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CAN Comment is a series of occasional papers on community development by Community Action Network

*Community Action Network (CAN) was set up in 1987 with the objective of providing practical support to the work of community-based groups in Ireland. Over the last nine years CAN has been involved with providing training, leadership development and organisational support to over 200 organisations nationwide. CAN has also been involved with carrying out research on community development and in preparing handbooks and other resource material relevant to community groups in Ireland. CAN Comment is a series of occasional papers which focuses on issues of current relevance and importance for community development groups. This third paper in the series was written by Ray Smith. Ray Smith is a resource and development worker with CAN. He is also a group therapist in private practice. He has worked with and developed mens' groups over the last ten years. This paper, **About Men**, is based on Ray's experiences of and observations from, this work. The purpose of the paper is to generate discussion about men's development at community level and to raise questions for men involved in men's development programmes. The current members of CAN are Paula Darcy, Jack Dunphy, Pauline Faughnan, Aileen Foran, Caitríona Nic Giolla Phádraig, David O'Brien, Phyllis Park, Frank Sammon, Ray Smith, Pat Tobin, Larry Tuomey and Mary Whelan. CAN would be happy to hear comments on the issues raised in this paper.*

ABOUT MEN

MEN, EMPLOYMENT & UNEMPLOYMENT

Work and Status

Men often describe themselves in terms of their current employment. This, for men, is as much a part of their status as is being married or having a family. They see themselves as providers, husbands, fathers, all of which gives them a place in society. Traditionally men have had a very clear role in society neatly carved out by themselves and meeting their needs. Employment was a key element in defining this role. Their status traditionally depended on the position they held within the workplace. The higher the position within the workplace the more respect a man could expect and the more likely he was to become involved in community matters.

Security and Structure

In the 1950/60s, the term chairperson had not been coined and what community organisations existed at that time were always headed up by men. The role of chairman was often linked to or depended on the man's job or employment record. Men and society in general expected the security and structure which steady

employment afforded. Through this, men gained respect for themselves and earned the respect of the wider community.

Change

Recent changes in work practice and employment opportunities have resulted in significant changes for men which have, in turn, seriously affected their status. In describing themselves as "unemployed", men almost automatically see themselves in a negative light. This issue was illustrated vividly at a workshop for men organised in 1994 through a West Dublin Community Development Programme. The participants, many of whom were unemployed, were asked to discuss the impact of unemployment on men's role in society and the home. They saw the main consequences of unemployment as resulting in men having no role in society, lowering their self esteem and leaving them with a terrible fear for the future.

Impact On Society

Men with low self esteem are most unlikely to involve themselves creatively in the search for new job opportunities or in community activities. The security of employment is replaced by a feeling of hopelessness and despair. The world becomes a very different place for men who can no longer see a role for themselves.

The traditional role which they defined for themselves as -provider-, "head of the household" and "community leader- no longer holds. They think they no longer have a defined role in society yet they have in fact defined a role for themselves, which is based on their own history and development. Unemployment dictates that many men are now on the margins of society. No work means no status; no status means no participation; no participation means no power; no power brings men to that "terrible fear for the future" mentioned earlier. The fear serves to immobilise men and makes it difficult for them to think about their situation or to create new opportunities for themselves. More importantly, this fear prevents men from engaging in the kind of social analysis which would allow them to see that their situation is often caused by other men who have developed a society that is motivated by economic values and profit, with scant regard for the value of the human person

Home Status

Traditionally men were the providers for the family and held the status of "head of the household". This resulted from a society which cast the man in the role of primary wage earner for the family. Women were cast in the caring role which was seen as secondary to that of men. Unemployment has now removed men from their role as provider for the family. Men's role is also being impacted on by the fact that some women are now in a position to command wages equal to or above their male partners. Another factor affecting men's traditional role as provider is a move by both women and men to involve them more in the nurturing and caring role within the family. At the workshop for men mentioned earlier, the participants were asked to comment on how they now saw men's role in the family. They had great difficulty in seeing any clear role for themselves, other than that of breadwinner. However, they did recognise the need to change and adapt to new roles. They also recognised that participation in men's development groups could facilitate this change.

