

Adonis Mirror



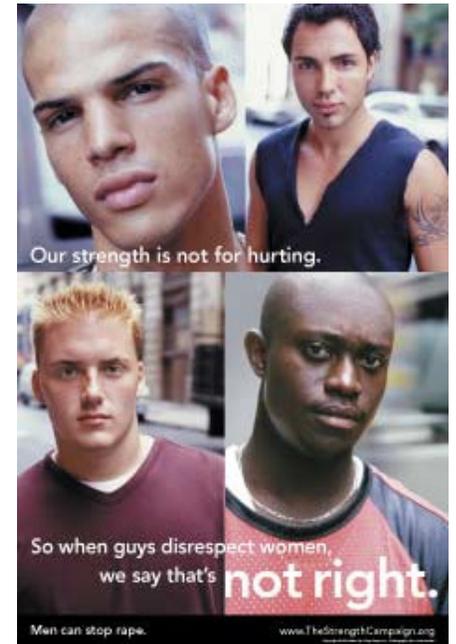
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Our Humanity is not in our Strength

By Richard Leader

Marc Lépine walked into the École Polytechnique on December 6, 1989 and murdered 14 female students, severely injuring nearly as many. He specifically blamed feminism for inspiring his actions—believing that affirmative action policies had denied him his rightful place in the world as a successful engineer—and saw his violence against those women as a political act of protest. However, he made no such response against the men of the Canadian military who had rejected him previously, nor against the men of the university who denied him his application: those men were protected from his wrath through the misogyny that both they—male society in general—and Lépine held in common. Two years later the White Ribbon Campaign was formed, now a multinational organization of men who work to raise awareness of male violence towards women. They do this through the wearing of the eponymous white ribbons, outreach events, and various media campaigns.

Their latest effort has been the adoption of numerous posters presenting a similar theme, the “my strength is not for hurting” series (or simply the “Strength Campaign” for those participating outside of Canada through Men Can Stop Rape.org, the group that first created this line back in 2001), which all include that same basic quotation as a headline. The cornerstone poster depicts four men of various ethnicities with the headline followed by a somewhat languid



“so when guys disrespect women, we say that’s **not right.**” Other versions display those same four men (although some models appear in additional online-posters) paired with women of ostensibly similar or matching ethnicities, bearing the quotes:

So when I wasn’t sure how she felt, **I asked***

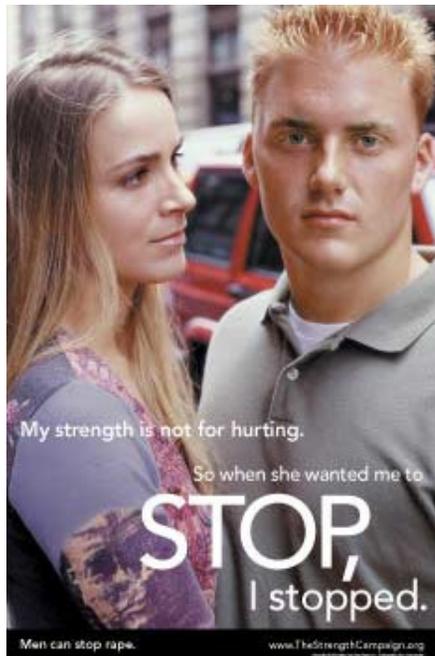
So when she wanted me to STOP, **I stopped**

So when she said **no**, I said OK*

So when I wanted to and she didn’t, **we didn’t**

*at least two separate posters use this text

Of the six separate heterosexual groupings I came across, only one included a couple that most people would interpret as non-Hispanic “Caucasians,” something that seems to indicate that minority men are more likely to be perpetrators of violence—at least when all the images are presented together at once on a website.



This is perhaps an unfortunate consequence, one would hope, of trying to offer inclusive images so local workers can best reflect their own communities, but an impression that the White Ribbon Campaign should have been aware of creating given that Marc Lépine’s victims were cause for national alarm when those of Robert Pickton, a man who killed over sixty women in the Vancouver region, were not afforded that same urgency as many of them were being exploited in the sex industry. Both race and class have had a tremendous impact on how men have historically

responded to reports of their violence against women and this history is something of which the White Ribbon Campaign should well remain cognizant.

