrasts provided by these ‘other’ Third World masculinities and sexualities [...] Practices shocking to Western sensibilities, such as polygyny, widow sacrifice, burqas, or infibulation, can function as pretexts for First World intercessions” (Stanovsky, 2007, p.x).

This vulnerability of first world concepts of masculinity to being exploited politically by, for example, right-wing actors claiming that women need liberation or protection from ‘other’ – mostly immigrant masculinities – can presently be observed in a number of geographical and cultural contexts. For example, when regional branches of the German Alternative für Deutschland propose a law prohibiting face veiling in public places and publish it under the heading of “Protecting Women’s Rights” (AFD Press Release 25 September, 2019); when Italian rightwing-actors try to appeal to women by promising to protect *our* women and *our* children or when in the United Kingdom the Rotherham child grooming scandal was utilised to vilify certain ethnic masculinities (Fae, 2019).

Likewise, there is a conspicuous absence of masculinities of the “Second World” or semiperiphery – such as post-socialist transitional societies – within dominant feminist (and masculinity studies) theorizing (Blagojević 2013, p. 164). This absence is in danger of becoming normalized, thus producing “distortions through sweeping decontextualized generalizations, or fascinating individual cases employed to illustrate the ‘theory’, or highly contested constructs on Balkan (and other) men that exoticize them and reinvent their otherness [...] in which ‘the West’ [...] still figures as the norm” (ibid).

In turn, this leads to a lack of understanding of the dissimilar roles that globalisation, transnationalism and neoliberalism play in the contemporary construction of culturally and geographically different masculinities.

Moreover, ignoring the body of work from the semiperiphery results in a neglect of the “lived realities of concrete men and women” (ibid), thus producing a theoretical framework which bears no relation to the phenomena it aims to describe and analyse.

In accepting multiplicity in conceptual definition, we avoid privileging particular world views. This is undoubtedly experienced as uncomfortable by many scholars who are embedded in broader realist traditions, pursuing a singular, albeit at times an accepted mediated ‘truth’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). How then do we approach critical conceptual discussion and definition? Rather than adopt an adversarial approach to critique, in which we set rival definitions against each other, we suggest an inquisitorial approach. Here the value of a concept and its definition is determined by the extent to which it can meaningfully elucidate our understanding of local contexts. Thus, the meanings of political masculinities as employed in this volume differ, for example, from: ‘politician’ as in Johansson and Darvishpour’s contribution (Chapter 6); gender equality activists as in Burrell’s (Chapter 3), Bell and Flood’s (Chapter 4) and Schwartz’ (Chapter 8) papers; masculinities in business and finance as in DeFillipo’s (Chapter 7) and Thym’s (Chapter 5) articles; NGO, UN and other gender equality professionals and structures in van Huis and Leek’s contribution (Chapter 9), to the apparent opposite of ‘political players’ – the seeming absence of political masculinities in Hearn’s article (Chapter 2).

*1.1.1.2. Locating political masculinities within a conceptual landscape?* It is argued that the relationship between the concept of political masculinities and other masculinity identities, practices and representations is unclear. Related questions arise as to whether political masculinities are invariably linked with the concept of power and the extent to which they may be considered at different levels of analysis.

The concept of political masculinities as initially proposed (Starck & Sauer, 2014), subsequently developed (e.g., Starck & Luyt, 2018) and

applied (cf. *Men and Masculinities*, Issue 3, Volume 22 and this edited volume), builds upon an extensive and rich theoretical literature. The reproduction of power through gender relations is a central tenet of this literature. In masculinities literature, the concept of hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) has been instrumental in furnishing us with an understanding of how dominant men's power is reproduced *vis-à-vis* women and other marginalised and subordinated men. Yet, as we know, this is only a small, albeit enormously influential account of patriarchy. Our understanding of political masculinities should rightly be informed by the account of hegemonic masculinities but not reduced to it. In doing so we should consider the concept of political masculinities' relative worth, as noted above, against broader Western core theories and non-core knowledge; be this codified in scholarly texts or residing in informal local knowledges, past or existing. We should, at a minimum, recognise that masculinities may be examined at multiple levels of analysis. This is informed by a range of seminal texts, broadly poststructuralist in outlook, and unmistakably influenced by grand late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century theorising including, for instance, psychoanalytic and Marxist thought: psychic processes (e.g., Lacan, 1958), identities and social practices (e.g.; West & Zimmerman, 1987), discourse (Foucault, 1969), institutions and ideologies (e.g., Connell, 1995).

