



5. Norms of manhood among young men in Australia (a commentary by Professor Michael Flood)

Traditional models of how to be a man face growing criticism in the twenty-first century, with increasing attention to the harms they cause among men, women, and communities. Social norms regarding manhood are diverse across cultures, history, and within any one society. But one version of manhood increasingly is seen as a problem; the version in which men are expected always to be tough, aggressive, risk-taking, stoic, heterosexual, homophobic and transphobic, emotionally inexpressive, hostile to femininity, and dominant. This form of masculinity is identified as oppressive for women, restrictive and limiting for men, and implicated in systemic gender inequities and other social problems (Flood, 2022; The Men's Project & Flood, 2018).

To what extent, then, do men themselves endorse this model of how to be a man? To what extent do men think that it is this version of manhood that they are expected or pressured to live up to? And how does this model of masculinity play out in men's own behaviour? The Man Box surveys answer these questions. Based primarily on a survey of young men in Australia aged 18-30, the Man Box research provides an invaluable mapping of patterns of masculine attitudes, norms, and behaviours. In the following, I comment on the Man Box 2024 findings and their significance, focusing on the sample of young men aged 18-30.

A model of traditional masculinity, based in being tough, stoic, homophobic, and so on, does not receive majority support among young adult men in Australia. Among young men aged 18-30, most do not endorse this version of manhood. Also, most men (although fewer) do not think that society is encouraging this version of manhood among them, and comparing the data from 2018 and 2023,³² the messages young men receive about manhood have improved in some ways. This is encouraging news. It suggests that healthier, more gender-equitable, and more inclusive norms of manhood are relatively common among young adult men in Australia, and that there has been some decline over the past five years in unhealthy and gender-inequitable norms of manhood.

There are, however, real reasons for concern. First, anywhere from one quarter to one third of young men endorse rigid, dangerous, or sexist models of manhood. Second, this endorsement is not declining fast. Men's levels of endorsement of traditional masculine ideology generally are steady, and we should put aside any assumption that unhealthy and sexist social norms inevitably will drop away over time. Traditional models of how to be a man continue to have a powerful influence on many men's and boys' lives and relations (Flood, 2019). There has been little change in the past five years in men's attitudes towards male aggression, male stoicism and self-sufficiency, domestic labour as women's work, homophobia, or hypersexuality, and substantial changes only in men's endorsement of male surveillance of their female intimate partners and men's comfort with grooming and fashion. Third, young men are still receiving societal messaging that reinforces these rigid and sexist models of manhood. Although there are significant and positive shifts in the societal messaging young men report receiving, their own attitudes are not necessarily following course.

Finally, young men's endorsement of traditional masculine norms is playing out in a range of problematic behaviours. One quarter of young men have used physical violence against an intimate partner, one fifth have used sexual violence against an intimate partner, and both sets of behaviours are more likely among the young men who more strongly endorse the Man Box norms. Traditional masculine norms also constrain young men's own health and wellbeing. Some have considered suicide and self-harm, some are drinking at dangerous levels, some are taking risks while intoxicated or drug-affected, and some are problem-gambling. Again, all of these are more common among the men with the highest conformity to Man Box rules.

What can be done about this? The final section of this commentary canvasses ways forward.

³² Data for this study was collected in 2023.

The Man Box surveys

We are fortunate now to have in Australia an increasingly rich body of quantitative data on masculine norms and behaviours: on men's perceptions of the expectations about manhood they receive, men's own endorsement of these expectations, and men's actual behaviour. The Man Box survey, first conducted in Australia in 2018 with 1,000 men and in 2023³³ with just under 2,500 men, provides valuable insight on masculine norms and on their links to men's lives and relations. It relies on data among young adult men, aged 18 to 30 and representative of that portion of the Australian population. The survey also now has been extended to a sample of men aged 31 to 45, although that is not included in this commentary.

Before exploring the Man Box findings, let us define some terms. "Masculinity" refers to the social organisation of men's lives and relations and the meanings given to being male. Given that the meanings and patterns of men's lives differ in different contexts and periods, often we speak of "masculinities", plural. One key dimension of masculinity is attitudinal – to do with people's attitudes, their personal beliefs about manhood and gender. Another dimension is normative or ideological, to do with beliefs about what (other) men do and what is expected of men, and comprises masculine norms or masculinity ideologies (Levant & Richmond, 2016, p. 24). Three other important dimensions of masculinity include the behaviours associated with being a man; the interpersonal relations among men and between men, women, children and others; and the institutional and structural organisation of men's lives.

The term "masculinity" often is used only for one dimension of masculinity, the normative, focusing on societal expectations of men and boys or masculine norms. In most societies, one version of manhood is culturally dominant, with the most widespread influence or highest social status, and this often includes the expectations that boys and men be strong, active, aggressive, tough, daring, leaders, heterosexual, emotionally inexpressive, and dominant. In some accounts this version of manhood, this set of societal expectations, is termed "traditional masculinity" or the "Man Box". The term "Man Box" derives from the pioneering work of Paul Kivel, an anti-violence and social justice activist whose "Act Like a Man Box" depicts the societal expectations placed on men and boys (Kivel, 1998, 2007).

The Man Box survey in Australia gathers data on attitudinal, normative, behavioural, and interpersonal dimensions of masculinity. It focuses particularly on masculine attitudes and norms, but also gathers data on aspects of behaviour and interpersonal relations. The Man Box survey relies on a model of traditional masculinity, represented by 19 statements expressing traditionally masculine qualities: self-sufficiency, toughness, physical attractiveness, rigid gender roles, heterosexuality and homophobia (and in the 2023 survey, transphobia), hypersexuality, and aggression and control.

The Man Box Scale was first used in a multi-country study of masculine norms in 2017 (Heilman et al., 2017, p. 21). Its items were identified from social scientific research on masculine norms, and field-tested. The scale has since been tested psychometrically and shown to be methodologically robust: to measure effectively a single underlying construct and to work across diverse contexts (Hill et al., 2020). The scale is similar to a range of other measures of masculine norms, and close to 20 such measures have been used in research on men and masculinities since the mid-1990s (Thompson Jr & Bennett, 2015).

