

# Unpacking and Reconstructing Masculine Norms in Australia

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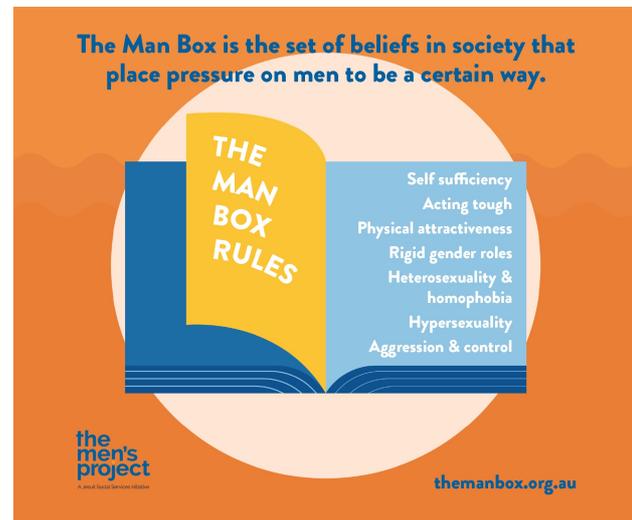
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## 1) Men and masculinities

- Men and masculinities are on the public agenda:
  - Emergence of men's groups and networks with a self-conscious focus on men and masculinities
  - Development of a field of 'engaging men' or 'work with men and boys'
  - Intensified public attention to 'men behaving badly':
  - Increased public debate over men's lives and relations and dominant constructions of masculinity
  - A 'turn to men' in feminist politics: discourses of male feminism and male allyship
  - An expansion of the range of social problems where masculinity is seen to be implicated

## 2) 1<sup>st</sup> survey: The Man Box Survey

- A national survey of 1,000 Australian men aged 18 to 30 (2018)
- Data on:
  - Young men's conformity to stereotypical or traditional ideas of manhood
    - Both personal conformity and perception of societal messages
  - Via 17 statements, related to 7 stereotypical masculine qualities
  - Behaviour and well-being



## Men's conformity to masculine norms

- Young men's endorsement is higher for qualities such as strength, physical attractiveness, control over women, and breadwinning
  - Men should act strong (47%), be the primary breadwinners (35%), and fight back when pushed around (34%).
- Lower endorsement for other qualities such as avoiding household work, using violence to get respect, and hypersexuality.
  - Fewer agreed that men should have as many sexual partners as they can (25%), avoid housework and child care (23%), and use violence to get respect (20%).
- So:
  - Large numbers of men may report attitudes and behaviours that are inconsistent with, or incomplete versions of, 'dominant' notions of masculinity.
- But young men also showed significant endorsement of some patriarchal norms:
  - That men should have the final say in relationships (27%)
  - That men should know their partner's movements (37%)

## The impact of masculine conformity

- Young men who conform to traditional definitions of manhood are more likely to suffer harm to themselves.
- Young men who agreed more strongly with Man Box ideals were more likely than other men to:
  - feel depressed or suicidal
  - seek help from only a narrow range of sources, and
  - be involved in binge drinking and traffic accidents
- Young men who conform to traditional definitions of manhood are more likely to do harm to others.
- Young men who agreed more strongly with Man Box ideals were more likely to
  - perpetrate sexual harassment (6x as likely)
  - perpetrate bullying (physical, verbal, and online), and
  - far less likely to intervene in others' violence
- 2018 report, *The Man Box: A study on being a young man in Australia*

## The impact of masculine conformity

- Men's endorsement of masculine norms has a unique and powerful influence on a large number of harmful attitudes and behaviours
- 2020 report, *Unpacking the Man Box*



## Which norm? Which outcome?

- While some masculine norms contribute to men's poor health, others are protective.
- Some masculine norms are more harmful than others
  - They have stronger associations with men's poor health or with men's harmful behaviour towards others
  - E.g., the norms of Rigid Gender Roles and Aggression and Control
- Specific unhealthy outcomes are shaped more by some masculine norms than others
  - E.g., the perpetration of violence was associated most strongly with men's conformity to "rigid gender roles" and "aggression and control"
  - Suicidal thoughts

## Which men in what context?

- So far: a variable- or predictor-centered perspective and an outcome-centered perspective
- But we could also explore a person-centered perspective: the men and their contexts
  - The groups or clusters of men who engage in high-risk behaviours and the men who do not.
  - But there are risks here.

