

# Masculinity – what on earth is that?



From left to right: Nana Blomqvist, Ahmet Polat, Harry Lunabba, Ira virtanen, Boodi Kabbani. Image: Kaisa Ahvonen

**Masculinity has been an increasingly heated topic in the public discourse, especially after the fallout of #MeToo.**

– In my daily work I am teaching young strong women who are becoming social workers, I am using a feminist research frame to understand men and boys as social beings in contemporary society, says Harry Lunabba, PhD in Social work and teacher in Social Science, one of four panellists in the panel Youth and Masculinities that was organized by The Finnish Cultural Institute for the Benelux together with the Vem é man project coordinator at Ekvalita Nana Blomqvist, who moderated the panel discussion, and is also the author of this text. The recording can be listened to here: [Youth/Masculinities](#)



Harry Lunabba. Image: NIKK – Nordic Information on Gender

The other three panellists were Ira Virtanen, PhD in Interpersonal communication, Ahmet Polat, Artist, and Boodi Kabbani who played the protagonist in the 2017 feature film [A Moment in the Reeds](#).



Boodi Kabbani and Janne Puustinen. Image: Wild beast productions

## Re/defining masculinity

The panel was organized as part of the Re/defining Masculinities week that took place on the 5th to 8th of November 2019 in Helsinki. The main organizer of the event was the Finnish institute for the Benelux, in cooperation with Ekvälita, Poikien Talo and Kulttuuritalo Caisa.

While masculinity has long existed as a topic in the field of social science research, it has only recently entered a wider public discourse, in particular in conjunction with the #MeToo debate, and has as such occasionally sparked heated arguments.

Men dominate the statistics for violent crime, suicide and substance abuse. The question at the heart of the debate about men and masculinity seems to be how we interpret what lies behind these statistical figures. While some would claim that this harmful male behaviour is biologically predetermined, others point to rigid social expectations on men that cultivate so called “toxic masculinity”. Others emphasise male victimhood, either due to marginalization or a rapidly changing society in which men are struggling to find their place in a bewildering social playing field.

*“this pink top is really girly ... wait, did I just say that”*

Even people who subscribe to the idea of gender as a social construct and are professionally immersed in the notion of gender fluidity may fall prey to internalized, preconceived gender norms.

– “this pink top is really girly ... wait, did I just say that”. What is it that makes a piece of cloth gendered, actually? Kabbani asks, referring to something he caught himself saying when looking at clothes in a store.

Kabbani is from Syria, and arrived in Finland in late 2014.

– I grew up in an environment where you cannot be something in between, which made me feel like I had to delete myself, he says.

Today, he says, he subscribes to gender fluidity, a notion which he brings to his work as an actor as well. For example when he prepares for a role in a movie he strives not to reinforce the one-dimensional image of an angry and violent man, and tries to bring out more emotional aspects of a character.

All the panellists have their own professional take on masculinity.

Virtanen says she got into the field of masculinity as a Masters student. She says that the notion that men don't need anyone or don't show emotions wasn't aligned with her experiences. That inspired her to do research on men.



Ira Virtanen. Image: JonneRenvall

– We need to look at men's friendship, men *do* talk about emotions, men have close relationships, she emphasises.

## *“Masculinity is largely untheorized”*

Lunabba, who works in the field of social work, realized during early stages of his studies that since he was often the only male in this context, it made sense that he should take on the responsibility of doing work that related with issues of boys..

Since then he has, among other things, been investigating boys in child protection work.

He decided to do his PhD about how boys' needs are recognized, and he wanted to focus on

– Masculinity and vulnerability is largely untheorized, he says.

Polat's perspective is partly that of an experienced artist, and partly of growing up between two cultures, Turkish and Netherlandish. In the discussion, he introduced his take on this topic with a short presentation and his latest video work *The Myth of Men*

The trailer can be watched [here](#)



From the film *The Myth of Men*. Image Company New Heroes

– I grew up in between different cultures, still working on finding my way between the “I culture” and “We culture”. There are responsibilities that are not articulated out loud [but that you are expected to understand and accept].

– I did not have a voice for all of this until I found photography. I have worked with photography for 20 years, with topics such as the role as a father, immigration, how to be a man, and where that role comes from, Polat says.

– When you talk about what it is to become a man, it is either cantered around responsibility or sex.