The term "traditional masculinity" is used here as a shorthand for the qualities identified in the Man Box survey, but there are two important caveats to make. First, there are in fact diverse traditions of how to define manhood, both in Australia and globally, and the qualities in the Man Box are not at all "traditional" in some periods and contexts. Second, we should avoid the assumption that older constructions of manhood necessarily are more regressive and newer constructions of manhood necessarily are more progressive (Yusupova, 2023). There are older and ancient societies, including outside Western or Global North countries, in which dominant definitions of manhood included gender-equitable and inclusive norms.

³³ Note: data collection was conducted in 2023, and results published in 2024.

The Man Box survey explores three domains: personal attitudes to masculinity, perceived social norms regarding masculinity, and attitudes and behaviours. The first two domains are based on the Man Box Scale, while the survey also asks about a series of other areas. The three domains comprise:

1. Men's personal endorsement of a series of statements linked to stereotypical masculine qualities ("In my opinion...");
2. Men's perception of societal messages regarding these stereotypically masculine qualities ("Society tells me that...");
3. Men's
 - a. Health and wellbeing, including life satisfaction, suicidal thoughts, help-seeking, and so on
 - b. Attitudes, including attitudes towards violence and gender inequality, and
 - c. Behaviours, including four forms of risk-taking, use of pornography, bystander intervention, and forms of violence and abuse including bullying, sexual harassment, and physical and sexual violence against an intimate partner.

One of the strengths of the Man Box 2024 study in Australia is its examination of a wider range of attitudinal and behavioural variables than other surveys using the Man Box or other measures of stereotypical masculine norms. The survey includes data on a wider range of behaviours, and complements its data on attitudes and norms from the Man Box Scale with measures of other attitudes regarding violence and gender inequality. Now for the first time with two rounds of survey data in 2018 and 2023,³⁴ it also allows assessment of changes over time.

The two Man Box surveys in Australia establish four key findings about formations of manhood in Australia:

- 1. A substantial minority of young men agree with traditional masculine norms.**
- 2. Young men's own endorsement of traditional masculine norms largely has remained steady over the past five years.**
- 3. The pressure young men feel to conform to traditional masculine norms has lessened over the past five years.**
- 4. Young men who conform to traditional masculine norms are more likely than other men to suffer harm themselves and to do harm to others.**

³⁴ Note: data collection was conducted in 2023, and results published in 2024.

Men and traditional masculine norms

A substantial minority of young men agree with traditional masculine norms, and this informs harms to their own health and harms done to others. **On average, one quarter (26%) of young men agree with the Man Box rules, and one third (37%) agree that these rules are communicated to them by society.** As this commentary explores later, men's personal endorsement of these stereotypical masculine norms has strong associations with a range of problematic behaviours, that compromise their own health and wellbeing or that do harm to others.

At the same time, the Man Box rules clearly are not the dominant norms of masculinity in Australia. They do not represent the most common personal attitudes or perceived social norms among most young adult men. **Most young men, about three quarters (74%) on average, disagree with these ideas about manhood, and most young men (62%) disagree that they receive societal messages that embody the specified Man Box norms.** Other Australian data, using more open-ended methods to explore Australian men's perceptions of norms of manhood and their beliefs about what makes a "real man", documents more diverse notions of manhood (Adegbosin et al., 2019; Sharp et al., 2023), although still with some continuities with the elements of the Man Box. At the same time, as I explore further below, levels of both personal endorsement and perceived societal pressure among young men vary markedly for the different elements of the Man Box.

There is a persistent gap between young men's own attitudes towards masculinity and the societal norms they encounter. Young men are less likely to endorse the Man Box norms themselves than they are to report receiving societal messages endorsing them. Young men were 11% less likely on average to agree with a Man Box rule than to agree that they are told it by society. Young men's personal endorsement was lower than perceived societal endorsement for every one of the 19 Man Box rules, although the size of this gap varies markedly, from 3% to 19%.

Stabilities and shifts in masculine attitudes and norms

Young men's endorsement of traditional masculine norms largely has remained steady over the past five years. Over 2018-2023 there has been no substantial change in men's attitudes towards male aggression, male stoicism and self-sufficiency, domestic labour as women's work, homophobia, or hypersexuality. There has been a decline in young men's personal support for one aspect of male dominance and control in relationships, but not others. Young men also show an increased comfort with men's involvement in grooming and fashion.

The societal messages about manhood that young men perceive show greater change than young men's own attitudes. Perceived societal messaging endorsing male dominance in relationships and families has declined, although more than one-third of young men still report receiving such messages. There has been no change in perceived societal support for male aggression as a way to gain respect if necessary, but some decline in perceived societal support for male aggression as a response to confrontation. Substantially fewer young men now report receiving societal messages that endorse male stoicism and self-sufficiency, represent domestic labour as women's work and men as the primary breadwinners in families, or assume male hypersexuality.

The Man Box findings thus highlight both shifts and stabilities in young men's attitudes towards manhood. Focusing first on the shifts, the largest changes are to do with two areas: relationships, and grooming and appearance.

Relationships: Young men's personal support for Man Box rules has declined most for the idea that "If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time," with endorsement of this notion dropping from 37% in 2018 to 22% in 2023. This 15% drop is the biggest decline in personal endorsement among the 16 Man Box rules, with the next biggest decline at 9% and 12 of the rules declining by 5% or less or not declining at all.

This represents an encouraging lessening of support for men's control of intimate female partners, but it is not part of a consistent pattern of significant decline in young men's support for male dominance and control in relationships and families. The drop in support for men knowing where their partners are at all times only brings it down to a similar level of endorsement for another statement about male dominance in relationships, that "In heterosexual relationships, a man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage". About one-quarter of young men (24%) agree with this, with only a 3% drop in endorsement since 2018.

One-fifth to one-quarter of young men aged 18-30 thus endorse aspects of male dominance and control in relationships and families. Looking at the further data in this study outside the Man Box rules, similar proportions of young men (19% to 25%) also distrust women's reports of violence victimisation, minimise the impact of violence against women, and are prepared to blame female victim-survivors for the domestic violence they experience. (As these and other attitudinal items outside the Man Box survey were only used in the 2024 study, we cannot assess changes over time in them.) Other recent Australian data from young people aged 16-24 shows that young men's attitudes towards and understandings of violence against women consistently lag behind young women's (ANROWS, 2023, p. 5).

