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The Flexible Man

by Gerhard Amendt

The title “*Der Flexible Mann*” (The Flexible Man) not only connotes speculation that the opposite may hold true, it also implies a tacit comparison with putatively greater flexibility in women, at least in present times.

If we are to discuss male flexibility, we must also recognize its limitations. That, in turn, makes us realize that flexibility in male-female relationships can only be grasped as part of the reciprocity that exists between them. The person who uses the term "flexible" is referring to the dynamics of relationships between men and women in the public as well as the private sphere. This constitutes a rejection of the generally accepted division of the world into victims and perpetrators as a dichotomy between good and evil, for those who dichotomize the world destroy relationships, produce stagnation, and are ultimately pursuing totalitarian tendencies. Those who use the word “flexible” and behave in this manner have decided in favor of changing themselves and recognizing the other. They believe in a rich world of relationships between men and women and have disentangled themselves from the gender dichotomy.

People who are flexible can step out of their accustomed ways and reorder the circumstances of their lives. Flexible people can recognize change and adjust to it, although they can also mount resistance to it for a wide range of reasons. When it comes to the “flexible man,” however, it is not a question of dynamics of any sort; but rather of the gender arrangement which shapes relationships between men and women.

Looking beyond gender dynamics to the history of the human race, men are the epitome of flexibility. On the one hand, the purpose of their existence rests upon protecting women and children from the adversities of the external world and thereby ensuring their survival. In return, they received recognition from women and were considered sexually more desirable as a reward. They were proud and self-confident. The extreme form of this arrangement can be seen when men devote their entire lives to women. This occurs whenever men are coerced through reproach or a sense of guilt and hold themselves responsible for the dissatisfaction of women.

Another aspect of male flexibility can be seen in the myriad ideas that men have come up with to ensure survival throughout human history. They have applied their drive, ingenuity, enthusiasm for technology, and analytical abilities and have striven to unravel the unknown in the skies, beneath the earth, under water, and in the subtle structures of the human being. They developed weapons that allowed them to kill others – and to be killed themselves. They thereby fulfilled mankind’s insatiable desire for a better life,

security, health, and insight into human and non-human nature alike. They risked life and limb in the process, while at the same time also meeting women's continuing expectations that their domestic workload would be lightened – because women's participation in life outside of the family realm was dependent upon it.

Thus, many manifestations of masculinity would be misunderstood if they were restricted solely to providing what is needed to sustain daily life. That would obscure the areas of life, the production, and the technology that men have created outside of the family so that their pay slips prove sufficient. And it would overlook the fact that men have always been divided into those who had riches and gave orders and those who had to follow the orders and make do with little.

This should not lead us to classify men's extraordinary flexibility outside of the family as a sphere that has taken on a life of its own in either a technological or economic sense – even though men's monomaniacal immersion in their work sometimes seems to indicate that. Instead, the passionate responsibility men assume for the extra-familial world rests on an identity that is geared toward maintaining the family at a high level of well-being. To phrase it differently, work is not an end unto itself for men, but meaningful action that is embedded in the agreement that they will provide well for wife and child and preserve the family as a space where they themselves can find recreation. Optimistic indicators for this can be seen in the overtime worked when a child arrives, and in continuing education which is directed at lifelong activity in the workplace. A pessimistic indicator, however, can be seen in divorce which strips meaning from many men's lives. At less education-minded strata of society, divorce results in professional decline and often leads to depression and unemployment. Meanwhile, research shows that educated young men often decouple work from their family orientation and that they have a tendency to turn work into an end in itself. This also explains why they are marrying increasingly less often. Although divorce law also makes no mean contribution to destroying the relationships of fathers to their children. Family law is a reflection of misandric policy.

There can be no doubt that passive resistance arises in men when they are required to do more work within the family. Working women in particular voice complaints over this. Yet the flexibility that women expect under such circumstances is characterized by a remarkable contradiction. Women are not readily willing to admit their ambivalence; they want their husbands involved at home, but only to the degree that the men don't take matters into their own hands and thereby interfere with the women's all-encompassing motherliness. If the goal is to change men's resistance against household work, one must also address this ambivalence on the part of women, because it poses a significant obstacle to effecting reciprocal change.

