Men in focus

Unpacking masculinities and engaging men in the prevention of violence against women

Summary of evidence review

Our WATCh
End violence against Women And Their Children

About this evidence review

This evidence review synthesises and analyses existing research on masculinities and violence against women to develop a deeper understanding of the links between dominant forms and patterns of masculinity and violence against women. It explores how primary prevention efforts can best address and challenge these patterns and effectively engage men in the prevention of violence against women.

This review adopts an intersectional approach and draws on relevant literature to build an understanding of how our social structures, norms and practices create complex intersecting forms of discrimination, disadvantage, power and privilege, and how this plays out for different groups of men, such as:

• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men

• Immigrant and refugee men

• Men who identify as gay, bisexual or trans

• Men of lower socio-economic status

• Men who hold significant power, privilege or status

It considers how differences in men's experiences and in their relationship to power intersect with dominant forms of masculinity to help shape patterns of men's violence against women.

What is masculinity?

• It is a **social construction** rather than something that men and boys are born with

• It is a **set of social expectations or standards** for how men should think and act, but which many men are often unable to meet or live up to

• It is **multiple and situational** — men do not conform to one single model of masculinity, and masculinity is performed differently in different contexts

• It **intersects with other aspects of identity and social location** such as race, class, sexuality, ability, age and the Australian context of colonisation. These intersections produce multiple masculinities and different experiences of being a man

• It is **embedded in social norms, structures and practices** — it operates at individual, organisational, community and systemic levels of society

Key findings

While there are many masculinities, or ways of being a man, there tend to be particular social norms, attitudes and practices that men feel pressure to conform to and support

These include: autonomy, dominance and control, aggression and toughness, risk-taking, stoicism and suppression of emotion, hypersexuality and heterosexuality.

These dominant forms of masculinity help to maintain gender inequality

They can create and give legitimacy to the privilege and power that men as a group hold over women as a group, and that men hold in their personal relationships with women. At their most harmful, these dominant forms of masculinity also help drive men's violence against women.

Men who form a rigid attachment to these dominant ideas, or 'norms of masculinity', are more likely to demonstrate sexist attitudes and behaviours, and use violence against women — especially when their masculinity is challenged or when they find it difficult to live up to these norms

This suggests that the problem lies not necessarily in the norms themselves but in some men's rigid attachment to them, and the social expectation that men conform to these norms only and avoid other behaviours considered feminine or 'unmanly'.

The 'Man Box' study

The Man Box is a recent study on the attitudes and behaviours of young Australian men aged 18 to 30. It found that young men inside the Man Box are those who endorse the Man Box rules (dominant ideas of masculinity). These young men are more likely to commit acts of violence, bullying and sexual harassment.

Responses of young men in Australia to questions on their behaviours	Inside the Man Box	Outside the Man Box
Perpetrated physical bullying in the past month	47%*	7%*
Made sexual comments to women you don't know in a public place in the past month	46%*	7%*
Went along or didn't take action when witnessing guys making sexist comments or jokes	57%*	48%*

* represents statistically significant relationships at $p < .05$

Source: The Men's Project & Flood, M, (2018) The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in Australia, Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne.

Dominant ideas or norms of masculinity are often central to male peer relationships (men's friendships and interactions with other men)

These norms can influence the ways in which men relate to each other, and can be seen in the way some men and boys use sexist, homophobic or aggressive behaviours to assert their masculinity, 'prove' their manhood and gain approval from male peers.

While important steps have been taken to address disrespect towards women in a range of settings, **some settings such as sports and male-dominated workplaces, and other sites in which men engage in large numbers (for example, pornography), can often promote harmful versions of masculinity that include sexist and violent attitudes and behaviours.**

Violence and aggression are strongly associated with masculinity

This link is often supported, justified and legitimised in our society – glorified in popular culture, celebrated in some sports, or reproduced in the view that men's aggression is just 'boys being boys'. Violence and masculinity interact on a continuum, from social norms emphasising male aggression and dominance, to actual practices of violence, both in socially legitimised forms and in ways that cause extreme harm to others, including women.