Moreover, over one-third of young adult men feel that aspects of male dominance and control in relationships and families are approved by society as well: 35% agree that society tells them that "If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time", and 39% agree that society tells them that "In heterosexual relationships, a man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage". Young men's perceptions of societal approval for these two statements both have declined since 2018, from 44% and 43% respectively.

Young men in 2023 are more supportive of male dominance and control in relationships and families than people in general in Australia, with a recent national survey finding that 11% of the population agree that men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household and 19% agree that women prefer men to be in charge in relationships (Coumarelos, Weeks, et al., 2023).

Over one-third of young adult men have attitudes that deny the extent of gender inequalities and express resentment towards women. They agree that "Many

women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia" (39%), "Many women mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist" (35%), and "Many women don't fully appreciate all that men do for them" (35%). Similarly, other Australian research found that young men were more likely than young women to agree with various anti-feminist statements about gender equality (Evans et al., 2018) and to condone gender inequalities (Coumarelos, Roberts, et al., 2023, pp. 68-69). This suggests that there is a consistent pool of young men in Australia with sexist and violence-supportive views.

Grooming and appearance: The second area of the Man Box rules with the largest decline in men's personal endorsement is to do with grooming, fashion, and appearance. Young men now seem more comfortable with the notion that men can work on their appearance, and doing so does not compromise their manliness or their appeal to women. Only one quarter (23%) agree that "A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly," down by 9% from 2018. This growing comfort with male grooming probably reflects a trend that has been underway since the 1990s, a decade that saw the invention of the 'metrosexual', a man who practises personal grooming in terms of hair, clothing, and even makeup (Flood, 2008). Clothing and lifestyle companies have been working to generate a market of men interested in such traditionally feminine practices and products. Rather than a more radical male embracing of femininity, metrosexuality quickly came to represent a minor shift in the norms of masculinity, particularly among urban and middle-class men (Casanova et al., 2016; Shugart, 2008).

Alongside these shifts in young adult men's attitudes towards manhood, there are also areas of stability. Young men's endorsement of five aspects of stereotypical masculinity has remained largely the same over the past five years:

- Male aggression
- Male stoicism and self-sufficiency
- Domestic labour as women's work
- Homophobia
- Hypersexuality

Male aggression: There has been no consistent change in either young men's own endorsement of the use of violence to gain respect or the perceived social norms supporting this. About one-fifth of men (22%) agree that "Men should use violence to get respect if necessary," and in fact this is 2% more than in 2018. Young men's view that this is the message they receive from society also has held steady, with 34% agreeing, down only 1% from 2018. A related Man Box rule is that "A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak," and here the patterns differ. Young men's sense that society tells them this shows a large drop over 2018 to 2023, of 16%, and is down to 44% (still significantly higher than their support for men using violence to get respect if necessary). Young men's own endorsement of the rule also has declined, although by far less: 30% now agree with this rule, down from 34% in 2018.

Both Man Box rules frame men's use of violence as necessary if not normal, and both may be seen to refer as much to men's violence against other men as to other forms of violence. Young men show slightly less support for the idea that violence is legitimate as a response to others' coercive or aggressive behaviour than the idea that violence is legitimate as a way to get respect if necessary. Young men continue to see both ideas as socially endorsed, again with the first idea as more so, although the extent of perceived societal support for the first idea has declined.

Male stoicism and self-sufficiency: There has been no change among young men in attitudinal prohibitions against help-seeking, although their perceptions of social norms here have shifted substantially. Around one-quarter of young men agree that "Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help" (28% agree) and "A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect" (23% agree). For these two Man Box rules, respectively, young men's personal endorsement since 2018 either increased (by 1%) or barely declined (by 2%).

Although young men's own endorsement of male stoicism has not changed in five years, their perception of societal messaging certainly has. This represents a narrowing of the gap between young men's own support for male stoicism and the perceived social norms for these, with the movement occurring only on the social norms side. There have been large shifts in levels of perceived social pressure to avoid help-seeking and to act strong. Of all the Man Box rules, the largest decline

in perceived societal messaging was for the rule that "Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help", from 54% in 2018 down to 34% in 2023. Close behind this 20% drop, the perception that society tells men that "Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside" declined by 19%. There was a smaller decline, of 9%, in the perception that society tells men that "A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect."

Although norms of male stoicism have declined, substantial proportions of young men still feel that society endorses them. For example;

- 50% agree that they are told by society that 'guys should act strong'
- 40% agree that they are told that 'men who talk a lot about their worries, fears, and problems should receive less respect'
- 34% agree that they are told that 'men should figure out their personal problems on their own'.

For these first two domains, male aggression and male stoicism and self-sufficiency, the patterns over the last five years seem to be in tension, particularly in relation to perceived social norms. The contrast between these may reflect differing levels of social challenge to these elements of stereotypical masculinity.

On the one hand, at least some aspects of a perceived norm of male aggression seem to have remained steady. Young men are as likely now as they were five years ago to feel that they are told by society that violence is a way to get respect if necessary. In Australian society there has been relatively little social challenge to the notions that males are innately predisposed to aggression, male-male violence is normal if not entertaining, and 'boys will be boys'. While there have been over four decades of campaigning and advocacy addressing men's violence against women, there has been far less attention to men's violence against other men. This absence may inform young men's sense that men should 'use violence if necessary'.

Norms of male aggression also include the idea that a man should ‘fight back when others push him around’. Young men are less likely than they were in 2018 to feel that this is the message they receive from society, although 44% still agree. So perhaps a norm of male aggression has declined overall. Although there was no change in perceived societal endorsement of the idea that “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary,” perhaps the words “if necessary” have a strong influence on young men’s perceptions. They may work to qualify a blanket endorsement of violence as an appropriate way to earn respect.

On the other hand, perceived norms of avoiding asking for help, acting strong, and fighting back when pushed show a consistent decline. This may reflect the influence of widespread cultural messages about men’s health, including both organised campaigns and informal shifts in masculine social norms. These shifts may mean that the norms of male invincibility and male stoicism evident in other research among older men in Australia (Sharp et al., 2023, p. 122) are lessening.

