

A History of the Men's Movement by Mick Cooper



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Introduction

Since the 'Men's Federation for Women Suffrage' [1] established itself before World War I to secure the vote for women, there has always been a group of men prepared to struggle alongside women. With the most recent phase of feminist activity initiated in the late sixties, a movement of antisexist men also emerged, offering solidarity with the women's aims. Whilst the specific goals of the men's movement were never as clear as for the women's, the numerous conferences, newsletters, and communications networks suggest that it too can be seen as a unified organization rather than simply a conglomeration of individual groups.

Though the size of the movement has always been small, probably never more than two thousand men actively involved in men's groups, its theoretical significance is far greater. The men's movement is a specific strategy that some men have turned to as a response to the feminist challenge. By understanding its historical and political development, we can evaluate the adequacy of this approach. Moreover, analysing the attempts of some men to dismantle patriarchy gives us a deeper insight into the relationship between men and the sexual stratification under which we live.

This is a critical essay. I will be arguing that women's oppression directly benefits men and that a men's movement aiming to rid itself of these benefits will not be able to do so without loss and sacrifice. However, this is not a personal criticism of those men involved in the movement. Considering the rejecting, undermining, and ridiculing that most men, even those on the left, directed at feminism, antisexist men must be credited for their attempt to make a positive response. Many men within the movement were dedicated to the struggle against patriarchy, and it is only with hindsight that one can observe clearly the problems they encountered.

This paper begins with a brief discussion on the nature of sexism to define the use of the term and to

clarify my argument. I will then go on to look at the women's liberation movement and its role in the establishment of the men's movement, discussing the ideological parallels that exist between the two. The bulk of this paper is a historical analysis of the men's movement, charting its political development and assessing the trends and conflicts that occurred within it. Finally, I will attempt to end on a positive note, using the historical analysis to suggest ways in which the men's movement can challenge sexism if it so desires.

Historical evidence for the period under scrutiny is scarce. The small size of the movement has led most historians to ignore it, and few feminists have either the time or inclination to study men's history. Data for this paper have been obtained from three sources. Firstly, two or three books on men's politics have incorporated brief histories of the movements [2] and although these are too imprecise for a detailed analysis, they have served as a strong foundation on which to build my research. Secondly, magazines and journals produced by the movement have been scanned [3] and whilst these have provided the most abundant source of detailed information, they are limited by the interests and awareness of the editorial collectives concerned. Thus a final source, that of private interviews [4], has been used to fill in missing episodes and to ensure that the account presented is as accurate as possible.

Sexism and Patriarchy

Due to lack of space, much of what could be said about sexism and patriarchy cannot be discussed here. However, as many feminist writers have gone into great depth over the issue [5], I will confine myself to that which is only directly relevant to this paper. Specifically, I wish to develop a working definition of 'sexism' to help build a clearer understanding of the phrase 'challenging sexism'.

At its most simple level, sexism can be considered as gender stereotyping, expecting men and

women to behave in a certain way. Rosenkrantz *et al* [6] found that traits such as aggression, independence, dominance, objectivity and nonemotionality were associated with men, whilst the obverse of these traits were associated with women. Talbot Parsons [7] argued that the different roles of men and women can be attributed to structural differentiations between instrumental and expressive leadership. Whilst men take the major role in performing cognitive and logical tasks in the family structure, women perform more emotional and affective tasks. Analysing sexism along these lines, as modern liberal feminists have done, leads to the conclusion that both men and women are restricted and oppressed by the roles which they have thrust upon them.

However, radical feminists have criticised this approach. They argue that men and women are not oppressed equally by the system but that 'the system - patriarchy - is specifically the oppression of women by and for men.'

'The inadequacy of the sex-role theory of oppression becomes obvious when one considers its implications: that both men and women are oppressed by their respective sex-roles. Which is comparable to: both slave and master are oppressed by the slave system.' [8]

Borenman *et al* [9] found that only 30% of the items considered feminine were also considered desirable compared with 70% of the male traits. Radical feminists [10] argue that men benefit from the aggression, independence and power that they have in political, economic and personal ways, whilst women are disadvantaged by their role.

An analysis of the distribution of power between men and women reveals the inequality of their statuses. For instance, Amundsen [11] found that of the 884 top executives in the American corporate economy, not one was female. She also found that union executives were almost exclusively male, and of the top ten universities, no women occupied major posts.

The same inequality of distribution is true for present day UK. A 1988 report in the *Observer* newspaper [12] found that women earn 66% on average of men and that only 6% of those earning £500 a week or more were women. Whilst women comprise 50% of the workforce, in the powerful jobs they are sparsely allocated with just 10% of general managers, 7% of senior civil servant, 2% of surgeons, 3% of judges, and 8% of chartered accountants. However, women are still performing the majority of mental tasks. In 90% of households, women are doing the washing and ironing, in 75% the cleaning, and in 70% they prepare the supper.

Men's power extends beyond the political and economical aspects of society. In all areas of life the power of men over women can be seen. Pornographic objectification is almost completely confined to women, as is sexual harassment and rape. Adrienne Rich suggests that the power of men over women is primarily a sexual one. Men can deny women their sexuality, force male sexuality on them, command or exploit their labour, rob them of their children, confine them physically and mentally, and use them as sexual gifts [13].