> While there are many masculinities, or ways of being a man, there tend to be particular social norms, attitudes and practices that men feel pressure to conform to and support.

Men do experience negative impacts on their own health and wellbeing due to dominant forms of masculinity and the pressures to conform to them

Men who subscribe and adhere to these models of masculinity are subject to greater health risks and experience poorer outcomes than men who are less attached to these models. These men experience higher rates of depression and suicide, are more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as dangerous driving and substance abuse, and develop poorer help-seeking behaviours.

Men who are negatively impacted by systems and structures of discrimination such as racism, homophobia, ableism and classism suffer disproportionate negative impacts to their health and wellbeing compared to other men.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, there are unique impacts to health and wellbeing due to ongoing cumulative effects of colonisation, which include cycles of intergenerational and collective trauma.

As well as harming women, men's violence harms other men

The majority of violence is perpetrated by men, against women and also against other men. Men who experience social discrimination and disadvantage experience higher levels of violence from other men than those who do not experience such discrimination and disadvantage.

The triad of men's violence

Some researchers have developed and used a model called the 'triad of men's violence' to describe how dominant forms of masculinity can lead men to commit violence not only against women and against other men, but also against themselves (psychological, emotional and physical harm to self). This model has been theorised as a triad (describing three forms of men's violence), however, it doesn't capture every form of men's violence, for example, men's violence against children.

Men's violence against men

Men's violence against women

Men's violence against themselves

Source: Kaufman, M (1987) The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence, in Kaufman, M (Ed), Beyond patriarchy: essays by men on pleasure, power and change, Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Guiding principles for prevention

The following principles help to guide all prevention efforts that focus on masculinities and on engaging men and boys.

★ **Challenge essentialist ideas of men and masculinity**

The idea that masculinity is 'natural' to men can help justify and normalise men's expressions of dominance, aggression and violence towards women. Prevention efforts can help challenge this by drawing attention to the social construction of masculinity and the ways in which men are expected, and feel pressure, to conform to particular norms and practices.

★ **Encourage an understanding of sex and gender that does not limit people to two rigid 'boxes'**

Prevention efforts should not adhere to a binary understanding of sex and gender as this can reproduce essentialist ideas that masculinity is innate in men. This can reinforce and justify men's display of dominant forms of masculinity and also has negative implications for people who are trans, gender diverse and intersex.

★ **Look for solutions across all levels of society**

Prevention efforts that address masculinities and that engage men and boys should avoid focusing only on single factors or individual causes of violence against women. Instead, it is important to consider how masculinities and gender inequality are embedded in all different levels of society, and in multiple social systems and structures. This approach can help highlight that 'the problem' is not simply at the level of individual men's attitudes, and can help identify solutions at the broader levels of policy, organisational and institutional strategies, community mobilisation and social change.

★ Address dominant norms, structures and practices of masculinity

Prevention efforts should actively challenge men's rigid attachment to dominant norms, structures and practices of masculinity. This includes challenging the excuses and justifications given for men's violence and aggression. Challenging these dominant forms of masculinity can also help address other systems of discrimination, such as homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, which are intimately linked to sexism and the rigid norms and structures of masculinity.

★ Promote positive male peer relationships

Prevention work should draw attention to the ways in which men often rely on dominant norms of masculinity in their relationships with other men. This involves challenging male peer relationships that are based on sexism, homophobia and aggression and disrespect towards women, and supporting men to interact and form bonds with each other in more positive, respectful ways.

★ Aim to be gender transformative

Prevention efforts should seek to actively challenge dominant norms and practices of masculinity (rather than reinforcing or maintaining them) and promote a range of alternatives that are based on equality and respect.

★ Embed an intersectional approach into all prevention work

Applying an intersectional approach to prevention work that addresses masculinities and seeks to engage men is crucial in order to understand and respond to differences in men's privilege and access to power. While men benefit from gender inequality, some are also impacted by other forms of structural inequality and social discrimination. Prevention work needs to understand and address the different circumstances, structures and systems that men are engaged in, and how these differences shape the patterns of men's violence against women.

