

Strong and Tough: Reflections on Masculinity from Africa

“Strong” and “tough.” Males across many cultures often identify these common traits to describe “real men.”

In our North American retreats on healthy masculinity as we examine the so-called “man box” of dominate masculinity, “strong” and “tough” are heard repeatedly. These same words were used at recent men’s retreats I led in South Africa and Tanzania.

How are we to understand that “strong” and “tough” are so frequently used to describe what “real men” are like?

In February, I visited Mennonite churches in South Africa and Tanzania who received JoinHands grants. During this time, I also led retreats on healthy masculinity. I learned from men about what it means to be a man in these African cultures.

During one of the exercises, men call out words to describe “real men.” These words are then written in a so-called “man box” of dominate masculinity. We reflect on these traits and their impact. After this, we fill in a larger circle the traits of “good men” who embody healthy masculinity and what we see in Jesus as a model human. This exercise leads to engaging conversations as men compare what’s in the “man box” with what’s in the “circle” of healthy masculinity.



While the long list of traits and roles vary from place to place, “strong” and “tough” repeatedly appear in the box whether from Black, White, or Latino men in North America or among the men in Tanzania and South Africa. I learned that in some African settings, traditional practices of circumcision are still a test for many adolescent males to demonstrate how strong and tough they are—for they are not to flinch, blink or tear up as their foreskin is cut away with a knife without anesthesia.

(Fortunately, more and more young males have their circumcisions performed in clinical settings.)

Men are often perceived as power hungry with a drive to dominate others with their strength and toughness. This problem is not hard to see, based on how many men seek and abuse power over and against women and other men. This is a problem we must confront.



While there’s some truth in this assertion, I wondered about a less judgmental observation from nature to understand that men, at a certain time, had to be strong and tough.

When my traveling companion and I left one area in Tanzania for another, we visited Serengeti National Park.

While impressed with elephants, hippos and zebra, I was especially curious to notice in herds of kudu, antelope, or springbok that solitary bucks stood among many females (as pictured below).



When we saw a male with a female lion, our guide explained how only the strongest, dominate male is given the opportunity to mate with females so that his traits are passed along their offspring. He said, "Strength to protect and provide in the pride are essential to survival." As I listened to his descriptions of lion behavior, the male lion got up and went off with several females and mated with one.



At this point I recalled how often men also list "womanizer" in the man box—that a "real man" has many women. The guide went on to explain that a female lion can even close off her uterus to prevent a less desirable male from inseminating her—a matter of sexual selection within the process of natural selection for the survival of the fittest.

Listening to men in retreats and observing males in nature, I had to wonder: Did men simply learn from the animal kingdom the need to be strong and tough?

Haven't certain roles in history to protect and provide required these traits of men? Rather than attributing to human males a will to dominate, can we be less judgmental and more understanding of men in view of this legacy?

Some men use a biological explanation like this to justify their behavior. "This is just the way men are."

Males in the animal kingdom need to be strong and tough. This *was* also true for human males earlier in history. But no longer.

We are now more developed and live according to higher ways of God's Kingdom. I can imagine Jesus saying to men who point to males on the savannah: "You once saw what it took to be a male, but I say to you..." While Jesus was a strong man, he didn't use his power over and against others in ways that were abusive or dominative, but served others in love, with respect and for justice.

The closing session of the retreats focused on the character of healthy masculinity by turning to the words strong, loving and wise from 2 Timothy 1:7. Yes, there is a place for being strong. But it needs to be tempered with love and wisdom. Only then can power be used with and for others in ways that are generative.

--Steve Thomas, U.S. Coordinator for Mennonite Men



A circle of good men in Cradock, South Africa seeking to embrace healthy masculinity