



# World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

**PROGRAMME:** No. 930 recorded 5 March 2004

**GUESTS:** Craig Mokhiber  
Deputy Director, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York

Prof. Robert Connell  
Expert on Men's Gender and Masculinities, Australia

Dean Peacock  
Activist for Violence Prevention & Gender Equality, South

Africa

**MODERATOR:** Mary Alice Williams

## **“THE ROLE OF MEN AND BOYS IN ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY”**

Equality between women and men is a principle of international law, recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So why is the idea that men and boys have a major role in realizing this principle been given relatively little thought, until recently? What can be learned from the reaction of men in various countries to the greater empowerment of the women in their lives? How deeply rooted is the cliché that ‘boys will be boys’ – that gender behaviour patterns cannot be changed?

In this special edition of World Chronicle, hosted by Mary Alice Williams, these questions are discussed by three male experts on the subject of gender discrimination: Craig Mokhiber, of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York; Prof. Robert W. Connell, an expert on men's gender and masculinities from Australia; and Dean Peacock, an activist for violence prevention and gender equality from South Africa.

**WORLD CHRONICLE** is produced by the News & Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration: 28:00"  
Executive Producer: Michele Zaccheo  
Director: Livingston Hinckley  
Production Assistant: Lebe L. Besa

**ANNOUNCER:** From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**WILLIAMS:** Hello, I'm Mary Alice Williams and this is **World Chronicle**.

Violence against women. Discrimination against girls. Inequality among genders. Are these "women's issues" -- or problems that can only be addressed by making them relevant to men and boys? And how do men in different countries react to getting involved in the cause of gender equality?

Our guests today are three male experts on the issue of gender behavior and discrimination. They are:

Craig Mokhiber of the UN office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York. Prof. Robert Connell from Australia, an expert on men's gender and masculinities. And Dean Peacock from South Africa, an activist working for violence prevention and gender equality. Gentlemen welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Equality between men and women is a principle of international law. It is recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Why is the idea that men and boys have a major role in realizing this principle been largely not thought of until recently?

**CONNELL:** I think that's fairly straight-forward. Issues about gender equality were placed on the table by the women's movement so they were coded from the start as being women's business. But of course, every women's issue is also at the same time an issue about men, about what men have done or failed to do. And I think it's gradually become clear, it's gradually become more widely recognized that men are involved in all of these matters and therefore have some kind of responsibility to do something about them.

**MOKHIBER:** I think that's right, and I think it's understandable as well if you can think about the women's movement in the early days looking to create space for itself in which to develop its thinking and its strategies and so on. It's probably understandable that they would try to do it in a way, which was a bit insulated from domination by men essentially. But I think that its true that in recent years there has been increasing...

**WILLIAMS:** So are you saying that if it doesn't come from men it's not going to happen? There will be a stratification between men and women?

**PEACOCK:** Just to add a point and then to come back to your question. I think there was also real issues around trust that many of the issues that were on the table had to do with men's violence, men's use of domestic and sexual violence, and so to bring men into conversation of that sort and to bring men into those spaces I think, you know in many ways elicited some sense of unease and distrust initially. And I think the urgency of the HIV epidemic

in some ways paradoxically has forced that discussion to become about those men and women in ways that are different than were the case before.

**MOKHIBER:** And I think the answer to your question is yes. I think that without the engagement of men it's impossible to achieve women's human rights in the way that we are talking about today. Men after all disproportionately have the power and the resources in society that determine the degree to which women are going to realize their human rights.

**WILLIAMS:** This is a very complex issue. There are political and economic and social and cultural underpinnings to keeping women at the least down and at the worst abused. Where do you start? What is the most important aspect of what I have just said?

**MOKHIBER:** Well, I mean, I think one thing is to recognize that we are not talking about a charitable response here on the part of men. I mean one of the developments in recent years has been that this has been recognized as a matter of fundamental human rights and therefore an obligation on the part of men. One of the great achievements - and I think the women's human rights movement gets credit for this - is the creation of a legal framework for a pattern against gender discrimination and that means in fact that men are obliged under law...not just in the public sector but also in the private sphere as well.