It is doubtful whether any analysis can adequately address all such levels of analysis within a single account. Nor, from an inquisitorial perspective, as described above, would this be deemed particularly helpful. We invite the concept of political masculinities to be applied to a full breadth of local contexts. In doing so, we argue, the concept is best located at the outset within our already rich understanding of gender relations within a broadly poststructuralist perspective.

1.1.1.3. *Understanding power and political masculinities?* An understanding of political masculinities, as noted above, should acknowledge that they are, however defined and applied, fundamentally implicated in the

reproduction of power. We have argued that their definition might be varied depending upon the level of analysis being applied and the local contextual issues being investigated. From this perspective, political masculinities, as is the case with the more general concept of ‘masculinities’, may be understood as including, for example, identities, practices and representations as well as the relationship between these. Yet other questions relevant to understanding power and how it is exercised through political masculinities remain.

Firstly, what counts as a political domain? To what extent are all domains political, or alternatively, is it useful to distinguish between different degrees of ‘politicalness’? In this respect, we may ask what ‘power and its explicit reproduction and challenge mean’ (Starck & Luyt, 2019)? More specifically, how useful is it to emphasise power that is explicitly exercised when it frequently functions implicitly? And if this distinction is useful, how do we go about identifying the implicit versus explicit exercise of power. These questions are similarly posed by Hearn (Chapter 2, p. x):

Much depends here on different understandings of the political; as such... [Starck & Sauer’s (2014) definition]... is a useful starting point, from which discussion of political masculinities can be extended. Additionally, Starck and Luyt’s (2018) comment that “the concept of political masculinities can usefully be applied in instances in which power is explicitly either being (re)produced or challenged” presupposes an understanding of what is meant by both *power* and its *explicit* reproduction or challenge.

We argue that it is useful to distinguish between different degrees of ‘politicalness’ or the extent to which power is operating explicitly, whether this be at, for example, an identity, practice or representational level of analysis. Why? It is a common observation that power operates implicitly (Foucault, 1977); insidiously to reproduce inequalities as both normal and often natural (Butler, 1990). But to identify instances in which power is understood, by contextual actors, as explicitly being reproduced is beneficial. In identifying such instances, or through actively making the operation of power explicit, possibilities for challenge and change are realised. This is not least in the case of men and masculinities which

contribute as, or in support of, change agents for gender equality. Crucially an understanding of power, as being explicitly reproduced, is not pre-given. It does not exist outside of common consensual understanding among contextual actors. Indeed part of our challenge as change agents is, and will remain, making the implicit, explicit as a foundation to change. Burrell (Chapter 3, p. x) helpfully contributes:

“...the concept of ‘political masculinities’ also helps to draw attention to the construction of masculinities within explicitly political spheres, which are likely to have a particularly significant influence upon gender relations more broadly (Starck & Sauer, 2014; Starck & Luyt, 2018). The field of men’s violence against women prevention can clearly be seen as one such sphere. Men who are active in this context are likely to have a heightened awareness of the political dynamics of masculinity and gender, and seek to problematise and make those dynamics transparent to others. Masculinity is therefore consciously and explicitly politicised, and challenged on a political basis, in this setting”

A second important question concerning power and political masculinities relates to the claiming and gaining of political rights. This is a highly contested field of discussion not least of which in wider feminist scholarship, for example seen in the work of black feminists (e.g., hooks, 1981), and more narrowly between the field of critical men’s studies (e.g., Canaan & Griffin, 1985) as opposed to the populist men’s rights movement. A review of this literature is beyond the focus of the current chapter. The issue of power and political rights – their claiming, gaining, and exercise – specifically in bringing about progressive change toward gender, is considered in detail below.

