



Man Enough? Why Men Shouldn't Have To Be

By Patrick Gathara



A fable I was taught as a young Kikuyu boy seeks to explain the rise of the patriarchal society. It speaks of a time, long ago, when women ruled over men. Unhappy with the state of affairs, the “oppressed” men conspired to get all the women pregnant at the same time, and so easily overthrew them. They have since been the undisputed rulers.

The misogyny and fear of women expressed in that tale are alive and well in contemporary Kenya’s male-dominated society. Today they manifest in the [repeated refusal](#) of the country’s parliament to enact laws mandated by the country’s constitution that prohibit any public body (including Parliament) of having a composition of more than two-thirds of their members from one gender. It is manifested in President Uhuru Kenyatta’s own refusal, which [gives the lie](#) to [his rhetoric](#) at last week’s Women Deliver Conference in Canada to implement the same rule in his appointments and nominations. It is a fear that may, ironically, be also driving discrimination and oppression of men – specifically, homosexual men.

Banning homosexuality

Last month, in a [convoluted and contradictory judgment](#), the High Court upheld colonial-era laws that criminalised sex acts “against the order of nature”. Enacted at the very dawn of colonial

occupation by the famously stuck-up Victorians, the laws are today spuriously defended as [reflective of "African culture"](#). The High Court in Botswana recently struck down as unconstitutional an identical law, also introduced by the British, declaring it "discriminatory" and warning that "human dignity is harmed when minority groups are marginalised".

Many times, such harmful laws are supported by the same Kenyan men who rabidly oppose women's empowerment. As it turns out, this may not be a coincidence. According to [researchers at the University of Geneva](#), prior to the feminist revolution of the late 1960s, men had largely constructed their masculinity in opposition to women as anti-femininity. However, as society moves towards greater gender equality and as men are encouraged to get in touch with their "feminine" side and to show emotion and vulnerability, some men, particularly those of a more traditional bent, look for something else to serve as a foil for their idea of masculinity. Typically, they emphasise their heterosexuality. As, Prof Juan M. Falomir, who led the research team says, "homophobia is the alternative way of asserting their masculinity."

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The trajectory of Kenya's legal prohibitions exemplifies this. As women in Victorian Britain teetered on the verge of [a vast change in the laws](#) that had constrained them since medieval times, their menfolk were imposing draconian decrees targeting specifically male homosexual behaviour in their colonies. Today, as women in Kenya increasingly assert themselves in public spaces and challenge the norm of masculine domination, the blowback is not just against them but also against gay men.

Gay women too suffer bigotry and violence. As is true in many other countries, they are subjected to horrific abuse, including assaults and rape, as research on their [lived experiences in Kenya](#) has shown. "Masculine presenting" gay women or "studs" experience more discrimination and abuse and are "deliberately locked out of conversations around protection of women by State actors," the research found. Infamously, the Kenya Film Classification Board last year [banned](#) the multiple award-winning movie *Rafiki* "due to its homosexual theme and clear intent to promote lesbianism in Kenya". The constitutionality of the ban is currently being challenged in court.

Here too, constructions of masculinity are at play. "Patriarchy becomes panicked at these women denying men an opportunity for sex on demand, power on demand, or both. Their power and ability to live the life...outside the autocracy of male influence...becomes a threat to society as it is constructed," says Dr Njoki Ngumi. Men see lesbians both as sexual rivals taking "their" women, and also as women denying them sex and power.

The link between misogyny and other bigotries is particularly visible online, a platform that has been described as ["the gateway drug for extremists"](#). Today in the West, the rise of populist, far-right governments has also coincided with the accession of an [increasing number of women](#) to the pinnacle of power. Donald Trump was widely expected to lose to a woman in 2016. The outgoing Prime Minister of the UK is a woman as is the Chancellor of Germany. And Santiago Zabala has also [linked](#) the inclusion of "a racist, homophobic and anti-immigration party" in Spain's ruling coalition to "the patriarchal obsession with the so-called natural order and the politics of hate that it incubates".

It is important to keep in mind, though, that it is women who have borne the brunt of the violence

committed by men who are unable to construct masculinity in terms other than domination of another. In recent years, for example, reports of women maimed or murdered by their partners or by men they have spurned have become [a staple of Kenyan daily news](#). Such assaults are about reminding women of their place in patriarchy's pecking order, especially when - as witnessed in the public violence meted out on female politicians in Kenya at the hands of their male counterparts - they dare to [confront](#) or [deny](#) a man.

