



GENDERHOPES
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gentlemen, Please Rise

By Lucy Coote

“Don’t be such a girl!”

“Take it like a man!”

“Grow some balls!”

“Don’t cry!”

All over the world these strong, negative messages can be heard in exchanges between males to males and females to males, passed along from generation to generation. Worse still, they stick.

What has society done to our boys, our men?

What are we instilling in them from their tender, young ages?

What exactly is the definition of “being male” anyway?

Monaco-based charity, GenderHopes, recently showed the film “The Mask You Live In” which attempted to address how society defines masculinity that is enforced on boys from a very young age, often with dire consequences. A few months prior I’d been to see their other film, “Miss Representation,” which focused on female gender identity issues, in particular how females are portrayed by the media.

It seemed to me that the definition of masculinity questioned by the film was this: a male must fight, be aggressive, be in control, dominate, be strong, hard and tough and, above all, never show any kind of ‘girly’ emotion - unless it was anger or hate.

The broad spectrum of fathers, sons, teachers, scientists, doctors, psychologists and sociologists sharing their experiences on screen each gave us their stories and opinions. It left me feeling sad, mad and overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the situation, because if we stand back and take stock, we can see just how many lives we are talking about. We are, in fact, talking about half of the world’s population. In fact we’re talking about all the population as this issue affects everyone, both male and female.

This film was difficult to watch; so powerful were the images shown of boys being bullied, boys watching hardcore porn on the internet, boys playing terrifyingly violent and graphic video games, boys completely absorbed by the darker side of human nature, unable (through conditioning or social pressure) to respond or reach out in any other way.

Critics suggest that it was biased as it was shot in America, but this doesn’t detract from the basic fact that the issues raised in the film are of global concern.

I was left asking myself, is it ok for males to be stereotyped as “the stronger sex” and, if so, at what point can males actually feel secure enough to let their emotions flow freely, just as females do?

I wanted to shout out at the screen, at the audience, at anyone really that we are all human. We all get upset and hurt, we all love, we all want to be loved, we all enjoy tenderness, intimacy and closeness. Why can't guys show this without being ridiculed or shamed for seeming too feminine?

And how much do females contribute to this suppression of boys' emotions and, if they do, how can we change it for the better?

Here we find ourselves, evolved beings living in the 21st century, still enforcing these damaging "ideals" on our boys. Why?

I believe there is some biological, masculine behaviour that is perhaps in-built, but with the right nurturing and, in particular, the right parenting, surely we can retain the healthy side of masculinity yet suppress these constant messages to “man up”?

Surely it starts at birth? Teaching a young, impressionable boy to be a gentleman is a good thing, both for him and indeed for the world around him. It isn't a sign of weakness on his masculinity or character. “Manhood”, the excellent book by Steve Biddulph, perfectly illustrates the problems and possibilities confronting men in their daily life and I encourage parents of both sexes to read it.

Having seen the film, and now having had a little time to digest it and to reflect, I think we can all (friends, family, colleagues, health professionals, media) play a part in showing men, and more importantly boys, that they can be the whole person they were created to be, rather than living in the fearful shadow of seeming "unmanly".

Can we do this? I think so. Yes, it'll require effort from everyone, and for some the steps may be small, but if we are united in our efforts it is possible.

Let's be the generation that makes that change. We can start by watching this film.

About the author

Lucy Coote lives in Monaco with her five year old daughter and supremely patient husband. She feels compelled to pick up a pen and write about topics that impassion her, usually centered toward the more taboo. One such topic is the advocating of women's rights and equality. Lucy feels her driven purpose in life is to communicate for others in need whose voice is often not heard.

*For more information about the documentary *The Mask You Live and the Representation Project*, please visit: <http://therepresentationproject.org/films/the-mask-you-live-in/>*