

The role of men and gender equality

Introduction

Last year I was on a sabbatical for three months in The Netherlands at the end of which I had planned to cycle from Amsterdam to Luxembourg. Regrettably, it never happened. So, I'm very happy that I made it this time, even if the mode of transport that brought me here has left a deeper imprint on the increasingly fragile environment than the trusted bicycle. But it is a journey of an entirely different order that I want to locate this paper. In undertaking that journey, I want to do four things.

1. First of all I want to locate the equality debate within a much broader discourse about the current values that shape western society and in that context I want to begin the journey with a critique of the work of Francis Fukuyama.
2. Secondly, I want to look at the equality agenda and in particular examine Susan Faludi's argument that a relentless backlash against relatively small gains has been unleashed since the early 1980s.
3. Thirdly, I want to look at how education has been influenced by Fukuyama and I want to examine if there's any evidence to support Faludi's thesis.
4. Finally, given that the title of this paper is *The role of Men in Gender Equality*, I want to attempt to frame a response to that question.

Confronting Current Orthodoxies

Francis Fukuyama, the darling of the neo-conservatives in the United States and elsewhere, stunned the world in the early 1990s with his audacious claim that we had reached the end of history¹. We have now reached, it appears, the pinnacle of the evolutionary process. The really big questions have been settled. Not that specific historical events will no longer unfold; rather his argument is that all societies, countries, governments will inevitably embrace liberal democracy as the ultimate form of government and the way from now into the future all people will eventually organise their affairs. There is no alternative. Socialism is dead Liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration that will satisfy people and will ultimately embrace every country, region and transnational state around the globe. In this new world, property rights and the right to so-called free-trade are paramount. Highlighting the failures of socialism, Fukuyama believes that its weakness lay in over-recognition of what he refers to as "second and third generation rights, such as the right to employment, housing and health care. The problem with this over-concentration is that they are clearly not compatible with other rights like those of property or free economic exchange² (p.43). And not surprisingly, Fukuyama gives very little attention to women in history. Man is the ultimate yardstick. His comments on the fashions in history are particularly revealing.

In the past couple of generations, for example, there has been a movement away from diplomatic and military history toward social history, the history of women and minority groups, or the history of everyday life...historical attention (has) shifted from the rich and powerful to those lower down the scale...

¹ Fukuyama, Francis. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. Penguin London.

² *Ibid*, p. 43

In Fukuyama's journey to the nirvana of unfettered neo-liberalism, women scarcely get a mention. Western Europe and The United States, along with countries like Japan, South Africa, India and Australia had already completed the journey. Eastern Europe, Russia and some countries in South-east Asia are on their way. From now on there will be no more change, no more social and political upheavals and no going back. The really big questions on how we order our affairs have been settled. The journey to this final resting place was, like the journey in T.S. Elliott's *Journey of the Magi*, a cold, hard journey, involving cold wars, civil wars, absolute monarchy, totalitarianism, fascism, colonialism, communism and Marxism, among other perceived nefarious isms.

But like the end of journey of the Magi, a new dawn, a new epiphany followed the dark night of tyranny. Liberal democracy is that new epiphany, following on from the darkness of totalitarianism in all its many manifestations. On the cusp of a new millennium and looking back at two thousand years of history, Fukuyama was able to declare:

*as mankind approaches the end of the millennium, the twin crisis of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty*³.

The pessimism of the pessimists is, he argued, flatly contradicted by the empirical flow of events in the second half of the twentieth century. Today, Fukuyama confidently proclaimed we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own. So, perhaps this conference is redundant. Perhaps at this stage, we should just shut up shop and go home. But before we do that let's just look at that world for a moment, that Fukuyama cannot imagine getting any better. Not everyone is so sanguine about the world in which we live. Jan Art Scholt⁴ for example, while acknowledging that the neo-liberalism that Fukuyama so celebrates has generally prevailed as the reigning policy framework in contemporary discourse argues, that it has "served powerful interests, particularly those related to dominant classes and countries". Left behind are children, indigenous people, people of colour other than white, older people, and to a large extent, women. Take the position of children in the world for example.