**PEACOCK:** And I think legal approaches are obviously enormously important and at the same time they're not efficient, that I think it's really important that this issue also be framed, the issue of gender equality, the issue of challenging many of our contemporary gender rules be recognized as in men's interests as well; that if you look at contemporary gender rules very often they in fact compromise men's health and well being as well. So here in the U.S., if you look at some of the important public health indicators: suicide rates, fatal car crashes, substance abuse and...occupational stress certainly, if you look at who the perpetrators are of crime - not just crime against women but in fact crime against men - we see that men really do have a very significant investment I think in challenging many of his contemporary gender roles...

**WILLIAMS:** But how do you cut through cultural paradigms and convince men of the accuracy of what you've just said? I mean... that's the issue here, right?

**CONNELL:** Well you have to be very realistic about this. There are things that men have to lose as well as things that men have to gain.

**WILLIAMS:** Why did they lose anything if they have better cooperation with women?

**CONNELL:** Because of the privileges men have now. I mean men dominate the corporate world; men dominate the political world, almost worldwide - men gain higher incomes than women by almost a factor of 2, globally. There are a lot of things that men have to...well in the long run... have to concede in order to create a more equal, more peaceable and more

livable world; and that's why this issue is politically, actually quite complex and difficult. There are gains from men, there are very good reasons why men should support gender equality, but they're not for the most parts simple calculations of immediate self-interest. There are longer-term gains.

**MOKHIBER:** There is after all this so-called patriarchal dividend; they're not just assembling advantages that they have. But one of the interesting things about this issue if you look at society as in crisis, in the middle of humanitarian catastrophes and human rights catastrophes and so on, you'll find that in those situations women tend to be given roles that are non-traditional roles to be empowered more in economic and political life. But the worrying part of that is once the crisis subsides, women are back in the kitchen – women are back in traditional roles. And the challenge here is to help men and societies understand that even in normal situations there are many benefits to be gained by society at large by empowering women.

**WILLIAMS:** As example, in Rwanda it is the women who are leading the reconstruction. In Iraq, women have just achieved enough power to ensure that they could be represented by 25% of the governing council, yet women in Iraq are less safe than they were, there is more abuse, there are more kidnaps, and there are more rapes in Iraq now than there were before all of this business started.

**MOKHIBER:** I think Prof. Connell's point is the main point of the day, which is it's a complex issue. People for example look at symbols of women's empowerment, they look at Afghanistan and say, "the transition is taking place why do we still see the burka everywhere?" And the answer is that it's a complex phenomenon. Women are not in every respect better off since the fall of the Taliban. Issues on personal security and sexual abuse and other physical violence against women have increased in some areas since the departure of the Taliban and for some women the burka has become a symbol of security.

**WILLIAMS:** Are there circumstances that you can give us evidence of...that the higher women, the higher the level of education women achieve, the more power they achieve, that there is a backlash - that it does make their lives less secure?

**CONNELL:** I think there's no doubt that there are backlashes in different parts of the world including of course some of the richest countries. This is not just a problem of the developing world, but in some of the richest countries including the country that I live in, where there have been major gains for women's education for instance and access of women to some of the professions. Among some groups of men there is anger or resentment about this or a few men are now the victims in education or in health matters. So men's reactions to all these issues are very diverse. There are even conflicting movements of men, some pursuing their

notion of men's rights. You know - opposition to the rights for women, others pursuing in a gender of gender equality, hopefully in cooperation with women – and that is characteristic of politics among men everywhere.

**WILLIAMS:** Should governments legislate this or does change have to come from the bottom of it?

**MOKHIBER:** I think the answer is both. I mean it's true that you have to make cultural and societal changes that have a lot to do with education and conditioning and changing of attitudes, but as the old saying goes, "You can never wake a man who is only pretending to be asleep." That means in some cases that obligation, which is after all with the human rights framework brings to this, is necessary as well. And again, I mean this has been something that has been very important over the last few years is this notion that the state has human rights obligations that extend into the home and into the family and into the private sphere as well.

**CONNELL:** There's also plenty of evidence from research on organizations that for a shift towards gender equality to occur in corporations or in governments, leadership - an example from the top - is tremendously important given that men are mainly the people who run corporations and governments. A public commitment and follow-through of men in leadership positions makes a tremendous difference to the acceptance of gender equality lower down the organization.

**PEACOCK:** And that's certainly true of the work that we do in South Africa with the Men as Partners Program, which is a program of a large international reproductive health organization based here in New York. And we work both with men at a very grass roots level: so unemployed men from the townships, unemployed men in rural areas. And then we also do a lot of work with key stake holders in local communities, so faith-based leaders, traditional leaders, traditional healers, people who really do in many ways set social norms in that community and who have an ability to enforce laws that are in place, but are often not enforced, right? So I really do think it has to be from the top and from the bottom.

