

Challenging toxic masculinity in schools and society

Kathleen Elliott

Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to discuss the contours and consequences of simplified, toxic forms of masculinity in schools and society.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Using a lens influenced by a feminist cultural critique, the author situates concerns about gender, power and inequality in current events in the American culture.*

Findings – *The author argues that toxic masculinity supports and is supported by gendered patterns of power that perpetuate broad inequalities and that schools have an important role to play in challenging these inequalities.*

Practical implications – *The paper includes concrete steps that educators can take to interrupt and teach against toxic masculinity and to involve young men and boys in this work as allies.*

Social implications – *The author argues that these steps have powerful social implications given schools' influence as socializing institutions.*

Originality/value – *In this way, the paper's value lies in highlighting how, by including discussions of masculinity and involving men and boys, schools can build on previous successes in fighting gender inequality that were aimed at girls and young women to effect a broad cultural transformation and help create a more just and equitable society.*

Keywords *Gender, Inequality, Education, Masculinity*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Kathleen Elliott is Assistant Professor at the Educational Foundations, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Whitewater, Wisconsin, USA.

Toxic masculinity in US culture

If there is a silver lining to the increasing number of allegations of sexual misconduct coming out of Hollywood, it is that they shine new light on the issue of gender inequality and have started a national conversation about toxic masculinity, gender and power. It is a conversation that education professionals should listen to closely. After decades of working to expand opportunities for women, there are signs of progress toward gender equality. Women now earn the majority of bachelor degrees and one-third to one-half of all law and medical degrees (US Census Bureau, 2012). They are represented in boardrooms, newsrooms and classrooms and occupy powerful positions in government, business, science and arts. Young women can play sports and take high-level math courses and pursue ambitious careers often without the kinds of hurdles that their mothers and grandmothers faced. Schools have played an important role in these developments through improving access to high-level classes, encouraging girls to excel in subjects dominated by men, growing athletic programs and developing curricula that include women's contributions in diverse fields. However, despite these efforts, gender inequality, bias and violence remain alive and well in schools and in the American culture more broadly. The news unspooling from the Harvey Weinstein scandal, the story of a powerful man accused of harassing and assaulting dozens of women over the course of decades without repercussions, is the latest reminder of the depths this inequality reaches. It highlights the magnitude of our failure, as a society, to address toxic, simplified masculinity and the unequal power dynamics on which it thrives.

As a society, we tend to think of inequality only in terms of those on the losing side, creating a significant blind spot with regard to power. In this way of thinking, gender inequality is considered a women's problem, something that does not involve men and that can be addressed by focusing on women alone. Hence, the decades of trying to address gender inequality through programs and policies aimed at advancing and empowering women and girls, but with very little attention paid to examining masculinity; how we raise boys and think about boys and men; or how policies, institutions and culture create and support the very inequalities we are trying to mitigate. This lopsided focus on femininity and women addresses only one part of the problem and, therefore, renders any progress partial as well. It leaves the power dynamics that support gender inequality unexamined and firmly in place. Further, it allows dominant or toxic masculinity, masculinity based on simplified norms and understandings of traditionally masculine characteristics such as violence, physical strength, suppression of emotion and devaluation of women (Connell, 2005; Pascoe, 2005; Posadas, 2017) to flourish unfettered. The result is a culture that continues to award power and status to men (particularly white men), despite how they behave or treat others, and that offers to women a complex mixture of opportunity and constraint, empowerment and subjugation, which they must navigate on a daily basis.

There are a myriad of examples of this tension in nearly every corner of our culture and society. Women can be leaders in business, industry and higher education, positions that require, even celebrate, ambition, confidence and assertiveness, but they must also adhere to the conflicting mandate that women be nice, nurturing, self-sacrificing and not too demanding. Women can participate in, and even excel at, athletics, but they do so in a culture that demands that they also conform to dominant standards of beauty and heterosexual desirability. These double standards persist because of our collective failure to address gender inequality as a cultural problem, not simply as a women's issue, and to challenge toxic masculinity and the power hierarchies that create and support it. Sexual assault and harassment are perhaps the most heinous examples of the consequences of this failure. While most men do not engage in such behavior, most women (e.g. athletes, executives, researchers and artists) experience it, fear it and/or learn to adjust their behavior to avoid it—another symptom of the cultural sickness.

In his statement following *The New York Times* article that first broke the story of his decades-long use of sexual intimidation, harassment and assault, Weinstein dusted off an old scapegoat and blamed his actions on the past, on having grown up in a time “when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different” (*The New York Times*, 2017). This excuse has many problems, including that it attempts to deny any personal responsibility for his actions. But it is also a powerful justification because it draws on the collective wish that things will get better simply through the march of time and generational change. It is the same impulse that insists that children will not make the same mistakes as their parents and that the next generation will know and be better, stronger, more just than the one before it. It is a wish that allows us to forgive ourselves for our shortcomings and releases us from the responsibility to make the world a better place, now, ourselves. It is also a wish that just isn't going to come true. While Weinstein blames his actions on coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, there are plenty of examples of younger men, who grew up in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, engaging in the same behavior and benefitting from the same systems of power that do not hold them accountable for denigrating, intimidating and abusing women and, in fact, even reward them for it. Clearly, despite some progress toward expanding women's (and, to an extent, men's) roles and opportunities, each new generation is not doing better than the one before it and the progression of time will not, by itself, undo what decades of socialization have wrought.

