

WORKING WITH MEN: A RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW

Kate Cavanagh and Vivienne Cree

In November 1997 issue of **Scottish Affairs**, Julie Brownlie reviewed our book **Working with Men. Feminism and Social Work**. We now take this opportunity to respond to the review and to reiterate some of the central debates and issues presented in what has been described in another review as a 'groundbreaking book' (**Professional Social Work**, February 1997).

Ms Brownlie's review usefully highlights and describes in some detail a number of important themes from the book which she herself identifies as constructive and thought-provoking. On the other hand, however, aspects of the review are less well formulated, at times merely serving to reinforce points already made in the book itself. There are also, disappointingly, straightforward inaccuracies and misinterpretations in the review. Most importantly she misrepresents the central aim of the book, which is not 'to make visible the place of men in social work practice, education and research', but rather to examine the hitherto unexplored subject of feminist practice with men. In addition, the reviewer sometimes seems to misunderstand the complexities involved in this work, minimising the book's contributors' engagement with, and reflection upon, the inevitable tensions and contradictions which many feminists in social work are struggling with on a day-to-day basis. For example, she underestimates the complexities of the epistemological and methodological issues which are raised by Cavanagh and Lewis in their account of interviewing violent men, and fails to acknowledge the exploration of the difficulties in co-working articulated in the chapters by Wilson and Wright. Thus this rather lengthy review

*Kate Cavanagh is in the Department of Social Work, Glasgow University and Vivienne Cree is in the Department of Social Work, Edinburgh University. **Working with Men: Feminism and Social Work** is published by Routledge (pb, £14.99), ISBN 0415111854.*

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unfortunately tends towards over-assumptive description rather than meaningful and appropriate reflection on the substance of the book itself.

Working with Men is the first text of its kind which engages with the contentious issue of feminist practice with men. It is an edited collection of chapters written by feminists who come from a variety of standpoints but are united by their view that transforming the gendered production systems which continue to oppress women necessitates critical engagement with men. Historically, men have been absent from the social work discourse which has focused on women. For the last two decades, feminists have quite rightly criticised the ways in which women have been pathologised and discriminated against in social work. Even in situations where women are not 'clients' seeking social work help, they are usually the focus of social work intervention by dint of their roles as carers. Feminist practitioners, in recognising the inadequacy of the social work response to women, have developed alternative services for women and children. **Working with Men** argues that whilst forefronting women continues to be necessary, it is not sufficient in itself, particularly given many years of New Right thinking which has undermined the hard-fought gains achieved by over 20 years of feminist activism.

While the focus of feminist social work and social workers has been on women, discourses around men and masculinities have grown. Some of this literature has its origins in the women's movement and may be seen as pro-feminist in orientation and practice. However, there has been a gradual encroachment of anti-feminist masculinist literature which is now informing knowledge within the social sciences generally. Many feminists have been reluctant to explore the issue of working with men or to generate a discourse which might inform feminist strategies for the transformation of masculinity. This position becomes untenable when viewed in the context of recent developments in social work practice. Direct work with men in social work is growing, and practice initiatives are now influenced by masculinist ideas and analyses, some of which are antithetical to the interests of women. Given this reality, **Working with Men** argues not only that social work practice with men must be informed by women and women's experiences, but also, more contentiously, that feminist social work must go further than this by making efforts to challenge and change men through developing a range of strategies which incorporate direct work with men. Scully (1990) asserts that women must invade and critically examine the social constructions of men. All the contributors to **Working with Men** have not only been doing just that, but have been part of a feminist enterprise which, through writing about and

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reflecting upon this experience, has attempted to expand the boundaries of feminist discourse and practice.

It is important to make a statement about our position in terms of the essentialist debates about men and masculinities. In the first chapter of **Working with Men**, we argue that just as there is no single category 'woman', so there is no unitary category 'man'; on the contrary, there are many different ways of expressing femininities and masculinities. Nevertheless, this in no way detracts from the ways in which the collective power of men continues to exist and to be perpetuated in individual, interactional and institutional contexts.

Working with Men is a beginning. We hope that the important insights, dilemmas, and contradictions discussed by the contributors will encourage other feminists to reflect on the broader debate about feminism and men. Ramazanoglu asserts that 'the contractions of feminist theory show quite clearly the need to struggle with men while simultaneously struggling against them (Ramazanoglu 1989, p.190). This was our challenge: it continues to be so.

REFERENCES

- Ramazanoglu, C. (1989) **Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression**, London: Routledge.
- Scully, D. (1990) **Understanding Sexual Violence**, London: Harper Collins Academic.

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