Ahmet Polat. Image: unknown

### **Honour and masculinity**

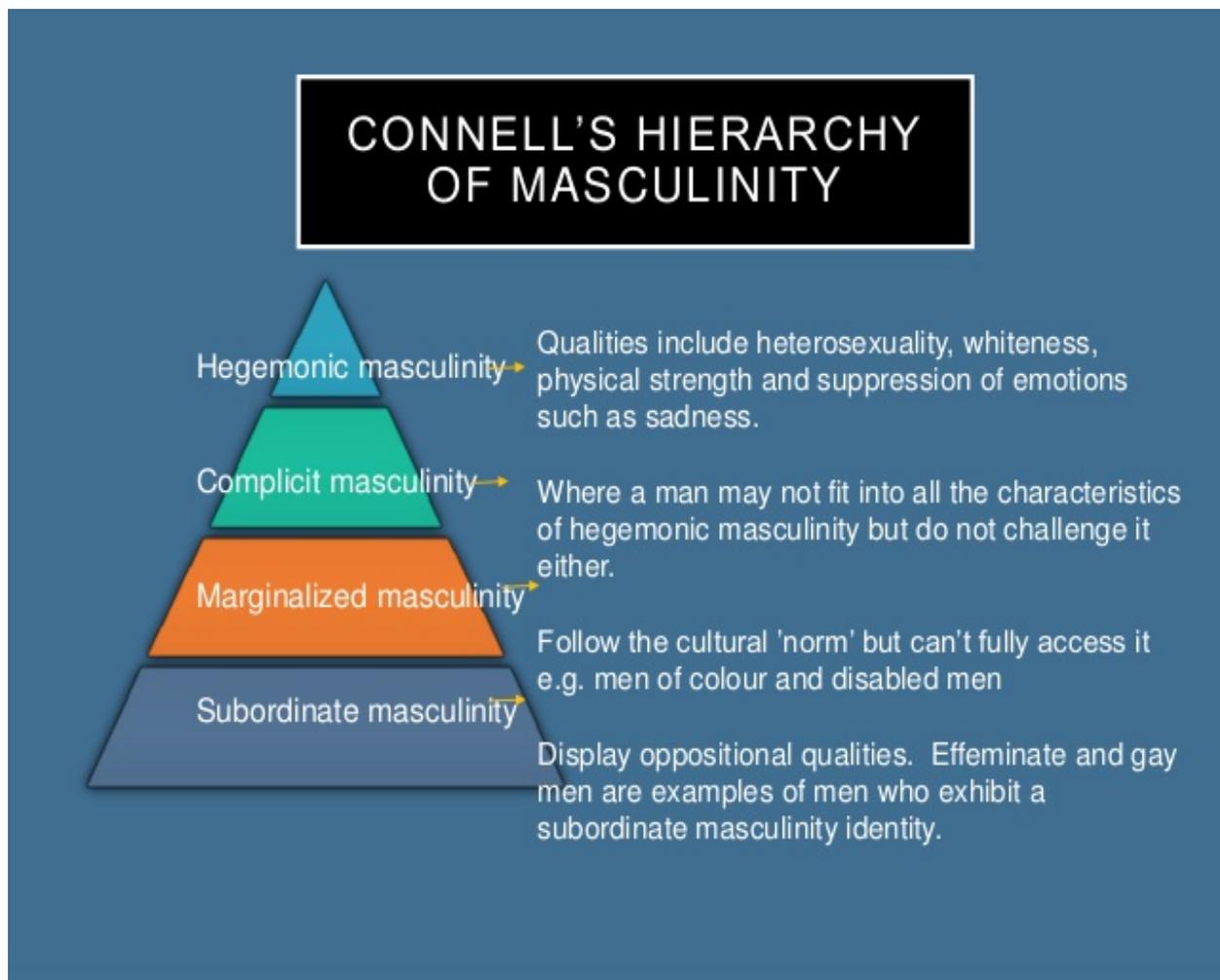
Polat mentions honour as one of the themes of his film. It can easily be recognized that certain concepts of honour are attached to masculinity regardless of cultural context.

– Is this hegemonic masculinity? Blomqvist asks.

Lunabba stresses the importance of nuancing the concept of masculinity.

– if we focus on hegemonic masculinity we reinforce it, we need to address vulnerability, the core of being human is to be vulnerable, he emphasizes.

In the 1990's Australian sociologist RW Connell promoted the concept of "hegemonic masculinity", by which she theorized a culturally idealized or stereotyped idea of manhood that organizes men into hierarchies that stress violence, heterosexual prowess, and rejection of so called feminine traits. Hegemonic masculinity also creates a framework on how to relate to women (either with contempt or desire), creating male hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity does not leave much room for men to show vulnerability, especially in public.