Perhaps more surprising is how the text is itself a far cry from what many of the White Ribbon Campaign’s own pro-feminist writers (such as Michael Kaufman) have long been saying about masculinity and even other posters the organization has promoted in the past. One of which was an art-nouveau sketch of a figure (fairly low rent compared to the slick photography of the Strength Campaign) that asked:

Have you ever noticed the WORST thing you can call a MAN is a WOMAN?

What does that say about how we view women?

Work for gender equality, healthy relationships, and an end to violence against women.

Yet it is now men’s purported strength that will protect women; where women are both cast as inherently weak even as violence is presented as a choice each man can make—and the possession of that choice itself is indicative of his rightful status as a man and not a woman. While the literature of the Strength Campaign’s organizers (most of which is disseminated by the US based component at Men Can Stop Rape.org or MCSR, which seems to have far less of a bedrock in feminism and more in traditional urban social-services, and thus their term for the campaign will be used below) indicates that they have made this deliberate focus on ‘choice’ in order to prove that male violence is not inevitable. While a sensible and optimistic enough conclusion on its own, this has come at the cost of making it appear that male domination is certain: as if male strength and female weakness is an unassailable fact.

That criticism itself certainly opens up unintended avenues (many antifeminists enjoy arguing that women are the primary cause of domestic violence and men its chief victims) that I wish to head off, but the focus on choice is an especially dangerous one given that it sets up a form of patriarchal apotheosis where every man is allowed to consider himself the fate-maker of the women

around him. He can choose rightly or wrongly—just as the characters of male fantasy life in scenarios out of *Star Wars* and the like can stray to one side of “The Force” or another—but the choice remains in his male hands and those who choose ‘correctly’ tend to believe themselves owed a reward for their benevolence. Violence against women is not a choice and neither should its continued existence also benefit those men who do not perpetrate it themselves, as such an incentive certainly gives them a vested interest in its perpetuation—so long as it stays outside of their own immediate sphere of relations.

While the US contingent is the largest backer of the Strength Campaign, having offering cutely named “Strength Training” workshops and the like since early 2001, Chris Holz, co-chair of the White Ribbon Campaign, had this to say about their adoption of the program (although he fails to mention that it is over four years old and not something they devised themselves) in their spring 2005 newsletter:

White Ribbon is launching an incredible campaign aimed at young men. We’ve produced five posters that are on their way to schools and workplaces across Canada. Each has a positive message about the difference men can make in the lives of the women they care about. Trial runs have showed these images have a huge impact.

Such an impact is to be expected: men are being told exactly what they want to hear, that they are indeed men, and being a man means something. Conversely, their previous attempt at a poster that asked why “the worst thing you can call a man is a woman” shipped with a separate bit of paper that had to explain the more recondite themes it was exploring, disclaiming its use of expressions such as “bitch” and “sissy,” using nearly 250 words to connect denigration of ‘the feminine’ to violence against women in case the poster itself was not perfectly capable of connecting the dots. Chivalry, on the other hand, is a subject with which most men are intimately familiar.

The efficacy of this “impact” must be called into question, however, as appeals to men’s strength are nothing new in this arena. Colleges and universities have long held “real men” essay contests



with slogans such as “real men don’t rape” and the National Organization for Women (NOW) even sells a “Real Men Don’t Use Violence” bumper sticker, all setting up those men who act out violently as defective, rather than normative, in their masculinity. This is an important reversal to take note of given the fact that those behind these marketing campaigns tend to believe—or are forced to believe by the ‘gender experts,’ rather than feminists, who are increasingly acting as gatekeepers when it comes to such public discourse—in a spectrum of masculinity. It is then posited that only certain segments of this continuum are malignant as the overwhelming majority of “masculinities” are themselves oppressed by a more “dominant” or “hegemonic” masculinity, and are thus positive or at least benign due to their subordination. This vested interest in keeping masculinity around as a concrete entity requires substantial sleight of hand: “real men” campaigns are required to see the most violent sorts of masculinity as aberrations, mistakes in an inherently noble archetype of protectors and defenders, and yet the adherents to masculine personas who do not fully partake in the bounties of patriarchy (often won through sanctioned violence) are simultaneously also entitled to see themselves as subordinated in an attempt to have it both ways. The professed “dominant” masculinity becomes one of rhetorical convenience.

