

Changing economy fuelling anti-feminist backlash

Loss of traditional jobs prompts some men to yearn for gender roles of 'good old days'

Montreal, Quebec – June 3 – A Windsor, Ont., researcher says the loss of traditional manufacturing jobs in Canada is fuelling a backlash against feminism.

Christopher J. Greig is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. In a paper presented at the 2010 Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences taking place at Montreal's Concordia University, he argues that instead of looking to redefine masculinity on new, more open lines, social and economic changes are prompting many men to pine for a return to 'the good old days' when men were men – and when women, presumably, knew their place.

Greig says that manhood is a concept built on social, historical and cultural values, not something innate ordained by biology.

"Definitions of manhood are shaped by changing socio-political structures in society," he says. Because manhood is not an absolute, its definition changes over time.

Sometimes, changes in society force a reconsideration of what a man is. Greig says this happened a few times during the 20th century, for example after the end of the Second World War. We're in the midst of another period of questioning right now, he says. It's driven by several factors, such as the increased role of women in the paid workforce and the decline of traditionally male manufacturing jobs.

These changes are prompting questions like: 'What does it mean to be a man when you've been laid off from your job at the factory and your wife is now the family's breadwinner?' Greig says many men are answering the question by expressing a longing for a return to old-style values.

"We're seeing something of an anti-feminist backlash, where because of the loss of manufacturing jobs and the crisis of de-industrialization, there's been concern around men's identity," he says.

He adds that men now talk disparagingly of the 'chickification' of society, and express a desire for old-style patriarchal values.

"Part of the backlash is being driven by men's uncertainty," he notes. "There's a tendency, when things are uncertain, to want to get 'back to normal'."

Greig argues that a return to patriarchal values won't solve the current crisis of manhood. That, he says is because older definitions of manhood limit and constrain men by assigning them specific roles.

Instead, he says, men should be looking to expand and redefine manhood – perhaps by finding definitions that do not tie a man's identity to his job. That way, if he loses or changes his job, his identity does not suffer.

That suffering is real: In his hometown of Windsor, for example, Greig says many automobile sector manufacturing jobs have been lost and because their identity was so wrapped up in their jobs, many men are seeking out mental health services.

There isn't a quick fix for any of this, he cautions.

And questions of gender, he adds, are always in flux. The current crisis provides an opportunity to create diverse, democratic, expansive, and equitable expressions of manhood.

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