The concept of hegemonic masculinity illustrated. Image: Unknown

Lunabba is concerned for the angry men in our society. He emphasizes that it is not only the marginalized men that are angry, but that men from the upper classes also tend to hold a world-view according to which society treats them unfairly based on their gender.

– It would help them escape the anger if vulnerability was being addressed, he says.

Virtanen points out that the (social) discourse changes slower than reality. We could do a better job of representing men and boys in a more nuanced way, she says.

– Close friendship between boys should not be represented as an exception.



The childhood friends Aatos and Amine from From the documentary Gods of Molenbeek: Image: Reetta Huhtanen

According to Virtanen journalists have been asking her to comment on friendship between men and boys as if it was something out of the ordinary for two decades already.

*“it was really hard to learn vulnerability, to feel things that you were not allowed to feel earlier”*

In the public discourse on masculinity, the conceptual difference between masculinity and being a man is not always clear, says Blomqvist.

According to Lunabba it is interesting to note that “being a man” doesn’t necessarily hold any particular connotations, whereas masculinity is the framing of what men are supposed to be. He points out that among the murkier aspects of masculinity is the idea that men have a biologically predetermined incapability of taking care of children.

– We struggle because there is a framework of ideas of what we should be like, and masculinity means different things in different parts or times of life, Lunabba stresses

Masculinity is an idea, and manhood is body and identity, Blomqvist concludes.

– Even though I agree with that notion, Lunabba says, we should not talk about toxic masculinity. We should also talk about good masculinities.

### **Unlearning masculinity**

Alluding to previously mentioned notions on gender norms and society, Blomqvist poses a question about gender norms as building blocks for society at large.

Virtanen points out that she looks at things from the perspective of what she calls the Human Condition. She points out an important distinction regarding how we react to uncertainties in life. When faced with a perceived threat to our identity, the feeling of insecurity can either

prompt us to cling ever harder to previously internalized aspects of our identity, or to experience the pressure to change as growth and maturity.

– Nothing in the universe is permanent, not even rocks, and one notion of masculinity is that being a man is to be a rock, something people can lean on. However, one needs a bit of empathy towards oneself, she concludes.



Image: Pixabay

– Emotional security would be a good foundation for the resilience needed to face the change life brings, Blomqvist says.

Virtanen emphasizes that it is problematic if men do not seek support.

Kabbani chimes in and says that it would help a lot if being a man wouldn't have to equal being a rock. Rather, he says, men should be able to be themselves first and foremost, and realize that being a man has nothing to do with masculinity. Masculinity has nothing to do with being human. Everything about masculinity is not bad, he muses. To be a responsible provider and to be protective are good things, but shouldn't be limited to one gender, Kabbani says.

However, he says he felt it was really hard to learn vulnerability, to feel things that you were not allowed to feel earlier. Masculinity can be dehumanizing, he states.



One burning question Polat has come across in his work has been fathers who say “I don’t know how to talk to my son”. Image: Company New Heroes

– Syria has been struggling for so long with dictatorship and war that it is so much easier to stick to the stereotype, because that is what we know, Kabbani points out.

### **How to go about change, are demands on fast change the road to counter reaction?**

Polat relates an anecdote from a visit to a reception center for asylum seekers, where there was a poster hanging saying: “Here men can marry men and women can marry women”. The story highlights the challenges that people who have grown up in a context with rigid gender roles face when expected to internalize egalitarian and democratic views and values.

– We expect these people to accept these ideas immediately, Polat says.

– But the demands can feel overwhelming, like “Wow, take it slow, give me a second, I just need food, I still want to provide”.

It’s not realistic to believe that one can simply discard an outdated hegemonic masculinity that excludes gender and sexual minorities’ rights overnight, states Polat. If pushed too hard, people can cling even harder to their conservative ideas as a defence mechanism, he warns.

### **Culture, Masculinity and sexuality**

Polat and Kabbani highlight the fact that Middle Eastern and Turkish culture is what they call a “we-culture” and European, in turn, is an “I-culture”.

On one hand the gender roles in the Middle East are very rigid. Kabbani tells a story about a male relative of his who really liked children. However, because that was seen as feminine he couldn’t spend time caring for his children as much as he wanted to.

On the other hand, men can be very affectionate with each other, even if the male role is rigid, for example in Syria. Men address each other with the word *habibi* that literally translated from Arabic means *my love*. The threshold to be physically affectionate is likewise very low, as it is considered friendly and brotherly, rather than sexual.



My love, *habibi*, written in Arabic. Image: unknown

### **Middle Eastern masculinity**

Polat points out that a culture of repressed sexuality also plays out in the relations between heterosexual men, a notion that Kabbani wants to differentiate from the general normalcy of non-sexual affection between men in the Middle East.

