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## 'I never expected to be talking about men's issues today'

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Getting men and women together to sit around and talk about gender. Sounds ordinary enough. Might happen around a dinner table but when was the last time it happened at work? Maybe it never has? Tim Muirhead and I recently ran a full day 'Partners for Change' workshop and were delighted with the results. Attendees came in male/female collegial pairs. Women mostly did the inviting, asking a male colleague to come to the workshop with them, with the intended focus of strengthening their capacity to work individually and together to tackle gender issues in their shared workplace.

In previous blogs I've highlighted that I believe it is essential, if we are to make more substantial progress, to engage men in the gender change effort. And as I explored in my "what about the men?" blog, we need to do more than ask men to help women to make workplaces better for women. While engaging men as allies is a big step in the right direction compared to expecting women to fix it for themselves, it doesn't go nearly far enough. What is required is partnership – where men and women tune into the difficulties experienced by their opposite gender colleagues – and commit to work for change. This is a new space; a new approach to doing gender equality work that was entered into with enormous goodwill by our participants.

It quickly became apparent that men and women share some common struggles in the workplace. We also share, to a degree, a sense of powerlessness in changing cultural and structural issues that we identified as contributing to gender inequality.

Given the shared struggles – 'greedy institutions'; 'work/life balance' – there can be a temptation to ignore gender. 'See? We're all experiencing the same thing really!' But deeper exploration of this reveals powerful gender dynamics at work. Many men, it turns out, are feeling an overbearing pressure to climb the career ladder, while yearning for more connection with home and family. Women, on the other hand, feel pulled away from that career ladder by home and family roles and expectations. Gender stereotypes put different demands and pressures on men and women, with both genders paying a price for restrictive expectations that are reinforced by workplace norms and practices.

The workshop structure enabled these deeper questions of gender to be explored. Participants particularly appreciate the opportunity to discuss gender issues in single gender groups – men talking with men and women talking with women about the gender issues they face themselves and those faced by their opposite gender colleagues.

This gave men an unusual opportunity, reflected in the Blog title, 'I never expected to be talking about men's issues today'. In the 'safety' of an all male conversation the men were able to openly discuss, for example, the gender-based pressures of 'succeeding at all costs', even if the costs are, say, stress, depression, or connection with the kids. The pathways to seniority are generally 'male-friendly'. But the conversation we haven't explored adequately is: do we really want to follow that path?

The women's conversation was equally rich. While some women have had the opportunity to discuss their issues in all women groups, others had not. For these women, the process of validation - 'it's not just me who experiences this' - is important. The list of challenges became quite long and it was hard to move on to the less familiar question of what challenges men face in the workplace.

The day had begun with everyone identifying changes participants would like to see in their workplaces, that would improve gender equity. The list was long, and there was a feeling of powerlessness. And yet by the end of the day participants had come up with their own set of achievable actions – most of which could be achieved almost immediately, within their particular working environment and within their capacity to make a difference.

The Partners for Change workshop epitomizes the 'bifocal approach' of linking individual development to organizational change. This is an enormously hopeful and positive approach where men and women begin to see how their interactions, their actions can contribute to change in their organization. Working together, from different perspectives, different power bases and different positions in organisations will bring strength to partnership. Working with willing volunteers, as we did, to strengthen this capacity to work for change can mean immediate results.

I hope that there were some interesting discussions around dinner tables that night, and again the next day in participants' workplaces, as the exploration of gender partnership for gender equality continues.

The next post exploring our Partners for Change work will be Challenges for men: The expectation to lead and succeed. The final post in the trio will be titled Women's Work, Men's Work, an exploration of the different roles women and men need to play, as partners in moving the gender equality agenda forward.

# Challenges for men: The expectation to lead and succeed

November 11, 2014



'We (men) are expected to lead', one of the male participants exclaimed. As a woman so immersed in working with women's leadership development programs I found myself somewhat taken aback. It was impossible for me to imagine a woman saying anything like it. For women the reverse could be said to be true: we (women) are not expected to lead. It was one of those moments when you are left in no doubt that gendering processes are alive and well. A moment when socialised gender roles, so often implicit become explicit. And, in this case, open for discussion.