But what additional experiences could be frightening men and making housework unpleasant for them when they are confronted with flexibilized femininity? If we take a

look at the way flexibility in men is measured, the following becomes apparent. For a good 30 years, a German women's magazine has been conducting research on the work husbands perform within their families. With daft consistency, attention is focused, not least, on the frequency that men "change diapers" and "take out the trash." This, supposedly, is the way one measures flexibility – although not the only way. But don't these questions equally document major ambivalence toward the father's involvement in the family's day-to-day existence? Women have their husbands get rid of the filth and thereby symbolically move them closer to the excreta of family life. As long as the man continues to function as the breadwinner and takes out the trash, he remains in sync with unmodified classical role allocation. He is permitted to approach only as close as the outer boundary of motherhood and is forbidden to shape the internal structure of the family in any independent way. This will neither kindle male flexibility to a roaring fire nor assuage a man's displeasure that his wife is already setting boundaries before he can even develop fatherliness of his own. This not only hinders the development of fatherly attachment but equally undermines the flexibilization of male identity. Even so, the most consequential outcome may be the conclusions that men draw from such rejection. It makes them doubt whether women will be serious about their professional activities when they encounter the harshness of the workplace or become unemployed. Or will responsibility fall to the man, as usual? Thus, men's anxiety and women's rejection function as two elements of a dynamic in which both parties contribute to failure. As a precaution for the event that she will have to return home, the woman prevents the man from making changes independently in her realm.

In addition to relationship experiences such as these, there is a social rhetoric that does not pass by men unheard. They see for themselves that women can become extremely successful if they choose. Absurdly, however, in spite of their gains in strength they are constantly identified as victims. This contributes to an ideologization of men as quasi omnipotent figures. The idealization of men as broad-shouldered individuals with unflagging strength is unmistakable, despite the negative connotations. Men's ability to withstand stress is idealized and demanded in harsh although indirect terms.

It is true that the modern women's movement practiced female empowerment. Its intention was to resolve opposing interests between men and women by carrying them out as conflict. When the Movement of 1968 disintegrated, however, this came to an abrupt end. What remained were decomposition products in the form of communist and feminist circles. Self-empowerment was replaced with the above-mentioned division of the world into victims and perpetrators, those who did not have power and those who did. The operators of the circles catapulted themselves into the status of quasi-messianic saviors. Their elitist ideologies dispossessed both men and women of their individuality. Paradoxically, this occurred during a time that was proclaimed the age of individualization itself. Yet de-individualization has always been a feature of communist

and feminist circles. It went hand in hand with upgrading the state to the status of an all-encompassing provider, and empowerment fell by the wayside.

Both of the decomposition products followed emotional schism that split the genders into powers of good and evil along the lines of the medieval dichotomy. It is a mechanism we have seen in all totalitarian movements up to and including McCarthyism in the USA during the 1950s. In feminism, this ultimately led to yet another division of the genders according to anatomical sex differences. In the end, it transitioned into neo-conservative essentialization based on anatomical sex differences. Men are evil because they have a penis; women are good because they don't. Flexibilization in perceptions of one another broke down. And because men – according to gender feminist ideology – bear the onus of guilt for all history of the world, fatherliness should be taken away from them. They will only be acceptable as fathers, the reasoning runs, when the fatherliness becomes identical with “purely-good” motherliness.

This serious degradation notwithstanding, men have reacted with silence. The terror of political correctness at some universities, in political parties, and in the German Protestant church, and the breathtaking barbarism of feminism may have made it difficult to voice objections. Some men sought consolation in the arrogance of categorizing feminism's infatuation with victimization as an outgrowth of female whining. And they continued to remain silent when the woman holding the office of German Federal Minister of Family Affairs defamed them as "knaves," when German social democracy included the fight against masculinity as a prerequisite for achieving *Menschlichkeit* (humaneness), and posters created by the German federal government denounced boys as potential rapists following in their fathers' footsteps. Apparently, men are incapable of mounting a flexible response to injuries of their self-esteem.

What would explain their rigidity? At the lower strata of society, the evolutionary internalization of the "breadwinner syndrome" surely continues to be a prominent factor, since men will only change in a fundamental sense when women reach a convincing decision in favor of "bread winning." But men doubt whether women will be ready to go through thick and thin even when times are difficult. Only that would allow men to enjoy their lives beyond breadwinning without experiencing guilt.