As the current model of globalisation tightens its grip on the poor of the world, the precariousness of working conditions increases. The informal sector is steadily increasing with 70 per cent of the labour force in the Gambia, Mali, Ghana and Uganda working in this sector. Most of the jobs created in the 1990s in Latin America and in Africa was in this sector. The trend towards the casualisation of the workforce has continued into this millennium and is set to continue into the future.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that the number of child labourers in Africa will surge from current estimates of 80 million to more than 100 million by the

³ Ibid p. 42

⁴ Scholt, Jan Aart. 2000. *Globalization, a critical introduction*. Macmillan Press. London.

year 2015. Equipped with hammers, mops, hoes, shoe-shine brushes and a dazzling array of consumer items, children form a very visible army of labour in the streets and countryside of the world's poorest countries.

Less visible but equally accessible are the child soldiers and child prostitutes who in their very different ways serve the interests of patriarchy and neo-colonialism. An ILO report⁵ estimates that between 0.25 and 1.5 percent of all children in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand are involved in child prostitution perpetuated almost exclusively by men.

Sexual exploitation is not confined to such workers. Child domestic workers are extremely vulnerable to abuse, violence and exploitation. Forced labour, slavery and trafficking in children are all on the rise. Such practices are to be found in the West African countries of Benin, Burkino Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Togo, in the Caribbean countries of the Dominican Republic and Haiti and in Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines. Both in terms of their numbers and in terms of the insidiousness of the conditions in which they work, more and more children are becoming more and more at risk.

The risks that children have to confront are not confined to the street and the brothel. They are also at risk in many of the factories and plantations that provide a seemingly endless supply of consumer goods for western consumption. The finger prints of exploitative labour are all over our clothes, our shoes, our food, our carpets, our toys and our footballs. The tea, coffee and cocoa we consume come to us compliments of the over-stretched hands of the young. I was in India last year and witnessed the death of three children aged between eight and eleven from pesticide poisoning. They were working in genetically modified cotton fields as bonded labourers. Ask the friends and families of those children if the so-called free market has succeeded in producing unprecedented levels of material prosperity everywhere as Fukuyama would have us believe. Ask the friends and families of these children if gender equality can be achieved with reference to their economic, social and political rights. Their answer I suggest would be a clear "no".

And it's not just the young that suffer in this world. Here in the heart of Europe, we have built a fortress around us to keep the poor of the world out while at the same time, we deny them the very means that might sustain a livelihood in their own country. I have just come back from Senegal where the fishing industry and the livelihoods of coastal communities has been severely dented by the presence of large factory ships from the EU and Japan, ships that as we speak are hovering up the only source of nutrition that has enabled these communities survive for centuries. And then when they try and flee their continent they are met by a large "Keep Out" sign. In Ireland, we had a referendum on this issue last year and the keep out sign was dressed up as a common sense policy change.

⁵ Lean Lim, Lin. 1998. *The Sex Sector: The economic and social basis of prostitution in Southeast Asia*. International Labour Organisation. Geneva.

As far back as 1979 there were warnings on the pernicious influence of big business and from very mainstream sources. . The Brandt report⁶ stated that business has been spreading an incredible destructive capacity over the globe. “We see a world in which poverty and hunger prevail: in which, resources are squandered, in which more armaments are made and sold than ever before...”. “It is a terrible irony”, the report goes on to say that “the most dynamic and rapid transfer of highly sophisticated equipment and technology from rich to poor countries has been in the machinery of death”. The Report was particularly critical of transnational companies whom it blamed for “the attempt to bring down the Allende regime in Chile, the illegal payment by oil companies to governments in different parts of the world, the support given by certain corporations to illegal regimes in Africa, the ability of multinationals to manipulate financial flows, imposing restrictive business practices...”.

These and related issues of human rights, solidarity with the poor and disposed simply do not feature in Fukuyana’s historical *cul-de-sac*. Inconvenient issues like poverty and inequality are dispensed with. How can any of us seriously begin a dialogue on equality while at the same time accepting the current economic order? Its utterly contradictory. Neo-liberal equality is a classic oxymoron.

