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Raheleh AkhaviZadegan
International American School of Cancun, Mexico

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Film Review: *Beyond Men and Masculinity*—Exploring the Detrimental Effects of Masculinity and Envisioning a New Paradigm

Reviewed by Raheleh AkhaviZadegan

**Film Information**

**Title:** Beyond Men and Masculinity  
**Director:** Alex Gabbay  
**Country of origin:** United Kingdom  
**Year:** 2020  
**Length:** 56 minutes  
**Original language:** English, Japanese, and Hebrew with English subtitles  
**Genre:** Documentary  
**Educational Distributor:** GOOD DOCS

**Abstract**

The documentary *Beyond Men and Masculinity* explores the negative impact of traditional masculinity on men’s mental and emotional health, as well as its broader societal implications. It advocates for a redefined version of masculinity based on vulnerability, compassion, and equality. The experts in the documentary emphasize the need for men to express their emotions, challenge traditional gender norms, and create a more just and equitable society. By redefining masculinity, the documentary envisions a future where men can thrive beyond rigid expectations and embrace their authentic selves, leading to improved mental health, reduced violence, and stronger communities.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Mental health, Vulnerability, Compassion, Equality, Emotional expression, Societal transformation

**Introduction**

Alex Gabbay’s documentary *Beyond Men and Masculinity* (2020) delves into the intricate web of traditional masculinity, exposing its harmful effects on individuals and society as a whole. The film meticulously dissects the insidious ways in which boys are indoctrinated into the dominant gender ideology, fostering notions of male superiority and suppressing emotional expression from a young age. This early socialization, starting as early as 3-5 years old, disconnects boys from their vulnerability and sets the stage for a lifetime of personal and societal struggles.

Gabbay’s exploration transcends mere exposition, incorporating insightful perspectives from renowned experts like Carol Gilligan and Terry Real. They illuminate the psychological and social repercussions of patriarchy, highlighting how early socialization conditions boys to suppress emotions, leading to a disconnect from their authentic selves and hindering healthy relationship formation. This forced emotional detachment, experts argue, contributes to high rates of male

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1 Dr. Raheleh AkhaviZadegan is an English Literature Teacher Educator at International American School of Cancun, Mexico. She completed her Ph.D. in 2019 at the University of Tehran. A seasoned educator and scholar with 20 years of experience in the field of English language and literature learning and teaching, she is also a prolific writer and researcher, publishing numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals. She can be reached at [www.linkedin.com/in/raheleh-akhavizadegan](http://www.linkedin.com/in/raheleh-akhavizadegan) and [rahelehakhavizadegan@gmail.com](mailto:rahelehakhavizadegan@gmail.com).
violence and mental health problems, as exemplified by interviewee Chris’s experience of shame and anger stemming from a childhood incident.

The film includes interviews with various experts and scholars as testimony. Relationship expert Terry Real further emphasizes the detrimental impact of patriarchy on interpersonal relationships, advocating for “relational empowerment” over the isolated “personal empowerment” emphasized by traditional masculinity. Judith Chu’s research underscores the pressure boys face to conform to stereotypical expectations, leading them to distance themselves from so-called feminine traits like sensitivity and empathy. C.J. Pascoe’s work sheds light on the pervasiveness of homophobic slurs as a tool to enforce conformity and police masculinity performances.

However, the film does not merely dwell on the negatives. It showcases communities like the Ever Forward Club and Felix Falkenhahn’s groups that provide safe spaces for men to explore their vulnerability, process emotions, and build healthy relationships, offering a path toward healing and transformation. The documentary ultimately culminates in a call for a new definition of masculinity in the 21st century. Gabbay argues for a vision of manhood built on kindness, compassion, and equality, and showcases men who are actively challenging traditional norms and redefining what it means to be a man. By illuminating the detrimental effects of traditional masculinity and offering a glimpse into a more fulfilling alternative, Beyond Men and Masculinity sparks a crucial conversation about redefining manhood and creating a more equitable and compassionate world for all.