Community Involvement

As already mentioned, a man's status was often directly linked to his position in the workplace. The economic position of his family dictated his role in the community. As employment for men declined, they became more and more isolated and marginalised. The loss of status led to a loss of self esteem and to a sense of powerlessness. Men confined themselves to the home with little or no social contact with other men and little activity outside the home. In effect, men became invisible. As men were experiencing this loss of power, women were beginning to take stock of their situation. Women throughout the country, but particularly in poorer working class areas, embarked on a process of development which used participatory, consultative, personal and political development. The very positive impact of this process soon became obvious as women began the difficult task of taking charge of their own lives and playing a more active role at community level.

Men and Personal Development

As women were discovering themselves and finding their power, men were becoming more isolated. Their loss of status and lack of experience in participatory organisations made it very difficult for them to become involved in a process which focussed on personal development as a means to community development. Women continued to forge ahead and laid the groundwork for a participatory model of development which has now been adopted by many anti-poverty organisations and community development programmes. Men simply got left behind in this process.

INVOLVING MEN

Efforts to involve men in community and personal development programmes are relatively new. Many of these programmes are organised by women and the inclusion of men has often proved problematic. The approach to organisational leadership adopted by men is very different from that used by women who had undertaken training in personal and community development. This difference of approach often leads to clashes and conflict. Many men do not cope in a situation where they cannot exercise their traditional approach to leadership. As a result of this, few community organisations have equal male/female representation. This situation has serious long term consequences for men because they are not appropriately represented in organisations which are effectively developing strategies for employment creation, community development and other initiatives to combat poverty.

Loss, Isolation and Responsibility

If men are to come out of their situation of isolation and powerlessness, they themselves must take responsibility for the process of development needed to bring about this change. It is not a question of women taking responsibility for including or promoting men. This process will take time and will not be easy. It involves the development of a new model of participation, of thinking and working, which will enable men to rediscover their dignity and their worth and help them design roles in the community and the home, which are democratic and caring. The process of change is always frightening. Men who were used to secure structures, power and status find the loss of these very frightening. They need help to overcome this fear and this is best provided by men who have engaged in the process of change and who are convinced of its value.

The Men's Network

Men's development is certainly at a very embryonic stage but there are some positive signs of progress. There is now a network of mens' groups which bring together men who have participated in some kind of personal or community development. It has functioned for just over a year. The aims of the network are to provide a forum for men to discuss their situation, to explore their hopes and fears and to promote greater participation by men in personal development and community activities.

Another aspect of the activities of the network is the promotion of a process of dialogue between facilitators of mens' groups. The aim of this dialogue is to explore ideas and approaches which will hopefully lead to the emergence of a development process relevant to men's needs'.

Men's Gathering

The group, Men's Gathering, is another example of a group of men coming together in the search for change. This group encourages men to examine their role in society, their masculinity and the challenges of living with change. The group uses a creative process which helps men get in touch with different areas of their personality.

CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS

There are several challenges facing men as they set out on a process of development. The first step is taking responsibility for embarking on this process. Who is responsible for men's development is currently under debate in some quarters. As already stated, men must take responsibility for their own development and they are also responsible for defining what that development should be.

Male Control

In arriving at definitions, men must examine the importance for them of being in control. They must analyse the reasons that uphold the many male dominated structures in our society. These include the male dominated structure of the Catholic Church, the all maleness of organisations such as the Knights of Columbanus, Working Men's Clubs, Gentlemen Clubs, Golf Clubs, Confraternities, and not forgetting the male dominance of the political and economic world. If we think in terms of how difficult it is to get "Mens' Groups" going, it may be interesting to look at how the above mens' groups have kept going over centuries. Part of the analysis of this situation should include an examination of how male dominated structures have institutionalised male control and reproduced social conditioning that place men in a position in society that is definitely not based on justice or equality.

1. For further information about Men's Network, contact: Tommy Spooner (chairperson) LS 1 Balcurris Road, Ballymun, Dublin 11. Tel. 8622194.

Childcare and Men

Reference has already been made to the crisis facing men in relation to the role within the family. A recent development at community level is the Provision of childcare facilities which has been due largely to womens involvement in promoting the need for these facilities. There are very few men involved in providing childcare or campaigning for childcare facilities. What is this saying about men's role or responsibility within

the family? The lack of male involvement clearly says to women that childcare is "womens work" or that it is "unmanly" for men to be involved in childcare or domestic work. Therefore, childcare issues are ignored by the political and economic sectors. Provision of crèches or childcare services also remains largely ignored by business and political interests, partly because these interests are, in general, controlled by men.