But if Fukuyana’s discourse buttresses neo-conservative hegemonic designs to frame our political and economic thinking, another well-established narrative also seeks to shape our thinking and this discourse also serves patriarchal neo-liberal interests. This is the discourse of the failure/irrelevance of feminism and other social movements like the environmental movement, the civil rights movement and the disability movement. Putatively reputable publications like Time magazine and Newsweek have been to the forefront in gleefully pronouncing the death of feminism. The feminist narrative that confronted centuries of exclusion from all facets of public life – the workplace, the political and judicial arenas, among others, has been replaced by a narrative of male victimhood, a victimhood that denies or downplays male privilege.

The Backlash

Six years ago, Anthony Clare⁷ an eminent psychiatrist in Ireland and for those of you familiar with BBC Radio 4 he is the presenter *In the Psychiatrist’s Chair*, published what many men regarded as a seminal (pun intended) book that argued that men are now in crisis. The central thesis now is that it is men who are in crisis and that women, if they have not already taken over the asylum, are in the process of doing so. Let’s look at some of Clare’s arguments.

He tells us that “beneath the surface, male power is being subverted” (p. 4). If men listen, Clare tells us, they can hear the “tumbrels lumbering up the avenues and the masses calling that their (men) time is up” (p. 69).

⁶ Independent Commission on International Development Issues. 1980. North South: A Programme for Survival. Pan. London. Pp, 13, 14, 189.

⁷ Clare, Anthony. 2000. *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*. Chatto & Windos. London.

Anthony Clare informs us that “in this feminist revolution, male power is being overthrown. Men, like colonists seeing their empire crumble, don’t like what is happening” (2000:4). He asserts that “employers discriminate in favour of younger people and women instead of men”. To argue this is to overstate what feminism has achieved and to exaggerate the extent to which male power and supremacy has been challenged. This overstatement is part of the current backlash against feminism. For example, Clare’s belief that employers discriminate in favour of women does not stand scrutiny unless one is talking about the secondary labour market of low paid temporary employment. The trajectory of men’s careers still exceeds that of women, as, for example, the employment pattern in the Irish civil service, the judiciary, the Irish parliament, trade unions, legal and medical professions business and management, universities and training colleges indicate. And I’m sure there is similar evidence in other jurisdictions.

The academic world, which Clare straddles, is a case in point. In seven universities and in two teacher colleges of education - 95% of the professors are men and 5% are women; 94% of associate professors are men and 6% are women; 82% of senior lecturers are men and 18% are women; 70% of lecturers are men and 30% are women; 54% of assistant lecturers are men and 46% are women and in the lowest paid category of all, junior lecturer 47% are men and 52% are women – the only area where women outnumber men.

This is the scenario for the Irish parliament:

- The percentage of women elected to the Dáil (lower house of the Irish parliament elected by popular suffrage) has risen by only 1 per cent, to 13 per cent, over the past 10 years. At this rate, it will take 370 years for the percentage of women in the Dáil to reach 50 per cent.
- There are 22 women currently serving as TDs (Member of Parliament) in the lower house of the Irish parliament, 10 counties do not have any women TDs;
- Almost 45 per cent of serving women TDs come from politically active families. Women not belonging to politically active families form only 7 per cent of the current Dáil;
- The number of women appointed to the Cabinet decreased by 7 per cent for the current Government, while the number of women appointed as Ministers of State declined by a full 11 per cent;
- The percentage of women elected as local councilors remained unchanged at 15 per cent in the 1991 and 1999 local elections;
- The percentage of women appointed to State boards has rarely reached 40 per cent, although this has been an official guideline since 1991;
- These findings reflect women’s exclusion from other decision-making functions – women account for only 3 per cent of managing directors, 9 per cent of secretaries-general in the civil service and 7 per cent of high court judges.