The differences in power between men and women has led some feminists to argue that patriarchy 'the omnipresent system of male domination and female subjugation' [14] is the primary form of oppression. Shulamith Firestone, in the *Dialectics of Sex* [15] extends Marxist material dialectic analysis by arguing that the biological division of labour between men and women served as the primary force for creating a powerful class - men, and a powerless class - women. The history of society, rather than being a product of economic class struggle, is a product of sex-class struggle.

Sexism, as a product of patriarchy, is the oppression of women economically, politically, and personally. The role that men undertake, rather than being forced upon them, is a means by which they can better maintain their power. As Carol Hamisch suggests: 'If men

cry less than women, then it's because men have something to gain by withholding valuable information so that they control the situation' [16]. Whilst sex-roles can be understood as a product of power relations, the power differentials between men and women are not explicable in terms of sex-roles.

Lisa Tuttle's *Encyclopaedia of Feminism* [17] defines sexism as 'the system and practice of discrimination against a person on the grounds of their sex' [18]. Specifically, it refers to the oppression women suffer through a patriarchal system that is 'achieved through socializing, perpetuated through ideological means and maintained by institutionalised methods' [19]. The sexist discrimination that women undergo can be directly attributable to this system of social stratification. In real terms this means that women are subjected to treatment that men would not have to incur in most areas of their lives. Economic discrimination, sexual harassment, rape, pornography, male violence are all aspects of sexism that oppress women.

'Challenging sexism' means taking an active role in struggling against this oppression of women. This can take many different forms and act on many different levels. For instance, freeing women from childcare by running creches could be seen as challenging sexism on a personal level, whilst campaigning for equal pay would be challenging it on an economic level. In each case the specific aim is to lessen the discrimination experienced by women and to counteract the patriarchal system that has created these conditions.

Though few feminists would want men to take over the campaign against sexism, it is clear that there are activities men could undertake to challenge patriarchy. Yet, as I argued earlier, sexism is not a random product of sex-roles but a set of public and private institutions that inherently benefit men. Whilst men can challenge sexism if they want to, it is not in their gender interests to do so. This theoretical hypothesis is substantiated by the history of the men's movement

which reveals the persistent reluctance of men to challenge sexism, and their tendency to focus rather than on women's oppression.

The Women's Movement

Undoubtedly, the single most important catalyst for the development of the men's movement was the emergence of a women's organisation which challenged the identity and personal lives of virtually every man involved in the left and humanistic organisations. Not only had the women's movement named men as an oppressive group, but the personal benefits that men had acquired through their status in the gender hierarchy became seriously challenged.

In 1966, the National Organisation for Women (NOW) was set up in the United States [20] with Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* [21] as its first president. The movement consisted of both men and women and acted as the core of American liberal feminism. At its second national conference in 1967, it drew up a bill of rights which consisted of the following: equal rights amendment to constitution; enforcement of laws banning sexual discrimination; maternity leave rights; tax deductions for child care and centres; equal and unsegregated education; jobs training opportunities and rights of reproductive control. As an attempt to reform patriarchy its main techniques were through legal and legislative action, coalition building and influencing public opinion.

Whilst NOW has a strong influence on American government in its early years, many women became disillusioned with its liberal approach. Black radicals had seen how the equal rights movement could serve as a cover-up for an underlying inequality, and how their movement had become overrun by white liberals. Many American women were becoming severely critical of the men they associated with. This was particularly true in radical organisations where women were either tea ladies or sex partners

but rarely taken seriously. In 1966, Jo Freeman and Shulamith Firestone set up the first radical feminist group. They argued that the oppression of women could only be ended by revolutionary change rather than by attempts to reform patriarchy.

The women's liberation movement in Britain developed later than in America and focussed more on class aspects of women's position [22]. The first women's conference in Ruskin College, Oxford 1970, agreed on four demands: equal pay for equal work;



equal opportunities and education; free contraception and abortion on demand; free twenty-four hour childcare.

Many of the early women's Marxist organisations such as the IMG (International Marxist Group) and the Maoists. The strikes by Ford women for equal pay and the demonstrations by Hullian fishermen's wives for greater safety had brought the position of women to the front of the socialist agenda. However, as Juliet Mitchell suggests, many men on the left

trivialised women's issues claiming they were a diversion from the 'real' class struggle. The women who were deemed unassertive and submissive at meetings found that only by organising separately from men could they discuss issues they found important and speak their minds.

As socialist women broke away from their male colleagues and intermingled with non-Marxist radical women from libertarian and anarchic roots, so they realised that their negative experiences were shared. Women-only groups, away from male trivialisation, could solidify their understanding of the oppression they had suffered at the hands of their male comrades. 'Consciousness-raising', 'proclaiming the painful and transforming it into the personal' [23], allowed women to see that what they had considered a personal problem was in fact a political one. With the rapid growth of women's groups, feminist magazines such as *Shew* and *Harper's Bizarre* and the regular conferences, the British political scene was thrust into turmoil.

For men on the left, the situation was particularly uncomfortable. Firstly, these men had directly been accused of being oppressors and of benefiting from a hierarchical system. Secondly, they had become barred from the core of the new political activity, the women's group. Thirdly, for many men, their personal relationships were being seriously disrupted by feminist partners who were no longer prepared to put up with explicit sexism.