For the men in the room this statement 'we are expected to lead' was made by way of explanation, part of a conversation in which they were explaining some of the pressures they feel as men. They were talking about the cultural expectations that men be the breadwinners; with all the resultant focus on their career success where, as one man put it, 'only acceleration is visible'. This can be constraining, limiting their capacity to imagine and explore alternatives to linear onwards and upwards career trajectories. There were other expectations of them too –

about managing others and about taking on male styles of leadership.

We had a full agenda, so we moved on, hurrying a little through this feedback from the single gender conversations – where men and women had, separately, identified challenges for themselves and their gender counterparts. Now I wish we had stopped. We probably could have spent the remainder of the afternoon reflecting on that statement. How do these expectations translate; into applying for promotion or leadership positions, into meeting behaviour, into interactions between men and women in the workplace, and so on? How do men support each other to meet these expectations? And what about the women? How does the consequent lack of expectation for women to lead play out in the workplace?

When women have leadership aspirations that have not been matched by opportunity, recognition or support, this statement might be hard to hear. "If you don't want to lead, step aside and give me the chance" is a response I can easily imagine. It takes a while, at least it did for me, to get a sense of the burden of this expectation. The expectation of leadership and success had in some cases constrained choices and possibilities, effectively boxing men into linear career paths. What seems like male privilege might sometimes be burdensome, depending on your gender perspective.

I have another example of this but from the other point of view, where Tim identified what seemed to him to be female privilege. Tim, some time ago now, expressed to me his jealousy that women were so much more easily able to work part-time. I was a bit taken aback at the time, reflecting on my own experience where this had felt like a frustrating necessity rather than a privilege. Indeed part-time work is associated with many career-limiting consequences for women. It has taken me some time to reflect on this 'privilege of part-time work' as seen through the eyes of a man. And as I listen more carefully to how women talk about part-time work, indeed some are expressing their capacity to have the best of both the work and domestic worlds.

My response to Tim was also a good example of how, despite my immersion in gender work, I responded on the basis of my own experience. This 'sample size of 1' as I like to call it, is always a danger when doing gender

work. Everyone becomes an instant gender expert based on their own experience. The only way out of this difficulty is to be reflective on one's own responses/reactions, open and inquiring of the experiences of others, and to draw on the considerable amount of data and rich body of gender research that is available. This 'sample size' problem reinforces the need for the dialogue that underpins true partnership.

In our workshop the women, in their own discussions, had correctly identified many of the gendered expectations that men face, but hearing directly from the men made all the difference. These opportunities for open conversation between men and women - conversations in which we can all be honest enough to speak of our true aspirations and frustrations - hold rich promise for developing gender insight and together working to build more gender equitable, inclusive and humane workplaces.

We are entering a new phase in the movement for gender equity; a phase in which no-one should feel either locked out of, or locked into, opportunities for reason of their gender. For my part, I increasingly imagine a future in which people of all genders can thrive with more choices and less constraints.

# Men's work; Women's work

November 16, 2014

by guest blogger Tim Muirhead

I've worked for about 17 years to help improve Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations. Jen de Vries has worked even longer to improve gender equity. In both of these fields we are in a time of transition – about 40 years old and counting – from an era of unambiguous and socially sanctioned disparity in rights, dominance and power, to an era of genuine equity. That transition is hard work. And in both of those fields I'm in the dominant group. I'm white Australian, and I'm a bloke.

My work, over these 17 years, has been in partnership with Aboriginal colleagues. My interest has been, as a self-interested Australian, in trying to create more harmonious communities, and in the simple fact that our well-being is interdependent. But, of course, as a member of the dominant group I've had to grapple with the question: 'what is our work in that?'. History tells us: it is the oppressed that lead themselves out of oppression. So what do the rest of us do, if anything? In grappling with this question I was influenced by a simple statement from the late Lilla Watson, an Aboriginal leader from Queensland:

**"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, let's work together".**

So I've strived to work together, and in doing so I slowly came to realise that, although we have to work together, we have different work to do. I can't do the Aboriginal work; Aboriginal people can't do my work.