★ Maintain accountability to women

Work that focuses on men and masculinities must simultaneously maintain accountability to women. This means ensuring women are involved and their voices remain central in this work.
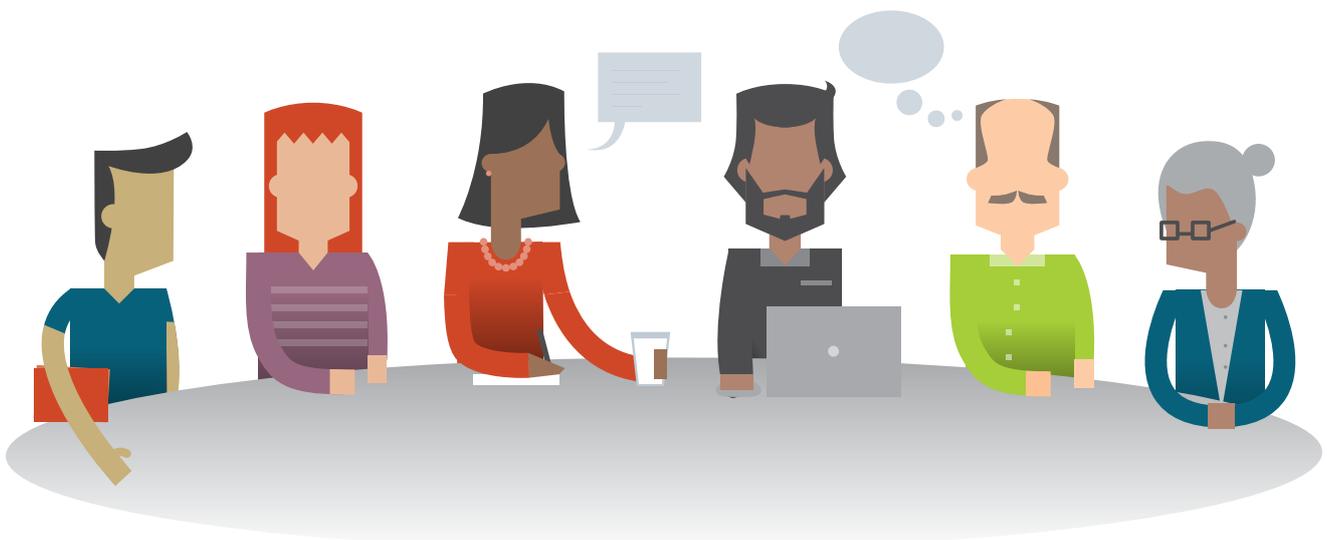
Engaging men and boys

This section focuses specifically on the engagement of men and boys. It outlines a number of considerations for policy makers and practitioners when engaging men and boys in prevention efforts, and highlights the key challenges associated with this work.

Considerations for policy makers and funders

Use whole-of-population engagement	Different efforts to engage men and boys in prevention work should engage the whole population and work at all levels of society. Individual programs and initiatives are most effective when combined with group or community-based efforts and larger-scale society-wide strategies for cultural and structural change.
Take a long-term approach	Changing deeply embedded social norms – such as those associated with masculinity – takes time. Programs and initiatives must be delivered over long periods of time in order to maximise their effectiveness and impact.
Employ multiple strategies tailored to different audiences	Multiple strategies are needed to engage different men and boys. Each strategy must be informed by a deep understanding of the intended audience in order to effectively appeal to and engage those men and boys.
Adopt an evidence-based approach	The development and delivery of programs and initiatives should be informed by a strong evidence base that includes research which is relevant and current.
Evaluate and monitor	Prevention efforts and initiatives should undergo rigorous and regular monitoring and evaluation to track and assess their effectiveness and impact.

Tips for practitioners

Well-designed initiatives that effectively engage men and boys to reflect on and challenge dominant forms and patterns of masculinity can contribute to the reduction and prevention of violence against women. Key elements of promising practice are as follows:

Use gender transformative strategies

This involves encouraging men to critically reflect on and question dominant norms and practices of masculinity, and promoting more positive and respectful alternatives.