**WILLIAMS:** How does your average male sports fan react to the suggestion that he is indispensable to achieving greater gender equality?

**PEACOCK:** Well I think initially it's something that most men never even think about. I remember the first time I learned about this work, I learned about it with a real sense of surprise like "wow" they're in fact men involved in promoting gender equality - that the issue was for so long framed as a women's issue that I think men often just didn't even consider that they had a role to play. But I think when you frame it in the ways that we were discussing earlier both in terms of self-interest and in terms of obligation, I think men begin to recognize that this is in fact an issue that they have a critical role to play, and I think one issue we didn't touch upon earlier

is men's very real concern for the women in their lives, whether their mothers, their daughters, their colleagues, their fellow congregants, and men...

**WILLIAMS:** Their wives?

**PEACOCK:** What's that? Their wives? Did I not say this. And certainly, you know when you explore with those men their fears and concerns about their partners safety, the safety of these women I mentioned, I think they then recognize a real sense of urgency and are very often eager to figure out ways. I think it's quite hard sometimes for men to sort of understand what role they might play, but I think are very eager to figure that out.

**WILLIAMS:** Yeah. You told us before a story about being in a bus depot in Soweto where a man said that his wife had substantial power in her professional life and that was fine, but man when she got home she'd better know her place.

**PEACOCK:** And I think as Bob said these issues are really complex - that when we then ask that man or either men, "Are you concern about your partner's safety?" The answer is yes – across the board almost. And so, then we have an opening right? We have something we can work with, his concern – his investment in her safety. And, you know those are in some ways paradoxical, and at the same time I think make sense, that people come at these issues with conflicting emotions.

**CONNELL:** There are also big differences between different groups of men here so the reaction of your average sports fan depends partly on how old the sports fan is, especially among younger men. We're now finding in quite a number of countries evidence that the younger men are more inclined than their fathers to agree with the idea of an equal sharing of work with their wives or partners in the household. They're more interested in active hands-on fathering in spending time with babies and young children. So with that kind of response emerging, whether responsibilities among younger men, you've got a real basis for at least discussion and perhaps practical action around men's support of women's rights...

**WILLIAMS:** And that happens in countries that grant paternity leave for instance, so when a new baby comes in to the world the father can also get time off from work.

**CONNELL:** That's fine. I mean that's wonderful with countries which can afford that and where social policies supports that, it makes a tremendous difference to men's involvement with their children. And that capacity to be involved with children is something that young fathers value tremendously all over the world.

**WILLIAMS:** This is World Chronicle and our topic today is the role of men in fighting discrimination and violence against women. Craig.

**MOKHIBER:** Well I think that's right. I think that you can end this with formal arrangements to try to solve the problem. But in the end we're really are talking about societal changes and I think this is where things like education and public information become so vital.

**WILLIAMS:** But education for men. In India for instance the more educated the woman is the more she's subjected to abuse and violence.

**MOKHIBER:** Well, education for men about the value of education for women for example, there's good science behind this. Every feasibility study that's ever been done in connection for example with the UN's Millennium Development Goals have recognized that we cannot achieved those development goals that benefit men and women in society without paying concentrated attention to things like women's education, women's empowerment and the full engagement of women in achieving these goals.

**WILLIAMS:** In a number of industrialized countries there are groups and you referred to it already which claim that they...that men are now at the disadvantage; did they get a lot of coverage because it's a reverse argument or is this a widely held belief in the society?

**CONNELL:** I think they get a lot of coverage because the media enjoy this kind of story, which is a kind of prickly response to feminism.

**WILLIAMS:** Man bites dog?

**CONNELL:** Men bites dog kind of story, but in some areas these arguments have gained credibility partly because they point to, but in my view rather distort, real issues. There are for instance quite important issues about boys' education. That's not the case that boys are an oppressed group. Boys on the whole are an empowered group but there are specific groups of boys in schools who are having difficulties with school who, you know, have difficulties with...

**WILLIAMS:** But that has nothing to do with women being educated, the girls being educated.

**CONNELL:** Well I agree. In my view that's correct but some people tell the story as if boys were doing badly in school because girls are doing well. So, a kind of competing victims syndrome is set-up, and that's bad for everyone, I think.