Challenging gender and sexual inequality in schools

Which is why it is important for educators, in particular, to think about masculinity and to consider the roles that schools can play in shaping conceptualizations of masculinity and

gendered patterns of power. Schools are powerful socializing institutions, which is why they have been at the forefront of efforts to address gender and sexual inequality for years and why they have been successful in helping facilitate change in this area. Despite the lopsided, and therefore, limited, nature of their focus, educational programs for girls and women have been successful at encouraging, empowering and preparing young women to take on expanded roles in society. Women's school-based athletic programs transformed how the US society views women athletes. School-based efforts to encourage girls to take high-level classes (including math and science) gave young women the tools to take advantage of expanded access to higher education. Initiatives and developments like these added "strong" and "smart" to the list of things women can be and made a tremendous difference in society. Schools can take on the same kind of leadership role in expanding ideas about masculinity and men's role in society.

Successfully resisting toxic masculinity on a cultural level requires the participation of men committed to being allies in the fight against gender inequality. School-based LGBTQ advocacy, particularly the work of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), provides an instructive example of this kind of work. Since their founding in the 1990s, GSAs have grown into a school-based, grassroots movement aimed at involving LGBTQ youth and heterosexual allies in the fight against homophobia and gender and sexual discrimination. Research on these groups has found that they can be very successful in educating their peers about and challenging homophobic language and behavior and that they have a positive impact on their schools' cultures (Elliott, 2016; Woolley, 2012). Part of their effectiveness comes from the involvement of heterosexual allies in their work. Youth listen to their peers and involving the voices of those in power often sends a stronger message than the voices of the marginalized alone. Educators can draw on the lessons of GSAs and previous gender equality work to once again take the lead in more fully transforming ideas about gender, identity and power and moving toward a more just and equitable society.

Challenging toxic masculinity in schools

Schools around the USA and the world have already begun to take on this challenge, mostly in higher education. Organizations like Men Can Stop Rape (mencanstoprape.org) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Men's Project (msc.wisc.edu/mens-project) are notable examples of programs aimed at expanding ideas about masculinity and involving men in anti-sexist work. The Men's Project at UW-Madison focuses on intersectionality and the complexity of masculine identities and helps participants develop the perspectives and skills necessary to challenge simplified definitions of masculinity and take on leadership roles in preventing gender-based violence and discrimination. While this program is targeted for undergraduate young men, many of its goals and methods can be adopted in k-12 schools. Finding ways to promote healthy masculinity early and to teach boys and young men to recognize, reject and challenge simplified, toxic masculinity is essential for creating cultural change. Educators of all types can and should be involved in this work, which includes simple steps that educators across disciplines can engage daily in their schools.

Highlight women's achievements in curricula and in the classroom

Including women's achievements and stories in the official curriculum has been promoted for decades as a way to work towards gender equality and empower young women in the classroom. It remains a powerful way of providing more diverse representation and teaching students (girls and boys) about women's achievements, which are more likely to be omitted from formal curricula. But teaching about women's achievements is not only good for girls. It is also a powerful way for boys to see examples of women who are intelligent, capable leaders, images that contradict the ones of women as subordinate and sexualized that are most often promoted in popular media. This lesson can be extended by

ensuring that girls in the classroom are receiving equal time to ask questions, participate in discussions and receive praise for academic achievement. While girls receive higher grades and graduate in greater numbers than boys, they are also less likely to speak in class or receive teacher attention, which can help promote the idea that girls and women can be smart, but should also be submissive.

Explicitly teach and model complex masculinity

Masculinity is diverse and complex, shaped by an individual's racial, social class, religious and cultural identities, as well as by their experiences. However, the image of masculinity youth encounter in the media, popular culture and even in textbooks and other curricular resources is often dangerously oversimplified and focused on aspects of toxic masculinity such as physical strength, dominance and heterosexual prowess. Provide boys of all ages and grade levels with diverse examples of men and of masculinity and encourage them to identify and explore the varied and complex aspects of their own identities. Modeling is a powerful teaching technique that teachers, coaches and administrators can use every day. Teachers can model respect for all genders and sexualities, demonstrate vulnerability, express emotion, sensitivity and empathy and create learning spaces and opportunities in which all their students can do the same. This may be particularly important for teachers who are men to demonstrate to boys and young men in schools.

Explicitly teach about sexist speech, behavior and gender-based violence

For students who have grown up in a culture saturated with sexist images (of women and men), language and patterns of behavior, it can be difficult to identify them as anything other than normal or, even, natural. This normalization of gender inequality influences how people think about and treat others. Students use sexist language and behave in discriminatory ways often without realizing it, but can be encouraged to change their behavior is taught to think about it more critically. For example, teaching students the homophobic nature of saying “that’s so gay” or the sexist underpinnings of calling someone a “pussy” as a way of marking them as weak or timid can make them reconsider their language and change their behavior. Be explicit and straightforward in these lessons. Make them part of official classroom discussion. Challenging this kind of language and behavior is essential, and so is explicitly teaching students *why* it is unacceptable and *why* they should challenge it in themselves and others.