### **3) 2<sup>nd</sup> survey: Attitudes to masculinity**

- VicHealth survey: A nationally representative survey of 1,619 respondents, 16 and older (2019)
  - Questions: Agree / Disagree, Forced choice
  - Dial testing of messages

### **Findings: Patterns of attitudes 1/4**

- There is a continuum of gendered attitudes, from progressive to conservative
  - Population: 25.1% are 'Supporters', 48.9% are 'Persuadables', and 25.9% are 'Opponents'
- There is a consistent gender gap: Men have worse attitudes than women
  - Men's attitudes to gender are consistently less progressive than women's
  - Men are less aware than women even of the constraints of masculinity on men themselves
- Two-thirds of 'Supporters' are women. Two-thirds of 'Opponents' are men

## **Findings: Patterns of attitudes 2/4**

- The harms of traditional masculinity
  - Widespread agreement that traditional gender stereotypes are limiting and harmful, for boys and men and for children in general
- Compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia
  - Are weak
  - Weak endorsement of masculinity as requiring the rejection of all things feminine (but not tested much)
- Men dominating and controlling women
  - Strong rejection of this, except among opponents

## **Findings: Patterns of attitudes 3/4**

- Gender as biologically determined or socially constructed
  - Broad support for an understanding of gender as socially constructed – for the understanding that boys' and men's lives and relations are shaped by social messages, by gender socialisation, as much as they are by biology.
  - But also support for the notion of 'natural' differences between men and women
- Changing gender roles
  - Widespread recognition of the need to open up gender roles for men, particularly with regard to gender roles that constrain males' own health and wellbeing

## Findings: Patterns of attitudes 4/4

- Men's roles in positive change
  - Agreement that progress towards gender equality, and breaking free of gender stereotypes, will be good for men
  - Almost universal agreement that men can play a role in preventing violence against women
- A war on men
  - Widespread support for anti-feminist messages

## Findings: Framing matters

- When statements on gender are framed in progressive terms, the opposition agrees as much as persuadables. E.g.;
  - Endorse a social constructionist understanding of gender
  - Recognise the pressures on boys and men to act in certain ways and/or the harms of traditional gender stereotypes
  - Call for opening up gender roles and/or moving past gender stereotypes
- When statements on gender are framed in regressive terms, the opposition differs from persuadables, and even more from supporters. E.g.;
  - Praising traditional masculinity
  - Suggesting there is a 'war on men':
  - Supporting male dominance and control in relationships
  - Endorsing biological essentialism
- The opposition is a weak opposition. The middle are unsure

## Findings: Responding to frames

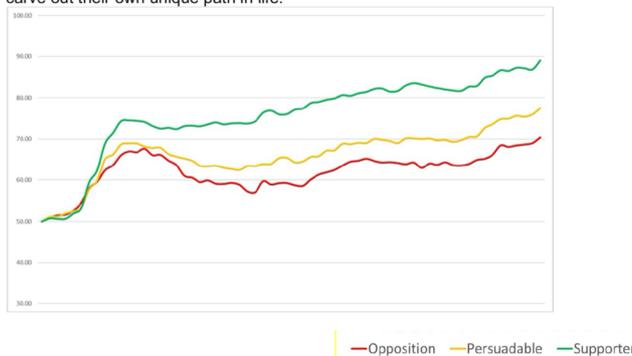
- Dial testing of 5 30-second audio messages
- 5 frames
  - Free Men: men and boys are restricted by masculine stereotypes and should be freed from them.
  - Man Made: socially constructed models of manhood are unhealthy for men, and we should build new, healthier models of how to be a man.
  - Context Matters: masculine traits are suitable for some times and places but not others, and we need more flexible models of manhood.
  - Gender Bender: men and boys should think of themselves as people or human beings first, rather than as men.
  - Opposition Message: men are largely good and decent, but are now being attacked and shamed.
- Opponents' level of support for the first four messages is reasonably high
  - They act like a persuadable audience when we put forward our case
- Persuadables will support anti-feminist messages to some extent

## Dial testing: 'Free men' message

We should all be free to live open, honest and meaningful lives.

But too many men and boys are still trapped by outdated ideas about being a 'real man'. These unwritten rules put pressure on them to suppress parts of who they are. It's unhealthy for anyone to live a lesser life because they feel like they have to hide their true selves.