For some men, involvement with an antisexist men's movement to work in parallel with the women's movement was a solution to their problem. Not only could they now become involved in the small-group 'personal is political' process that

the women were developing, but they could also show women that they were prepared to challenge sexism and patriarchal oppression.

Above all, it was the personal relations, as Daniel Cohen relates, factor in their joining the men's movement, 'its initial membership being variously pushed, cajoled or coerced by activists in women's lib' [24]. Others, whilst not being 'cajoled', joined for different personal reasons. For instance Dan Muir writes 'I got interested [in feminism] because a woman I fancied as a sex-object was hot on female rights' [25]. The men's movement offered an opportunity for men to maintain their relationships with newly-politicised women whilst being on the right side of the gender revolution.

Because feminism was so fundamental to the men's movement, many of the factors in the former had parallels in the latter. Hearn [26] suggests that for radical feminism, Marxist/Socialist feminism, and liberal feminism, one can find an associated faction in the men's movement. To understand the background of the men's politics, it is worth briefly discussing all three of these areas of input.

1) Radical Feminism

As the radical feminism of Firestone, Rich and others developed, so men who were in contact with these ideas took on the arguments. They accepted that 'Sexism is an institutionalised way of life in which women, gay people, and children are systematically oppressed and disempowered by heterosexual men' [27], and took, as men, direct blame for this oppression.

The most radical of these approaches for men is contained within the *The Effeminate Manifesto* [28] of Danusky, Kroeber and Pitchford. They argued that 'All women are oppressed by all men' [29], and that their purpose was to 'urge all such men as ourselves... to become traitors to the class of men' [30]. In terms of their purpose was to act as partisans for the coming women's revolution, performing any militant

action asked of them.

A more accessible radical men's approach is suggested by Leonard Schein [31]. He argues that men working together in a movement can support women in three ways: by ending their reliance on women for emotional support; by facing their violence and hatred within themselves; and by sharing their personal experiences of patriarchy. Through a process of criticism and self-criticism, men could see how they both consciously and unconsciously oppress women and begin to challenge this behaviour.

Because radical men saw themselves as benefactors of the oppression of women, they believed that the only way to seriously undermine sexism was through dedicated and committed sacrifices in terms of money, time and power. To many men, however, this was seen as both unnecessary and abhorrent. Radical men were frequently accused of being guilt-trippers when demanding that men should take responsibility for the oppression of women.

The radical approach was never popular in the men's movement. Whilst always treated with a certain amount of respect, we shall see later that it tended to polarise men rather than push them into activity. Whilst calls for direct action were frequently heard, they were rarely followed up, and when the call was inescapable, rather than produce a positive response, the movement crumbled.

ii) Socialist Feminism

From those men involved in left-wing organisations that had been split by feminism, a socialist element was brought into the men's movement. This was especially important in the early days where concurrent with the women's movement, class oppression took a prominent role in the antisexist men's movements politics.

Marxist and socialist antisexist men argued that both men and women were restricted and stereotyped by the class system. Men were turned into mindless emotionless automatons to function efficiently in factories whilst women were brought up to preserve the capitalist family structure. Just as

women needed to discuss on a personal level the oppression they suffered, so men too needed to talk about their struggles in order to break out. Whilst men are coerced into acting as oppressors of women, it's not all roses, being dominant, taking the initiative, being the breadwinner [32].

In the first few years of the men's movement, a socialist approach was particularly strong. However, paralleling the women's movement, the 70's revealed a move away from socialism and economic determinism and towards a more humanistic/radical approach.

iii) Liberal Feminism

As with the liberal feminists of the American movement, the liberalism in the British men's movement tended to be of American import. In the United States many men saw the psychological repression that men suffer as equally damaging as that of blacks and women. The Berkeley men's manifesto stated that 'all liberation movements are equally important, there is no hierarchy of oppression' [33].

Repression was tied neither to capitalism or patriarchy but to societally pervasive institutions creating rigid gender stereotypes that served to dehumanise and restrict both men and women. Rather than coming from the women's movement, many of the ideas were fundamentally humanistic. Psychologists such as Rogers [34] and Maslow [35] and their human potential movement had revealed the deformity that social pressure could create. The Liberal Men's Liberationists wished to break free of the 'macho' dominant role that they were oppressed by and return to being real, natural humans.

In America, books and journals were published that argued the need for male liberation. Titles included: *The Inexpressive Male: a Tragedy of Male Society*, *Men's Liberation*, and *The Hazards of being Male — Surviving the Myth of Male Privilege*. A review by Connell *et al* [36] states that 'One of the most prominent themes in the "male role" literature of the 1970's was the restrictions, disadvantages and general penalties attached to being a man' [37]. Of the thirty-eight books

they list of this genre printed between 1971 and 1980, the principle themes were the evils of traditional masculinity, that men need liberating too, that reformations of masculinity, and that masculinity is 'on the move'.

The American men's movement has an interesting history [38]. Following the 1977 publication of *Snodgrass: A Book of Readings for Men against Sexism*, the movement split between radical antisexist men and men's liberationists. Whilst the former faction maintained a close proximity to the women's movement, the men's liberationists moved further away. David and Brannon's *49% Majority* looked at the discrimination against men in divorce and legal proceedings, and led to the setting up of 'fathers' groups. Later on in 1980, the 'National Organisation for Free Men' was set up to fight for the rights of men in legal issues and campaign *against* the women's movement over issues such as abortion.