Domestic labour as women’s work: There has been no change in young men’s views of household tasks as ‘women’s work’. One-fifth (20%) of young adult men still agree in 2023 that “A man shouldn’t have to do household chores.” Perceived societal support for this idea has declined slightly, from 39% in 2018 to 33% in 2023. There was a slight decline of 5% in young men’s agreement that “It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house or take care of younger children,” now down to 18%. However, the decline in support for this statement may be less about males’ involvement in domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning and more about men’s care for children. Perceived societal support for this idea has declined, from 38% in 2018 to 28% in 2023.

There has also been a slight decline in young men’s personal endorsement of the male breadwinner role. Thirty-one percent of young men agree that “In heterosexual relationships, men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women,” down by 4% from 2018. Perceived societal support for this idea has declined substantially, by 14%, from 56% in 2018 to 42% in 2023. (The Man Box rules do not ask much about men’s roles as fathers, limiting our ability to assess attitudes here.)

Four-fifths of young adult men thus agree, in effect, that men should do household chores (81%) and boys should be taught to cook, clean, and take care of younger children (82%). A smaller proportion, 69%, believe that in heterosexual relationships both men and women should be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families. Presumably this leaves another ten or so percent of young men who believe both that men should contribute to domestic work and caregiving in heterosexual relationships and that men should also be the primary breadwinners. In addition, young men’s

own attitudes towards domestic and care work and household divisions of labour have shifted less over 2018-2023 than the societal messages about these that they perceive.

Homophobia: Young men’s personal endorsement of homophobia, measured here by agreement with the statement that “A gay guy is not a “real man””, has not changed, with only a small decline in agreement from 28% to 25% over 2018 to 2023. Young men think though that societal messages have shifted more, with a drop from 47% to 35% in the proportion agreeing that this is the message they receive from society. This may reflect the diversification of gendered and sexual identities visible particularly among young people (Cover, 2018), although young men’s own levels of homophobia have largely persisted at least over the past five years. About one quarter of young men agree that that it is not okay for heterosexual men to be friends with gay men and with trans or gender diverse people (23% and 22% respectively). Higher proportions of young men, 39%, endorse the view that “A transgender man is not a “real man””. Data on changes over time is not available for these last statements.

Hypersexuality: There has been little change in young men’s personal endorsement of male hypersexuality since 2018, with about one-fifth of young men continuing to agree with norms of male sexual promiscuity (21%) and perpetual sexual readiness or interest (23%). Substantially greater proportions of young men agree that these norms are communicated to them by society. Forty-two percent of young men agree that they are told by society that “A “real man” should have as many sexual partners as he can,” and 35% agree that they are told by society that “A “real man” would never say no to sex.” Here however, there have been significant declines since 2018, of 12% for the first statement and 14% for the second statement. Also, young men give the notion of male sexual achievement (“A “real man” should have as many sexual partners as he can”) some of the lowest levels of men’s endorsement among the Man Box rules: 21% agree, giving this notion the third lowest level of agreement.

The area of the Man Box rules to do with sexual practice seems to be one where young men’s own attitudes and perceived social norms are particularly far apart. Among all 19 rules, the largest gap between personal endorsement and perceived social pressure is for the rule based on male sexual promiscuity, a gap of 19%. There is also a large gap for the rule based on perpetual sexual readiness, of 14%, the equal fourth largest of the gaps. The gap between personal endorsement and perceived societal messaging is smaller for other dimensions of sexuality to do with sexual identity, homosexuality, and gender diversity, including perceptions of transgender men as not ‘real men’ and the acceptability of heterosexual men’s friendships with gay men.

Societal messages about manhood

Today's young men feel under less societal pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms than their peers of five years ago. In 2018, overall, 49% of men aged 18-30 agreed that there is societal pressure to conform to the Man Box rules, but by 2023, this had dropped by 11%, with 38% agreeing. This indicates that perceived pressure to conform to this model of masculinity has declined somewhat, but it does not indicate necessarily that pressure to conform to norms of masculinity per se has declined. That is, there may have been declines in the specific expectations that make up the Man Box, rather than in the overall degree of pressure men feel to conform to some sort of masculine norm.

The decline in perceived societal pressure differs markedly for different elements of the Man Box rules. The largest declines are for norms such as self-sufficiency (although this was for only one of the two elements here, to do with men figuring out their personal problems on their own) and toughness. However, despite the decline in perceived societal pressure on men to act tough, based on the two "Acting Tough" statements, 44% and 50% of young men still felt that they received these messages about toughness from society, and the "Acting Tough" area of the Man Box shows the highest levels of societal pressure of the seven areas. Indeed, the statement that "Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside" is the only one of the 19 statements seen by a majority (50%) of the young men as a societal message, down from 69% in 2018.

Other elements of the Man Box rules that also showed sizeable declines in levels of perceived societal pressure from 2018 to 2023 include physical attractiveness, the male breadwinner role, and hypersexuality. Again though, for some of these such as the male breadwinner role, there is still significant social pressure. For example, 42% of young men agree that "Society as a whole tells me that in heterosexual relationships, men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women," down from 56% in 2018.

Despite an overall decline in perceived societal pressure to conform to the Man Box rules, some elements of the Man Box are seen by young men as enforced as strongly as ever. Norms of male aggression and control seem largely to have held steady. Two of the three statements related to this element of the Man Box show the smallest degree of change: "Men should use violence to get respect if necessary" (1% decline) and "In heterosexual relationships, a man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage" (4% decline). There was a larger decline (9%) in perceived societal pressure for the third statement, "If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time."

Although young men now feel under less societal pressure to conform to the Man Box rules than the same age cohort five years ago, there has been less change in young men's personal endorsement of Man Box rules. While overall perceptions of societal pressure declined by 11% (from 49% to 38%), overall personal endorsement declined only by 4% (from 30% to 26%). Young men do show less personal support for the Man Box rules than the levels of societal support they perceive, but over time the former has declined less than the latter.

The pattern of change in levels of personal endorsement again is uneven. There is data for both 2018 and 2023 for 16 of the 19 Man Box rules. While young men's levels of agreement with some Man Box rules lessened, with reductions of at least five percent in personal support for six of the rules, for other rules there was little or no change, and for two statements there were even slight increases in support.