It's time to free men and boys from the shackles of narrow stereotypes. Everyone should feel comfortable being themselves and carve out their own unique path in life.

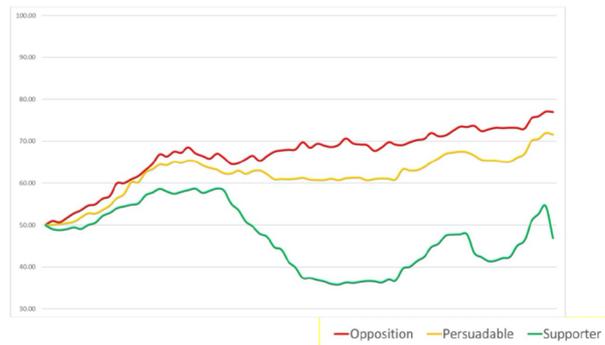


## Dial testing: Opposition message

For as long as humans have existed, good men who provide protection and strength have been important to the success of our society.

But the ideas behind gender equality have now gone too far. Feminists and other gender-bending 'experts' are waging a war on men - treating masculinity as if it were a disease.

Attacking men for the crime of being masculine benefits no one. We need to stop shaming men for being different to women. That's just how men are. Instead, we should celebrate the vast majority of good and decent men and let our boys be boys.



## Wider reflections on masculinity

- Gender norms are changing, largely for the better
- Young men's attitudes can be the worst of all
- Men's actual performances and negotiations of masculinity are diverse and shifting
- Attitudes and norms intersect with practices, relations, and structures

## 4) Reconstructing masculine norms

- Transform gender
  - Work for the transformation of gender roles and relations towards gender justice.
  - Highlight the harms of traditional, patriarchal masculine norms
  - Weaken their cultural grip
  - Promote healthy and ethical alternatives
  - Disseminate and scale up effective initiatives to engage men and boys
  - Build attention to masculinity in existing health promotion efforts

## 4) Reconstructing *cont'd*

- Get specific
  - Address particular norms and particular men
  - 'Get specific' about the forms of manhood and personhood we *do* want
- Support diversity and resistance
  - Turn up the volume on the facts of diversity and change in manhood
  - Support men's and boys' resistance to masculine norms and relations
  - Challenge the pervasive policing of masculinity
- Go beyond norms
  - Tackle the structures and institutions that sustain systemic gender inequalities.

## Resources 1/2: on the 2 surveys

- *Masculinities and health: Attitudes towards men and masculinities in Australia* (Flood, 2020): <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ProgramsandProjects/HealthInequalities/Attachments/VicHealth-Attitudes-to-men-and-masculinity-report-July-2020.pdf>
- VicHealth, Masculinities and health materials: Scoping review, Report on attitudes, Promotion framework, and Messaging guide: <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/healthiermasculinities>
- Men, masculine norms, and gender-transformative change (Flood, 2020), pp. 38-46 of the report *Unpacking the Man Box*: <https://jss.org.au/what-we-do/the-mens-project/unpacking-the-man-box/>
- Men and the Man Box – A commentary (Flood, 2018), pp. 46-53 of the report *The Man Box: A study on being a young man in Australia*: <https://jss.org.au/what-we-do/the-mens-project/the-man-box/>
- Conversation piece on the 2018 report: <https://theconversation.com/australian-study-reveals-the-dangers-of-toxic-masculinity-to-men-and-those-around-them-104694>
- Conversation piece on the 2020 report: <https://theconversation.com/inside-the-man-box-how-rigid-ideas-of-manning-up-harm-young-men-and-those-around-them-143081>

## Resources 2/2: on men and gender

- Engaging men in building gender equality: A massive collection of resources: <https://xyonline.net/content/men-building-gender-equality-guide-xys-content>
- Bibliography – Working with men: <https://xyonline.net/books/bibliography/bibliography-12>
- Bibliography – Working with boys and young men: <https://xyonline.net/books/bibliography/bibliography-11>
- FREE Book, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* (Flood, 2018): <https://xyonline.net/content/new-book-engaging-men-and-boys-violence-prevention>
- Dr Michael Flood's publications: <http://www.xyonline.net/category/authors/michael-flood>
- The Men's Bibliography (lists over 39,000 works): <https://xyonline.net/books/bibliography>
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