### **1.1.2. Change agents for gender equality.**

The concept of *change agents* is most commonly applied within organisational management literature, generally, and specifically as this relates to achieving gender equality within institutional and organisational contexts. For the purposes of this chapter, key observations will suffice.

It is surprising, given its frequent use, that the concept's common tenets seem to have been rarely defined. We suggest that, at a minimum, it refers to *actual or potential cause(s) of change acting on contingency(ies)*. This is, of course, a dry and abstract reading of the concept which may go some way in explaining the dearth in its definition. A more instructive reading, as it is applied in organisational management literature refers to *actual or potential actor(s) that seek to bring about change to the status quo*. The 'status quo', in cases focusing on achieving gender equality, include a wide range of individual, political, social and institutional processes operating to reproduce gender inequalities.

Focus in most literature lies on the characteristics of change agents, or actors, and the extent to which these characteristics determine breadth, depth and durability of change. A broad distinction can be made between agents that are internal versus external to change contexts (Linstead, Brewis & Linstead, 2005). The latter are also sometimes referred to as embedded change agents. It is generally accepted that internal or embedded change agents are more impactful, especially when their action is intrinsically motivated (Kelan & Wratil, 2018). But Burrell's (Chapter 3) contribution underlines the extent to which men's motivations for engaging in change initiatives are often complicated. Simple distinctions, for example, between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, may have limited worth in understanding applied contexts. Individual motivations, both as understood by self and others, need to be viewed as complex and evolving. This, as Burrell demonstrates, holds implications not only for the durability of change, but also the perceived legitimacy of their political action. Yet questions of motivation alone are insufficient in understanding key characteristics of change agents.

Personal power is central to the success of change agents (Barrett, 1995). The potential influence of change agents who inhabit positions of power, such as men in finance (Thym, Chapter 5), provides a good example. Yet this too is insufficient alone. This is illustrated well by Agócs (1997) who points out that in initiating change, many agents encounter denial of inequality by contextual stakeholders, and therefore fail to make substantive progress at the outset. This is even so when change agents are 'authorised', for example, through their professional knowledge or skills. It poses additional significant challenges to minority or disempowered group members as change agents, for example, women driving change in male dominated contexts (e.g., Bell, McLaughlin & Sequeira, 2002) who may be perceived as partial and self-interested (Agócs, 1997) or ethnic minority men who may be seen as part of the problem [e.g., as the primary perpetrators of violence against women (Burrell, Chapter 3)

or who hold cultural values that are inconsistent with gender equality (Johansson & Davishpour, Chapter 6)]. Bell and Flood (Chapter 4) highlight the extent to which some men's economic and social capital, although beneficial in underpinning their gender advocacy, in fact serves to exclude minority group members from participation in such work; thereby limiting potential breadth of impact.

Parpart (2014) underlines the worth of including a diversity of men as change agents in challenging existing gender relations. The risks of not doing so include, but are not limited to, representing the issue as a problem for women alone and thereby excusing men from confronting their power and privilege. Broader structured relations of power are, as a result, left unchallenged. This is particularly the case in the development agency context where men focused initiatives are seen to compete for funding with initiatives focusing on women. But as Bell and Flood (Chapter 4) illustrate, through their account of men's experiences as anti-violence against women advocates, there have been increased attempts to engage men as active agents in a wide range of gender equality initiatives globally.