Men's behaviour and the impacts of conformity to masculine norms

Norms of masculinity are of interest above all because they shape behaviour – because they shape the lives and relations of men and boys and those around them. The two Man Box surveys also have established two key findings about the impacts of masculine norms. Both Man Box surveys examine the associations between young men's behaviours and their endorsement of stereotypical masculine norms, and the most recent survey extends this by exploring a wider range of behaviours. There are two consistent findings in this research:

- **Young men who endorse traditional definitions of manhood are more likely to suffer harm to themselves.**
- **Young men who endorse traditional definitions of manhood are more likely to do harm to others.**

Suffering harm

Young men's health is uneven: while some young men are thriving, others are struggling with poor mental health, isolation, suicidal thoughts, and risk-taking. The Man Box surveys show that one important influence on young men's health and wellbeing is their attitudes towards manhood. Men's endorsement of traditional masculine norms has been widely demonstrated to be associated with a range of problematic individual and relational outcomes, although this also depends on the specific masculine norms and health outcomes in question (Levant & Richmond, 2016, pp. 33-35).

Large numbers of young men have experienced symptoms of poor mental health, the Man Box survey finds, and these are most frequent among men with the highest levels of endorsement of the Man Box rules. This is particularly the case for young men having thoughts of suicide and self-harm. About one-quarter of the men surveyed (25.4%) reported they were very unlikely to seek help from anyone for a personal or emotional problem, and over one fifth (22.9%) had not sought help from anyone in the past six months.

Young men show higher rates of risk-taking behaviour – risky alcohol consumption, illicit drug use, problem gambling, and dangerous driving – than other cohorts in Australia, and traditional masculine norms inform young men's participation in these. The Man Box survey findings illustrate this clearly for three forms of risk-taking: risky drinking, dangerous behaviour under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, and problem gambling.

- One in three young men (33.1%) meet 'risky drinker' criteria in terms of the quantity or frequency of their alcohol consumption, and this was more common among men with the highest endorsement of Man Box rules.
- Close to one in three young men (30%) have engaged in an activity while intoxicated by either alcohol or drugs that carried an increased risk to them or others (such as going to work, driving a car, or going swimming). Again, this was more frequent among men who agree more strongly with Man Box rules.
- Over half of young men (53%) participated in some form of gambling in the past month, and one in five (19%) are involved in problem gambling. Men with the highest levels of support for the Man Box norms also showed higher levels of gambling, and problem gambling.

The survey data on men's involvement in two other risk-taking behaviours, dangerous drinking and illicit drug use, did not show any relationships with their levels of agreement with the Man Box rules. This may, however, reflect the limits of the data themselves. Dangerous driving was measured only with a question asking if respondents had been in a traffic accident (rather than causing one, or other elements of risky driving such as speeding). Illicit drug use was measured only by a single question on use of any illicit drugs.

The Man Box survey explored young men's involvement in various forms of violence and abuse, and for two of these, it included data on young men's own victimisation.

- *Harassment:* Close to half of young men (44%) had experienced "someone or a group of people [making] unwanted sexual comments to you in a public place or online", and this was significantly higher among young men with stronger endorsement of Man Box rules.
- *Bullying:* Asked about three forms of bullying (verbal, online, and physical), two-thirds of young men (68%) had experienced at least some bullying in the last month. Those with the highest endorsement of the Man Box rules were more likely to have experienced any bullying and to have experienced frequent bullying.

A further dimension of young men's health and wellbeing is their life satisfaction. This is one domain where higher endorsement of the Man Box rules is not associated with a negative outcome. Instead, **young men with higher endorsement of Man Box rules also showed higher levels of self-reported life satisfaction, while young men with the lowest levels of endorsement showed lower life satisfaction.** There are at least three possible explanations for this: the rewards and costs associated with conforming to or departing from traditional masculine norms, the positive impact of endorsement of specific masculine norms, or the demographic makeup of those men who have lower levels of endorsement of Man Box rules.

The association between endorsement of the Man Box rules and higher life satisfaction may reflect an insight fundamental to the notion of the 'Man Box' itself: men are rewarded for staying 'in' the Box, and punished if they step 'outside' it. Men who can successfully demonstrate stereotypical masculine qualities may receive social status from peers and others, be viewed as more capable employees or leaders, and feel satisfaction or pride in their achievement of social expectations of manhood. (At the same time, men with higher endorsement of traditional masculine norms also pay other costs themselves, as the Man Box data indicates, including the poorer mental health and higher levels of risk-taking behaviour described earlier.)

On the other hand, men who violate normative expectations of masculinity may pay a cost. Stepping outside of the Man Box may involve social penalties, such as discrimination and stigma, constraints on friendships and relationships, and informal occupational and institutional disadvantages. It also may involve costs with a more personal dynamic. Where men fail to live up to the manhood ideals they themselves have internalised, they experience 'gender discrepancy strain' (Levant & Richmond, 2016, p. 35). We cannot, however, test whether this is the case among the men in the Man Box survey. This would require comparing men's perceptions of the ideal man (their idealised gender role standards) and their perception of their own gender role characteristics, and data on the latter is not available. (Note that men may violate masculine norms for various reasons, reflecting differing degrees of agency and differing drivers: they are poor at stereotypical masculine behaviours or for whatever reason have personalities at odds with stereotypical masculine traits, they have sexual identities or orientations that fall outside masculinity's strictly heteronormative principles, they actively contest and resist stereotypical masculinity, and so on (Flood, 2008; Heasley, 2005).

A second possibility is that higher levels of life satisfaction among men with higher endorsement of Man Box rules in the Man Box study represent the positive influence of their support for and enactment of specific masculine norms. Other research has documented that stereotypical masculine norms have differential impacts on men's health and wellbeing. Particular masculine norms can have positive or negative associations with men's health, as various reviews attest (Gerdes et al., 2018; Gerdes & Levant, 2018; Wong et al., 2017) and as research e.g. among young adult men continues to show (Kaya et al., 2019).

Lower levels of life satisfaction among men with the lowest levels of endorsement of Man Box rules also may be shaped by the demographic characteristics of this group. For example, gay, bisexual, and transgender men are overrepresented in this group, and homophobic and transphobic discrimination and internalised homophobia may lessen their levels of life satisfaction.

Doing harm

Substantial proportions of young men have caused harm to others, and the bluntest expression of this is in violence and abuse. The Man Box survey explores young men's involvement in three forms of violence: physical and sexual violence against an intimate partner, sexual harassment, and bullying. It finds that sizable minorities of young men have perpetrated such behaviours, and doing so is more common among young men who endorse traditional definitions of manhood.