These supposed gender experts, rather than feminists (especially radical feminists who are themselves frequently viewed as oppressors), are often found on the periphery of such pro-feminist actions. The last and most likely final issue of *Brother*, a magazine put out by the National Organization of Men against Sexism (NOMAS), in winter of 2001 included an advertisement for GenderPAC—a group more interested in the oppression of “gender expression” than more serious violations of human rights on account of sex—not far from its praise of a billboard put up by a number of men in Maine that offered “Strong Men Don’t Bully” as its anti-domestic violence message. That missive itself ties into an undercurrent of patriarchal mandates declaring that it is only weak or powerless men who are forced to rely on violence to control their women; a real man can exhort control much like a puppeteer using his resources of capitalism and religion to achieve the same effect far more gracefully.

While organizations such as GenderPAC (who believe that “gender ought to be protected as a basic civil right”) tend to be gender lovers rather than gender abolitionists, even though claims to the contrary are often made, such encouragement of masculinity is especially dangerous in the context of violence prevention. If the legitimization of the so-called subordinated masculinities—especially that of drag kings, “female-to-male” transsexuals, or even that of lesbian sadomasochists who sometimes visit actual harm to their female sexual partners under the rubric that it being consensual trumps its factual status as domestic violence—results in a wider range of masculinity being considered to be both disenfranchised and positive, where the *only* “hegemonic” agents are not just rich, white, and heterosexual but also high school prom kings, football players, and senators, a wide swath of the most “traditional” forms of masculinity are also excused by this framing. Men Can Stop Rape refers to these allegedly beneficial forms of masculinity as “counter-stories” to the negative “dominant story,” and concludes their list of objectives for Strength Training with the futile hope that they can “Positively re-vision masculinity in order to promote nonviolence and gender equity.”

This presumption of gender and gender roles as healthy—provided one can pick and choose a favorite among them—is gaining traction especially amongst younger people. A 2005 “Visions in Feminism” conference held at the University of Maryland not only had a strong transgender component to its curriculum, but also a segment on masculinity in punk rock music, proposing “because we believe in the do-it-ourselves ethos, we will also look ahead to the creation of a positive, non-oppressive masculinity for our community and beyond.” Though now mostly defunct, a group hosted by Yahoo.com calling itself “malefeminists” has the following as its mission statement:

We’re about the role feminism ought to play in MEN’S lives & having the courage to RESPECT and ENCOURAGE women in every way.

Most of all we’re about STRENGTH. The STRENGTH to appreciate independent, outspoken women, the STRENGTH to challenge our own pre-conceptions, the STRENGTH to live as mature, developed MEN instead of the weak, angry stereotypes we see every day.

Rather than “refusing to be a man” as John Stoltenberg wrote in decades past, new and improved forms of masculinity are seen as the preferred path for the next generation, where men are men and women are women—and if anyone objects to that then they at least have the option of switching. Instead of divorcing actions, ideas, or cultural props and their subsequent interpretation from gender, things such as “nurturing masculinity” and “aggressive femininity” are proposed, which ever solidifies gender as a reality despite—perhaps—softening the blow to those such categories are imposed upon. Manhood is allowed to remain more desirable than personhood, something this Liberal pursuit has very much in common with the Promise Keepers on the Right. Consider the “praise” that Men Can Stop Rape uses to advertise the efficacy of their efforts and how much of it is wedded to idealized forms of masculinity:

Wow! What great work you are doing. When we invited you to speak at our 2001 Education Director's Retreat...we had seen the Strength Campaign posters in the metro stops around DC [and] were already impressed with your work...Too often masculinity has been defined solely in terms of "power over someone." Your messages of redefining masculinity to include nurturing and caring are critical tools and strategies to changing our culture and to bringing, as our conference said, "hope for humanity."

—Glenn Northern, Program Manager, Planned Parenthood Federation of America

We build the best defenses against assault, but attacking the problem at its root is the only real solution. The most promising group on the front lines is an organization called Men Can Stop Rape. Their provocative ad campaign features photos of young, soap-opera-quality chiseled hunks and gorgeous, full-lipped women with messages like, "My strength is not for hurting, so when I wanted to and she didn't, we didn't." If one-third of today's college men find forcing sex on a woman acceptable, maybe [Men Can Stop Rape] will set the new trend of responsible masculinity. I, for one, find it exceedingly sexy.