Men's activism nonetheless runs the risk of reproducing unequal gender relations and even hiding men's complicity in patriarchal relations. Burrell (Chapter 3, p. x) notes that "even within (pro-) feminist spaces, men's voices can unintentionally be valued and respected more than women's. Men can be applauded and valorised for doing relatively little...". A contradiction therefore emerges in which men's power affords them greater agency in effecting positive change, whilst at the same time reproducing gender power relations. It is also evident that men's contribution to gender equality can be both progressive and retrogressive at the same time. This is illustrated well by Thym (Chapter 5) where, in analysing autobiographical accounts by men in leading positions within finance, these men engage in complex patterns of support and challenge to dominant discourses of masculinities; what Luyt (2012) has described as processes of 'normative preservation', 'reform', '(re)production' or 'revolution'. We see, similarly, in Johansson and Davishpour's contribution (Chapter 6), how Yasri Khan's masculinity practices, as a Muslim and Green Party politician in Sweden, both served to challenge and reproduce normative ideals of masculinity.

The distinction between external and internal change agents is somewhat complicated by the, nonetheless, useful concept of 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Meyerson and Tompkins (2007, p. 311) note from an organisational perspective, that these "are a special

class of actors embedded in multiple institutional contexts – tied both to their workplaces and to identity and/or interest-based communities associated with alternative logics”. It is argued that in being both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, and thus being able to draw upon multiple conceptual and material resources, tempered radicals are able to achieve a critical consciousness. The difficulty that tempered radicals experience in negotiating, at times, conflicting identities is evident in Schwartz’s (Chapter 8) account of self-identified pro-feminist men contributing toward a gender equality school intervention among boys in Israel. Success of this intervention was undermined by these men variably inhabiting pro-feminist and normative masculinity positions.

The impact of tempered radicals is, it is observed, often limited in other ways too. In many cases they act in relative isolation, failing to develop a wider collective movement for change – mainstreaming gender initiatives – through mustering insufficient material and political support (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007). They often remain, what Kelan and Wratil (2018, p. 5), describe as “micro change agents” – an observation that holds true for change agents more generally as well. Gosselin, Biere and Ann (2013), for example, highlight that such “solitary and pioneer” (p. 471) action frequently results in short-term impact. This, in turn, can give rise to change agents’ demotivation because they might perceive their agency as limited. Their efficacy beliefs might be negatively affected when they compare “their predictive and operative thinking” with the results of their own actions (Bandura, 2001, p. 9) – that is to say, little or no short-term impact on gender relations. However, “[u]nless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). Schwartz (Chapter 8, p. x) provides an illustrative example of this. This chapter relates how he and his colleagues, who worked as gender educators in Israeli schools, “began to experience frustration that stemmed from the recognition that we were not as impactful as anticipated” and that as a result many of his colleagues resigned.

Initiatives that incorporate a range of stakeholders, from conceptualisation through to implementation, achieve the most long-term impact. Such a participatory model distributes responsibility and empowers a variety of stakeholders (Goltz & Sotirin, 2014; Gosselin, Biere & Ann, 2013; Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007). This emerges, for example, as a criticism of the White Ribbon social movement in Australia. Bell and Flood (Chapter 4) note dissatisfaction from its Ambassadors – or advocates – themselves, who feel they represent too narrow a

demographic and fail to engage at a ‘grassroots’ level. Empowerment may best begin through developing a gender understanding that is relevant to the local context (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016). In this respect DeFillipo (Chapter 7) underlines the importance of homosocial spaces as central in achieving impactful change toward greater gender equality. She argues that – commercial sex work contexts in Thailand including karaoke bars and massage parlours – serve as key sites in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. As such, these spaces offer “transformative potential” (p. x) when being harnessed for progressive change toward gender equality. In such cases, and beyond, change agents should be supported to be both inspirational and challenging in leadership. They should provide strategic vision and act as catalysts for, and facilitators of, change (Gosselin, Biere & Ann, 2013; Kelan & Wratil, 2018).

