

Fostering Healthy Masculinities among Men and Boys

Dr Michael Flood

Citation: Flood, M. (2022). Fostering Healthy Masculinities among Men and Boys. *Men's Development Network New Conversations Symposium*, Ireland, July 28.

1

Gender

- Simple definitions of gender:
 - Norms, practices, and structures related to men's and women's lives
 - The meanings given in any particular society to being female or male and the social organisation of women's and men's lives and relations
- Gender includes:
 - Identities and personality
 - Norms and values
 - Behaviours or practices
 - Interpersonal relations
 - Images and representations
 - Patterns of work, care, sexuality, etc.
 - The organisation of institutions
 - Etc.

2

Men and masculinities are on the agenda

- Public debates about men's roles and relations
 - #MeToo. Gillette's ad campaign. Media talk of 'toxic masculinity'
 - High-profile incidents of men behaving badly can intensify these
- Growing attention to men and masculinities in policy and programming
 - In such fields as violence against women, sexual and reproductive health, maternal and child health, fatherhood and parenting, HIV/AIDS, etc.
- International commitments on the need to engage men
- Scholarship on men and masculinities
- Male activism and advocacy

3

Masculinity

- Masculinity: the social organisation of men's lives and relations and the meanings given to being male
 - An open-ended definition
 - The roles, behaviours activities and attributes that are seen as appropriate for boys and men in a given society
- In any context, some versions of masculinity will be *dominant*
- In most contexts, dominant versions of masculinity contribute to the problems of gender inequality and gender constraint
 - E.g., the masculine norms that boys and men must be dominant, in control, aggressive, tough, risk-taking, stoic, compulsively heterosexual, etc.

4

Masculinity and men's violence against women

- Masculinity is involved in domestic and sexual violence:
 - Masculine norms...
 - Masculine practices...
 - Masculine structures...
- (Yes, gender is not the whole story. But it is a central part of the story.)
- Forms of masculinity that are: Unhealthy. Toxic. Patriarchal. Gender-inequitable. Sexist. Violent



5

Masculinity and harms among men

- Dominant constructions of masculinity also limit and harm men
- Examples:
 - Suicide
 - Poor physical and mental health
 - Risky driving
 - Drug and alcohol abuse
 - Male-male violence
 - Crime and anti-social behaviour

6

Why pay attention to men and masculinities?

- Traditional, rigid, patriarchal forms of masculinity are implicated in:
 - A wide range of social problems
 - Gender inequalities that disadvantage women and unfairly privilege many men, including the harms that some men inflict on women
 - The harms that men and boys themselves suffer
- Patriarchal masculinity:
 - Is bad for women
 - It shapes men's involvements in sexist and patriarchal behaviours and relations, including men's abusive or violent treatment of women.
 - It contributes to gender inequalities.
 - Is bad for men themselves
 - Limits men's physical and emotional health, their relations with women, their relations with other men, and their parenting of children

7

The 'engaging men' field

- Comprises gender-conscious initiatives and interventions aimed at men and boys
- Is well established, through significant national and international groups and networks
- Has increasing support through both international commitments and state and national government policies
- Is growing in scale and sophistication
- Is based on feminist frameworks and done generally in collaboration with women
- Shows evidence of effectiveness
 - A series of reviews of published studies: WHO 2007; Ricardo *et al.* 2011; Dworkin *et al.* 2013; Edström *et al.* 2015; Flood 2018; Graham *et al.* 2019; Wright *et al.* 2020
 - Interventions, *if* well designed, can produce change in attitudes and behaviours

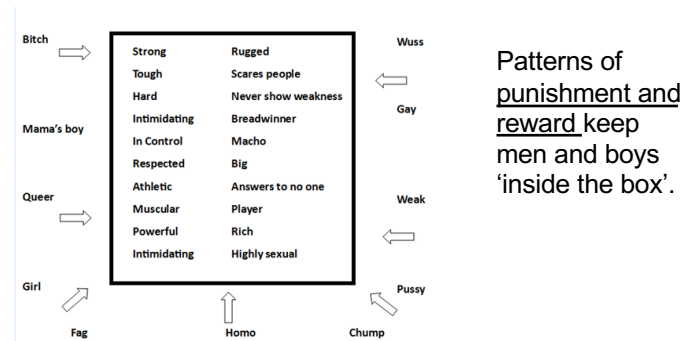
8

Traditional masculinity: the 'Man Box'



