

As published in *The Guardian*, Comment & Debate, 25 November 2011. P.46.

Credits:

Cynthia Cockburn is Honorary Professor in the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick.

Ann Oakley is Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Portrait photographs: two jpgs attached.

**This culture of masculinity costs far too much to ignore.  
Cynthia Cockburn and Ann Oakley**

*If men committed as little crime as women it would pay for the deficit. They can change: testosterone need not mean violence.*

Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The phrase 'violence against women' calls for comment. It names the victims, but not the perpetrators. The fact that men are mainly responsible for violent and health-harming behaviours, not only against women and children but also against each other, is so taken for granted that it slips beneath the radar of commentators and policy-makers.

Take the riots of August this year. As the suspects were charged, considerable detail was published by the Ministry of Justice. The press focused on the age, ethnicity, neighbourhood and employment status of offenders. Yet by far the most dramatic divergence the statistics revealed was gender: 92% of the first 466 defendants were male. Something yet more significant went unremarked: of the 124 individuals charged with offences involving violence, all were male.

When information on a further 1,715 people charged with rioting offences was issued by the MoJ a month later, the focus was on the fact that 73% of the defendants had a previous caution or conviction. Few noted that the MoJ had chosen to focus only on male rioters: females were absent from these 'average' recidivists. What we saw was a palpable concern with the youth, class and race of rioters but a lack of analysis of the key fact the statistics illustrate: the culpability, and cost, of masculinity. As so often, masculine anti-social behaviour was just the wallpaper.

In 1959 the social scientist and policy activist Barbara Wootton remarked that 'if men behaved like women, the courts would be idle and the prisons empty'. Half a century later the British Crime Survey and police crime figures bear her out. In 2009-10, men perpetrators in 91% of all violent incidents in England and Wales. The figures vary by type of incident: 81% for domestic violence, 94% for wounding, 96% for mugging, 98% for robbery. MoJ figures for 2009 show men to be responsible for 98%, 92% and 89% of

sexual offences, drug offences and criminal damage respectively. Of child sex offenders, 99% are male. The highest percentages of female offences concern fraud and forgery (30%) and theft and handling stolen goods (21% female).

The MoJ publishes an annual report, *Women and the Criminal Justice System*, whose purpose is to fulfil the 'equality' provision in the Criminal Justice Act. But looking at statistics on women conceals the obvious: a comparable report on men and the criminal justice system would be policy dynamite.

On the road, men commit 87% of all traffic offences and 81% of speeding offences. Home Office data reveal the bearing of masculinity here too: men are responsible for 97% of dangerous driving offences and 94% of motoring offences causing death or bodily harm. A World Health Organization Report in 2002 on gender and road traffic injuries cautiously broke the code of silence by remarking that masculinity 'may be' hazardous to health.

Some of the costs of masculinity are paid individually. Boys are 'permanently excluded' from school at a rate four times higher than for girls, and attain fewer GCSE and A-levels than girls. But what of the overall costs to society?

Take prison costs alone – an estimated £45,000 per prisoner per year 95% of whom are male. If men committed crimes leading to custodial sentences at the rate that women do, the exchequer would save about £3.4 billion a year.

Zoom out to the overall cost of crime, calculated by the Home Office at £78 billion a year in 2009, including not only criminal justice system costs but lost productivity, service costs and impact on victims. If men committed as few crimes as women, the overall number of incidents would fall by 54%. This creates an annual saving of £42 billion, equivalent to almost a third of last year's public sector budget deficit. However, the most masculine crimes are the most expensive. A homicide, a sexual offence and a serious wounding cost £1.4 million, £31,438, and £21,422 respectively (2003 figures). The most feminine crime, theft, is the cheapest at £844 per incident. Thus the real saving to the UK of such a change in male behaviour would be vastly greater.

As the *British Medical Journal* recently pointed out, this life-damaging gender difference must be challenged by addressing the culture of masculinity that sustains it. How men and women behave is socially shaped. Popular understandings of masculine characteristics play up biology. Testosterone, the male hormone, the 'metaphor of manhood', is portrayed as driving men inexorably towards aggressive behaviour. Yet studies show that testosterone is related to status-seeking but not directly to aggression. Many other factors are influential. Testosterone levels are increased or diminished in both males and females by diet, activity and circumstance. The opportunity to interact with guns, for instance, appears to increase testosterone, while men's testosterone levels fall when they are involved with the care of children.

The case we are making is that certain widespread masculine traits and behaviours are dangerous and costly both to individuals and society. They are amenable to purposeful change. The culture of masculinity can be, and should be, addressed as a policy issue.