At a global level it is hard to sustain the men as victims proposition when you consider for example, the level and depth of violence against women. The UN says it is the most prevalent violation of human rights in the world. A World Bank analysis, for example, reports that 35 recent studies from industrialised and developing countries show that one

quarter to one half of all women have suffered physical abuse from an intimate partner and this abuse cuts across education, class, income and ethnic boundaries. A report from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA⁸) spells out in graphic detail the reality of global violence against women. At least one in three women, the report states, has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some way – most often by someone she knows. One woman in four is abused during pregnancy. Two million girls are coerced into the sex market each year. Events that may trigger violent responses include not obeying the husband, talking back, refusing sex, not having food ready on time, questioning the man about money or girl-friends or going somewhere without his permission.

But despite the mounting evidence of the increasing vulnerability of many women, the assertion of male victimhood gains momentum. In Ireland, a chorus of support chimed in to bolster Anthony Clare's argument. One academic described his book as *a tour de force*. One Irish journalist, John Waters, has built his reputation as the scourge of political correctness and as a self-styled defender of men. Waters wants men to rally round to confront the so called *misandry* or hatred of men that has supposedly afflicted our society and what Waters calls "the propaganda which makes possible their (men's) marginalisation"⁹ (12 January 1999).

In an article in the Sunday Times, Neil Lyndon¹⁰ put men's supposed marginalisation in more graphic terms:

It's hard to think of one example of systemic and institutional discrimination against women today. Men are the new second class citizens. Men are suffering from systemic disadvantages.

Warming to his subject he went on:

The penis is not taken seriously. It is treated as a crude mechanism. It is in fact, the subject of institutionalized neglect.

There is now the impression that men are the victims, that women have it all, that feminism has won out and that men are being more and more marginalised. Patriarchy may not yet be dead we are but to borrow a phrase from Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* "far away across the fields the tolling of the iron bell" can be heard heralding its imminent demise.

Given men's continued dominance of practically all areas of public life, not only in Ireland, but in the western world and globally, the assertion that men are now in crisis not surprisingly is greeted with a mixture of scepticism and outright disbelief by many women, particularly feminist women and by many men. The debate between some representatives of the "men in crisis" school of thought and feminists who fought for the right to equal pay for equal work, for access to the labour market, for the right to control their own fertility and other advances has been characterised by hostility, bitterness and some cynicism.

⁸ www.un.org

⁹ Waters, John. "Prejudice is right on if men are the victims". Irish Times. 12 January 1999.

¹⁰ See Faludi p. 85

Susan Faludi in her powerful book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*¹¹ details in uncompromising terms, the way in which many men have sought to undermine the advances that women have made. It's not the fact that women have achieved equality that scares men argues Faludi but the fact that women may achieve equality. US sociologist William Goode¹² one of the many sociologists who has reflected on what Faludi describes as the "peculiarly hyperbolic male reaction to miniscule improvements in women's rights" concluded that "men view even small losses of deference, advantages, or opportunities as large threats". Irish journalist Nuala O'Faolain echoes Faloudi when she writes "I flinch when male commentators write about what they often sneeringly call feminism. Wouldn't you think, she rhetorically goes on to say, "decent men, aware of their privileges would welcome the advances some women have made in this century?"

Education

So, what's the relevance of all of this for education? Educational policy in Ireland in the last two decades is heavily influenced by current economic orthodoxies despite all the rhetoric within my country that we have one of the finest systems in the world. In education as in other domains we tend to have an exaggerated sense of ourselves. The world Fukuyama represents casts a long shadow and education does not escape its malign influence. The Blarite education project in Britain also seems heavily weighted in this direction. Irish educationalist Denis O'Sullivan¹³ claims that "the Irish frame of education and social discourse has become increasingly coterminous with the theme of education and the economy with the result that cultural identity, language, civic competence and moral development were excluded as themes"

Another Irish educationalist Jim Gleeson¹⁴ claims that strong economic interests such as the Confederation of Irish Industry began to have a disproportionate influence on schooling and curricula during the 1980s. Michael Fuller¹⁵ claimed that the state and economic interests coalesced to redefine cultural capital as legitimated in schools, in accordance with the perceived need to link education and economic planning. Significantly, Gleeson claims that education, at least within Ireland, "transmits the dominant cultural emphasis as if it were unproblematic. And notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary, despite the poverty, debt, underdevelopment, patriarchy, inequality and injustice, and all the exploitation the current neo-liberal model is always presented as unproblematic. And to put it bluntly, that presentation whether it by Francis Fukuyama or others is false, untrue, a lie. And in my view it is the task of educationalists to confront that falsehood and to (re)assert the importance of equality, fairness and justice as key values within the educational system and in the process challenge the current emphasis on market-driven individualism and competitiveness.