This task requires that change agents challenge taken for granted understandings or dominant representation of gender. Inequalities, and the relations of power that sustain them, need to be made visible. Barrett (1995) argues that in acting as facilitators of change in this way, change agents must anticipate the disruption that they are prompting, and seek to develop positive and enduring alternative(s) in its place. This need not only address alternative gender practices but also consider related alternative identity positions (Parsons & Priola, 2013) for themselves and others. Burrell (Chapter 3) describes the difficulty male activists frequently experience in fully challenging dominant representations of gender. These men run the risk of disassociating themselves in a variety of ways from, in this instance, the problem of violence against women. It is argued that this disassociation, as a defensive response, jeopardises transformation in both self and others. Men engaged in activism need to remain critically self-reflective concerning the position that they inhabit in patriarchy, and hence their complicity in men’s violence. Whilst moving beyond a sense of shame, and the associated danger of inaction, men must remain accountable to women in their pro-feminist work in order to achieve ongoing critical self-reflection as well as political legitimacy. This, where successful, results in altered personal identities, as well as collective change agent identities, as a partner to broader social change. Bell and Flood (Chapter 4, p. x), point toward the importance of changed personal and collective identities, where White Ribbon (Australia) advocates feel that it “is one way that they can act as agents of change and ‘be the change’ they want to see in the world”.

Finally it is worth noting that local participatory change initiatives, whilst important, cannot take place in isolation from broader national and international change agenda (Mayoux, 1995). Van Huis and Leek (Chapter 9) discuss men's contribution as change agents to gender equality initiatives within local, national and international development contexts. In these cases, efforts do often appear to articulate with each, as is evidenced in their adopting common strategies. Yet the authors warn that these strategies are frequently characterised by 'men-streaming' gender equality to the extent to which girls and women are side lined as the key beneficiaries of these interventions.

### **1.1.3. Political man and masculinities as change agents.**

There is increasing evidence that gender equality is beneficial to both women and men. Recent studies across European regions, but also the United States, have shown that gender equality improves men's quality of life, has a positive health effect, reduces the chance of family conflict and decreases violence, depression and (men's) suicide rates (Scambor et al., 2019). These facts raise the question as to why not more men act as, or in support of, agents of change for gender equality.

The answer lies in the manifold challenges that these men must navigate and the way their engagement in gender equality issues might challenge the status of feminist issues and projects. Firstly, as Goltz and Sotirin (2014) remind us, we should avoid stereotyping identity positions, particularly in cases of disempowered or minority group members (e.g., Muslim men), as incompatible with a feminist change agenda. Yet we should equally accept that men's involvement runs the risk of diluting or altering the focus of gender equality projects toward men and away from women, which can result in "throwing women's emancipation overboard" as van Huis and Leek illustrate (Chapter 9, p. x), or in the diversion of funding from women to men (Bell and Flood, Chapter 4).

At the same time, Bell and Flood (Chapter 4) remind us of the significance in involving men as agents of change. In the case of violence against women, they point out that most of such violence is carried out by men. In addition, they reemphasise that violence is strongly defined by constructions of masculinity and men thus "have a shared responsibility" (p. x) in preventing this violence. Men as agents of change are, however, in a very different position from women since they are advocating a kind of change, which demands that they themselves

forego the patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995, p. 79). Moreover, they must inquire into their own contribution to, or position on, sexism and violence (Flood and Ertel, Chapter 10). They thus need to engage with ideas of gender equality in an approach that requires self-scrutiny in a fashion that is not required to the same degree of women. Such a self-reflection can also affect their professional identities. Thus, Dockweiler, Holter and Snickare (2017, cited in Sørum, 2018), interviewing men in the petroleum industry, found that even the mere acknowledgment of gender inequality, in this case the lack of women and male leader's advantage due to their gender, would threaten men's perception of themselves as competent and masculine because it would mean that they did not advance to their positions on the merits of competence (alone). In addition, men engaging in gender equality activism not only have to examine and renounce established power structures in wider patriarchal society, but also in their own personal relationships – this potentially causing difficulty in these men's homosocial relations, for example, when they renounce sexist behaviour or jokes.