Reconstructing masculinity

But how exactly do we go about reconstructing masculinity? Is that even possible? Or does the solution lie in abandoning the idea of gender altogether as fundamentally anti-human? After all, masculinity and femininity are social, religious, political and cultural constructs, only incidentally related to biological accoutrements. When the *Standard* newspaper calls Amina Mohammed "[the only 'man' in Uhuru's Cabinet](#)" or Macharia Gaiho [says the same about Martha Karua](#) in the *Daily Nation*, they do not mean to suggest that the two are in possession of penises and scrotums. When one is told to "man up" or "don't be a pussy", the reference is not to biology. All these are pretty offensive - and plainly wrong - cultural constructions that suggest that traits like bravery and assertiveness are to be associated with males while fear and submissiveness are inherently female.

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If we understand that, then we can begin to see the idea of gender itself as just another weapon in the service of patriarchal domination. Rather than a dictate of biology, it is a way of ordering society's power structure in much the same way other fictional constructs, such as race or tribe, have been historically used.

But while we may rightly take umbrage at media folk ascribing particular qualities to race or tribe (imagine the uproar if the *Standard* were to describe Mohammed as "the only Kikuyu" or Gaiho were to call Karua "the real mzungu" as a way of recognising their contributions), we seemingly have no problem with the false dichotomies of male as strong and female as weak.

Even the Kikuyu fable I cited at the beginning is an attempt to use biology as a justification for the tyranny of man over woman. Women, it suggests, are weak because they can become pregnant - an assertion that has been shown to be scientifically bogus. If anything, it is the other way around. A [recent study in the US](#) found that elites athletes and pregnant women have similar endurance levels. Pregnancy, researchers found, "pushes the body to the same extremes as endurance events like long-distance triathlon competition Ironman or the Tour de France."

But the fable doesn't stop there. It constructs female rule as inherently oppressive and men as victims who are justified in using women's biology against them - kind of like waylaying a cyclist at the end of the Tour de France, which is hardly a fair fight. It is interesting to observe how these ideas then play out in real life as when men deny women access to birth control or abortion and the persistence of practices like FGM or early marriage, all of which are meant to serve as a form of control.

It is no accident that the gender roles and attributes that patriarchal societies have invented tend to

favour the dominion of men and to construe biology as women's inescapable prison. Men, they believe, have freedom that women don't because women can be raped, need to be defended, cannot hunt or fight. So, the logic goes, biology has decreed that their place is in the home, to serve as the caretaker and caregiver for the man who is able to do those things. Yet every day, women are demonstrating the falsehood of such ideas. Sure, the average man is physically bigger and stronger than the average woman, but that does not tell us if he's braver, more intelligent, a better hunter or a better fighter. After all, humankind's rise to the top of the food chain has little to do with the size of our muscles.

Femininity is associated with silly and frivolous pursuits while masculinity is about serious things. Women gossip, men talk; women are vain and illogical; men are practical. Yet this script is quickly flipped when it suits the latter, especially when it involves labours that are long, non-stop and are most likely to be devalued or demanded for free. Suddenly women are inherently better, more loving and more attentive parents, while men are inherently incompetent assholes who should not be left alone with either the house or the children. This despite numerous studies [demonstrating](#) that supposedly hardwired gender differences are really the result of social conditioning - "it is the experience of parenting, and not some inalterable genetic factor or hormone, that constitutes what we call the 'maternal instinct.'"

Playing the victim card

Of course, this is not welcome news for men. Most of us like the world just as it is. We can do pretty much what we want - boys will be boys - and we justify it (and comfort ourselves) with the delusion that nature decrees that it is the women who must pick up the pieces (and our socks). We are the kings - why would we want to give that up? When nature is no longer a sufficient prop, we resort to inventions like culture, tradition and even the law and conveniently interpreted religion to cement our place at the top. When those are themselves undermined by reason, we turn the tables and, like the folks in the fable, don the garb of the victim.

"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate," declared Adam. "Nature has given women so much power that the law has very wisely given them little," is how the eighteenth-century English poet and essayist, Samuel Johnson, sought to justify the oppression of women.

Today in Kenya, we are assailed by online calls for the uplifting of the "boy-child" who has apparently been hard done by as a result of the focus on empowering girls and women. Now it is not in dispute that many boys need help. What is telling is the assertion that the help has to come at either the expense of or as a reaction to that given to girls - even though it is undeniable that across the board, girls and women suffer much more violence and denial of opportunities, mostly at the hands of men. However, the boy-child (and male empowerment) activists many times betray their motives by behaving as if the boy-child problem stems, not from the same patriarchal system that oppresses girls, but rather from the attempt to abolish it and its effects.