¹¹ Faludi, Susan, 1992. *Backlash The Undeclared War Against Women*. Chatto & Windus, London.

¹² See Faludi p. 83

¹³ See Gleeson below

¹⁴ Gleeson, Jim. (2004) *Cultural and Political Contexts of Irish Post-Primary Curriculum in Curriculum and Ideology in Sugrue, C. (ed.) Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences International Perspectives*. The Liffey Press. Dublin.

¹⁵ See Gleeson

But that is not the only task for educationalists. There is also an urgent need to confront the backlash against equality between women and men. And that backlash, as we have seen above, can be quite formidable. When, for example, the Department of Education and Science in Ireland under the guiding hand of your colleague and mine Maureen Bohan attempted to address issues of boys' in school in a programme called *Exploring Masculinities*, it seemed as if the world was about to collapse. *Exploring Masculinities* was a programme of personal and social development for senior cycle boys. It focused on and celebrated the diversity of forms that masculinity can take and recognised that not all males fit the one mould. Such was the perceived threat to Irish masculinity that the programme was the subject of parliamentary debate and a ministerial review was put in place. There were ninety-four newspaper articles written about the programme between December 1998 and November 2001.

With the exception of those written by academics and those involved in education, the vast majority were critical. Despite the unprecedented level of scrutiny that this programme was subjected to by various academics and despite two different teams of evaluators' unqualified endorsement of the programme, it has virtually disappeared without trace. Its disappearance was a victory for lay right wing movements that has extraordinary access to the media and whose influence is hugely disproportionate. Yet another study on this programme is currently underway and preliminary findings indicate that almost ninety per cent of parents value programmes like *Exploring Masculinities*. Yet the depressing outcome is that the power of well-organised right-wing commentators prevailed. And it's not only in relation to this particular programme that the right has currently achieved the upper hand but in the way it frames the broader debate about how we ought to order our society. And confronting that in the name of equality and justice and fairness is a task for all of us.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three key points that I would like to make. The first relates to Fukuyama. Prior to reading his book, I was conscious of media and other discussions on his treatise. It was generally very well received. But I was also reminded of what Mark Twain once said about truth and lies. He once said that a lie can get half-way around the world before the truth can get its shoes on and so it would seem with Fukuyama's theory. What really got to me was the notion that we cannot imagine another world other than we are at currently. Well now! Neo-liberalism may be the ultimate epiphany for Fukuyama but the reality is, as outlined above, it sidelines the majority of the world's population.

Let's remind ourselves of what Fukuyama said about the imagination. We have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own. Well on your behalf and on my own, I beg to disagree. I think we have no difficulty imagining an altogether different world. And that I suggest is the first task for both women and men who are interested in promoting gender equality. It is a challenge to our imagination and as Albert Einstein once remarked imagination is more important than knowledge. For Irish socialist and Nobel laureate George Bernard Shaw, imagination is the beginning of creation. So, if we are even to begin to take the first faltering steps towards creating a fair society, one that is

based on principles of justice and human rights the first test, I suggest, is a test of the imagination.