Moreover, men advocating change towards gender equality have been subject to closer and more critical scrutiny by the public over the recent past alongside increasing public debate concerning gender equality and masculinity in particular (cf. Flood and Ertel, Chapter 10). An important factor determining these (potential) difficulties is the geographical/cultural framework within which these men operate, as discussed above. Scambor, Holter and Theunert (2019, p. 30) cite a number of studies, which prove that men's perception of gender equality (and their proclivity to act on this) depends on the overall gender equality in their country, the general level of "male role pressure" within that society as well as the fear (of crime) levels of that country.

Men contributing as, or in support of, change agents for gender equality, as well as those appraising their contribution, face a difficult task. This is one of finding a balance between competing demands: refraining from reproducing normative masculinity in these men's work while at the same time motivating them; balancing a focus on men and women in their work, in order to not marginalise or even undermine women's projects and their funding; as well as these men undergoing (potentially painful) self-reflection concerning their own and personal gender and sexuality politics and experiences whilst fostering their continued engagement. However, the contributions to this volume are testament to the fact that, if not always successfully, there are many men and women willing to undertake this herculean task. The

need for men's pro-feminist engagement remains undiminished. It is a challenge only for the brave.

## 1.2. A Summary of Contributions

- Jeff Hearn (Chapter 2) offers an arguably surprising perspective to this edited volume. He considers the seeming absence of political masculinities in various contexts, which create new gender power structures and challenges for progressive change in gender relations. Specifically he looks at absences through transnational/global processes, beyond the nation; technological absences, of virtuality and disembodiment in cyberspace; and bodily absences, as, for example, with ageing.
- In the third chapter Stephen Burrell examines some of the difficulties of engaging men and boys in the prevention of men's violence against women. In his empirical study he analyses expert informant interviews with activists in the United Kingdom drawing attention to the very personal nature of the changes at stake.
- On a similar note, the authors of Chapter 4 – Kenton Bell and Michael Flood – ask how men's work to prevent violence against women changes the nature of their relationship with other men and with women. Employing a case study of White Ribbon Australia's Ambassador Program, and drawing on an online survey and in-depth interviews, they report and analyse the changes in these men's personal relationships.
- A very different kind of analysis is provided by Anika Thym in Chapter 5. She discusses two autobiographies of men, who ordinarily would not be among the first to be associated with change toward gender equality. Her close reading of these accounts of men in leading positions in the financial sector highlights how much indeed 'the personal is political' – gendered and economic.
- Joakim Johansson and Mehrdad Darvishpour ask in Chapter 6 whether it is possible to simultaneously occupy the subject position of 'Muslim male politician' and 'feminist' in a non-Muslim country and what implications this holds for progressive change in gender relations. For this purpose they carry out a thematic analysis of

articles in Swedish newspapers on the ‘no handshake’ debate of 2016 when Swedish Green Party politician Yasri Khan refused to greet women by shaking hands.

- Cassie DeFillipo, in Chapter 7, presents an ethnographic study of homosociality of men in northern Thailand who jointly visit sex workers. Her focus lies on the exploration of homosocial places as sites of change, where on the one hand, existing gender relations are perpetuated, but on the other negotiated.
- In Chapter 8 Yaron Schwartz, through interviews, investigates ‘dilemmas of gender politics’ as experienced by men involved in an Israeli gender equality intervention programme for boys. He discusses how these men, in seeking acceptance among the teenage boys, had to negotiate between contradictory pro-feminist and traditionally masculine positions.
- A similar problem is highlighted by Iris van Huis and Cliff Leek in Chapter 9. Through content analysis, interviews and participant observation of UN and NGO gender equality programmes in the Netherlands they identify the danger of a “masculinisation of gender equality” as a result of the programmes’ focus on men.
- Finally, in their critical commentary in Chapter 10, Michael Flood and D’Arcy Ertel pinpoint the challenges faced by men in pro-feminist work in order to achieve gender equality, as described in this volume, but also going far beyond.

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