Community, Men and Power

Because so often men do not include themselves in the domestic chores of their immediate family, it is therefore difficult for them to involve themselves in the domestic chores of community life. Time and time again, community meetings are dominated by men loudly proclaiming what should be done, how and by whom it should be done. Yet when we look around the community at ground level, it is obvious that most of the development and the work that goes with it, is being done by women. Men need to examine at what level they become interested in Community Development. Looking at many groups and especially "partnership" initiatives, it seems that men come to the fore around Partnership companies. It would seem that men become involved because, within partnership structures, there is a direct political and economic aspect which is the considered home of the male, a place he can relate to and be comfortable with. The other side of the partnership structure is the sub groups where much of the leg work or donkey work is done and many of these groups are community based. They carry out the domestic chores for the community and for the partnership. This work is largely carried out by women. Men need to examine why they do not want to become involved at this ground level. They must own reasons and use them as a means to bringing about change for themselves.

Ideas for a Model of Development

As mentioned before, it is hoped that out of the work underway at the moment with mens' groups, a model of development will emerge which is appropriate to the needs of men from different backgrounds and experiences. For that kind of model to emerge it is important that mens' groups in both middle and working class areas adopt some common approaches. These approaches must take on board an analysis of the society and world we live in, the role of men in constructing and maintaining present day society, the impact of this role on everyone, but especially on women and on unemployed and marginalised men. Discussing these issues must inevitably lead to an examination of behaviour and responsibility. If men are to genuinely take responsibility for their behaviour they must first of all examine the influences and circumstances which have formed that behaviour. This may not be easy, as men must confront their dual role as both the oppressor, especially of women, and the oppressed. However, without honest and profound discussion on these issues, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to progress a model of development which promotes holistic growth, combined with justice and equality for both men and women.

Education and Development

When thinking about men's education and development, it is dangerous to think just in terms of personal development. Moving from a position of complacency which privilege can afford, or of hopelessness caused by poverty linked to loss of power and status, requires a process which combines the personal, the social and the political. The long term impact of personal development on its own will be both limited and limiting. It must be combined with the issues mentioned above. There is a tendency to think that the needs of mens' groups in working class areas can be met through personal development. Men in these areas will certainly

benefit from this kind of development but so will men in middle class areas where the tendency is more towards a concentration on an intellectual pursuit of the inner self. No one route will provide the desired holistic result. Therefore, it is essential to combine ideas, experiences and talents.

Men's development is at the very early stages and until men can recognise their resistance to change and to their loss of power and control they will continue to remain stuck in the past, reliving the old patterns which no longer work for them and render them unable to explore new ways of being

CONCLUSIONS

According to Brian Wren (in his book, "What Language Shall I Borrow") "Patriarchal society is reproduced by profound social conditioning, forming us deep within as masculine and feminine." He also says that patriarchal society was formed over a long period of time which implies it can change. It appears that in our society men are allowing themselves become the victims of change

rather than agents of change. In this article we have been on the see saw of power. We have seen the situation where the loss of traditional roles have rendered many men powerless in taking control of their own lives or of the events that affect them. It seems that for many the loss of economic control has led to despair and hopelessness where they cannot envisage alternative ways of living or being. Many men do not take up the challenge of exploring their own beliefs and values in relation to their role in society. They are waiting for "the job" to come along. They will then, once again, pick up from where they left off. I think they do not realise that even if that job comes their way, things will not go back to the way they were. Women have moved on and present new challenges to society which leave men confronted by themselves, not by women. They are confronted by their own values and beliefs, their actions or inactions. This confrontation provides an opportunity for men to explore their roles, values and beliefs in man to man relationships as opposed to man-women relationships.

If men were to engage in this exploration I believe it could go some way towards defining a model of development for men, by men.

Regaining Power or Learning New Roles?

It is clear that men's development is complex and goes beyond the idea of getting a group of men together and putting on a personal development course. The cry of many community organisations is how can we get men to participate. Often when a community organisation does manage to get a group of men together, the next question is what do we do with them? This must raise questions for those involved in men's development. Not least, what is the appropriate development model, and what is its objectives? Is it to regain power or to learn a new role and so share power? If it is the latter, are there models of that happening in this society?

Change and Loss of Power

Men's development is at the very early stages and until men can recognise their resistance to change and to their loss of power and control they will continue to remain stuck in the past, reliving the old patterns which no longer work for them and render them unable to explore new ways of being.