The second conclusion I wish to draw here today, is that the pursuit of gender equality can never be achieved unless it happens within the broader search for social and economic equality. We cannot cherry-pick gender equality and say “We’ll have that” and not economic equality or not have rights for economic migrants or for people with disabilities. Think of the child laborers all over the world. How can we begin to talk about gender equality in that context unless we are talking about sharing the misery? It is my contention that gender equality cannot be achieved within the current economic orthodoxies. Neo-liberalism can not deliver equality. Of course we can shuffle the deck-chairs on the Titanic and of course we can set targets but I suggest if we only succeed in getting women into position of power only for them to reproduce current inequalities, then the whole enterprise will have failed. That is what is currently happening. And that I suggest that has been a weakness in the way gender equality has been constructed in the past. It has been constructed within a liberal paradigm that ignores broader issues like wealth distribution, global poverty, under-development and increased centralization of power.

The last two decades has seen the rise of right-wing women into position of power who has overseen the deepening of inequality. A former British Prime Minister comes to mind as does a former deputy prime minister in my own country. So the main task for us men who still wield a disproportionate degree of influence over the economic system in which we live is to challenge, at whatever level we can, the current economic order. And for women, I suggest the challenge is to confront their right-wing sisters who now want to roll back the state and who trenchantly argue for the privatization of what were hitherto state functions. The irony is of course that many of these same women came to positions of power because of strong state support. So if we, women and men, are interested in working towards equality then we have to work jointly in challenging current economic orthodoxies as represented by the likes Frances Fukuyama and others.

The third conclusion I would like to put before you from these deliberations is the importance for us men to recognise that even if we don’t support patriarchal structures that we are beneficiaries of it – there is such a thing as the patriarchal dividend. It accrues to all men even those who are marginalised because of their sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, and ill-health or social class. Arising from that recognition and acknowledgement should come a resolve to contribute to the dismantling of patriarchy and a concomitant resolve to pursue more power-sharing relationships.

And if powersharing is to be achieved it means that we have to become less defensive, more open and more willing to listen, more proactive in supporting our women partners in the home; ensuring, what Harry Ferguson¹⁶ calls *domestic democracy* is not just an

¹⁶ McKeown, Ferguson, Harry and Rooney, Dermot. Changing Fathers? The Collins Press. Cork. (No permission needed)

aspiration but a full blooded reality. And ensuring that our women colleagues in the workplace are actually treated as equal partners, and when they are left lagging behind as they are in most public areas of life, that men actively become involved in ensuring that the horizontal and vertical impediments to progression are undermined.

It is also important that women are not left with the emotional workload, people men turn to when we need support but that men are available to provide that emotional support to women too and to other men. If acknowledgement of men's dominant role in society is the starting point, then the concerns and scepticism of many women alluded to at the outset of this paper may very well begin to dissipate.

I think it is important to state that men who are interested in moving on from old models of society are not themselves responsible for the construction of patriarchy but such men must ensure that we are not responsible for its maintenance or its reproduction. And that is difficult. Power sharing as the republicans and unionists in Northern Ireland or the Israelis in the Middle East are currently experiencing can be a painful experience. If power sharing is to be achieved, it will involve making painful decisions for men. The pain may very well include withdrawing from personal, social, political and promotional advancement to facilitate the advancement of women who made such sacrifices in the past for the men and children in their lives. To put it bluntly, how many men would forego their own personal advancement for the sake of their women partners or women colleagues in a kind of voluntary positive discrimination?

Rather than wait passively within the walls of the citadel, men's and women's interests would both benefit if each was to join with the other in taking down the bricks one by one. In this new setting, the pressing issues that many men face like high levels of suicide, violence of all sorts, substance use/misuse, poor literacy, homelessness, early mortality, unemployment and poverty can be tackled in a refreshing way. In this way men can begin as Nuala O'Faolain suggested almost a decade ago to "take responsibility for his brothers" and in the process of doing so contribute not only to the liberation of women, (which is not to argue that the liberation of women is dependent on the goodwill of men), but to our own liberation as well. And the good news is that some of that work is happening. I am currently lucky enough to be engaged in a collaborative reflective process with Alan O'Neill, whom you will meet later, on that very work of men taking responsibility for his brothers and I have been deeply moved by that process.

It is on the level of the imagination and consciousness that change must come and then that imagination needs to be formulated into some coherent action. But change in one area cannot happen in isolation from broader societal change. To think otherwise we are only kidding ourselves.

Peadar King
October 2006