Analysis

The documentary Beyond Men and Masculinity dissects the complex connection between gender and power, revealing its impact on individuals and societal structures. The core message revolves around the harmful nature of traditional masculinity and its role in perpetuating power imbalances. Expert voices like Terry Real and Alex Gabbay emphasize that traditional masculinity is inherently linked to power and dominance. This fosters the belief that men must be in control and superior to others, creating a societal hierarchy where men occupy the top positions. Judith Chu and C.J. Pascoe delve into the patriarchal system that grants men power and privilege. This system thrives on the notion that masculinity is the norm and femininity is other, creating an unfair and unequal society. The documentary showcases how traditional masculinity negatively impacts men like interviewee Chris, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Carol Gilligan further highlights its detrimental effect on mental health, contributing to depression, anxiety, and other issues. Ashanti Branch and Alex Gabbay emphasize that challenging traditional masculinity is not just about individual growth, but about creating a more equitable society for everyone. This requires dismantling the hierarchy and fostering a world where everyone can be their authentic selves. Experts like Terry Real and Carol Gilligan envision a future where a redefined masculinity reigns, one that is rooted in kindness, compassion, and equality. This new definition would acknowledge and value all emotions, regardless of their association with traditional gender norms. By exposing the harmful power dynamics embedded in our current system, Beyond Men and Masculinity invites us to question the status quo and work towards a future where gender no longer dictates one’s access to power and fulfillment.

Beyond Men and Masculinity explores how traditional masculinity discourages vulnerability, equating it with weakness and inadequacy. This pressure to conform can lead to emotional repression and negative consequences for men’s mental and physical health. However, the documentary reframes vulnerability as a strength, arguing that it allows men to connect with others on a deeper level and build authentic relationships. Experts like Terry Real and Carol Gilligan emphasize that men’s well-being and ability to connect depend on expressing their full
range of emotions, including vulnerability. Interviewees like Chris highlight their personal journeys, recognizing that true strength comes from embracing their emotions. Safe spaces created by organizations like the Ever Forward Club help men heal from trauma and develop healthy relationships through open communication about their feelings. Felix Falkenhahn and Judith Chu emphasize the importance of fostering emotional literacy in men, teaching them healthy communication skills, and encouraging boys to express emotions from a young age to avoid the harmful effects of traditional masculinity. Terry Real and Alex Gabbay hope that redefining masculinity will create a more compassionate and just society where connection and compassion are valued above power and dominance, leading to a future of well-being for all.

The emotional burden of traditional masculinity is unveiled by showing the detrimental impact of traditional gender roles on men’s mental and emotional health. The pressure to conform to the “man up” culture encourages men to suppress their emotions, leading to emotional isolation and a disconnect from their authentic selves. As C.J. Pascoe, a Gender Studies scholar, points out, this suppression can lead to harmful coping mechanisms and hinder healthy relationships. The documentary further highlights the link between traditional masculinity and negative mental health outcomes. Carol Gilligan, a psychologist, emphasizes that men adhering to these rigid expectations experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Interviewee Chris exemplifies this struggle, highlighting how suppressing his sadness due to societal expectations led to feelings of isolation and a struggle to cope with emotions in a healthy way. Judith Chu, a Gender Studies professor, emphasizes the detrimental impact of traditional masculinity on relationships. The pressure to be strong and dominant often prevents men from expressing vulnerability and intimacy, leading to difficulties in communication and conflict resolution. This struggle is further echoed by Ashanti Branch, who emphasizes the challenges men face in building healthy relationships due to their adherence to restrictive gender roles. However, the documentary also offers hope for healing and transformation. Felix Falkenhahn, a facilitator of men’s emotional literacy groups, highlights the importance of creating safe spaces for men to explore their emotions and vulnerabilities. This exploration, as Alex Gabbay, the filmmaker, points out, allows men to connect with others on a deeper level, experience true intimacy, and begin to heal from the harmful effects of traditional masculinity.

While traditional masculinity often discourages vulnerability and emotional expression, experts like Terry Real emphasize the importance of relational empowerment for well-being, arguing that “patriarchy teaches men to disconnect, not connect.” This disconnect, as C.J. Pascoe further explains, is ingrained through “a script... about being emotionally stoic.” Consequently, men struggle to communicate their feelings and build intimate relationships. However, the documentary offers hope through healing facilitated by communication. Ashanti Branch highlights how sharing stories and being vulnerable “opens up the door to healing and transformation,” allowing men to connect and build healthier relationships. Felix Falkenhahn further emphasizes the importance of language, stating that “we need to create a space where men can express themselves authentically without judgment,” especially in the context of trauma and sexual assault. Encouraging men to openly communicate their experiences is presented as essential for mental health and healing. Redefining masculine communication involves teaching men a new language that embraces vulnerability and emotional expression. Alex Gabbay states, “It’s time for men to move beyond the limitations of traditional masculinity... This means learning to communicate in a way that is honest, vulnerable, and respectful.” Carol Gilligan adds that “men need to be able to express their full range of emotions, not just anger. We need to create a society where all emotions are valued and respected.” This reframing aims to help men separate their masculinity from societal expectations and encourages them to communicate authentically.
The documentary addresses how the lack of emotional communication and vulnerability can negatively impact relationships. Judith Chu argues that “boys are socialized to distance themselves from anything that is seen as feminine, including sensitivity and empathy. This can make it difficult for them to form and maintain healthy relationships.” Interviewee Chris exemplifies this struggle, expressing how being told to “man up” hindered his emotional expression and led to conflict in his relationships. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of empowering young boys to express themselves authentically and develop healthy communication skills. Felix Falkenhahn believes that “we need to start teaching boys about healthy communication at an early age,” while C.J. Pascoe argues that “by challenging traditional gender norms, we can create a world where all young people feel empowered to express themselves authentically.” This exploration of vulnerability, communication, and empowerment in Beyond Men and Masculinity highlights the potential for men to move beyond restrictive societal expectations and embrace a more fulfilling and authentic experience of masculinity.