Kabbani makes a further point on the cultural differences.

– [The Middle Eastern] man is a ready made package, whereas in Finland, you can still be yourself even if everybody wouldn't like it, he says.

– You will not get killed for it, Blomqvist chimes in.

In the Middle East, there are a lot of places where people don't interact with the opposite sex, Kabbaani says.

– You see all the hugging, holding hands, it shows that in some ways they have a lot of freedom to be human, but on the other hand, the gender roles are very rigid.

In order to highlight the many nuances in Turkish physical interaction he touches Luanbba on the shoulder.

– In Turkey affection is shown for example through touching someone's hair or earlobes, he says.

### **Poscolonial legacy vs. cosmopolitanism**

Polat poses the question of who controls the narrative. He applauds the positive changes in society, both regarding decolonization and diversity, but also recognizes that the growing acceptance of cosmopolitanism in the Netherlands, for example, creates an opposite reaction.

The language we use also excludes some groups of people. People with post-colonial backgrounds, LGBT people for example, are generally positioned lower in the conversation, Polat says. The conversation should be inclusive, so we generally invite a lot of different kinds of men to our panels. The narrative should not be controlled only by one group of people, Polat points out.

## *“Who controls the narrative?”*

Kabbani says that Finland is different from the Netherlands regarding the considered normalcy of cosmopolitanism. He says that during his early stay in Finland strangers would come up and touch his hair or beard. He also shares the story of a friend of his, that he describes as the sweetest person on earth, but who for some reason frightens girls. Kabbani says that he has experienced the frightening effects he himself has on those around him.

– People avoid sitting next to me on the bus or they hold their things when I am around, he says.

– It is unfair to be associated with violence and danger, he says.

### **Solutions**

## *“Communication is the key”*

Virtanen offers a hands-on solution and emphasizes interactions. Her research on intergroup dinners has given clear results.

– Research vastly shows that people who engage in conversation and interaction decrease prejudices and increase empathy. Communication is the key, she stresses.

The otherness becomes familiar, Kabbani states.



Piia Peltola, Aino Pennanen, Boodi Kabbani and Janna Räsänen. Image: Riikka Oksanen

Kabbani says that his theater group goes to the smallest places around Finland, where Kabbani might be the first person of color they have seen.

– But when I am not framed as an immigrant on the stage, then they see that I am like them.

– There is a lot to learn from the “we” culture, Polat points out.

– You Middle Easterners could teach us Finns some things on social interaction, Blomqvist jokingly states.

– Yeah, Finns could really practice their social skills, Kabbani laughs.

**Text: Nana Blomqvist**

\*\*\*\*\*

## Fact box

### Moderator

**Nana Blomqvist** has during the past years worked as a freelance journalist for Yle and for Ny Tid, coordinated a trauma mapping investigation on asylum seekers' mental wellbeing, coordinated a group for refugee and undocumented women, and was the project manager of the Vem é man project and currently serves in the same capacity at the Inter Nordic cooperation project on equality work with a focus on masculinity.

### Panellistst

**Boodi Kabbani** is an activist and actor from Syria, living in Finland who is known for playing the protagonist in the award-winning movie A Moment in the Reeds. He is also performing a role in the recent Swedish TV show Agent Hamilton and the Finnish TV series Cargo.

**Ira Virtanen** is a PhD in Interpersonal communication, specializing in issues regarding same sex friendships, vulnerability, and potential need of supportive actions in interpersonal communication. As a result of her more recent research she has developed an intercommunication support model for young men. The model is an eight-week long group process.

**Harry Lunabba** is a PhD in social work and teacher in social science who has been engaged in the field of masculinity and masculinities for a long time. He has received the Statsrådet Mauritz Hallbergs award and published several articles and has edited the rather recent Anthology Poikatutkimus (Boyhood research).

**Ahmet Polat** is a visual artist who has worked with different forms of art since 20 years, has received several awards and had exhibitions in different countries, among others, Turkey, Greece and the Netherlands. One of his most recent works is the film The Myth of Men in which he investigates some of the core codes of masculinity, but also the unpredictable.

Services that are reaching out for boys, mentioned in the panel:

[Poikien talo](#) (Loistosettlementti)

[Poikien puhelin](#) (Väestöliitto)

The recording of the panel can be accessed here

<https://www.mixcloud.com/Ekvalita/redefining-masculinities-youth-masculinities/>

\*\*\*\*\*

**This article was written within the project *Internordic cooperation in equality work focused on Masculinity*, funded by NIKK – Nordic Council of Ministers**