

LET'S TALK ABOUT MEN - PART 1

By Marion Verweij, the Netherlands

In Feminenza, we love to search for a greater understanding of what makes men and women tick, and how we can form a better partnership together for the future. The first two principles of Feminenza speak about how we believe that the existence of the two genders implies a partnership to something better, and that their union is designed to create something that is a step forward for humanity. There is a need for remedy and rebalance, not as a reaction against the past, but for the sake of the future, in which there is much yet to be understood about both genders. Part of our quest therefore is to understand more about the masculine gender, to seek out our brothers endeavouring to improve gender relations, and encourage them in their efforts.

Thus with much interest I attended a festival in Amsterdam early last December organised by Women Inc. One of the debates was organised by WO=MEN, Dutch Gender Platform and carried the title "Let's Talk About Men." During this debate three men discussed the strengths and qualities of the new African Man. Interviewing the three men afterwards was heart warming; it is always encouraging to meet agents of change and to hear more about their views on the relationship between the genders. As they spoke of what motivates them, it filled me with hope, to once again meet men who care and are willing to stick their necks out, on behalf of a greater humanity between the genders. In this issue we meet Aernout Zevenbergen. Part 2 with Dean Peacock Mokgethi Tshabalata Sonke Gender Justice Network will appear in the next issue of Feminenza Magazine.

TO BE A MAN ISN'T EASY

Aernout Zevenbergen was born in Lusaka. At an early age his Dutch parents moved back to Holland where he grew up. He became a correspondent for various international newspapers and magazines traveling in 30 different countries throughout Africa. He has also worked for the WHO, the development agency SNV and the Dutch ministry for Foreign Affairs. In 2007 he published his first book "Vlekken van een luipaard" (the spots of the leopard) which he hopes will be released in English in 2008. The book is about men in Africa, aiming to rewrite the bad reputation African men have been given in the media. "To be a man is not easy," says Aernout, and one of the reasons he wrote his book is to help open up a dialogue on the subject in Africa.

Early in his career as a correspondent based in Africa, Aernout felt he ought to do something about HIV/AIDS. As he spoke with different people about it he felt something fundamental was missing and went in search of what that was. Then in 2001 two events occurred which totally changed him from being a political social correspondent to a man on a spiritual quest.

The first happened in Nyanza province where he was following a story on a wife's inheritance. He was attending the funeral and got to speak to various family members, including a number of women, about the problem of wives' inheritance and AIDS. What he

met was inflexible tradition. One woman told him that you can't change a tradition or everything else will collapse. They explained that everyone knows about condoms but it goes against tradition so they don't use them. The same went for wives' inheritance: it's tradition so you can't change it.

The second moment happened when soon afterward he was back in Nairobi conducting an interview with a man on his deathbed. Aernout asked the man if he was strong enough would he use a condom and thus save others from being infected to. The man said "no."

In that same period he attended a talk by the Jua Kali workers (Swahili for: 'Under a cruel sun', (those who work outdoors, under the trees) - where a woman was giving a lecture on HIV and demonstrating the use of condoms. There were about 40 men present and after her demonstration she asked if they would use the condoms. They said no and gave her five reasons for their answer:

- 1) because I must plant my seed in as many plant pots as possible,
- 2) it is an affront to God,
- 3) it is an affront to ancestors to put my sperm on the garbage heap,
- 4) if I use a condom my balls will explode,
- 5) you don't eat a sweet with a wrapper around it.

"None of these reasons had rational validity," Aernout explained passionately. "They were born from myths, religious ideas that were fixed, promoting the idea that my enjoyment should not be fooled around with. There should be no barrier between me and my joy, my task. These stories became crucial to me. And the question was very simple: what is it with men and sex?"

"So these experiences started tickling me to ask what is change and what is static? What does it mean to be a man today in Africa? Sexuality is part of what you are, also your past. What is it? My experience has not convinced me that sexuality in Africa is particularly 'wild' or 'promiscuous'. The moment you have a judgment you limit your vision, you define it and you're going to test your hypothesis but you don't test anything outside of it. So to understand it I had to delve into my own masculinity - a white European with an emancipated mother and a father who believed his role was to. I was born into a welfare state. I am a son of Calvin and Erasmus. That is my baggage. These are my roots and background and that is what guides my questioning. I need to be aware of that, to be able to put as much as I can aside, to be able to see better, to see as clearly and as humanely as I can what defines life in other cultures with no judgment, so I can try to see as clearly as I can what *is*, and not what I think I see through thick layers of filters.

