

Men need families

by Belinda Brown

On Thursday, Diane Abbott delivered a lecture at the think tank Demos on "[Britain's Crisis of Masculinity](#)". She put an important subject on the agenda. By telling us that "loving families are a benefit to men" she made a good point. But by focusing on masculinities, rather than men, she lost some important facts in fine epithets, jargon and rhetoric.

But it was her adherence to feminist dogma that really let her down. As a "card carrying feminist", it was incumbent upon Abbott to insist that no family model is better than any other - even where there is no-one to take the economic provider role. This was because, in her view, any resulting problems for children can be largely attributed to poverty, and this can be resolved presumably by the state taking the provider role.

However, if the state enables a family to manage without a provider, what role does this leave for men?

CPS Research Fellow [Harriet Sergeant](#), on the responding panel, had a useful contribution to make here. Sergeant has spent many years befriending members of a gang in South London and ascertaining their views on this matter. Many of them had conceived children and would have loved to have been a part of their family and to have played a valuable role in their lives. However, with the sorts of wages their skills could obtain in work, they were completely unable to compete with the state as provider. A mother and child can work pretty well as a unit, so what incentive or need is there to integrate a third person into this family's life? The men's typical response was to see a conspiracy to keep them out of families.

But [Geoff Dench](#), another panellist, explained how bringing men into families is exactly what we need to do if we want to get the most out of them. According to Dench, society is built around bonds between mothers and children; men are marginal here. What differentiates us from most of the animal kingdom, and possibly even reflects the level of development of a society, is the extent to which we can pull men into playing a useful family role. By allowing men to provide for families and encouraging interdependence, we nurture their otherwise latent altruistic instinct and motivate them to achieve and strive.

This is where feminists have so palpably failed men. They have been determined to prove that we can manage without them. They have de-legitimised male achievements by attributing them to 'patriarchy'. They have robbed men of relationships with their children. No wonder men have [higher rates of homelessness, suicide and custodial sentencing](#).

But men are our sons, brothers, fathers, lovers and sometimes even our husbands. We all suffer when men fail to thrive.

Fortunately, among younger women, card-carrying feminists are rather thin on the ground. [Survey after survey](#) suggests that, where women can afford to, they are more likely to prioritise their family, work part-time and sometimes even stay at home. Alison Wolf argues that focussing on a career is the choice of a minority. A YouGov survey suggests it is financial necessity which keeps the majority of women in work.

Research reported in [the New Scientist](#) suggests that women with these priorities are making the intelligent choice. This study showed that altruism and family values influence long-term happiness. People whose survey responses placed a higher priority on altruistic and family goals were rewarded with greater long-term life satisfaction, compared to those who prioritise career and material success.

Organisations like [Mothers at Home Matter](#) argue that there is currently both a financial and almost moral pressure coming from government to push women out to work – including an inherent unfairness in the tax system. In response, they are campaigning for a transferable tax allowance which would make it easier for women to prioritise their family and stay at home or work part-time if that is what they choose to do. This would help to create more interdependence between men and women. It would also allow more men to have the useful role which Sergeant's research suggests many yearn for.

In contrast, Ms Abbott is committed to a world where differences between men and women are a product of cultural creation, where equality is measured in numbers and where all families, even those with no provider, are equally functional. This suggests Ms Abbott is unlikely to do anything very useful for men.