—Megan Dively, Student Columnist for *The Penn*, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

This campaign is very refreshing. I particularly like the positive direction of the ads as they show men who look "cool" and like a part of the "in crowd" caring for others in a non-wimpy way. Kudos to the design team.

—Shelley Bearman, Kansas Department of Health and Environment

I love that the posters give "real men" a chance to be social change agents while still claiming their masculinity. I love that your [poster] series sends this message to men of all racial/ethnic groups. Also, I like that the poster series doesn't present itself as radical work—it seems like "normal guy" stuff.

—Deirdre Rosenfeld, Director, Women's Center, Minnesota State University

It would be dishonest not to admit that a good measure of my objection to the Strength Campaign is out of selfishness. Whether I am or even feel like a "normal guy" is a pointless question to entertain, but just as those men with the most patriarchal power are paradoxically most of use—and thus doubly privileged—to many segments of the feminist movement, it seems that pro-feminists are themselves being asked to take the backseat to the men (and their sexy masculinity) whom we might consider to be our own oppressors. For my own part, I realize that such jealousy or anger is of limited value: if one woman is saved from male violence due to the efforts of the Strength Campaign, then it has indeed accomplished something. However, if it is the men who are seen as the most threatening to women who are most deserving of special dispensation—namely the continual flattering of the same masculinity that serves as the bedrock for women's fear—feminists themselves have good reason to find this work suspect: indeed, it is Men Can Stop Rape and not a more forthright Men Can Stop Raping.

Identity is at the core of this issue. Like conservatives who are currently in the midst of an internal struggle, overreacting to how religion itself has become seen as effeminate in certain respects (and thus they are attempting to infuse a fair amount of macho energy back into services to win back those more important male souls), Leftist anti-domestic violence efforts are also caught in a paradox. At once bastions of patriarchal power such as athletics and fraternal orders are considered hotbeds when it comes to the perpetration of violence itself, and yet their power—both practical and semiotic—is

necessary to reach boys and men “where they are,” lest they be uninterested in or even offended by the anti-violence message. Men Can Stop Rape relied on professional athletes and unrelenting sports messages for their single issue of *REP Magazine* (which one might presume is not aging well as they continue to push it nearly five years after it was developed) and in a January 2004 resource sheet advises:

Meet men where they are. Clearly in doing this work we want men to grow in their awareness of the issues and in their willingness to act to prevent violence against women. However, we can't let our vision of where we want them to go obscure our sense of where they are, not only in terms of masculinity, but in other ways as well:

1) Geographically 2) Culturally 3) Emotionally

It's important to let men teach us about where they are during workshops. If they can't connect with the music or movies or actors we use as examples, ask them to supply examples. It's important to avoid assuming that men are incapable of experiencing a wide range of emotions and to check in with them about what they're feeling. And it's important to take into account that men experience masculinity in different ways, and so it's more valuable to think of and be sensitive to different masculinities present at a workshop.

If “masculinity” itself has no definitive meaning, encompassing anything that any individual—whether male, female, or intersexed—claiming it for an identity wishes it to encompass (even the most purportedly feminine of constructs), it seems odd to privilege that meaningless by being wary of stepping on its toes. No matter how meaningless, it would seem that the word still has power and that such efforts are given over to adding to it (hence the confluence of those gender experts), rather than dismantling it at its core. All this talk of respect and sensitivity to “different masculinities” is a smokescreen and “meeting men where they are” is a euphemism, all

to hide from the fact that those working the programs are themselves afraid of men, absolutely terrified of them—and for good reason. Female audiences can be pushed around, prodded or protested (something gender experts excel at doing) into obeisance. Men, as gender terrorists, need to be approached from a position of weakness in order to be mollycoddled into being receptive of any message at all. If violence stems from feelings of entitlement, catering to such privilege seems to be a perilous proposition in the long run, even if it allows a measure of safety to anti-violence workers themselves in the short term as they attempt to interact with other men.