"So I came to core questions that have to do with what it means to be a man and they are:

- Where do you come from?
- Who are you?
- Where are you going?

"This issue of male identity has one common problem if these three questions can't be answered. For example I went to a place in Tanzania: the slopes of Kilimanjaro where coffee growers live. In the nearest town of Moshi I found an enormous library where the local people could read and find out anything they want. The only thing missing in that library were books about themselves, their region, their history, their ancestors. You can find out that the cold war was fought out in Africa and you can find out how the oil companies have been bribing African countries, you can read about art in New York and sushi in Tokyo. These are important things to know, but even more than that every person needs to know who he or she is. Who are you as a human being? And these questions have been completely ignored and the answers forgotten.

Coinciding with these two life changing events Aernout was also going through a personal crisis. After a relationship of 12 years he was about to get married and he and his fiancé were planning to have children. His girlfriend had had a string of affairs, even as they were preparing the wedding. Then it became clear that the relationship was not going to work out. Aernout ended the relationship but he had a lot of difficulty getting rid of the idea of becoming a father soon, and suddenly being on his own. "Some of my closest friends and relatives said the break-up was her fault. But I never walked away from it so easily. It takes two to tango, and it takes two to trip and fall. It was *our* relationship which I co-created with her. To understand why things went wrong after so long, I had to look hard and honestly at my own part. I couldn't just apportion blame, that would not have allowed me to see my own mistakes and learn from them, to see what shadows I carry inside and I need to work on. I had to find out what in my behaviour inspired her to maintain the affairs. Apportioning blame only helps for a couple of hours, but it did not help me come clean or reshape the relationship I had with her from lovers to best friends. These days we are close, good, old friends.

The break-up forced me to deal with pain, with mourning the loss of a love, of dreams and hopes and most importantly: it forced me to redefine my own perceptions and definitions of masculinity. The break-up, in other words, became a process of liberation and soul-searching. I too had to ask myself: what does it mean to be a man, today? And I had to fall back on the bare essentials to re-write the foundation.

"So I found myself in those familiar dilemmas that men often have to face, such as: some women are insulted if you don't open the restaurant door for them, whilst others get insulted when you do, etc. Masculinity was defined by society in 100,000 ways, adding up to a complete jungle. I had to go back to myself to define masculinity for myself. I started to ask myself questions like, "Can I love another if I don't first respect and love myself and what is crucial to me? What does self-love mean?"

"Aernout doesn't see himself as having all the answers, but he wants to kick start the debate about African masculinity, which is why he wrote his book. He believes that the issues need to be looked at and that if the argument of "it's tradition" comes up, his answer is: "Isn't it your responsibility as ancestors of the future to adjust something now

if it is deadly? Traditions are not static. Those who say they are don't want them to change because their interests are bound up in tradition.

No man wants his wife or daughters or mother to be raped. We men need to stand up and say: "You're not a man if you rape, and you're not responsible if you don't take responsibility. If you have to resort to violence then something is wrong with your psychology. For me, it is not strong, free, liberated men who do these kinds of things. On the contrary: a rapist is for me, as a man, a loser, a weak brother, a man with serious issues who goes for the weakest in his surroundings so he can feel "in control", "in charge" - at the expense of an other. I would like to add my tiny little bit in showing men and allowing men to grow much bigger, and to be much more liberated than society tends to allow them to be.

"I come from a family of five boys. And if I look at my brothers I see they have been able to pluck the fruits of women's emancipation. They are able to be human beings and not just a man. They are able to play a role in raising their children. I talked to a youth from a youth movement in Botswana who said: 'I want to be a man who takes responsibility for my children. I want to have the liberty to change the diapers and to play with my children. But the funny thing is I have to do that in this day and age when the curtains are closed because my friends must not see me because otherwise they would ridicule me. But that is what I want. I want the liberty to be that kind of man.' Men in Africa need to see that they can win something here.

"In Africa, at this stage of the emancipation of women, men are still seen as the enemies or potential enemies, because a momentum of change is needed to keep going and it helps to use resistance against men to keep the momentum going. What I'm saying is it needs to be broadened, there's something to be won for us men and also for women. The liberation of women is a marathon. But just by focussing on women's empowerment you're running the marathon on one leg. You need to get the other leg moving as well, then you'll be able to get to the end of the marathon in the foreseeable future with benefit to all."