



Britain's Crisis of Masculinity

A Demos Twentieth Birthday lecture delivered by Diane Abbott MP

2013 marks Demos' Twentieth Birthday. We are celebrating this landmark anniversary with a series of lectures looking at some of the biggest challenges facing society over the next 20 years.

In the first of this series, **Diane Abbott MP**, Labour's shadow public health minister, will identify a 'crisis of masculinity' in Britain, arguing that rapid economic and social change has affected male identity, and created a number of largely unspoken problems. She will discuss the ways in which families, the bond between father and son, and expectations around young men must be strengthened, against the backdrop of a number of deep public health and social problems.

Responses will be given by

Geoff Dench; author of *The Place of Men: Changing family culture in Britain*

Eleanor Mills; Associate Editor of the Sunday Times

Harriet Sergeant; author of *Among the Hoods: My years with a teenage gang*

David Goodhart; Director of Demos will chair the event

This event will take place on Thursday 16 May at Demos, Magdalen House, 148 Tooley Street, London, SE1 2TU from 10.00 - 12.00. Please arrive at 9.30 for refreshments and a prompt start. Click [here](#) for a map.

To attend please RSVP to events@demos.co.uk or call 0207 367 6331 with any access queries.

Demos would like to thank **[the Architecture Foundation](#)** for their support in delivering this lecture

Good health, hard work and family

Introduction

I'm delighted to be speaking at the first Demos Twentieth Birthday lecture this morning. Thank you to David and everyone at Demos – who are a much needed flash of colour on the political landscape. And thank you all for being here.

My speech this morning is about a crisis of masculinity in Britain.

I make this speech as a card-carrying feminist and as a single mother.

But I want to speak to you about a crisis that for too long has been unspoken, abandoned and left derelict.

Too many British men...

The changing nature of the labour market and social attitudes over the last 60 years has affected men, and I think it's time we started talking about it. This generation no longer asks itself what it means to be a man.

And too often, women – particularly those who achieve success - wrongly get the blame. I believe we must move away from adversarial gender politics.

Tomorrow, too many young British boys in schools will be swept a little bit further from realistic and fulfilling paths to happiness and success – and will be victims of the messages about their role in the world. Friendships, books that could and should have been read, and families will fall by the wayside.

Tomorrow, too many British men and boys will wake up isolated and misdirected by a boundless consumer outlook, economic instability and whirlwind social change.

Tomorrow, too many British men and boys who need the space and support to talk about manhood, expectations and boundaries from an early age, at schools, with other boys, and with their parents will remain silent.

But it's not just that.

This year, too many British men will return home so late, that happy family life will be pushed even further out of reach; too many British men will be diagnosed with a cancer that was preventable; and this year, too many British men – shouldering the burden of a growing economic mess they did not create – will commit suicide.

I fear British society has given in to a fatalism about outcomes for boys - the ‘they’re just like that’ syndrome. It’s got to change and I want to explain why today. This is a problem that is affecting our economy, the health and well-being, the potential, and the aspirations of men and young boys across the country.

I fear we’re running the risk of having...

- A generation of British men without realistic heroes, who feel like they have been set up to fail.
- A ‘we’ve got nothing left to lose’ generation of British men.
- A nation of atomised, lonely, entrepreneurial boys, who often have lives without meaning.
- A society where British manhood is now shaped more by market expectations – often unachievable ones - than by fathers, family values, a sense of community spirit and perseverance.

I believe we need to say loudly and clearly, that there is a powerful role for fathers. The truth is that just as loving fathers are a benefit to children, so loving families are a benefit to men.

And that the ‘left’ must reclaim the debate about families.

Britain isn’t broken

Let me be clear. I’m not here to talk about ‘Broken Britain’. I’m not here to do down single parent families. I am a single mother. I’m not here to place blame on any families, or to try and suggest that one particular family might be in some way better than another.

You may hear these arguments from others, but not from me. What I'm here to say is that we need to work towards creating a society and an economy in which young boys and men can talk about their identity, and find their way in the world without shame, isolation, or feelings of resentment.

A colour snapshot

Thinking about old expressions of masculinity is like flicking through a dusty, well-worn, black and white photo album from a loft – the men who toiled in the iron, steel and coal industries, in shipbuilding, and pre-mechanised farming. The soldier, the bank manager, the breadwinner, the family man.

Yesterday's heroes, in the fantasies and the realities of British life, were affirmed, in part, by physical strength, silent stoicism, and athletic daring.

But the inescapable truth is that:

- Fewer men than ever are able to connect the fabric of their lives to those archetypes.
- More people are employed behind tills than mining coal
- Machines and not sweating men assemble cars
- The decline of heavy industry and manufacturing jobs has left a lot of men in a position where they don't feel the jobs on offer – particularly service jobs – are ones they feel comfortable with.
- The masculine predilection for risk and violence, far from saving national pride, often collides with modern workplaces, industries and our outlook in Britain today.

Look at many of our young men graduating from university this year. Faced with mass unemployment and often unable to fly the nest, they can find themselves locked into a transitional phase at home, or find themselves voluntarily creating an extended adolescence, sometimes resentful of family life.