The liberal aspects of the American men's movement played an important role in its British counterpart. With no men's books published in Britain until around 1977 [39], the early American men's liberation literature was all that British men had available to read. Indeed, the first British men's magazine *Brothers* contains a long extract from Jack Sawyer, author of the Berkeley men's manifesto. The article includes a passage that conveys the general American liberal approach stating 'It is less obvious that roles that confer relative privilege, like White American, heterosexual males, also oppress' [40].

Men's liberationists saw the purpose of the men's movement to allow men to share their experiences and in so doing develop their inner potential. Men should learn to feel positive about themselves and celebrate the newly discovered feminine aspects of their personality. The movement should 'create a climate in which love between men can be nurtured and grown' [41], as social mores restrict affectionate behaviour between men.

Men's liberation was always related, however, to the liberation of

women. It was felt that as men challenged their sex-stereotyping, so they would be less oppressive to the women in their lives. As opposed to the radical feminist analysis that sees men's interests in opposition to women's, male supporters of liberal feminism tended to see the two as mutually compatible. As one letter in *MAN (Men's Anti-Sexist Newsletter)* puts it:

'Be yourself, talk to me and I'll talk to you. I'm not every where about how good it feels to be a man, how nice we are — our ways of caring for each other... and maybe you will find your sexism changing, dissolving effortlessly, without the pain, grief and guilt so many insist on... Let's have fun.' [42]

Early History 1971 — 1977

Tuttle's *Feminist Encyclopedia* suggests that the first men's group in Britain started in Brighton in 1971. Daniel Cohen became involved in a London based group at about the same time. According to him, those men present tended to be white, middle-class and university education coming from left-wing political organisations such as Big Flame, IMG and various anarchist organisations.

Early meetings tended to focus on what men could do to challenge sexism. Many men were unsure of their role in the feminist struggle and were thus indecisive about what action they could take. Pushed into an organisation by their feminist colleagues and then deserted, it was up to the men to decide on their activities. With little direction, most men adopted the methods the women's liberation movement had used, particularly that of consciousness raising.

A description by a Birmingham men's liberationist in *Brothers* 1 may give some idea of the activities of the early men's groups. The writer tells how there was little common agreement on the purpose of men's liberation and a split developed between the "academics" (primarily interested in a high degree of theoretical self-consciousness)

and the consciousness-raisers (primarily developing their politics from personal experience) [43]. The latter group 'won' and 'personal understanding' became the subsequent orientation of the group.

The writer states that the group dismissed post-Marxist economism and favoured a more humanistic anti-deterministic perspective. However, there was still a strong emphasis on socialist issues like the family, the State and work. The writing suggests that the general approach of this period seems to be of a socialist feminist analysis akin to that of Mitchell and many early feminists. According to the article, many men were discontented with the 'rhetoric and incomprehending comments' [44] of the Marxist groups, especially their reduction of politics to a simple class analysis.

The first British men's conference of *Men Against Sexism* in June 1973 was attended by approximately thirty men from eight men's groups around the country. The organisers convened the conference around four programmatic ideas: 'the opposition to oppression of women', 'liberation from the disadvantages of masculinity', 'liberation from sexism as a counter-revolutionary ideology' and 'for socialism... without sexism' [45]. However, whilst three of these four ideas focussed on the oppression of women, all four of the discussion groups centred on the issue of masculinity. *Men* and the family, *men* and their culture, *men* and social revolution (which was dropped) and the future of *men* against sexism.

The most potentially antisexist discussion group, 'Men and the Family' started off with an introduction by Marshall Harris that argued the family served as part of the economic transition belt and that the renunciation of the family at home could be a revolutionary act. However, according to the report, the discussion that followed focussed on men's personal experiences within the family and their relationships with women. Whilst the structure of the conference was based on pro-feminist, antisexist ideologies, the discussions rarely considered sexism. Whilst the

men's movement saw itself as specifically antisexist, the content of the conference reveals that this issue was actually low down on the men's liberationist agenda.

The first men's magazine *Brothers*, produced in Birmingham following the conference, further reflects the men's liberation approach that the movement had taken. As well as the article by the American Jack Sawyer, *On the Politics of Men's Liberation* and another by John Walton on how 'Men are Discriminated against in all Walks of Life' [46] only two out of the twenty-five pages could be related to the oppression of women. Of these, one page looked at whether pornography was sexist or not, whilst the other page contained two excerpts from feminist's writing about the position of men.

Two further national men's conferences followed in November 1973 in Birmingham and in April 1974 in Leeds. Whilst there are few records of events that occurred at these conferences, the newsletters give some idea of the issues surrounding the men's movement of this period. Specifically, a conflict can be seen developing between the men's liberationists and the 'antisexist men'.