More than one-quarter of young men (28%) have perpetrated at least one of the forms of intimate partner violence about which they were asked. This included, for example, pushing or shoving a partner (11% of respondents), having sexual intercourse with a partner when the partner was afraid of what they might do (10%), and forcing a partner to do something sexual that is degrading or humiliating (10%). About one-quarter of the men (24.8%) have perpetrated at least one form of physical violence against an intimate partner. One-fifth (20%) have perpetrated at least one of three forms of sexual violence against an intimate partner.

These levels of self-reported perpetration among young men are similar to those in other studies in North America, Europe, and elsewhere (Flood et al., 2023, pp. 23-28). For example, 29.3% of men on average at universities in the USA and Canada have perpetrated sexual violence in their lifetimes, according to a systematic review of studies over 2000 to 2017 based on 78 samples of 25,524 college men (Anderson et al., 2021). The Man Box figures focused on eight forms of physical and sexual violence against a current or former intimate partner. Its findings on the proportions of young men who have perpetrated partner violence would be higher if they included other forms of violence and abuse including emotional abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse, and coercive control.

Violence-supportive and patriarchal attitudes are a consistent predictor of men's perpetration of domestic, family, and sexual violence, as four recent meta-analyses and systematic analyses and a wealth of other studies have found (Flood et al., 2023, p. 36). The Man Box survey finds this too. **Among young men aged 18 to 30, there were far higher rates of perpetration of sexual and physical violence against intimate partners among those men who agreed most strongly with the Man Box norms.**

Pornography use is a risk factor for sexual violence perpetration, as longitudinal, experimental, and correlational studies show (Crabbe & Flood, 2021). In other words, men and boys who consume pornography are more likely than other boys to perpetrate sexual violence. The Man Box survey finds that pornography use is common among young men: 81% had used pornography over the past six months, 50.1% did so at least once a week, and 12.2% did so daily. Half of young men (52%) had looked at violent pornography, that is, at sexually explicit material which included one or more of the following being done to a woman: pushing or shoving, pulling hair, spanking, gagging, choking, slapping, kicking, punching, bondage or restraint, or forcing sex. Men with the highest levels of endorsement of the Man Box rules were more likely to use pornography – to look at it and to do so frequently – and this was especially true for violent pornography.

The Man Box survey also collected data about young men's perpetration of two other forms of violence and abuse:

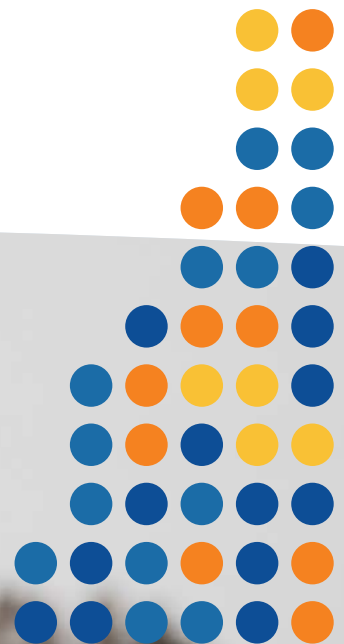
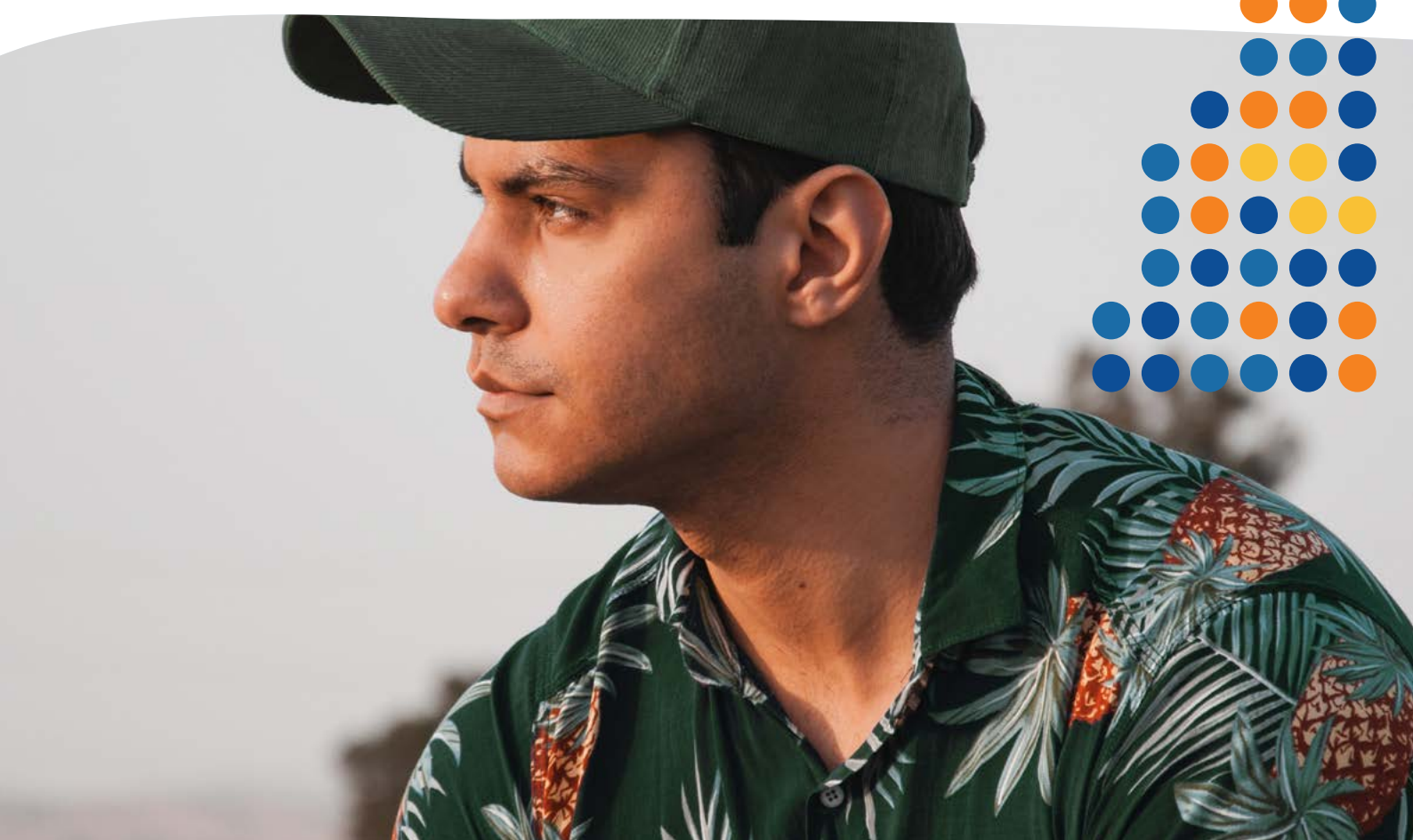
- *Sexual harassment:* Young men were asked about one form of sexually harassing behaviour, whether they had made “sexual comments to a woman or girl [they] didn't know, in a public place or online”. One third of young men (33%) had done so in the last month, with 16% reporting they had done so often or very often. Perpetration was far higher among men with the highest levels of endorsement of the Man Box rules.
- *Bullying:* Over half of young men (58%) reported perpetrating at least one type of bullying (whether verbal, online, and physical) over the past month. Men with the highest levels of endorsement of the Man Box norms were much more likely to have perpetrated bullying and to have done so frequently.