“The whole point of patriarchy,” argues relationship expert Terry Real, “is to teach men to disconnect, not connect. It teaches men to prioritize personal empowerment over relational empowerment. But what humans need for well-being is relational empowerment.” As C.J. Pascoe, Gender Studies scholar, observes, “masculinity is a performance. It's a script you learn as a boy. And a big part of that script is about being emotionally stoic. It is about not showing fear, not showing sadness, not showing pain.” This pressure to conform to a narrow definition of masculinity often discourages vulnerability and emotional expression, impacting men’s ability to connect and form healthy relationships. However, the film offers hope through open communication. Ashanti Branch, of the Ever Forward Club, emphasizes that “when men are able to share their stories and be vulnerable, it opens up the door to healing and transformation. It allows them to connect with others on a deeper level and build healthier relationships.” This act of vulnerability, Felix Falkenhahn, men’s emotional literacy group facilitator, argues, requires creating a safe space where “men can express themselves authentically without judgment,” particularly in the context of trauma and sexual assault. As Alex Gabbay urges, “it's time for men to move beyond the limitations of traditional masculinity and embrace a new definition that is based on kindness, compassion, and equality. This means learning to communicate in a way that is honest, vulnerable, and respectful.” This reframing aims to help men separate their masculinity from societal expectations and encourages them to communicate authentically.

The documentary Beyond Men and Masculinity delves into the harmful effects of traditional masculinity and advocates for a redefined version based on vulnerability, compassion, and equality. This shift, as Terry Real, a relationship expert, argues, has broader social and political implications: “Patriarchy is a system that benefits a small group of people at the expense of everyone else. By redefining masculinity, we can begin to dismantle this system and create a more just and equitable society for all.” Judith Chu, Gender Studies professor, further emphasizes the detrimental impact of traditional masculinity, stating that “it is built upon the idea of male dominance and female subordination. This leads to a society where women are discriminated against and marginalized.”

Alex Gabbay’s film highlights the positive impact of challenging traditional masculinity: “When men challenge traditional masculinity, it benefits everyone. It creates a more level playing field for women and allows everyone to be their authentic selves.” By redefining masculinity, C.J. Pascoe believes we can create a less crime-ridden society: “The pressure to conform to traditional masculinity often leads to violence and crime. By redefining masculinity, we can create a society where men feel less pressure to act in violent ways.” Terry Real further supports this idea, stating that “when men are able to express their emotions in a healthy way, they are less likely to become violent or abusive.” Ashanti Branch highlights the positive impact of redefined masculinity on
communities: “When men are able to connect with each other on a deeper level, it creates stronger communities where everyone can thrive.” Alex Gabbay further emphasizes the broader societal impact: “Redefining masculinity is not just about changing individual men. It’s about changing the world we live in. It’s about creating a world where everyone is free to be themselves.” The film sheds light on the potential for a more just, equitable, and compassionate society through a redefined understanding of masculinity. The documentary’s call for change extends beyond individual transformations, urging societal shifts toward gender equality, reduced violence, improved mental health, and ultimately, a world where everyone can thrive.

Conclusion

The documentary Beyond Men and Masculinity provides a thought-provoking analysis of the connection between gender and power, highlighting the harmful nature of traditional masculinity and its impact on individuals and society. Through expert insights and personal stories, the documentary exposes the power dynamics and patriarchal system that perpetuate gender inequality and restrict men’s emotional expression. It delves into the emotional burden men face in conforming to societal expectations, leading to isolation, mental health issues, and difficulties in building healthy relationships. However, the documentary also offers hope for healing and transformation. It emphasizes the importance of vulnerability, emotional expression, and authentic communication as key components of men’s well-being and personal growth. By challenging traditional masculinity and advocating for a redefined concept rooted in compassion, connection, and equality, Beyond Men and Masculinity envisions a future where gender no longer dictates access to power and fulfillment. Ultimately, the documentary invites viewers to question the status quo and work towards a more equitable society that values and respects the full range of emotions for everyone.