The second issue of the magazine in October 1973, reflects this conflict in its renaming as *Men Against Sexism*. Rather than focusing on men's liberation, sixteen of the twenty-four pages looked at women's oppression. This includes articles on *The Origins of Sexism* [47], *Sexist Language* [48] and *Running Creches* [49]. One article by a member of the magazine's production team, Dan Muir [50], states 'I am very unhappy about the concept of men's liberation' [51] and that if men embark on a search to alleviate their own problems, the movement will become a diversion from feminism. Contrary to the men's liberationists that argued men must liberate themselves before they can liberate women, Muir argues from an existentialist perspective that the rotten aspect of one's thinking will wither if one can adopt a desirable and consistent pattern of action' [52]. Through antisexist activity men will free their minds.

Yet antisexist action was certainly of low priority. An article in the next edition of the magazine *Brothers against Sexism*, states that whilst actions such as:

- ...picketing sexist films, leafleting in the streets, stickers and posters, and street theatre were proposed at the Birmingham conference, no decisions were taken. Whilst it was felt that some 'action' was needed, we couldn't agree on what forms this should take and also whether we could indeed agree on what we were saying [53].

Though radical men in the movement were pushing for activity, and away from the self-indulgency of men's liberation, the historical material produced at that time suggests that men in the movement were still focussing on the problems of masculinity. As the editorial of *Brothers against Sexism* states:

...as men in the men's movement we recognise that we have to retrace our steps and rediscover in ourselves those traits that have been termed 'feminine' and so discover in us as men — passivity, warmth, intuition, tenderness, love, EMOTION. [54].

The third issue of *Brothers against Sexism* in Spring 1974 contained an article over which the resultant argument was to devastate the men's movement. Whilst the conflict was not directly between the 'men's liberationist' and the 'antisexist men', the issue of inactivity in the men's movement was raised in such a way that many men found it difficult to justify their existence as a movement.

The article entitled *Coming Out is the Only Way Forward* [55] argues that 'straight men derive privileges from being straight men as such' [56]. Because the benefits that men acquire from the oppression of women exist in a social system of patriarchy independent of the will of individual men, any sexual or other contact between men and women will always result in female oppression.

If men are serious about being antisexist, then they must sacrifice the privileges they obtain from women and relate on a sexual level exclusively with men. Men have to tolerate each other, piggy back qualities in order to help each other change [57]. Only when men are prepared to risk their masculinity to the extent of becoming homosexual, can a men's movement challenge sexism in the way that gay liberation has. 'The men's movement seems at present like Faraday inventing electricity whilst in the next room there's a colour television already switched on' [58].



on the men's movement. The next magazine, suitably subtitled *The Pig's Last Grunt*, had a resigned and depressed quality to it. The Stoke Newington group that produced the magazine wrote: 'the conference was too much about men's lib; the workshop had little to do with confronting sexism as it oppresses women, nothing to do with how we men oppress women' [60]. They argued that men's groups could only serve to reinforce sexist behaviour and proposed that they should be dissolved after a period of vigorous self-criticism. A later article [61] writes that men cannot challenge sexism solely on a personal level: 'To combat sexism in a serious way, we must add to our personal efforts to change ourselves an effort to change the social system of our roles' [62]. For three years after the production of *The Pig's Last Grunt* in Spring 1975, no conferences were held and no national newsletter existed.

Why had this attack on the men's movement so badly shaken it up? According to Daniel Cohen, the call for men to become homosexual had not been taken too seriously. Only one article in *The Pig's Last Grunt* attempted to tackle this issue [63]. More likely, the attack by the gay men had made salient the fact that the men's movement was not

Much of the London conference of November 1974 was taken up by this issue, climaxing with the walking out of several gay men after accusing the 'straights' of homophobia [59]. The plenary session was dominated by gay men venting their anger and claiming that the 'straights' should go gay or 'shut-up'. They argued that the fight against sexism could only take place in the women's or gay liberation movement and that the men's movement should either become an auxiliary or 'close up'. The criticisms and accusations of the gay men had a profound effect

challenging sexism. The belief that in changing themselves through consciousness-raising they were liberating women was delegitimised through an intense attack from an oppressed group. Their activities were condemned as a means for maintaining men's interest: 'Groups as presently constituted oppress women for they are intended to help us men live in peace with each other' [64]. Yet men could have responded to this critique by an intensifying of antisexist and pro-feminist activity. It is a significant fact that rather than reacting in a

positive manner, their only answer was self-criticism and disintegration.

Late History 1978 — 1988

After three years in the doldrums, the men's movement gained renewed momentum with a London conference in April 1978, attended by about two hundred people [65]. With the guilt-induced crisis of the '75 conference partially forgotten, the movement returned to its 'men's liberation' perspective. The newsletter condemned the 'masochistic' [66] politics of the early years and workshops at the conference focussed on men's issues such as non-verbal communication, co-counselling, men's writings, men and childcare, and men's groups in crisis. For many men who wrote to the newsletter, the conference had been a great success. The political conflict and challenges were no longer present and the atmosphere returned to the cosiness of the men's liberation groups: 'So many men, warm, friendly, gentle men, touching, holding and sharing. Kissing, talking, learning and listening together'. [67]

Steve Gould in the same newsletter writes that 'more and more men were rejecting the notion that "struggling against sexism" is confined to support for the women's liberation movement and coming to see that this puts women on a pedestal just as we have always done' [68]. Rather, he argued, men should look to their own poverty and oppression in order that they can 'create a climate in which love between men can be nurtured and grown'. [69]

Two major events occurred following the conference that helped to firmly establish the new phase of men's activity. In June 1978, the London Men's Centre was set up in an Islington basement, one night a week 'for all men struggling against sexism — in themselves — in other men — in society' [70]. Its programme alternated between antisexist discussions, on issues such as rape crisis, violence against women, sexism in the workplace, and consciousness-raising, although in the last six months the

discussions were dropped [71]. The Centre also organised creches for women's liberation events and became involved in other forms of antisexist activity such as producing 'Men say No to Sexist Adverts' stickers.

