



**Interview of the Month
Dr. Michael Kimmel,
Director of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities,
Stony Brook University
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- 1. GenderHopes: As the Director of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at Stony Brook University, could you tell us more about the work and objectives of the Center?**

Dr. Michael Kimmel: The Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities is a new type of institution, the first of its kind in the world. It aims to bring together activists, researchers and practitioners to develop projects that engage men and boys in order to further gender equality. The Center is university-based and is involved with organisations from all over the world, notably on how to develop and disseminate evidence-based research that redefines gender relations to foster greater social justice.

From 5 to 8 March 2015, the Center is organising [The International Conference of Masculinities](#), which is the largest conference of its kind in North America. The conference will discuss issues relating to men and boys, from boys' healthy development and education to fatherhood; from promoting men's health to supporting women's reproductive rights; and from joining the global struggle against men's violence against women, sexual assault, trafficking, and harmful traditional practices to engaging men in policies to promote gender equality in education, employment, social life, and the political arena.

- 2. As a leading researcher on men and masculinities, you spend a lot of time on US campuses. What do you find the most challenging when working with young men today?**

I work directly with young men on campuses, where I encounter two main challenges regularly: first, just as white people don't think about race, men rarely think about gender as they consider it as 'women's issue'. In general, men don't know how to talk and think about gender so our first task is to bring men into the conversation and how to engage them on this so called 'feminist' topic.

The second challenge is that it's often insufficient to try to engage men by posing the ethical argument and by telling them that supporting gender equality is the right thing to do. Hence, we must show men that supporting gender equality is good for them as well; it will benefit men as well as women.

3. How can we counter the argument that equality between men and women is impossible as long as we hold on to traditional values of a expecting a man to 'act as a gentleman' (holding the door for a woman, carrying her suitcase)?

This argument is a non-sense, because it starts from the incorrect assumption that supposes that, *'If you weren't a woman, I would treat you badly'* or *'if you were my equal, I wouldn't hold the door open for you'*. We need to approach that angle differently: *'When I hold the door for you, it's because I am a nice person, not only because you are my equal'*. In that sense, equality is to treat everyone equally nicely, not equally badly.

However, it is crucial that men understand that holding the door for a woman or being nice, gives them no entitlement to touch a woman's body or to have sexual interactions with her.

So this brings us to *'who should pay on the first date?'* Unfortunately, reality is still that often, men make more money than women, so in that sense, men can pay on a first date. The most important point here is to talk about the issue and for example say *'Let me pay for this, you can get the next one'* which implies a second date! It is also is a nice gesture as it is a pleasure to treat someone to dinner but also to be treated to dinner. Most importantly however, men must make no assumption about it: they might have paid for dinner, but they haven't paid for sex.

4. This brings us to rape and other forms of sexual assault, which have occurred on US colleges' campuses and have made the headlines in recent years. How can we work with men to prevent such abuses from taking place? Is peer pressure the main factor? Where have we failed as a generation in raising our boys so that they think that the bodies of women are their property?

Rape and sexual assault is the ugly other side of treating women as property. Sexual assault has occurred for a long time, but only recently have women started to talk about it and have been able to stand up and say that the assault didn't occur because she had too much to drink or because it was a date gone wrong.

Although it is estimated that 95% of sexual assaults on US campuses still go unreported, women do now report such assaults on campus much more than they did 10 years ago. The reason for this is that women now think that if they report it, people will listen and will believe them. They also assume that the university where it occurred will do the right thing and prosecute the perpetrator.

It's important to note that 90% of men on campus wouldn't even think of committing rape or sexual assault. It is only a small minority, say 6 or 7% who are serial predators and the question is '*why do they do it?*'

Such predators can continue to operate mostly due to two factors: they imply that if the woman remains silent, if she doesn't say no, they can assume that she has given her consent. Secondly, if she doesn't say no either, if she doesn't say stop, it's also an implicit permission. While women must therefore be able to say no and be heard, men must also start to say no to sexual assault, not in my name and to stand up against it.

It's highly damaging to see reports of false accusations of rape making the headlines in the media as such false accusations constitute a very small number of reports, only 1 or 2%. However, the media continues to report this widely, as media and the public tend not to believe women. As an example, it took 50 years for the public to understand and to accept that wage discrimination was and is still occurring. We now see the same problem with sexual assault: women are not believed.

5. What advice would you give to parents of young boys today?

When you take a look at little boys, aged between one and five, they are happy. Happy to play, to dress in a similar way to girls, they can still play easily with girls and with so-called girls' toys. But then, something happens when they hit primary school. Suddenly they start learning that boys are better than girls: they hear that from parents, from our culture, from cartoons, from teachers.

If parents want to change this, they must continue to encourage friendships between boys and girls all throughout their lives. The more friendships a boy has with girls, the happier and healthier the boys are.

6. What is the key message of "The Mask You Live In" and how do you hope this documentary can make a difference in the public opinion?

The Mask You Live In shows the ways in which we police boys to conform to a certain idea of masculinity, an idea which shuts them down and limits their development and potential. You don't want boys to get shut down; instead you want them to explore all the options and roles opened to them.

The most depressing sentence in education is when people say that boys will be boys. It implies that boys will always be slightly violent, repulsive animals, as that sentence is always used in a negative context, in the form of male bashing or when little boys misbehave. I believe we can do much better than that: boys can be people, human beings.

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Dr. Michael Kimmel is an American sociologist, specialised in gender studies. He is the Director of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at Stony Brook University in New York. Kimmel is also a spokesperson of the National Organisation for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS).

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