Many of our children are growing up too soon, but reaching adulthood too late.

A new Tesco store in Rowner, near Gosport opened this month. It had 4,300 applications for just 150 jobs.

And it is taking its toll where work is unsatisfying, unreliable, or unreasonably demanding of time.

For those with work, full-time male staff clock up 43.7 hours a week – more than two hours longer than the European average of 41.1, marginalising the British family unit and men's role in it.

And all the while, where the barren soil of inequality has sprung crucial and life-affirming grassroots politics for women, our men have little movement politics to speak of. Many British men have no authentic voice.

This is a colour snapshot of where we're at.

Earning and providing v taking and consuming

Something in recent years has changed.

What made a British man used to be earning, providing and belonging. But I fear that gold standard has melted into taking, owning and consuming.

It's what links the gang member in Hackney with a cupboard full of stolen trainers, to the malpractices of the some of the city traders in the City.

For many, what makes a man in modern Britain is his ability to flaunt consumer power. And for many of our young men, that will simply remain out of reach. What we teach many of our young boys is the price of everything, and the value of nothing.

My father's generation prided themselves on being providers - for their spouses, families and themselves.

Hard work, love, community, and family are no longer necessarily part of a British right of passage.

I'm particularly troubled by a culture of hyper-masculinity – a culture that exaggerates masculinity in the face of a perceived threat to it. We see it in our schools; in the culture of some of our big business financial institutions; in some of our inner cities; and even on many student campuses. At its worst, it's a celebration of heartlessness; a lack of respect for women's autonomy; and the normalisation of homophobia. I fear it's often crude individualism dressed up as modern manhood.

And we have a generation of boys without heroes, struggling to find a role, and sometimes, a voice, in society - lost in a changing economy where old images of masculinity have faded.

We see resentment and division, and wrongly portioned blame.

We see young British boys and men searching – reaching - for the right path. And many get lost along the way – to warped outlooks that are alien to their own family’s values; to gang culture; to deformed versions of our old fabled images; to fantasy worlds; and to a market outlook that priorities self-gratification and sensory pleasures above all else, even if it means bending and breaking the rules.

Britain was once the workshop of the world. But we have seen a de-industrial revolution in recent decades. When Margaret Thatcher came to power, manufacturing accounted for almost 30 per cent of Britain’s national income and employed 6.8 million people. By 2010, it was down to just over 11 per cent of the economy, with a workforce of only 2.5 million.

And we’ve seen a steep decline in genuine apprenticeships.

Look into the eyes of many of the troubled and often unhealthy young men leaving school early, who are at one with anthems of hyper-masculinised music lyrics, and YouTube clips of bullying.

Look into the eyes of many of the men sitting in the cubicles of bureaucratic English offices, with a disintegrating family life.

Look into the eyes of men sitting in the plush offices of the top City firms, with little of note to show for it but a nice car and often shallow relationships.

Do you see clear sense of pride?

The ‘transit’ generation of men

Rapid social change has left many British men and young boys as a “transit generation”, caught between the “stiff-upper lip” approach of previous generations and today’s cultural tornado of male cosmetics, white collar industry, and modernised workplaces.

It's an economy that traps many of our young British men between the decline of heavy industry and stable employment, and the fragility and false promise of many of Britain's white collar industries, and zero hours contracts.

It's a culture that snares many men between their traditional silent, strong and austere fathers, who went to work and provided for their families, and the market-driven, open and individualistic generation of their sons.

It's a society that locks men between modern family life and the long hours and sharp elbowed demands of consumer outlooks.

It's an unfortunate political landscape that catches many men between the belief that all human beings are essentially equal, and the collapsing pillar of patriarchy that mistakenly says men are naturally superior to women.

It's a situation that has victims.

Narrow stereotypes, based upon biological differences, have finally been laid to rest. So it's time we asked: what message are we putting out to young British boys and men about their role in the world?

It's all become a bit like the film Fight Club – the first rule of being a man in modern Britain is that you're not allowed to talk about it.

Pornification affects men and women

I spoke at the start of the year about the pornification of British culture. I want to make clear today that this issue doesn't just concern women. And that this pornified society is not something that men do to women.

This pornified culture tells girls that the most important quality they need is 'sexiness', and not cleverness, sportiness, application or ambition. It tells many girls that they only have value as sex objects.

But the messages being sent to our boys are just as limiting and restrictive: be macho, be strong, don't show your emotions.

We see many young boys' world view is shaped by hardcore pornography and other dark corners of the internet. We see too many young British boys turning to pornography to teach them what they think they need to know.

And we see men struggling to live up to these pornified ideals. Figures show rapidly increasing numbers of men purchasing Viagra and using it as a recreational drug, and also having plastic surgery.

When prescribed, Viagra is a very safe drug that can help many men.

But we're seeing a growing number of men of all ages turning to the drug by themselves due to performance anxiety, triggered by a host of psychological issues - from our increasingly pornified culture making 'normal' sex seem boring, to financial pressures. It may be a secret, psychological crutch for some men, who are under pressure to meet a pornified expectation.