An important point to note about the history of the London Men's Centre was that two or three of the individuals who set it up and remained closely involved in its later activity were members of the 'Alternative Socialist' group. This organisation, initiated by Keith Motherston, propagated an amalgamation of anarchic, feminist and socialist ideas. After its collapse in 1977 due to personality conflicts, many of its male members joined the men's movement and maintained their radical commitment to feminism. Where these men were involved, the movement was often pushed into more antisexist activity.

The second major development in the summer of 1978 was the appearance of *Achilles Heel* — a magazine of men's politics [72]. Produced 'by a working collective of socialist men who have been involved in men's groups and men's politics for some time' [73], the magazine tackled issues of men's liberation and antisexist on a fairly academic level. Amongst the articles for the first issue were long pieces on men's health, masculinity and fascism, sexism, and male sexuality. However, as with many aspects of the men's movement, whilst it proclaimed itself antisexist, the vast majority of literature focussed on men. Issue 4 took as a theme 'Men and Work' whilst issue 5 used 'Masculinity and Violence'. Issue 6/7 focussed on 'Sexuality', issue 9 'Fathers' and the most recently produced issue 10 is on 'The Way Forward for Men'.

The April 1979 conference in Manchester further strengthened the movement. A particularly important product was the initiation of the antisexist men's newsletter for the 'Combating of Sexism and Sexual Oppression' [74].

However, in the midst of the brotherly comradeship that was developing in the movement, a new conflict was emerging that was to more directly divide the men's liberationists and antisexist men. At the Manchester conference, a workshop had been held on a series of 'Commitments' that antisexist men could agree to in order to further their struggle against sexism. Keith Motherston, as one of the main 'commitment' advocates admitted that 'his frightening to evolve a list which amounts to devolving the power we've got' [75]. But he argued that to deal with the guilt feelings men had about their sexism, the best thing they could do would be to recognise their responsibility and take action to change their situation. The commitments were an opportunity rather than a duty, they would be 'proud to be fighting men' [76].

After discussions at the conference and a 'commitments' weekend, the final ten that were put to the 1980 conference in Bristol stood as follows: commitment i) to the group; ii) to rigorous consciousness-raising; iii) to supporting the women's liberation movement; iv) to supporting gay liberation; v) to sharing childcare; vi) to learning from gay and feminist cultures; vii) to acting on our own behalf; viii) to propaganda and outreach programmes; ix) to linking up with other men against sexism groups; and x) to the renunciation of violence [77].

Whilst most of the commitments offered little challenge to men in the movement, the emphasis on supporting women and practical action was alien to many men. Yet for the commitments group, pro-feminist action was a primary objective, as the introduction to the final draft states: 'We recognise the central importance of the women's liberation movement and its growing strength. We are committed to supporting it and changing ourselves' [78].

When the plenary session at the end of the conference came to discussing the commitments, many men were violently opposed. Some considered it 'bullshit, patriarchal and delineating' [79], that it was rules and regulations, restricting men, telling them what to do. The commitments group retorted that those men were afraid of making sacrifices, that antisexist was more than just getting in touch with one's feelings, that male individualism will

ent against any restraint, and that the men's movement is clearer about the 'men's' than the 'antisexist' bit [80]. Whilst some men disputed the commitments because of their anti-libertarian nature, many knew they could never do everything expected of them. As one participant, John Rowan, recounts:

'I drove people party, really. I mean here's something which sounds all right, can't be disagreed with, you think it totally valid, but you look at it and you think 'fuck me... I'm never going to live up to all this' and if I take it on, it's like heaving a giant supergo sitting on my shoulders shouting in my ear all the time 'you're not living up to it, you're not living up to it!'.' [81]

With so much hostility towards them, the commitments were withdrawn and the movement never came to a vote. Part of the reason for this was the proposal by Paul Morrison of the 'Self-definitions' [82], the purpose of which was 'something to show people this is us [83], and to resolve any doubts in people's minds that the men's movement was anti-women. The self-definitions were rapturously approved of in the 'most expressive display of unanimity' [84] ever seen in the men's movement. Whilst in content the 'self-definitions' were similar to the commitments, the essential difference lay in the fact that they did not compel the men in the movement to do anything. Morrison's definitions allowed men to call themselves antisexist, to say that they 'took equal shares in child care, confronted sexism in the workplace' [85], etc. whilst not committing themselves to these activities, and in reality, rarely doing them. As Daniel Cohen suggests, what started off as minimal self-definition became maximum ones. In the history of the men's movement, the 'commitments' episode is probably the clearest indicator that men were not prepared to challenge patriarchy. Whilst they strove to present an appearance of antisexistism, in reality there was no

desire to undertake actions that involved sacrifices and might have been against their own gender interests.