This goes for sexist language and behavior of all types, including gender-based violence such as sexual harassment and assault. Educators can take the lead in changing how we, as a society, think and talk about gendered violence, which is an important step in decreasing its occurrence. For example, explicitly teaching against common justifications for sexual assault that blame the victim, rather than the perpetrator, can provide students with the opportunity to discuss and ask questions about these common discourses, which they likely encounter regularly in the media. Having a safe, structured environment in which to challenge these ideas with the help of a knowledgeable adult can teach students to think critically about gendered violence and power, a necessary skill in developing new understandings of sexual assault and harassment that consider their relation to power and that hold perpetrators responsible for their actions.

Challenge sexist speech and behavior . . .

Here, too, modeling can play a transformative role. Educators send powerful messages to students through which language and behaviors they challenge and discipline and which they let go without comment or repercussion. Paying attention to, naming and challenging sexist and homophobic language and behavior in the moment are some of the most powerful ways that educators can teach young people to think and behave differently.

Again, it is important to interrupt this behavior with the aim of teaching young people to know and do better. This means stopping it in the moment, while allowing time, when able, to engage in discussion with students about their language choices or actions in a way that is challenging, but also respectful of students and mindful of the learning process. When practiced on a school-wide level by teachers, coaches, administrators and others, these actions can change a school's culture from one that accepts, or even tacitly encourages, these behaviors, to one that rejects them and holds students accountable for a higher standard of conduct. Knowing and following through on school and district anti-discrimination and disciplinary policies is an important part of this action. When students understand that there will be consequences for their actions, they are more likely to take these policies seriously.

... and teach boys to do the same

One of the most illuminating and frustrating aspects of the Harvey Weinstein case is the number of men, some of them very powerful, who knew about his actions and did not challenge them. Many have admitted to hearing rumors, many others heard first hand accounts from women colleagues, friends, even partners, but no one came forward or took tangible steps to hold him accountable for such behavior, such as refusing to work with him or his company. This level of silent complicity is, perhaps, one of the most insidious ways that toxic masculinity operates, escaping censure and even garnering rewards for men who embrace it. We are left to wonder what would have happened if even one man had been willing to use his power to challenge such behavior.

While it is important for educators to challenge sexist behavior, they cannot be everywhere and when such messages are received from one's peers they can be much more powerful than when they come from authority figures. But standing up to one's peers is incredibly difficult. Teach students to recognize problematic language and behavior. Provide them with the tools to challenge their peers when they hear disparaging or derogatory language or witness discriminatory or harassing behavior. Construct opportunities for students to practice these actions through role play or discussion exercises. Preparing students, particularly boys, to challenge sexist behaviors and to accept responsibility for doing so, is perhaps one of the most important ways to teach against gender discrimination and violence and to provide young men with the means to become part of the solution.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the perspectives and ideas offered here are not new. They describe established understandings and entrenched problems. The prescriptions for change also are not new. They are simple methods shown in the past to be effective in challenging inequality in schools and society. And that is the point. While educators have taken on gender inequality in the past, for the most part, we have not stepped forward to take the same kind of lead in challenging toxic masculinity and the gendered patterns of power that both support and are supported by it. The actions outlined here provide a blueprint for tackling this long-standing problem that's time has come. Modeling and teaching diverse, complex masculinities, explicitly teaching about and against sexist language, behavior and gender-based violence and continuing to include women's voices and achievements in the curriculum and the classroom can all help bring about healthier, more complex understandings of masculinity and femininity; the kind that can support more equitable relationships, social patterns and institutions. It is essential that men are involved, and take leadership roles, in this work and that educators teach young men and boys to recognize and challenge simplified conceptions of their own and others' identities. Supporting young men in their work as allies in the fight against gender inequality and violence is, perhaps, the most important and revolutionary role that educators can play at this moment.

References

Connell, R.W. (2005), *Masculinities*, University of California Press, Berkely, CA.

Elliott, K.O. (2016), "Queering student perspectives: gender, sexuality, and activism in school", *Sex Education*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 49-62.

Pascoe, C.J. (2005), *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Posadas, J. (2017), "Teaching the cause of rape culture: toxic masculinity", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 33 No. 1, pp. 177-179.

The New York Times (2017), "Statement from Harvey Weinstein", October 5 2017.

US Census Bureau (2012), "Census bureau releases equal employment opportunity tabulation that provides a profile of America's workforce", available at: www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/employment_occupations/cb12-225.html

Woolley, S.W. (2012), "The silence itself is enough of a statement': the day of silence and LGBTQ awareness raising", *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 43 No. 3, pp. 271-288.

Corresponding author

Kathleen Elliott can be contacted at: elliottk@uww.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com