

# Perceptions of Masculinity

Mention the concept gender-equality and most people think about women's rights. They would not be wrong to make this logical leap since much of gender-equality work is about creating a social context where women's rights and gender equality are ensured.

However, there is increasing awareness that there is a need to also look at men and the perceptions of masculinity/ manhood or being a man in respect of women's rights and empowerment. After all, there is a causal link between certain types of masculinity and violence against women, gender-based violence and patriarchal privilege.

Having said this, we now have to deconstruct these statements and try and understand the meaning of these difficult words.

We firstly have to understand what "perceived masculinity" means.

In Namibia, there is the perception that a "real man" is a virile man with a high sexual drive. It is "expected" that a "real man" gets what he wants, no matter how much cajoling, trickery and sometimes even force he has to use to have intercourse with a (just about any) woman.

Complementing the "real man", by contrast, is the "real woman", who, strangely enough, is the coin opposite of this idea of manhood. For a woman to be considered a "real woman," she has to be sexually constrained, coy and "lady like." In short, the "real woman" is supposed to be an angel. It is expected that this real woman will reject the persistent and pushy advances of the "real man."

Aware of the expectation for the woman to resist his advances, the real man is therefore justified to take that woman – after all, everybody "knows" that when a woman says no, she really means yes.

Is it therefore surprising that many young women in Namibia report their first early sexual encounters to have been forced?

There is a further perception that a "real man," once sexually enticed, is no longer in control of his sexual lust. He has to have sex, and he has to have it then and there – regardless of where this might be. This accounts for the many people who blame the victim for sexual violence, including for murder. In the perception of many, a woman who "teases" a man into an arousal or erection – (by being on the street at night, by wearing a short skirt, by being saucy, sometimes simply for being) – therefore is the one to blame for the frenzied – if disastrous – lust of the "real man." After all, a man has to sow the wild oats!

Then of course there is the matter of "the real" man as a sugar daddy. Because of the sexual prowess of the real man, We Namibians seem to condone men having their

young sexual trophies and that it is okay for a man to use his relative (to women's) financial muscle to demonstrate his potency. One seldom hears outrage about the sugar daddy himself, even if he has a wife and family as well as X number of lovers in tow. This was clearly demonstrated by an opinion expressed by a young woman in the papers in which she advised that "girls need to stop being 'dirty Kandeshis,' a term ...used to describe a girl that dates different guys for their money." Nowhere was there an attempt to hold men responsible. Instead, the writer justifies the killing of women by pointing out that "when it comes to guys, they really are easily blinded by girls. It is as if they worship the ground girls walk on." Surprisingly, she concludes – somehow confused – "what man in his right mind thinks being a relationship with someone half his age will last?"

Prevailing perceptions of masculinity clearly do not provide for concepts of manhood where the man could be a loving and caring son, father or partner. Caring men are considered weak and/or sexually deviant. The accepted "type" of masculinity is the man as a lover and a man among men – as a buddy. What we need are guidelines and assessment patterns that reflect the totality of roles that men and women play or should play in a society that is caring and democratic. We are not against sex, we do not prescribe sexual orientation but we think that sex should support and not undermine the full potential of both men and women.

By Laura Sasman

*Here's to all the real men out there..Boys play house, Men build homes, Boys shack up, Men get married, Boys make babies, Men raise children, A boy won't raise his own children, A man will raise someone else's, Boys invent excuses for failure, Men produce strategies for success, Boys look for somebody to take care of them, Men look for someone to take care of, Boys seek popularity, Men demand respect and know how to give it.*