Following the failure of the commitments, the movement's enthusiasm once more steadily declined. Newsletters came out less frequently, and no one could be found to organise the next conference.

In June 1980, the London Men's Centre closed down [86]. Since the beginning of the year it had been looking for premises and when it finally lost its residence in Islington, the four men who had initially set it up stated that they were tired of putting all their efforts into it with such little support. Rather, they decided, to put their energies into more directly pro-feminist activities with the setting up of 'Creches against Sexism' and 'Cash against Sexism'.

'Creches against Sexism' [87] was organised by men who 'wanted to do something practical about the oppression of women and of children and who enjoyed childcare' [88]. Its purpose was to continue the London Men's Centre's work of running creches for feminist events and consisted of a loose number of committed antisexist men. It also ran public meetings for men on issues such as how men could act against sexism, run co-jointly with the 'Against Sexism Against Patriarchy' organisation in London.

'Cash against Sexism' [89] was also organised by Mishra, Danny, Graham and Malcolm of the London Men's Centre. Like 'Creches against Sexism', its aim was to directly support feminist women in their campaigns. Men were asked to give monthly amounts to a central fund which was then distributed to women's organisations such as London 'Women Against Violence Against Women' (£100) and Liverpool 'Rape Crisis Telephone Line' (£125). The four central members, giving 3-5% of their wages were raising between them around £100 per month.

Despite the intense efforts of these men, both organisations received little commitment from other men in the movement. Whilst 'Creches against Sexism' had fifty

members on its list, many were erratic and irresponsible in turning up for events and responsibility often fell on the same four people. 'Cash against Sexism' received even less support. Only 10% of the money raised came from outside Mishra and co. and the majority of this was from collections at the London Men's Centre rather than donations or wage percentages.

Mishra argued that losing privileges gained through the oppression of others does hurt (but if you aren't willing to start surrendering privileges, don't call yourself "antisexist" [90], and suggested that all men should give ten percent of their wages to antisexist commitment. His words, however, were of minimal impact and little further cash was raised by the organisation.

Both organisations carried on until the winter of 1981, when a conflict with the women's movement led to their condemnation [91]. 'Creches against Sexism' offered to hold a 'Women against Violence against Women' conference. However, when the conference refused the offer for the creche and said instead that they would use paid women workers, 'Cash against Sexism' withdrew their funds. This move infuriated many women who felt that the men were using the money to control the women's movement, and that if they were truly antisexist, they would 'give back' the expropriated cash rather than handing it out like pocket money. Criticised and disillusioned, both 'Creches against Sexism' and 'Cash against Sexism' ground to a halt.

The winter issue of the *Anti-Sexist Men's Newsletter (ASMN)* saw the re-surfacing of the antisexistism's liberation debate. Mishra wrote arguing that the *ASMN* should stay radical and that 'Since Liverpool Rape Crisis Telephone Line' (£125). The four central members, giving 3-5% of their wages were raising between them around £100 per month.

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should:

1. spend a meeting talking about how you've been successful as a man;
2. ask a woman friend what it is about you that has led her to think of you as a friend and ally.' [95]

Men should be moving away from guilt and creating more positive images of themselves.

The Men's Action against Sexism conference held in Manchester in May 1982 was condemned by its organisers as an

Newham men's group on organising a response to male violence was picketed by feminists after they had been excluded from the meeting on the ground that it was for 'men only' [97].

This problem re-surfaced at the antisexist men's weekend in June [98]. Publicity had made no mention of whether women were invited or not and when the organisers finally reached a decision, it was to let workshops choose separately if they wanted women to participate. Whilst the movement had always assumed that men only meetings were legitimate if women were to organise separately, many men inside the organisation and women outside felt that excluding women was completely incompatible with antisexistism.

One group of men at the conference distributed a leaflet entitled 'How Can Excluding Women be Antisexist?' [99]. They criticised the conference for completely focussing on 'men's lives' and 'men's experiences' and refusing to accept that for women, the problem of sexism is *men*. Rather than holding 'men only' conferences, if men are to develop an effective antisexist practice, we should welcome women's criticism and be responsive to their demands. We could start by inviting women to meetings and groups. [100]

The same three men also ran a workshop at the conference on 'accountability' [101]. They argued that most of the men's movements' campaigns had focused on male problems rather than looking at the male problem. By being accountable to the women's movement, men would be forced to centre their activities around antisexistism rather than liberation. As Will Locke said:



unmitigated disaster [96]. Despite its title, they claimed it was all talk and sharing of personal experiences rather than planning of activity. No one had turned up to the workshops, on street action and supporting the National Abortion Campaign, and not one of the one hundred and twenty-five antisexist men had offered to help run a creche in the evening for a 'Women in Ireland' group meeting.

The movement appeared to be growing further away from supporting women. In March 1982, a public meeting organised by the

constructively to feminism then we must be accountable to the women's liberation movement and this means developing an antisexist practice not on our own terms and in men's interests but on women's terms. [102]

At the workshop some men complained that accountability was divisive because members of the organisation might not like it. Others argued that liberation had taken men off the back of women and that accountability would just be an added burden for the women's movement. Most of the meeting, however, agreed with the sentiments of the 'accountability' advocates. They felt they were going in circles and 'wanted to break out of their cosy brotherhood'. Despite this, the transcript reveals few concrete suggestions for activity. No further mentions of accountability were made in the following newsletters. Its only effect was to make men's grounds that women would now have to be invited. For the third time in the movement's history, a call for action had resulted in disillusionment and passivity rather than activity.