This construction of masculinity as victimhood is also evident in the resistance to attempts to decriminalise homosexuality. A typical example is provided by Ghetto Radio, which is popular with Nairobi youth, and which recently reported on the "[Alarm Over Rising Rate Of Lesbians In Eastlands](#)". As Dr Ngumi explains, "Women who are not coded as heterosexual, and thus available for male desire, are going about their business. But here, they are reported to be stirring up 'fear of being rejected' in men [in] a falsely alarmist and bigoted news piece which can instigate violence against them."

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they are a tiny minority. And yet, it makes sense if you consider that it is also about group domination as well. As Lara Temple noted in [her study of male rape](#), scholars “have posited ... that the subjugation of gay men stems from the perception that they forfeit their male privilege by behaving like women”.

For men who construe sex as something men do to women as an expression of power and penetration as conquest, men who allow themselves to be so penetrated are seen as traitors who endanger the status of all males. It is this idea of a loss of status that is behind the popular notion that homosexuality is somehow “spread” or people are “recruited” into it and that the homosexuals are coming for us all - the patriarchy’s version of the zombie apocalypse.

Biology is not destiny

Gender is probably an irredeemably oppressive way to organise the world. Modelling the world as inherently divided into a male and female half with gendered responsibilities and roles has terrible implications. Take for example Nigerian feminist and academic, [Obioma Nnaemeka’s assertion](#) that “each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own”. This creates the clearly problematic image of a world of incomplete people seeking to find their “other half”, rather than one where relationships are voluntary and can take a variety of forms.

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There is absolutely no reason why, in this day and age, biological differences should be assumed to ascribe limitations beyond the physical - just because nature decrees that it is the women who give birth and breastfeed, there is no reason to assume that they then must be the sole, or even primary caregivers. In the vast majority of instances, men and women can competently perform the same roles and share responsibilities. There is therefore no need to encourage men to get in touch with their supposed “feminine” side since what is coded feminine - such as a desire for and work towards cleanliness, hygiene and beauty in one’s self and their surroundings, as well as a desire to socialise with, care for and listen to others - is actually just human.

The same could be said of arguments that ideas of masculinity need not solely encompass violence and domination. Given that gender and its attributes are social constructions, Nigerian professor of history, Egodi Uchendu, [notes](#) that “yardsticks for assessing manifestations of masculinity could differ from place to place and from continent to continent”. There is no one masculinity, rather a multitude of ways to define manliness (as opposed to maleness). Some, like the Zulu, include traits such as honesty, wisdom and respect. Uchendu points out that among the Hua of Papua New Guinea, masculine subjects are seen “highly placed but physically powerless and weak”. And masculinity “is lost by men as they age but gained by women through childbearing”. Yet it is unclear why certain human qualities should be reserved to a particular sex at a particular time (or why their acquisition should necessarily come at the expense of other desirable traits) when they are clearly available to everyone at every time. And worse, they inevitably set up a power dynamic and competition that opens doors to violence and domination.

Towards a gender-free world

Creating a world free of gender does not mean that people wouldn't think of themselves as men or women just as ridding the world of racism and tribalism needn't require that people forsake their other made-up identities based on the biological adaptations coded as race, or on the imagined lineages coded as tribe. It just requires that we acknowledge that these are not markers of inherent differences beyond the physical or genealogical – if even that. This, however, will not be easy, just as creating a world free of other bigotries is not. The legacies of millennia of discrimination and marginalisation will need to be addressed and people, especially women, should be afforded help to overcome it. It is that legacy, for example, that necessitates measures like the not-more-than-two-thirds gender rule.

Unfortunately, we do not have recourse to a Thanos-like snap of the fingers that would dissolve long-standing bigotries and hostilities. Legal changes, while necessary, are not sufficient. They will need to be accompanied by targeted efforts to help women, as well as civic and cultural education campaigns and societal willingness to learn new ways to live and relate with each other. Change would take time to effect and to take hold. There will be many false starts, as there have been in the fight against racism and tribalism. But in the end, it will be worth it.