Over and above men's traditional concerns, there are topical issues that make them adhere to their mentality. Many of these matters are embedded within the private dynamics of couples and are inaccessible outside of psychotherapy. But in addition to that, a public discussion has been underway for 30 years with the goal of sensitizing men to the needs of women – although a similar requirement does not seem to apply for women. For men, this discourse is generally fraught with the allocation of blame for virtually all of humanity's problems. It extends from the environment to atheism and from anti-Semitism to the Holocaust. Even when a Christmas tree loses its needles

prematurely, it's the man's fault. Women, meanwhile, have been exempted from all responsibility for social developments, even when the question of child-rearing arises. Male guilt made female innocence possible. Government ministries, the field of research in women's studies, and the churches have supported this allocation of blame for three decades of unwavering infatuation with victimization. It is a process where women make characterizations of men, although men themselves have never been surveyed about their experiences. This unleashed impassioned competition over who could paint masculinity in the darkest colors and, as a consequence, femininity in the brightest. Yet when the premature allocation of guilt blocks flexibility and prevents the tolerance of ambivalence, those who are held responsible, i.e. men, find themselves in a more difficult position than women, who are assumed to have an almost childlike innocence.

The problem is not so much that women describe themselves as feminists in one form or another, but that the dark brew of feminist ideologies has been able to institutionalize the hateful, fear-stricken demonization of men. By not speaking up, men have not only kept their ancient provider mentality alive, they have enabled feminist ideology to churn out practically overnight a mighty phalanx of agencies, women's shelters, research institutes with guaranteed financing, and professional journals that refuse to engage in discourse, not to mention the advancement of women irrespective of their merit. A broad range of institutions whose work is not subject to political, fiscal, and scientific oversight have shaped an ideological image of the weak woman.

In a certain sense, feminist ideology has humiliated women by turning them into passive beings who lack the strength to prevail. It reminds one of Paul Julius Möbius's remark about "the physiological weak-mindedness of women," which he proclaimed to the world in 1900 with the intention of keeping women out of the workplace. Something similar is being stated today: women can't make it on their own and need someone to save them. In 1900, their salvation was seen in house and home. Today, it is seen in the state that has been restructured according to feminist specifications. Since women are supposedly victims, they can only achieve success through preferential treatment. Empowerment as liberation thereby becomes an impossibility.

And for men, the result of this demonization has been discrimination. Among other things, particularly in urban centers boys are taught that masculinity is not desirable and must yield to femininity, which is superior. In addition to that, feminism's promotion of divorce alienates children from their fathers. This affects unmarried fathers especially. The result is a glorification of single parenting which ensures that mothers can exert control over their children in a self-aggrandizing manner. At the same time, government support for the ideology of single parenting makes it easier for women to act upon their feelings of revenge and disappointment, when a man simply doesn't prove to be the fairy-tale prince of their dreams.

This has grave consequences for men's willingness to be flexible. For as long as women are portrayed as victims, men perceive them, in the gentlemanly tradition, as people who are in need of help. Vocational activity in women is viewed as an excursion into the extra-familial world that can enhance the breadwinner's income but does not involve a perspective that should be taken seriously. For many men, this confirms that they should continue to be prepared to work full time for their entire lives.

Furthermore, the dark brew of feminist politics has weakened the democratic process. Matters that would need to be worked through in the form of conflicts in order for resolution to become possible, wind up as the attribution of character traits from which there is no escape. Men and women do nothing but stand in each other's way, and flexibilization does not occur. Since feminism rules out mutual solutions, the idea is for the state to reach deep into the gender arrangement and the private sphere for the sake of benefiting women. As long as this ecstatic obsession with victimization is propagated as female nature, and there are calls for a strong state, nothing will change in terms of the rigidity of men. In the emotional world of men, dissatisfied women are taken as an indication that they have neglected their duty. In an attempt to assuage their guilt feelings, men conclude that they must put forth an even greater effort than before. In the USA, the psychodynamics of this situation have given rise to a mass movement that accepts feminist criticism of men without reservation. They call themselves *Promise Keepers*. A comparable movement in Europe does not exist. What might serve as an equivalent, however, is the conventional notion that the only wishes that bring true mutual satisfaction are those that have been read from a woman's eyes. But perhaps men remain silent about all of this because they sense the fear that newly won freedoms have generated in women – freedoms that may trigger equal fear in many men as well.

Translated by Philip Schmitz.