Preventing and reducing harm

Although most of the Man Box survey items on behaviour look at young men's involvement in behaviours that harm themselves or others, the survey also includes data on one form of pro-social behaviour, bystander intervention in violence.

- *Male-male physical violence:* If they witnessed their male friends engaged in a physical fight, over two-thirds of young men (70%) would be bothered by this, and nine-tenths of them – 65% of all men – would intervene.
- *Verbal intimate partner violence:* If they witnessed a male friend insulting or verbally abusing his female partner, three-quarters of young men (76%) would be bothered by this, and nine-tenths of them – 68% of all men – would intervene.

Young men in general seem slightly less bothered by the first form of violence than the second, even though the first is physical, and this may reflect the societal normalisation of male-male violence. At the same time, among those 'bothered' by these forms of violence, the anticipated likelihood of intervening is the same for both. For both male-male physical violence and intimate partner verbal abuse, young men with lesser personal endorsement of traditional masculine norms were more bothered by the violence and more likely to intervene.



Building momentum for change

To return to the opening points in this commentary, there is both good news and bad news in the Man Box findings. First, the good news: a model of manhood based in toughness, aggression, emotional stoicism, homophobia, transphobia, and male dominance is not the cultural standard in Australia, at least among men aged 18-30. Most men aged 18-30 do not endorse this form of masculinity, suggesting that most are more accepting instead of healthier, gender-equitable, and inclusive models of manhood or personhood. Moreover, most men report that traditional masculine beliefs are not the ones they receive from society, and more men report this than the men five years ago.

Then there is the bad news. A sizable minority of young men endorse rigid, dangerous, or sexist models of manhood, and levels of endorsement generally have remained steady over the past five years. A higher proportion of young men, although still in the minority, report that the messages they see from society also uphold these regressive models of manhood. These young men are more likely to perpetrate violence and other forms of harm against women, other men, and others. They may be particularly vulnerable to anti-feminist radicalisation in online spaces (Botto & Gottzén, 2023; Habib et al., 2022), or indeed, their sexist views may already reflect this.

It is disheartening to note that there has been little change in the past five years in young men's levels of endorsement of male aggression, stoicism, traditional divisions of household work, homophobia, and hypersexuality. Young men these days are less accepting of men always knowing their intimate partners' whereabouts but still just as accepting of men always having the final say in their relationships or marriages, with about one quarter of men supporting both these dimensions of male dominance and control in relationships. Finally, men's attitudinal support for traditional masculine ideology is reflected in their involvement in a range of behaviours that harm themselves, their intimate partners, or others.

What can be done about this? The three broad recommendations I offered at the end of my commentary on the first Man Box report (2018), summarised in the Text Box, "Beyond the Man Box", are a good place to start. In the second Man Box report (2020), I extended these recommendations, locating them within a gender-transformative approach. I called for doing more to address the specific norms associated with negative outcomes and to target particular groups of men and boys. I emphasised the value of supporting men's and boys' resistance to regressive masculine norms and practices and challenging the pervasive policing of masculinity. And I called for going beyond attitudes and norms, to tackle the institutional forces and structures that sustain unhealthy and oppressive forms of manhood.

Box 5.1: How to move beyond the Man Box

1. Highlight the harms of the Man Box

- 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.

2. Weaken the cultural grip of the Man Box

- Highlight the gap between masculine social norms and men's own ideals
- Turn up the volume on diversity and change among men
- Engage men and boys in critical conversations about manhood
- Challenge the sources of the Man Box

3. Promote alternatives to the Man Box among boys and men

- Promote healthy masculinity. And/or equitable and ethical ways of being
- Including such qualities as: gender equality, non-violence, respect, empathy, nurturance, emotional intelligence, and so on
- Whatever vision we have for men and boys, it must be: feminist – based on equality, diverse and multiple, and non-essentialist

Source: Summarised from *The Men's Project & Flood (2018, pp. 50-53)*.



There is a growing field of programming and policy focused on work with men and boys. A field of ‘engaging men’ has developed, involving gender-conscious initiatives and interventions aimed at men and boys in relation to violence prevention, health, parenting, education, and other fields (Flood, 2015). It is encouraging to report that the last decade has seen significant growth in this field. Programs and initiatives focused on men and boys have proliferated at local, national, and international levels, and the fields or domains in which work with men and boys takes place have expanded. There is a growing scholarly evidence base assessing the effectiveness of this work (Greig & Flood, 2020, 2021). In the community in Australia there is widespread support for example for men’s positive roles in violence prevention (Flood, 2020, p. 26) and majority support for the notion that men will benefit from breaking free from traditional masculine stereotypes (Flood, 2020, pp. 13-14). There is growing policy support for engaging men and boys, visible for example in Australia’s national violence prevention frameworks and policies.

The remainder of my commentary focuses on the most important ways forward for work with men and boys.

