TOXIC MASCULINITY

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When Vito Carleone in the iconic movie 'The Godfather' said, “I spent my life trying not to be careless. Women and children can be careless but not men” in the 1970s, theaters roared with applause everywhere. However, if the same statement (which has toxic masculinity written all over it) was made now, five decades later, that would have definitely been something to worry about. As the wave of modern-day feminism hits the shore, identification, awareness, and criticism revolving around toxic masculinity have created quite a stir, but before we delve deeper into this, we need to understand what toxic masculinity is.

The Cambridge dictionary defines toxic masculinity as, “ideas about the way that men should behave that are seen as harmful”. The word masculinity itself is a broad concept consisting of generic behaviors and practices that are traditionally associated with men and manhood particularity. Masculinity as a concept may have both positive and negative connotations. However, toxic masculinity is a subset that deals with specific ideologies like domination, humiliation, and control. It is marked with things like emotional detachment, hyper-competitiveness, chauvinism, and so on. Considering this, toxic masculinity as a phenomenon is specifically relational and is mostly defined to be in opposition to anything culturally associated with women or femininity. It is driven by this overwhelming fear of female emancipation, or rather the fear to be perceived as feminine, or unmanly. Toxic masculinity is undoubtedly a direct consequence of the patriarchy and therefore feminist movements around the world have revolted staunchly against this. A very predictable tension has tagged along with the rise of toxic masculinity, wherein majority of the conservatives allege that the blame-game of toxic masculinity is an attack on manhood, when men face the challenges such as suicide, alcoholism and drug overdose. On the other hand, the goal of progressives to detoxify masculinity to ensure a pathway of gender equality is a lovely juxtaposition.

There have been many righteous and unrighteous allegations on toxic masculinity for rape, murder, violence, online trolling, mass shooting, and even the election of Donald Trump. Although it is agreed that masculinity can be destructive, both the schools of thought, namely liberal and conservative, misunderstand the function of this term. When the common mass uses this term, they tend to detect the problem of cultural illness and masculine aggression as something which has infected today’s men and facilitates actions subjected to criticism. But the term is not a cause. The concept over the past few decades has evolved and has acted as a barometer for gender politics, having an arrow pointed towards the modifying causes of violence and sexism. Despite the unhindering support and popularity among feminists for toxic masculinity, it did not originate with the women’s movement. It originated from the much known mythopoetic men's movement in the 1980s and 1990s. This movement promoted a certain masculine spirituality to rescue the “deep masculine" – a protective masculine – from toxic masculinity.” The men’s aggression according to the movement was a result of an unhinged society that feminized boys.

But let’s ask ourselves a question- if we were to talk about sexism, where do these sexist attitudes come from? Are men simply culturally brainwashed into misogynistic behaviour and aggression, demanding re-process of education into the "right" beliefs? This misconception entails a certain danger. By putting all light on culture, those who resent toxic masculinity can definitively collude with institutions that perpetuate it. For example, recent evidence aims towards the diverting act of the alcohol industry to deny the relationship between alcohol and violence, instead of blaming “masculinity" and the "drinking culture.” This is a sheer repetition of liberal feminist arguments against this stance because there is compelling evidence that density of liquor in an area increases the local rate of domestic violence. So any serious plan to prevent violence against women would address alcohol availability along with sexism and masculine norms.

When discussing the impact of toxic masculinity on society, the greatest repercussion that must be taken into consideration is its effect on the mental health of men. A careful look at the gender stereotypes promulgated through toxic masculinity reveals one concerning pattern: most such societal compulsions mock men on the grounds of seeming ‘feminine’ or ‘gay’, betraying society’s ever- present ignorance and stigma surrounding women and the LGBTQ+ community. The mere idea of expressing one’s emotions as opposed to bottling it all up inside is considered unmanly, often resulting in men being subjected to gender dysphoria. Phrases such as “boys don’t cry”, “you throw like a girl”, and “man up” not only agitate an individual regarding their gender identity, but also propagate the idea of women being weak, vulnerable, and emotionally unstable. Although toxic masculinity largely pertains to the male population within society, its eradication also finds great roots within the feminist movement in attempting to ensure equal treatment of all sexes.

Apart from the gender-shaming that goes on within the phenomena, the suppression of emotions is a dangerous expectation imposed on men. This obligation finds its roots in the traditional family structure of the medieval times and thereafter, where the man, being the head of the family, was expected to remain confident, strong, and composed as the source of emotional and financial stability for the household. While the dependence of the family structure on the patriarchy has gradually waned, the pre-dated model of what it means to be a man still largely persists. Men raised within such a system have a complicated relationship with their emotions: as they are encouraged to shut them off or even avoid them entirely, they often take to external methods to cope with the internal trauma. Overworking is a typical symptom of such a condition, while some also take to self-medication in the form of alcoholism and drug abuse. Hence, it is no surprise that the leading cause of death among young men is suicide.

Breaking away from the cycle of such toxicity is imperative in moving forward as a society, and requires avoiding the trivialisation of depression in men. Changing attitudes, expectations, and reactions with respect to men showing their emotions and partaking in traditionally feminine activities is a necessity not only to make more men feel open about who they are, but to also teach the children of today about what it means to own one’s gender identity. True masculinity is simply about being comfortable in one’s body, no matter what the society may have to say about it.