**MOKHIBER:** It's interesting just as the women's movement has began to move away from its partisan approach to advocating women's rights and to say, "This is women's rights as human rights and we're all going to be in this together", you find the reaction from some men's groups on the other hand is, well we're going to take a partisan approach. The international human rights movement was never about that, it was never above one group only advocating for itself, it was supposed to be about the German advocating on behalf of the Jew, and the Israeli advocating on behalf of the Palestinian.

**WILLIAMS:** And none of that relates to gender.

**MOKHIBER:** All that relates to gender, however...

**WILLIAMS:** But you know any one gender or the other.

**MOKHIBER:** Yeah. That's right; the benefits are cut across both genders.

**PEACOCK:** But I think, I mean the other issue that I think is really important is that men's power, men's privilege was so invisible, is so invisible to so many men that any challenge to it can at times I think feel very threatening to some men. But I also wouldn't want to exaggerate the strength of these more conservative reactionary men's rights group, but by and large, with some exceptions, they're not especially powerful, they don't have much of a base, and often they gain some attention because they tend to be more middle class in their orientation.

**WILLIAMS:** I want to change the subject for just a moment or veer off into risk-taking, which is a celebrated part of male behavior; but is the AIDS pandemic changing that idea?

**PEACOCK:** Well certainly I think around sexual behavior it's changing it in some ways, risk-taking behavior in general probably not, and those things come together right?... so that all risk-taking behavior can be the consumption of lots of alcohol and couple that then with sexual behavior and whatever deterrence men may have in their minds about risk-taking behavior become compromised.

**WILLIAMS:** The reason I asked the question about AIDS is that many surveys in Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that men are often blocked by a fear of losing the respect of their peers from getting involved with caring and support of people who are suffering from HIV/AIDS.

**PEACOCK:** Right. I mean I think that is really an important issue that many of them, and I work with and certainly research elsewhere in the regions supports this, talk about their realization, the recognition that they should be playing a more active role in the home, caring for people who are ill, and really...you know sort of taking a much firmer stand. But they really do fear the consequences of that for themselves in the community, and so people will talk about being more involved in domestic activities when someone is ill, but making sure the neighbors never find out. And so I think in some ways their work we're talking about is in fact promoting risk-taking behavior. We're saying, you need to in this instance, take a risk, take a risk that you may get some strange glances, but on this issue this is a really important one for you to step forward and take that risk and take it courageously.

**WILLIAMS:** All three of you are involved in your professional lives in fostering gender equality. What about your personal lives? Do you feel that you shifted or modified your own personal behavior because of what you do professionally?

**MOKHIBER:** Well, I think...



**WILLIAMS:** Did I put you on the spot? (Laughter).

**MOKHIBER:** It's a very important question because there's an old saying that human rights begins at home, and I think that's certainly is true. There are plenty of folks who can pronounce an international human rights standard and not necessarily bring them in to their own personal life. I think so, I think our consciousness about these sorts of norms and standards and objectives is something that empowers you also in your personal life to try to do better. I think we all are human beings and we have shortcomings that are reflected also in our personal lives. But I think just a consciousness of international human rights and norms and standards -- we're in the middle of now something that the UN is organizing called, "The UN Decade for Human Rights Education", the very purpose of which is to create a culture of human rights, something that goes beyond formal parts of the human rights system and into people's homes and lives and I think that's an important aspect as well.

**PEACOCK:** Well then, if I think about my own experience, I've been doing work around these issues of gender and masculinities working with men for a little over a decade. And I grew up in South Africa, playing rugby and grew up in a very conservative racist society that was full of all sorts of hierarchies. And, you know, certainly part of what was exciting about taking this work on, was examining some of the assumptions I hold about gender, about myself as a man and finding out that in fact I felt much freer challenging many of those gender stereotypes and so, for me its been in at times a struggle, but in many ways a very (liberating) experience.

**CONNELL:** I recently found some letters that I've written as a very young man to my wife before we were married. And I must say I'm deeply embarrassed (laughter) about the attitudes that were shown in those letters. Yes it has made a big difference in my life. The women's movement raised a set of issues, created an atmosphere that men in my community had to respond to and I tried to respond to it. I am taking part in equalizing things in the household, taking greater share of the cooking, helping feed the baby, doing some of the close work in raising our daughter. It wasn't easy. I don't assume that this is a kind of change that men can make one think.