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Getting rid of gender-determined roles would require men, for example, to shoulder their fair share of unpaid household labour – cooking, cleaning and caring – most of which is foisted on women. This would free the latter to pursue education, dreams and careers. In fact, a growing body of research suggests that what we often think of as a gender pay gap is more accurately described as [a childbearing pay gap or motherhood penalty](#). Basically, women take a lifetime earnings hit when forced to drop out of the workforce to take care of children. In Kenya, [a 2018 report by USAID](#) notes that “unpaid care and domestic work burdens limit women's contributions in and benefit from productive activities, constrains their mobility, and limits their access to market resources”. The same does not happen to men. In fact, a *New York Times* [piece on pregnancy discrimination](#) noted that while “each child chops 4 percent off a woman's hourly wages...men's earnings increase by 6 percent when they become fathers”. Yet there is no physical or biological reason why childcare and domestic duties cannot be more equally shared.

Dr Ngumi notes that “if masculinity is defined by oppression, for men it cannot be practised without it”. Going forward, Kenya, like other societies around the world, will need to address the problems created by the toxic idea of gender and to create better, more meaningful, and more complete notions of humanity that are not legitimised by the oppression of someone else. Men, in particular heterosexual men, will need to understand that life is not a zero-sum competition with and over women. The truth is, as Kenyan lawyer and writer, Marilyn Kamuru says, “There is room for all of us, men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, to live more authentic, freer lives.”

Breaking the dominance chain

Still, the question remains: What would men gain by relinquishing the power that masculinity has so

far unfairly accorded them? Freedom for one. Because it is not just women and LGBTI folks who are oppressed by the idea of gender; heterosexual men are too. Kenyan academic [Godwin Murunga](#) [notes](#) that “the idea of flawed or hegemonic masculinity has been used to indicate that though all men enjoy the “patriarchal dividend” by the sheer fact of being men, these dividends do not accrue to all of them in the same manner and in equal measure”. It is perhaps more useful to think of it as a spectrum of domination, with women and sexual minorities at the bottom but with dominance being expressed right through the chain. Masculinity causes men to harm other men who are weaker, poorer, or who are of a different race or religion.

During the recent brutal attacks on protesters in Sudan, [many men, as well as women, were raped](#) by the Janjaweed militias. In fact, the rape of men is well-documented as a weapon in conflicts ranging from the Syrian civil war to that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And, as with the rape of women, it is about power, not sex. As [a harrowing report on the rape of men](#) in the *Guardian* explained, notions of gender and masculinity force a conspiracy of silence between perpetrators and victims with the latter often stigmatised and deserted by family and friends once their story is discovered. One victim in the report was afraid to let his own brother know: “I don’t want to tell him...I fear he will say: ‘Now, my brother is not a man’”. This demonstrates the truth of Lara Temple’s observation that “the rape of men is a form of gender oppression in which gendered hierarchies are reproduced”.

As alluded to above, men are also forced to give up a part of their human self in order to become more manly. The prohibitions against showing emotion, the constant competition to be First Bodi – or Alpha Male, the pressure to accumulate sexual “conquests”, all these take their toll, constantly shrinking their pool of experience, isolating them from the world, turning them into tired, grumpy, angry, old men, who have no idea how to love, how to be tender, how to be kind, or how to maintain mutually beneficial human relationships.

And they are downright dangerous. [Studies have shown](#) that “the system that keeps men in a collectively dominant position over women and in competitive relations to other men comes at a cost for men in terms of their health and quality of life. Faced with an ideal where physical resilience is valorised, men find it harder to seek healthcare and engage in preventive activities.”

On the other hand, equality has clear benefits for men. As Thomas Sankara said, “We do not talk of women’s emancipation as an act of charity or because of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the triumph of the revolution. Women hold up the other half of the sky.”

Women’s empowerment need not – and does not – come at the expense of men. On the contrary, it is indispensable to their welfare and to that of all of society. The World Bank [estimates](#) that gender inequality in 2014 cost the global economy \$160 trillion – which is double the total estimate for global GDP. And that figure has been rising along with population growth. Twenty years before, it was \$123 trillion.

Bigotry, in the end, is incredibly short-sighted even as concerns the bigot’s own interests. “The repeal 162 case is an excellent example of this,” says political analyst and author, Nanjala Nyabola, citing the High Court ruling upholding laws criminalising gay sex. “Was it worth unraveling constitutional protections against discrimination just to protect a heteronormative idea of marriage which wasn’t even on the table?” she asks pointedly.

The cost of discrimination is not just to the victims but is [borne by society as a whole](#). All of Kenya would benefit from a more diverse Parliament in terms of better governance. And the refusal to implement a constitutional principle is not just troubling for women. For if the people in power can ignore that provision, who is to say they cannot ignore any other provision? Are men really willing to

forgo their own protections just to keep women in their place? Rather than be king of a small pond, wouldn't it be better to share the bounty of an ocean of humanity? Only a man blinded by the idea of masculinity would say no.

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