**RIFS-Blogpost**

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If we want gender equity that is genuinely inclusive, we must build the conditions for authenticity and vulnerability.

**! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !**

**Zitation:** [Deacu, Adina-Iuliana] (2026): [International Men's Day at RIFS: What we heard, what we missed, and what gender equity might be asking of us] – RIFS-Blogpost, [17.12.2025].

**URL:** [https://www.rifs-potsdam.de/en/blog/2025/12/international-

**On 19 November, International Men's Day, I hosted a workshop at RIFS built around the intention to create a space where we can talk about boys' and men's challenges without sliding into backlash, blame, or "either/or" politics, with the aim of encouraging dialogue between genders for mutual understanding and support.**

I was inspired to develop this workshop by an interview with Richard Reeves (founder of the American Institute for Boys and Men), whose work emphasises that we can be committed to women's equality and take men's vulnerabilities seriously at the same time. What follows is a recap of the conversation, and a reflection on something that stood out immediately in the room: I've been organizing International Men's Day workshops for 5 years already, and this year too there were more women than men present (I refer here specifically to the biological sex of participants, not their gender).

1.1 What Richard Reeves argues and why it matters

Reeves' starting point was blunt: **partnerless and childless men tend to do worse than men with stable ties of care and belonging**. In his framing, the most dangerous place for a human being is to feel unneeded and to conclude that one's existence does not add value to anyone. This echoes broader findings in psychology that belonging and social connectedness are foundational to wellbeing and protective against depression and suicidality for anyone, regardless of their gender.

He also argues that we are living through a **cultural revolution**: women's economic independence has expanded rapidly (a historic gain), and it has inevitably reshaped the traditional "script" of masculinity. Where older norms gave men a relatively clear role (provider, head of household), many young men now face a

question mark: What is a good, socially valued way to be a man today without returning to patriarchy?

Reeves highlights several measurable signals of male vulnerability in many advanced economies:

- Education: the biological sex gap in higher education has flipped compared with the 1970s, with men now behind in degree attainment in several countries.
- Mental health and suicide: men die by suicide at substantially higher rates than women (e.g., around four times higher in U.S. data).
- COVID-era disruptions: in the United States, male college enrolment fell by more than seven times as much as female enrolment in 2020.

One of Reeves' most useful contributions, to me, is his refusal of the false choice young men are often offered online: "**Be reactionary**" (nostalgia, resentment, dominance) or "**be a malfunctioning woman**" (as if "good masculinity" only means copying stereotypically feminine traits). Instead, he argues that we need a third space: evidence-based, compassionate, policy-oriented and emotionally honest.

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### 1.2 The workshop paradox: Why were there still more women than men?

Despite the topic, **there were more women than men in the room**. And the few men who came were mostly psychologists who provide courses for men about what it means to be a man nowadays. This imbalance in participation is itself an important data point. A substantial body of research in psychology and sociology suggests

that many men are socialised, either explicitly or subtly, to equate vulnerability with weakness and emotional disclosure with risk. Norms of “self-reliance” and “stoicism” are associated with lower help-seeking and greater reluctance to discuss mental health struggles. Even when men do want these conversations, many have learned (through experience) that speaking openly can backfire: socially, professionally, or relationally. The result is often silence followed by coping strategies that look like “checking out” (withdrawal, addiction, disengagement) rather than “speaking up.” So, the turnout imbalance may have reflected something deeper than interest. It may have reflected **perceived safety**.

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### 1.3 Are we creating dialogue spaces that are safe for everyone?

This is where the gender equity conversation gets difficult, but with transformative potential. If the goal is equity, we have to ask: **Are we building environments where all genders can speak honestly with each other without blame and without being punished for it?** Research on “psychological safety” shows that people participate more meaningfully when they believe they can ask questions, admit uncertainty, share lived experience without ridicule or retaliation.

In practice, many public gender debates are not psychologically safe for anyone. They often reward certainty, camps, and performance, which are backed by social media algorithms preferences for polarities. That tends to produce women who feel they must be constantly vigilant (because they have learned the costs of not being), men who feel they must constantly defend themselves (because they have learned the costs of being misunderstood) and many other genders who don’t even join the

conversation. Neither creates mutual understanding. Reeves' comment that the inequality gap has flipped for young people in some domains (especially education) is not a call to roll back women's progress. It is a call to update our assumptions. When realities change, frameworks and assumptions must change too.

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### 1.4 From "gender" to the Invisible Backpack

This is where I think the biggest shift needs to happen. Gender alone cannot explain why two men can have radically different vulnerabilities, or why two women can experience power and precarity in opposite ways. Class, family stability, mental health history, migration experience, schooling context, race, disability, and community support matter more than gender.

I use the tool Invisible Backpack to encompass the accumulated experiences we carry, what we learned about love, safety, conflict, emotion, worth, and belonging, often before we had language for it. From that perspective, a more useful question than "What do men or women need?" might be:

- What kinds of Invisible Backpacks make it harder for someone, regardless of their gender, to speak vulnerably?
- What might other people carry in their Invisible Backpack that makes expression feel unsafe? How are we supporting them to learn to feel safer?
- How are we triggered by our own Invisible Backpack contents and how might we be perpetuating the exact moulds we want to change?

This shift doesn't erase gender. It makes gender less deterministic and therefore makes freedom to choose one's gender, lifestyle etc. possible without the fear of being judged for it.

As Reeves' points out in the interview, **people want to be needed**, but the form that "being needed" takes depends heavily on the Invisible Backpack they carry and on whether society offers a dignified role they can inhabit without shame. Making fewer assumptions and asking more questions about other people's lived experience allows us to create more inclusive societies.  That is also why I chose to mark International Men's Day at RIFS alongside my broader fellowship work on redefining "business" as "an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way". In both gender equity and sustainability, the deepest leverage point is not the format of the system but the inner logic that people bring into it. Our Invisible Backpacks shape not only how we relate to others, but also what kind of leaders we become in adulthood. Unexamined backpacks can produce leadership driven by disconnection: control, status anxiety, extraction, and short-termism, regardless of one's gender. Examined backpacks make space for relational intelligence, accountability, and regenerative decision-making.

This is why unpacking matters regardless of the gender we identify with. When we start noticing which assumptions still serve us and which ones quietly harm us, we become more capable of creating workplaces, institutions, and communities where people can be honest without being punished. And in that kind of environment, gender equity becomes less about competing identities and more about meeting shared human needs, like safety, belonging, dignity, purpose, and connection. Those needs are not gendered. They are human.

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## 1.5 What I’m Taking Forward

If we want gender equity that is genuinely inclusive, we need to move:

- from winning arguments to **building conditions for authenticity and vulnerability**; making fewer assumptions and asking more questions;
- from **group stereotypes to individual stories** shaped by context (Invisible Backpack), not only gender;
- from “right/wrong” binaries to the more difficult practice of **mutual learning, understanding and support**.

This shift will enable us to create spaces where everyone – regardless of their gender – can participate fully, be heard, and contribute to shared understanding.