Enable community-driven approaches

Initiatives that seek to engage men who experience structural and social discrimination and disadvantage should be community-driven, culturally relevant, and should avoid reinforcing the structures and discourses of discrimination that impact them.

Build awareness, knowledge and skills

Aim to increase men's awareness of the problem of violence against women. Build their knowledge about how they can actively help increase gender equality and prevent violence against women, and give them the skills to do so.

Use direct participation

Education-based programs and initiatives are often more effective when they are participatory and encourage reflection and action.

Appeal to men's emotional levers

Initiatives that encourage men to build empathy around the problem of violence against women increase men's willingness to engage in prevention efforts. This means they are less likely to engage in aggressive or disrespectful behaviour towards women. Care should be taken to avoid inadvertently devaluing women or reinforcing the idea that women need to be protected by men.

Use positive messaging

Initiatives that focus on men as part of the solution, and on what men can do rather than what they should not do, are more effective at engaging men and boys. Strategies that provoke shame, fear and humiliation are less effective.

Use male role models and ambassadors

Promoting positive male peer relations is integral to efforts to engage men and boys. Men who measure themselves in relation to other men are also likely to be influenced by their peers, suggesting male role models can play a powerful part in promoting alternative, healthier patterns of masculinity.

Engage women as well

While prevention efforts that engage men on issues of masculinity are critical, there is also value in developing initiatives that engage women on this issue. Such engagement can increase awareness and critical reflection by women on the roles women sometimes play in supporting harmful ideas about masculinity, and on the expectations women may have of men to conform to dominant norms of masculinity.

Key challenges and tensions

A number of key challenges emerge in prevention work that focuses on masculinities and ways to engage men. These challenges include:

Avoiding the reinforcement of dominant norms and stereotypes

Some prevention efforts seeking to engage men and boys rely on dominant norms and stereotypes of masculinity, which can inadvertently reinforce or perpetuate the very patterns that need to be challenged. This can be seen in strategies that appeal to 'real men' or encourage men to 'man up' or use their strength to protect women and 'combat' violence against women. Such approaches can be problematic because they reinforce the idea that there is such a thing as 'real men', and simply redraw the borders around this idea.

Similarly, programs and initiatives might use a 'good men' versus 'bad men' narrative to alleviate or minimise defensive reactions from men who do not perpetrate violence against women. However, this places a focus on 'a few bad individuals' and ignores the broader social and structural forces at play for other men. Further, it can result in the blaming or stigmatising of whole groups or communities of men, without an account of how these masculinities may be shaped by experiences of structural and systemic violence and discrimination. Reinforcing strategies can have short-term appeal and might provide a 'hook' to engage men and boys, but are not an effective long-term strategy.

Addressing men's complicity and privilege

The majority of men agree that gender inequality exists and that violence against women is a problem. However, many struggle to recognise how their own attitudes and actions as individuals contribute to maintaining dominant forms of masculinity and a system of gender inequality — all of which helps drive violence against women.

This is exemplified in the 'not all men' discourse that is used to exempt the majority of men from responsibility — despite the fact that the majority of men are implicated in maintaining dominant masculinity and gender inequality, and receive benefits as a result.

Importantly, the extent to which different men benefit depends on their proximity to dominant norms of masculinity and on their access to political, economic and social resources. Research shows that male privilege tends to be invisible to those that hold it, and that men measure their own privilege in relation to other men who are similar to them rather than those with less power and influence. Men are also disinclined to actively challenge a social system that benefits them over women. Addressing men's complicity and privilege therefore remains a key challenge in prevention work that engages men.

Taking the 'men will benefit' approach

Some prevention efforts highlight how men will benefit from greater gender equality and use this as a strategy to engage men. For example, men are encouraged to reject pressures to conform to dominant forms of masculinity because these result in poorer health outcomes for them. While this can provide a successful 'hook' to engage men and boys, such strategies should also:

- highlight that men's adherence to harmful masculinities disproportionately impacts women

- acknowledge that men also receive many benefits for maintaining the status quo and are likely to lose some benefits if this changes

- encourage or support men to take more systemic, challenging actions that are required to shift power and transform the current state of things.