9

Traditional masculinity: the 'Man Box'



10

Man Box survey (Australia): Key aspects of traditional masculinity remain influential

- Young men were particularly likely to agree that society tells them that men should:
 - Act strong (69%)
 - Fight back when pushed (60%)
 - Never say no to sex (56%)
- Few young men agreed that society tells them that:
 - Men should use violence to get respect (35%)
 - Straight men should shun gay men as friends (36%)
 - Boys shouldn't learn how to cook and clean (38%)
 - Men shouldn't do household chores (39%)

11

Men's own conformity to masculine norms

- Young men's personal 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%).
- Men show lower personal 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%).
- 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%)

12

Other things we know about ideals of manhood

- There is a consistent gender gap in support for traditional ideals of gender. Men:
 - Are less aware than women of sexism
 - Are more supportive of male dominance
 - Have more violence-supportive attitudes
 - Are less aware of the harms of traditional masculinity itself
- There is diversity among men
 - Ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, region, etc
 - Distinct cultures (peer, occupational, sport, etc.)
- Men are changing
 - There are shifts over time in gender, both positive and negative

13

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)
 - more likely to 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*

14

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*



15

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

16

Which men in what context?

- So far these are 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.

17

We must dismantle the Man Box

- We must transform gender roles and relations towards gender justice
- 1) Engage men and boys at scale
 - We must take work with men and boys from the program and project level into policies, institutions, and systems
 - Including building the engagement of men and boys into policy
 - Example: National violence prevention policy, Australia
- 2) Highlight the harms of patriarchal masculinity
 - Highlight the price of blind conformity to masculinity
 - Sensitise public health, welfare, & service provision to the harms of traditional masculinity
 - But also acknowledge male privilege

18

Beyond patriarchal masculinity

- 3) Weaken the cultural grip of patriarchal masculinity
 - Highlight the gap between masculine social norms and men's own ideals
 - Engage men and boys in critical conversations about manhood
 - Challenge the sources of patriarchal masculinity
- 4) Support diversity and resistance
 - Turn up the volume on diversity and change among men
 - Explore the protective or healthy value of non-conformity
 - Push back against the pervasive policing of masculinity

19

Towards healthy masculinity

- 5) Promote alternatives to patriarchal masculinity among boys and men
 - Boys and men cannot be what they cannot see
 - Promote healthy masculinity. And/or equitable and ethical ways of being
 - What do we call it?
 - Feminist? Healthy? Positive? Gender-equitable? Democratic?
 - Whatever vision we have for men and boys, it must be:
 - 1) gender-equitable / feminist
 - 2) healthy
 - 3) diverse
 - 4) non-essentialist

20

Towards healthy masculinity

- 6) Go beyond attitudes and norms
- Men's and boys' attitudes and behaviours are bound up with patterns and structures of power and inequality
 - We must tackle not only the norms that express unhealthy and oppressive forms of manhood, but the institutional and structural forces that sustain these

21

So...

- Traditional, unhealthy, patriarchal models of how to be a man have not yet crumbled into dust
 - But they are weakening
- Large-scale social change is necessary to end gender inequality and to build healthier lives for women, men, and all
- Men have a vital role to play

22

Resources: Work with and by men and boys

- Engaging men and boys in building gender equality: Resources: <https://xyonline.net/content/men-building-gender-equality-guide-xy-content>
- Engaging men and boys in violence prevention: Resources: <https://xyonline.net/content/engaging-men-violence-prevention-walking-tour-some-xy-content>
- FREE Book, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* (Flood, 2019): <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>

Contact: m.flood@qut.edu.au

23

Resources: Man Box research in Australia

- 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://iss.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>
- Men, masculine norms, and gender-transformative change (Flood, 2020), pp. 38-46 of the report *Unpacking the Man Box*: <https://iss.org.au/what-we-do/the-mens-project/unpacking-the-man-box/>
- 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>

24