

# Between cooperation and competition: being a man at TU Wien



genderfair!

Technology is male, engineers are male and technical degrees are for men. That is simply the way it was for a long time<sup>1</sup> and why TU Wien (Vienna University of Technology) was, historically, a male stronghold. Much has changed since then, and women are no longer excluded.



And yet it is apparent that women are not only underrepresented among TU Wien students but also among those who work, research and teach there. History has clearly left its mark and TU Wien has not yet shed its male character. In an attempt to change this, it is worth taking a closer look at men at the TU Wien. What does it mean to be a “man” in a male institution like TU Wien? What do men experience among other men, and how can men contribute towards adjusting the gender ratio at TU Wien?

A group of men working in a range of roles and fields at TU Wien tackled these issues in a workshop that took place in spring 2015. This discussion process led to a film project, “Masculinities at TU Wien—between cooperation and competition”, in which key insights into being a man at TU Wien were explored, together with five of the workshop participants.

### When is a man a man?

In order to answer this question it is important to recognise that gender is not something that only concerns women. Men also adhere to certain expectations and norms in their behaviour—what it means to be a “real man” is determined by society. Being strong, single-mindedly pursuing your goals, being able to hand out criticism as well as take it, are all characteristics that make up men today. Men learn early on that this is what is expected from them and they see what is promised in return: real men get recognition and appreciation, as well as access to resources and power. They enjoy the “patriarchal dividend”<sup>2</sup> simply by being men.

### “Serious games”—the social construction of masculinity

But masculinity is not something men are born with. It must be learnt, practised and consolidated, over and over again. This happens above all in confrontations with other men. Whether in the school yard, down the pub or in a business meeting, among politicians or professors: the social world of men is determined by “serious games of competition”<sup>3</sup> in which men measure themselves against each other and learn from each other. Pitting themselves against each other in friendly rivalry, fighting for recognition, success and power, “men” learn the tricks of the game: attack, defence, taking cover, forming coalitions. These serious games create competition between men, but they also bring them closer together and generate loyalty among those who participate in them. Men may challenge each other, but this also leads to fraternization: your opponent is also your partner in the serious games of men. Obviously, at university it is not a question of actual fighting, there are no black eyes or broken noses. Instead words are the weapons of choice: Who has the better idea? Who asserts his opinion? Who seems to know more and has the more convincing way of presenting himself? The training that men have been receiving since their early socialisation can be helpful here. “Men” understand the game and do not shy away from confrontation. Not taking part or being excluded from these games is worse than defeat. Even a lost confrontation can sometimes count as a sign of determination.



## In league with other men: your opponent as a partner

The serious games of masculinity bring men closer together. “Men” know and understand each other. It is easy to see how the impression can arise that the game is played in exactly this way because it always was like this and, preferably, you end up playing it with people “like yourself”. Serious games therefore take on the characteristics of all-male ‘clubs’ or alliances (Männerbünde) and turn into networks in which men exchange and pass on knowledge and resources. Closely knit and loyal, these networks distance themselves from outsiders.<sup>4</sup> Whoever wants to achieve something and get to the top can try and do so based purely on their own performance. But without connections to members of important networks this can prove difficult. However, if a “man” has managed to convince a sponsor of his worth, he stands a good chance of doors being opened for him and opportunities presenting themselves.



## Belonging: excluding and conforming

Men are not per se a homogenous group—they are not all on the same wavelength. But many of those who take part in serious games and want to reach the top realise that they have to conform in order to belong and to benefit from these structures. They adopt and reproduce characteristics and views that are valued in the group. Anything that does not fit in or could lead to exclusion is covered up and kept secret. Doubting or criticising established masculine behaviour is unwelcome and “men” quickly learn to keep that to themselves. Women are of course particularly affected by these male ‘club’ structures. Even if they manage to access important networks, they still risk being branded as “different” on the basis of their gender and, as such, their work will not receive recognition on a par with that of their “genderless” male colleagues.<sup>5</sup> In this way women are also put under pressure to be “one of the boys” and to conform.



## Nothing is irreversible!

The serious games of men promise benefits for those who keep to the rules. There is, however, a price to be paid: these serious games also reinforce processes of restriction and standardisation, as well as excluding and diminishing anything that seems different or strange. Men as well as women pay this price—in particular those who find themselves at the bottom end of the hierarchy and those who cannot or do not want to embrace the masculine ideal. Masculinity is a powerful performance. The way we pitch this gender performance has consequences for us, our environment and the places in which we live, study and work.

However, whatever we learn or habitualise<sup>6</sup> can also be “unlearned”. Different performances are possible. You do not have to play the game of masculinity, it is possible to pull out of this all-male ‘club’. Giving up certainty and male privilege takes courage. But there is a great deal to be gained, for all genders.



- 1 Cf. PAULITZ, TANJA: Mann und Maschine. Eine genealogische Wissenssoziologie des Ingenieurs und der modernen Technikwissenschaften, 1850 – 1930 (2012, Bielefeld).
- 2 Cf. CONNELL, RAEWYN: Der gemachte Mann. Konstruktion und Krise von Männlichkeiten (2006, Wiesbaden).
- 3 Cf. BOURDIEU, PIERRE: Die männliche Herrschaft (2005, Frankfurt am Main).
- 4 Cf. KREISKY, EVA: Brüderlichkeit und Solidarität. Maskuline Fahnennote einer politischen Ethik der Moderne, in: Godenzi, Alberto (Ed.): Solidarität. Auflösung partikularer Identitäten und Interessen, (1999, Freiburg, S. 29 – 111).
- 5 Cf. BEBBINGTON, DIANE: Women in Science, Engineering and Technology: A Review of The Issues. In: Higher Education Quarterly, 56 (4), S. 360 – 375. (2002)
- 6 Cf. MEUSER, MICHAEL: Geschlecht und Männlichkeit. Soziologische Theorie und kulturelle Deutungsmuster. (2010, Wiesbaden).

**Watch the video: [www.tuwien.ac.at/men\\*](http://www.tuwien.ac.at/men*)**

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**Men\*:** TU Wien students and employees

**Voices:** School pupil: Armin Širbegović (2<sup>nd</sup> year primary school)

Narrator: Michael Kölbl

**Camera, editing:** Michael Kölbl

**Music:** Boys Dont Cry, normanpalm.com

**A big thanks to the courageous workshop participants at TU Wien!**

The logo for 'genderfair' is displayed in white lowercase letters on a green rounded rectangular background. A white exclamation mark is positioned to the right of the text.

The genderfair project supports the professional orientation and further development of schoolgirls, women students and women researchers at TU Wien (Vienna University of Technology).

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