Maintaining accountability to women

Efforts to engage men and boys can risk sidelining and marginalising women's voices. For example, men who engage in prevention efforts and undertake gender equality work receive more praise and recognition and less backlash than women. This means men may also advance more quickly to leadership positions in women's organisations. Or, prevention efforts that employ the 'men will benefit' approach risk ignoring the fact that women are disproportionately impacted by gender inequality and the gendered drivers of violence compared to most men.

One solution is to develop accountability standards and mechanisms for initiatives that engage men, such as:

- actively listening to women and working in consultation with women's organisations
- advocating for women's leadership
- reflecting on male privilege and dominant forms of masculinity
- holding other men accountable when they display sexist or aggressive attitudes and behaviours.

Dealing with backlash and resistance

Prevention and gender equality work is often met with backlash and resistance, which can result in increased sexism, aggression and violence against women. This resistance appears in multiple forms and can occur:

- when common ideas about masculinity or the 'traditional gender order' are challenged
- as a defence of privilege or where gains for women are seen as a loss for men
- when prevention efforts are perceived as a collective attack on men.

While some men are aggressively resistant, prevention efforts should focus on the many men willing to be or capable of being engaged. In parallel, it remains important to develop strategies that respond to and address overt forms of backlash. These can include:

- offering alternative analyses of the issues these men are concerned about
- offering alternative male voices to show that some men think differently to how these men do
- critiquing the evidence used to discredit gender equality and prevention efforts
- demonstrating that gender inequality and dominant forms of masculinity are also harmful to men
- highlighting what men might gain from greater gender equality.

Source: Flood, M (2019) Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Continuum of male engagement

The 'continuum of male engagement' is a conceptual tool designed to support practitioners, policy makers and organisers seeking to mobilise and engage men and boys in efforts to promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence.
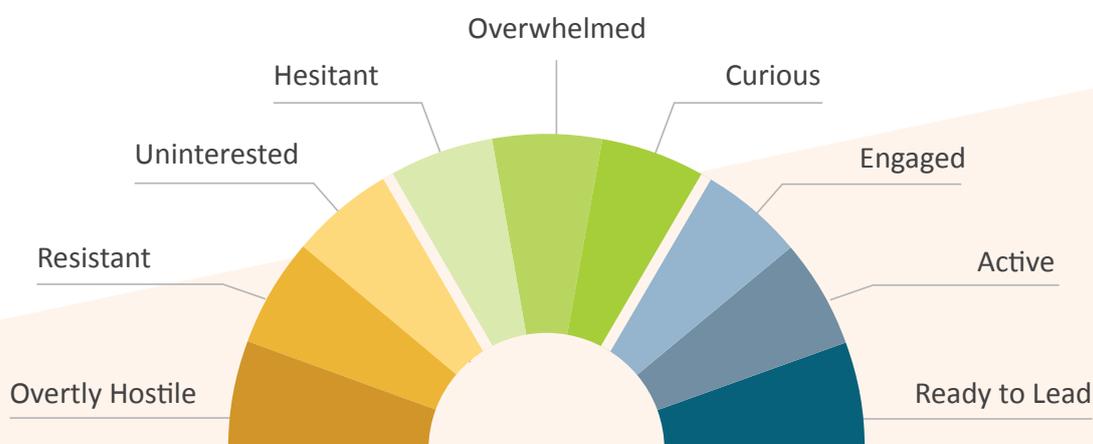
Source: Funk, R (2006) Reaching Men: Strategies for Preventing Sexist Attitudes, Behaviours and Violence, Indianapolis, IN: Jist Publications.

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This is a summary of *Men in focus: Unpacking masculinities and engaging men in the prevention of violence against women.*

To download the full review, please see the Our Watch website at **http://www.ourwatch.org.au/**

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This project was conducted by Our Watch, with funding assistance and support from the Victorian Government.

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