**WILLIAMS:** As a parent do you actually help?

**CONNELL:** No, I don't help. I am there.

**WILLIAMS:** There you go.

**CONNELL:** I am part of it.

**WILLIAMS:** But we're talking about all of the gentle way that culture change, family by family, person by person. But there are women all over this world in crisis; Amnesty International says a third of all women in the world including these United States is subject to

abuse. What can we do for the women who are in crisis? What can the United Nations Division of Human Rights do for these women who are in crisis?

**MOKHIBER:** Well, I think that as we said in the beginning of this discussion that one has to have a multi-faceted approach to this, and part of it is education, and I think the UN is working to try to help to bring human rights education about the role of women to places around the world. Another is monitoring, is making sure that we know what the problem is, what the sources of that problem is, and the scope of that problem is as well and the UN is doing a very important work in that area.

**WILLIAMS:** We know that rape is being used as an act of war in various Central and South American countries, now to believe that elsewhere as well. What do you do about that? Are Geneva Conventions not recognized widely in the world?

**MOKHIBER:** But the legislation is in place. I mean rape as a weapon of war is also covered in the statute of the International Criminal Court; an important achievement as well for the women's movement. The problem is not the legal framework; the legal framework is in-place also at the international level and largely at the national level. The problem is the implementation of that framework and making sure that the two pieces of this: accountability, including under the law and education and social transformation are presumably to come together.

**CONNELL:** The case you raised is a very difficult one, but it's one where governments can act. For instance, some of the problem revolves around military forces and the traditional mastermind culture are military forces were frankly abusing women has been – you know in past history, one of the ways in which armies created solidarity in a particularly kind of military masculinity. Well, that is being challenged in some military forces; it can be challenged a great more if governments actually are serious about the issue.

**PEACOCK:** Just to respond to a slightly different piece of your question, a question of rape in general. We are living in a society in many ways that supports sexual violence against women, that encourages men to objectify women's bodies, and I think part of what we have to do is we have to move beyond simple legal solutions to those problems - that its not enough to...and certainly it's important that people be prosecuted and convicted. And in South Africa I think we've got work to do on those grounds. But I think along side of that we really have to encourage men in their personal lives, in their public lives to take a stand. That when a man is in conversation with a friend and he makes a remark that supports a cultural violence against women – that man has to be encouraged to take a stand.

**WILLIAMS:** Language has meaning.

**PEACOCK:** Absolutely. And that is something in our work we really encourage men to do in a very active way in the workplace and affect his organization to constantly take a stand and we recognize that that's difficult.

**WILLIAMS:** How do you give men and boys the enfranchisement if you will to understand that it is in their interest that we end violence against women, that we end the denigration of women?

**PEACOCK:** I think you ask them to reflect on their own personal experiences when so many young men have grown up in homes where they were terrified when they heard the sound of their father steps coming down the drive way or...you know those young men who hid under the staircase when their father came home. And there are lots of them.

**WILLIAMS:** ...Are generally the ones who grew up to have their children hiding under the staircases.

**PEACOCK:** In some cases sure, and at the same time I think they also very quickly realize what's in it for them to change; that they don't want their children to grow up in the same way.

**CONNELL:** I think it's important, I mean, many men are the targets of violence themselves not usually from women, from other men. That in itself has a gender dimension because the situations that produced violence among men often have to do with institutionalized masculinity, the challenges among groups...

**WILLIAMS:** And power.

**CONNELL:** And power, exactly. So, there's often a basis in men's experience to understand what it is to be the target of violence, and the more we can encourage men and boys - because often this is developmental - it starts early in life - to believe that they are sharing experience and have common interests with girls and women rather constantly to think of them as separate and different species – one is from Mars and one from Venus; I think that this is ridiculous and damaging.

**WILLIAMS:** Thank you so much, all of you for your time gentlemen. And thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guests have been:

Craig Mokhiber of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York, Prof. Robert Connell from Australia, an expert on men's gender and masculinities, and Dean Peacock of South Africa, an activist working for violence prevention and gender equality.

I'm Mary Alice Williams. Thank you for joining us, we invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

**ANNOUNCER:** Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on your screen:

World Chronicle  
United Nations, Room S-827  
New York, N.Y., 10017.  
Or by email at: [besa@un.org](mailto:besa@un.org)

This programme is a Public Affairs Presentation from United Nations Television.

**The views and opinions expressed on this programme are those of the participants, and do not necessarily reflect the official statements or views of the United Nations.**