While some might argue that such claims are hopelessly extravagant, Ivory Tower, or out of touch with the realities of conducting outreach programs (yet the equally academic arguments of gender experts who often declare gender and even biological sex to be meaningless, something of little comfort to females who are very much exploited for their anatomy in the third world, are somehow seen as holding more practical value than such assertions deserve: especially when praxis is generally limited to preferred-pronoun protection for people within Liberal subcultures in the West), what or who people identify “as” or “with” is of far less importance than what they actually do. Adam Jones, a largely antifeminist writer, fancies himself an expert on “gendercide,” using a supposed nonprofit group, Gendercide Watch, as a continuous and rather transparent advertisement for a volume he edited in 1994: *Gendercide and Genocide*. He admits the term was first coined by a woman, Mary Anne Warren, for feminist reasons in her 1985 *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection*, though Jones is adamant that men are the predominant victims of such violence, not assigning any significance to the fact that it is men themselves who are perpetrating the violence against other men nor that the male winners and losers in wars typically share the same patriarchal values. In fact, Jones uses Gendercide Watch to present the Montreal Massacre (evidently unaware of the ethnocentric considerations given more recent examples such as the more than 300 murders of women in the region of Juarez, Mexico) as one of the few cases where females have been the victims of systematic violence, an anomaly in a process that he believes usually privileges women, going so far as to unprofessionally link to an article on his personal homepage (apparently first



examples of male on male murders and states, “If men don’t share the fear, it doesn’t mean they don’t share the risk,” as if that lack of fear—which affords men many economic, political, and social opportunities over women—costs men something as a gendered class, rather than as unlucky individuals.

While pointing out men’s general ignorance of potential drawbacks inherent to the patriarchal system can be useful and important work, it is all too often pulled in line with patriarchal goals, as it is in the efforts of Adam Jones. When he asks a spurious question such as “What does the White Ribbon campaigner say to men who have been brutalized by assailants who are also male? Are

published in 1992 by *MERGE Journal*, a periodical often still cited by Men’s Rights activists who wish to prove females the more violent sex, despite the inaccessibility of its actual text) entitled “Why I Won’t Wear a White Ribbon.”

His primary argument is that the White Ribbon Campaign is asking men to feel kinship with perpetrators of violence (“Marc Lépine is as remote from most men as Lizzie Borden is from most women”), requiring men to feel some measure of “guilt” or responsibility for acts that they themselves do not commit (“But I won’t be wearing a white ribbon. For me, it would be a badge of shame—a shame I don’t feel”). How men benefit from women living in fear of male violence is either omitted or reversed to make men the disadvantaged party. To this effect he cites a number of

those men responsible, in some way, for their own victimization?” pro-feminists must have the audacity to answer “yes,” in as much as we ourselves have contributed to a culture of violence by benefiting from it through all the times our ‘numbers’ have not been called—and that much is not mutually exclusive with helping such victims or even ourselves. What or who people identify with or as is less important than what that identification signifies politically. Jones’ refusal to admit any identification on his part with men’s violence and the Strength Campaign’s insistence on bulwarking masculinity are in some ways opposites when it comes to identity formulation, but are indistinguishable in the effect that they each achieve—as it is even in cases where males choose to identify as “women,” both denying responsibility for their privilege while exploiting for their own benefit the safe spaces that feminists have dared to carve out.

The White Ribbon Campaign has much to be wary of when it comes to the wholesale adoption of Men Can Stop Rape’s Strength Campaign, in that they are two separate traditions that just happen to share some of the same vocabulary. The words might be the same (gender, violence, masculinity, etc.) but they are assembled differently and for disparate reasons, even if their putative goals are the same. Whereas the White Ribbon Campaign was created with specific pro-feminist intentions, though at times considered problematic even to feminists, Men Can Stop Rape is an artifact of an attempt to salvage the damage done to minority male masculinity in the Washington DC area due to racism; it should be remembered that the heightened level of homophobia in minority communities is also a reflection of this attempt at healing fractured masculinity, something that activists should consider before stamping the Progressive seal of approval on such measures. This process of adoption has also been a dishonest one, where the Strength Campaign has been marketed to their audiences as something wildly new—rather than borrowed material that has been tried and tested—as if appeals to men’s power, whether benevolent or grotesque, and other such acts of fealty are an astonishing innovation. Masculinity will not be the end of patriarchy: The master does not care what furniture one moves around, nor even if you burn his house down, provided you are still willing to call him “master.”