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For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity.¹

By Najla Al-Fardan²

In this benevolent and adept social evaluation, journalist and author Elizabeth Plank (Liz Plank) highlights the dangers posed by an incomplete and ongoing gender revolution. She focuses her perspective on the limited attention given to the outdated and obsolete expectations of contemporary men. Plank remarks that the masculine norms of the contemporary society are related to the physical and psychological health crisis of the male population.

According to Plank, there is an immense threat to mankind and that threat stems from the current definition of masculinity itself. She references *toxic masculinity* as the root of all or most of the sufferings that mankind undergoes across the globe. Though the title of the book may create an expectation that the content would be anti-male, Plank's focus is in explaining that the victims of this immensely toxic masculinity are by themselves men and not women. She points to the fact that toxic masculinity is a rather serious contemporary social issue, that in turn, is connected to all the concerns, injustices, and horrors that we are experiencing in the world today.

Plank argues that men are responsible for most of the rape and murder that happens around the world, and further points to the fact that suicides are more extensive among men (Plank, 2019, p. 21). Plank's rationale is rooted in toxic masculinity, an outcome of a social system where boys from a young age inherit the understanding that "violence is encouraged, even rewarded, while proximity with tenderness is penalized" (Plank, 2019, p. 03). The notion of what it means to be a "man" is created from childhood in a global culture "that teaches stoicism over authenticity, dominance over empathy...boys become fluent in emotional self-censorship" (Plank, 2019, p. 03). Thus, the act of numbing and consequently, failing to understand emotions for the sake of appearing more "manly" naturally forgoes the ability to feel deep love, empathy, compassion, and connection; arguably, all emotions that require awareness and understanding. Hence, Plank argues that crime rates are prevalent among white men due to the suppression and lack of understanding of the emotions that are associated with human connection. While this may be true, Plank fails to recognize multiple variables that may also influence suicide and rape such as neighborhood norms, parent's educational background, the environment in which a child is raised in, and socioeconomic status, among others. It is evident that Plank takes on a heightened and extreme stance on the topic of masculinity and its toxic influence and role in society.

Plank begins her book with a startling claim that every mass shooting in the United States was perpetrated by white men (Plank, 2019, p. 12). It is evident that this claim is simply not accurate since there have been multiple shooting incidents instigated by non-white men. Plank defines mass shootings as a "uniquely white male disease" (Plank, 2019, p. 12), which is an extreme and exaggerated viewpoint, as the concept of masculinity is not unique to white men.

Plank identifies the influence of toxic masculinity as the primary reason of why men find it difficult to maintain simple relationships (Plank, 2019, p. 14). She additionally makes the argument that feelings of loneliness are prevalent among men as result of toxic masculinity. Men

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are instructed that intimacy is a sign of weakness, and because of this, they are unable to sustain long lasting relationships that eventually require the opening of intimacy and vulnerability (Plank, 2019, p. 14). Multiple articles have been published that focus on the global epidemic of loneliness in today's culture; the emotional state is hardly gender-biased in research and discussion. Further, the rise of technology, social media alternatives to human interaction and entertainment, longer work hours, and a rising universal culture that values individualism over community bonding may also be significant attributes to explain increasing rates of loneliness and depression. It is certainly not limited to toxic masculinity. It is evident based on her discussion that Plank views the issue of toxic masculinity as central, and a common recurring theme that explains all the undesirable situations and circumstances experienced by men. If a man scrapes his knee: toxic masculinity or spills his coffee: toxic masculinity. If a man is experiencing a breakup in a relationship: toxic masculinity. If a man is in desperate need of low-income housing, then you can be well sure that it is solely due to toxic masculinity.

Further, Plank is extremely selective and vague in the kind of studies she quotes in her work to support her argument. When there is a fear that research would weaken her argument, she has through omission, seemingly ignored these studies. The author cites multiple life concepts and understandings of Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology who is also the best-selling author of the book "12 Rules of Life". Plank cites a combination of specific, incomplete ideas and quotes by Peterson that can be easily misinterpreted in a negative manner to depict a visual image of what toxic masculinity looks like. She only addresses the parts of Peterson's work that serve her argument well and goes on to make a very tangential conclusion that the presence of toxic masculinity is directly associated with conflict.

Another extreme argument which Plank posits is that toxic masculinity, specific to the idea of male dominance, reveals itself in Disney cartoons such as Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, and Sleeping Beauty. Plank argues that childhood exposure to cartoons that frequently depict the man as the savior of the women establishes the idea that women need to be saved and protected by men. Additionally, she mentions that the endings of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty create the notion that a kiss (or any form physical touch) without consent is an acceptable behavior for a man toward a woman. She defines the normalization of this behavior as a form of toxic masculinity targeted to children. The perception provided by Plank seems to be in opposition of Walt Disney. The very intention and nature of Disney cartoons according to Walt Disney himself were to provide beautiful stories and fairytales, to spur feelings of hope and capability to young children. Plank finds the Disney storylines insulting to men and women, yet it may be valuable at times to see things simply for what they truly are and recognize its original intention, instead of inferring intention, in this case a debatable gender characterization and insult within the storyline.

Plank's call in her book is for mindful masculinity, which the author does not seem to clearly explain, leaving the concept vague. According to Plank, the "moral masculinity panic" is what traps men in obsolete, pseudoscientific, and even self-fulfilling ideas in relation to their testosterone and abuse, while also limiting their progress into caring professions where employment opportunities are on the rise. She continues by noting that men who are romantically keen about women are caught between the cultural model of suppressing the male emotion and the need for emotional fluency in establishing the expectations of women.

Plank intermingles brief sketches of individual men thereby allowing the reader to explore a few intersections of aspects such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, and emotional frailty with respect to the conventional norms associated with the so-called toxic masculinity. In spite of the interpretive bias in the text, Plank provides a thoughtful albeit erratic perspective of men. Her

interviews promote an emotional reaction from men that present masculinity in a complex perspective, surfacing the contemporary issues that men are presently dealing with. While the topic of toxic masculinity may surely provide assistance to explain matters such as declining relationships, a rise in loneliness, and increasing crime rates, the arguments are skewed and performed in a way that puts toxic masculinity right in the center; in bold highlight. The value of Plank's work can be found in the surfacing of another perspective of the assessment of gender norms. By focusing on the societal limitations afforded to men, she increases the scope of the discussion on gender equality.