Work with men and boys aimed at promoting healthy or positive masculinities in Australia must be intensified and scaled up. There are promising initiatives under way, but the work is small and scattered. Many efforts are focused on face-to-face education, and while this is a valuable strategy, it must be complemented by greater attention to strategies operating at more macro levels and aimed at organisational and structural change.

Community-level strategies are vital to address the social norms, social relations, and social inequalities known to underpin violence, crime, poor health, and other social problems. They target modifiable characteristics of the community: structural, economic, political, cultural or environmental. Community-level strategies move work with men and boys closer to the general ideal that initiatives be comprehensive, relevant, and empowering (Flood, 2023a).

We also need intensive intervention into the settings and processes most implicated in sustaining unhealthy and gender-inequitable masculinities. These may

include contexts such as workplaces, sporting clubs, and informal peer circles. One set of spaces in need of urgent intervention is the online platforms, communities and networks through which some boys and men are radicalised into sexism and misogyny (Flood, 2023b).

Work with men and boys must do more to identify and encourage protective factors, the factors that shape healthier and more gender-equitable attitudes, behaviours, and relations among men and boys. This work should be informed by scholarship on men’s pathways to gender-equitable and non-violent lives (Flood, 2014) and should address protective factors at individual, relationship, community and societal levels (Casey et al., 2022).

There are two more vital ways forward. We need to build capacity to engage men and boys. Efforts are necessary to increase the capacity of educators, advocates, and other practitioners to work effectively with and boys, whether through dedicated university curricula, professional development, or other strategies (Wells et al., 2023).

Finally, we need explicit standards for effective or best practice in work with men and boys. There is significant community appetite for ‘healthy’ or ‘positive masculinities’ programs among boys and men, and a proliferation of such initiatives. But there is little shared sense of standards or principles of effective practice, existing work in Australia is of uneven quality, and this may worsen as the field expands. However, good guidance on standards for effective practice is available, including assessment tools for work with men and boys (Keddie et al., 2023) and guidance for specific fields such as violence prevention (Our Watch, 2022; Regional Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women and UN Women, 2020; Wells et al., 2020), men’s health (Galdas et al., 2023), and other areas.

In building healthier and more gender-equitable lives for men and boys, there is much to do. To make progress, we must know where men and boys are at. The Man Box data provides invaluable data on the attitudes men have, the ways they treat themselves and others, and the wider social and cultural forces that shape their lives.

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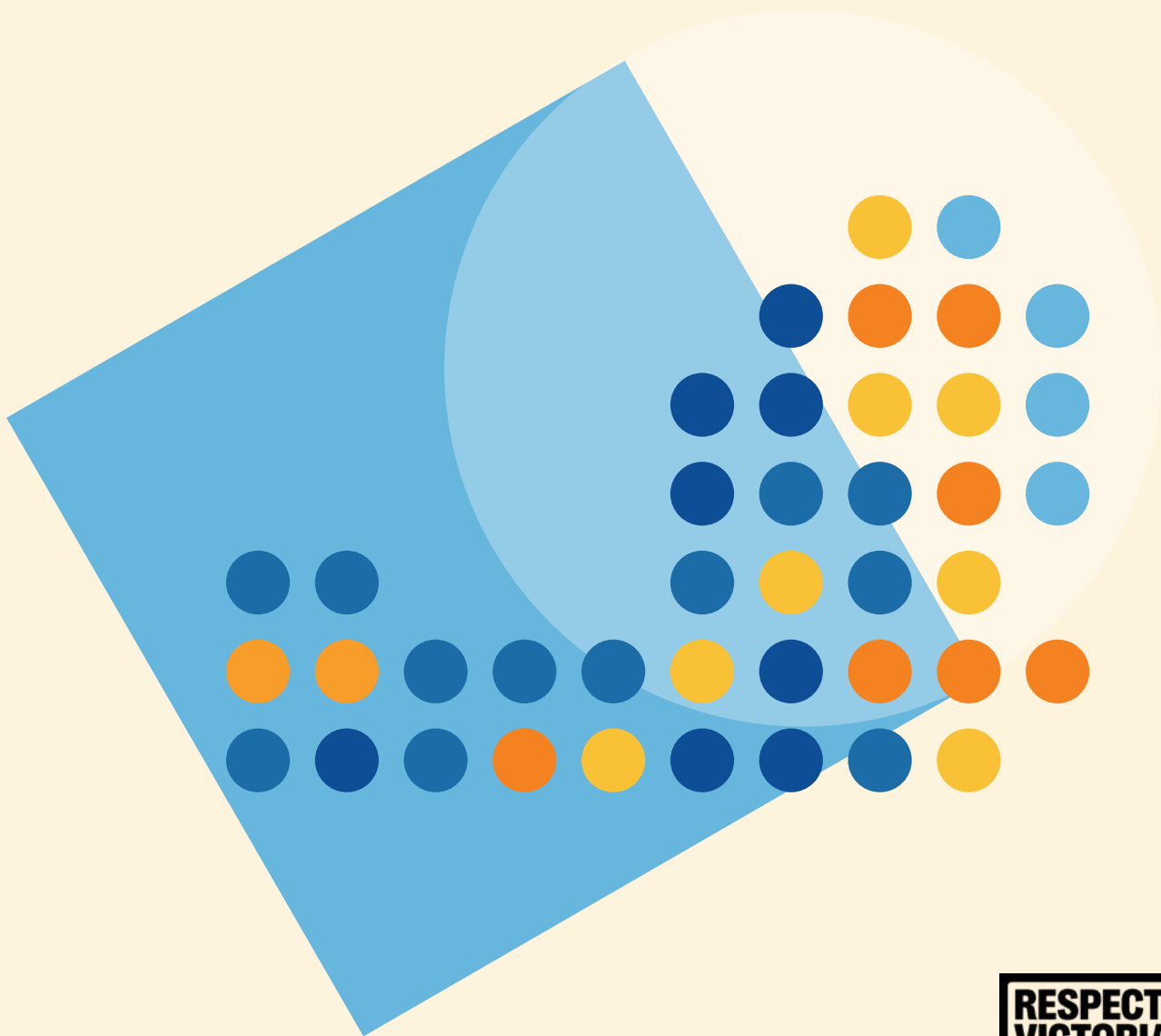
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The Man Box 2024

Re-examining what it means to be
a man in Australia

the
men's
project

A Jesuit Social Services initiative



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Respect Victoria

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