I think that we're seeing the rise of a 'Viagra and Jack Daniels culture' – a shift to Viagra becoming a party drug and a performance enhancer, rather than a medical one.

And more men than ever are getting boob jobs, nose jobs, tummy tucks or body implants.

Shallow relationships, poor health and early death

Men continue to earn more than women for example, and are more likely to occupy senior positions in the workplace. But lurking in the shadows of this particular injustice, there are a number of divergent problems.

The problems we face as a country are huge. Many men are paying heavy costs, in shallow relationships, poor health and early death.

In 2012, the Office for National Statistics gave average male life expectancy as 78.2 years and average female life expectancy as 82.3 years. Of course, life expectancy varies greatly by economic status.

Suicide, substance misuse, anti-social behaviour, "disappearing" from home, homelessness and a variety of behavioural problems are all markedly more common in men and boys.

Men are also more likely to exhibit personality disorders.

An analysis of the cancers that men and women 'share' by Cancer Research shows that men are 56% more likely to develop one of these cancers and 67% more likely to die.

Men are less frequent attenders of all primary care services for example, including dental services, ophthalmic services and pharmacy, as well as GP surgeries.

Men are also in a minority of those who use telephone advice and help lines provided by healthcare charities, and are underrepresented in relationship support services.

Men have measurably lower access to the social support of friends, relatives and community. Suicide is the single most common cause of death in men under 35. Credible evidence that the suicide rate in England is linked to the current recession. The Samaritans have seen calls to the helpline from people worried about financial difficulties double since the onset of the economic crisis. In 2008, one in 10 calls to the helpline were about financial issues, now that's one in five. The centrality of money in the lives of many men means that the loss of cultural certainty associated with unemployment can be more damaging for men than women.

And our young boys are often behind in school, and increasingly have low self-esteem about their body image. Young men are failing to reach mature adulthood in massive numbers, mostly for lack of role-models and reasonable paths toward success. We have lots of boys who at an early age start to think of education as being not macho enough. Nearly one in five boys is being taught in a primary school without a single male teacher on the staff.

Some particular population groups, most notably white and Afro-Caribbean boys from poorer families, are doing particularly badly at school.

The radio silence around these issues cannot continue any longer.

A new path

So we must fight for the right kind of change, and forge a new path...

I believe that we need to put families back at the forefront; that we must work to help strengthen the bond between fathers and their children, and we need to greatly raise expectations around young men. We must start normalising good health, hard work and family in Britain.

We must work to establish and normalise a multi-faceted notion of what makes a man – in our schools, families and workplace – which allows and encourages sensitivity, emotions, healthy sexuality, communication, and investing time in children education.

We must work towards British masculinities that are not defined in opposition to ‘Others’ –whether they be racial, sexual, cultural, and in schools we must challenge male gender identities which do not value learning and reading as a mark of success.

So what does that mean in practise?

We cannot repair the basic fabric of society until people who are willing to work have work. We need more advanced, rigorous vocational courses and a new focus on technical learning and skills.

Schools, parents and fathers in particular need to talk to their sons and our young men about manhood and fatherhood.

Educational prevention initiatives must focus on teaching boys about consent and boundaries as well as girls. Schools and PSHE need to start helping boys to explore a less narrow version of masculinity. It’s not about turning boys into girls. It’s about making boys feel like they can talk about their place in the world. We must allow men and boys to explore sensitivity, emotions, sexuality, boundaries, communication, and family life. Schools should take a leading role in teaching children and young people to see through gender stereotypes and sexualised media from an early stage. And the evidence shows that without access to information about sex and relationships, young people will rely on inaccurate information or portrayals, including those from pornography

Parents have a key role to play in reinforcing ideas about healthy relationships and sex. I think we need to look at ways national awareness campaigns can be developed to help skill parents to talk openly and confidently about sex and relationships to both boys and girls.

We’ve got to look at ways health campaigns can target men specifically in order to tackle problems like obesity, alcohol misuse and poor sexual health. We must say that needing health treatment isn’t a mark of failure. And we’ve got to normalise relationship support.

And a renewed focus on male-specific helpline services.

We desperately need more men in schools teaching our children, and being role models. And we must forge closer relationships between fathers and educational and childcare professionals.

As a country, we must give father friendly parenting classes a real focus and priority.

And to ensure that men stay involved in their children's lives we must start to look seriously at the ways that fathers can meaningful access to services and parental leave, in the way that mothers have. We need to value the father-child bond much more.

Conclusion

I believe that as a country we must find our voice on these issues – without hysteria, or the politics of loss and division.

We are a people that place a great premium on manhood, but provide ever fewer paths to achieving it. Often, our heroes are often absent, our families are often marginalised and many of our young men are falling by the wayside.

Too often, our modern society has equated masculinity with success in a consumerist economy. And made ill-health a sign of failure.

Clearly, there are big challenges ahead, which need care, attention and discussion.

We've got to place our faith in the British family unit, and show many of our boys how to earn and belong.

I hope that everyone here will help guide our thinking on these issues.

Thank you all for listening.