From 1982 onwards, the movement went into deeper decline. The newsletter that had originally come out every month or two now came out only about every nine months. *Achilles Heel* temporarily stopped publication and no more conferences were held.

With the co-ordination of the *Anti-Sexist Men's Newsletter* moving away from London to a group of co-conspirators in Cardiff, the magazine took a further step towards the men's liberation perspective. The 23rd issue produced in Bristol in the Spring of 1986, decided not to print any material that abuses or ridicules men [103], and not one of the articles were related to women and the problem of sexism. Rather, it focussed on *Loving Men* [104], *Friendship* [105], *Men's Journals* [106], *Men's Songs* [107], *Dresses for Misses* [108], and *The Eyes of Paraclypsus on Men* [109].

In the twenty-fourth edition in January 1987 the trend continued. A letter published suggested that men should 'forget the antisexist bit if it makes you unhappy' [110], and 'get out of the antisexist ghetto before it's too late' [111].

Can the Men's Movement Challenge Sexism?

The history of the men's movement shows that only a small amount of time and energy has been devoted to directly challenging sexism. Much more attention has been focussed on the problems that men incur due to the pressure they are put under to fulfil a masculine role. Whilst many men in the movement have argued that this is a necessary precursor to antisexist action, history offers this perspective little support. For seventeen years, men have been liberating themselves and there is a little support from these men in challenging patriarchy as there was in 1971. Only where men have taken direct action and made direct sacrifices, as with 'Creches against Sexism' and 'Cash against Sexism', has the oppression that women suffer been lessened. As Grünstadt and Rennie argue:

'However desirable the reduction of machismo may be for the enrichment of the individual male personality, it has nothing to do with women's freedom if it is divorced from the struggle to dismantle institutionalised patriarchal power.' [112]

In general, the men's movement has chosen those activities most beneficial to men not to women: consciousness-raising, tapping one's emotions, resolving one's sexuality, etc. These have been the focus of the movement because they have been the most enjoyable to undertake. Activities such as giving money to the women's movement, running creches, challenging other men, and direct action have often had little support because they are frequently painful and require real sacrifices. Men's class interests are not the same as women's, and the men's movement has tended to

choose the former over the latter.

If sexism is in men's interest, then can or will men ever be prepared to challenge it? In answering this question I would suggest that while the patriarchal system may serve the short term interests of men, in the long term, they too suffer from its competitive, aggressive and dehumanising effect. Though it may not be beneficial for a man to share half the washing up, in an egalitarian society, he too will be forced into roles that he dislikes.

But the men's movement has attempted to attack patriarchy from the wrong end. Because it is a system that works on unconscious and institutional levels as well as conscious ones, any attempt to individually change behaviour will still move along lines determined by forces beyond that person's control. Institutions: however much they attempt to reject this power, as a man they will always have it. Selfishness is taught to men at a very early age; however much men attempt to change their role there will always be unconscious 'selfishness' at the basis of it. Only by directly attacking the patriarchal structure which puts them in a position of power, can men depart from their masculine straightjacket, for it is their class position which creates their role and not the role that creates the class.

There are many activities that men can undertake if they seriously wish to challenge sexism. From the workplace to the university to the home, men can use their groups to identify sexist instances and formulate ways of confronting the problems women suffer. Challenging other men on a personal and political level are also important areas in which men can play a part in tackling sexism. By listening to women, finding out what needs doing, and being prepared to make sacrifices, men can ultimately help in the destruction of their own power and create a more egalitarian social system. The few men in the movement that have chosen this approach and been to some extent successful suggest that it is not an impossibility.

Conclusion

I have tried to show in this paper how a movement of men, genuinely concerned with the problems of sexism and female oppression, failed to challenge sexism because of a conflict of interests between men and women means that men will not 'enjoy' destroying their own privileges, and only through a concerted effort of real sacrifices and action can men realistically work alongside the women's liberation movement.

This does not, however, imply that the men's movement has been a waste of time. Not only has it done many positive things, but it has made an attempt to support women when most men were explicitly hostile to the growing feminist movement. If the lessons of the early years are sufficiently noted, then the period between 1971 and 1988 can be a valuable backbone in the development of a movement that has learnt the problems of certain approaches.

Furthermore, I would not wish to attack 'men's liberation' as an activity. For many men, the discovery of a more genuine, emotional side of them is a positive development as is learning to listen and to 'be oneself'. But one must be careful to distinguish between this liberation and the liberation of women. To suggest that men's liberation is challenging sexism is not only dishonest but is denying one's responsibility to tackling the wider problem of patriarchy. Antisexist for men is more than just talking about one's feelings, and the men's movement cannot tackle sexism until this incommensurability is understood.

Men have a role in challenging sexism but it is a difficult one. As Alice Jardine neatly sums up:

'What do feminists want... we do not want you to mimic us, to become the same as us, we don't want your paths or your guilt; and we don't even want your admiration. What we want, I even say what we need, is your work. And like all serious work that

involves struggle and pain.' [113]

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