To help unpack this I developed, almost on a whim, two lists: 'Aboriginal work/Non-Aboriginal work'. Then I discussed it with my Aboriginal colleague, Kim Bridge, and we revised it. It needs some elaboration, but you'll get the idea:

Aboriginal Work	Non-Aboriginal Work
Understand the context - the underlying dynamics between us	Under the context - the underlying dynamics between us
Move beyond history's impacts	Understand and acknowledge history's impacts
step up' to positions of authority	Make space' in places of authority
Practice pride	See, and focus on strength (rather than focusing so much on 'disadvantage', or 'dysfunction')
Lead (in Aboriginal world)	Respond to and support Aboriginal leadership Lead (in non-Aboriginal world)
Be resilient in the face of racism	Stand against racism where we find it.
Name solutions (not just problems)	Under the problems Be open to solutions (even if they're inconvenient)
See goodwill	Turn goodwill to action
Build relationship	Build relationship

The key point of the two lists is that each supports the other. If we, on the non-Aboriginal side, don't do our work, it is exhausting – to the point of burn out - for Aboriginal people to do theirs. And doing our own work enriches our own lives and our shared society.

I showed Jen the list, and she was taken with it. 'I wonder what a list like this would look like in relation to gender equity – what's women's work; what's men's work?' she asked.

So we decided to develop a list, and began by each, separately, doing our own. Sounded simple. It wasn't. I found I had all sorts of opinions on what men might need to do, but really couldn't speak of what women should do. And of course, on reflection, this was right and proper. That quick draft was only possible because of 17 years of honest, sometimes difficult, dialogue with Aboriginal friends and colleagues. And it made me realise just how much I haven't been a partner in the gender equity dialogue. I've been an observer – a supporter even – but not a genuine partner.

Jen got further than me, but she struggled as well. In reflecting on this she wrote: "After extensive involvement developing and facilitating women's leadership development, writing the women's work side was easy. But in attempting the men's work side I realised I was accustomed to thinking of men as supporters rather than partners. To write the list for men would require more opportunities to engage with men, listening to men tell their stories."

So we both struggled, and that simple fact reinforced our interest in working together, and with other women and men, towards genuine and transformative partnership. My attempts at genuine partnership with Aboriginal people and movements have enriched me through fascinating, deep exploration of how we can be more fully human, together. I suspect that attempts at truthful, genuine partnership between genders, not just in our personal lives but in relation to cultural and structural change, might do the same.

So Jen and I have started to engage others in the conversation about the different work that partnership might require (including in 'Partners for Change' workshops). Here's some ideas from various people (including Jen and I) on what might be included in 'the lists'. It focuses on gender equity in the workplace.

We would both be interested to hear your ideas about the different work that men and women can do, in partnership, to build genuine equity, knowing that 'your liberation is bound up with mine'.

Women's Work	Men's Work
Talk to men, leader and each other about gender issues - keep bringing it up.	Articulate benefits <u>for all</u> of improved diversity.
Do leadership differently, and don't be constrained by the models of leadership you see around you.	Champion different (less "masculine") models of leadership - more open, communicative, compassionate and equitable.
Strive to ensure that women in leadership leads to better workplaces (not just to women leading in "masculine" ways).	Speak out against males'"dominating" behaviours when you see them.
"Lean in" at work (or "step up") "Lean out" at home	"Lean out" at work (make space at the table) "Lean in" at home
Explore challenges for women, don't minimise their impact, and support women to be gender aware.	Explore challenges for men and dialogue about male identity.
Challenge cultural assumptions about femininity at work (e.g. women lack ambition or are not serious about careers).	Challenge cultural assumptions and stereotypes about masculinity at work (e.g. success at all costs).
Recognise "family friendly" work practices should benefit men as well as women.	Fight for a more "family friendly" and "person friendly" workplace, for your <u>own</u> benefit.
Support men and women who need time off for family.	<u>Demonstrate</u> we have wider responsibilities - including family. Use flexible policies, consider part-time work etc.
Resist the "domestic" duties in the office. Say no more often Speak up and take risks	Identify and model gender positive behaviour - e.g. "domestic" duties in the office; take the notes, listen more, speak less.
Stop feeling guilty about quotas and targets.	Mentor and sponsor women, and ask "where are the women"?