

Positive Narratives

A method to inspire men and boys to thrive and contribute to a world of equality





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overview: calling men in

Progressive movements working for gender justice have made significant gains, originally mostly focusing on girls and women, and subsequently on calling men out and dismantling oppressive social norms, power structures and systems. Increasingly, many such movements and organisations have also been effective at calling men in and building new norms and structures which could help them forge new identities – but much more needs to be done here. Many men and boys, in all their diversities, feel lost, left behind, and uncertain of their place in a world that is rapidly changing. Many feel alienated or attacked by the critical discourse around gender and words such as ‘patriarchy’, ‘toxic masculinity’ or ‘feminism’ make them anxious and defensive. Meanwhile, other voices started filling this space, offering men not only certainty and solutions to their problems, but also a sense of community, purpose, and identity – albeit through doubling down on oppressive and outdated gender norms, values and accompanying behaviour.

If we want a more equitable and peaceful future in which people of all genders can live free from gender stereotypes, oppression and abuse, we need to fill this space ourselves – with positive, inclusive narratives that inspire and support boys and men to grow into new roles in ways that benefit themselves and others alike. Narratives which abandon the zero-sum game* approach and speak to how we can all win. Narratives that focus less on criticism or calling for moral sacrifice, and more on identifying and promoting clear pathways to fulfilment, connection, and purpose, while simultaneously addressing and dismantling systems of oppression that perpetuate unjust power structures.

MenEngage Alliance is dedicated to transforming gender norms*, stereotypes, and systems to build a world of gender justice.¹ Positive narratives are one of the methods for achieving this goal, and many MenEngage members, researchers and activists worldwide use them already in their daily practice.²⁻⁴ This report builds on their work, aiming to find commonalities between local practices, inspire an exchange of ideas, and inform a wider public discourse and all who want to build a world of gender justice.

Positive narratives can help you frame your stories, messages and interventions in ways that will inspire men and boys to empower themselves to take steps towards revising gender norms and embracing healthy, caring and equitable masculinities.* We propose an evidence-based framework rooted in eight principles designed with the pragmatic goal of inspiring as many men and boys as possible to adopt as many values associated with such masculinities as possible, as quickly as possible:

1. Speak to the men in the middle
2. Meet men where they are
3. Focus on the next step
4. Use sticks less
5. Use more carrots
6. Engage emotionally
7. Inspire, don't lecture
8. Address men's problems

We offer three example narratives, outlining how they can be used, how they satisfy the principles, and what existing narratives they might replace:

- Join The Masculinity Revolution
- Aim For The Golden Middle
- Emotional Intelligence Is For You

* For an explanation of terms marked with a star, see Glossary on p. 39

This preliminary report outlines our proposal to supplement the critique aimed at rooting out patriarchal norms, values, and identities, with an effort to build and inspire new and better ones. In the future, we will expand on it by gathering, researching, testing, and sharing more positive narratives that can scale across communities and cultures.

Most importantly, we see this report as a living project and a continuous work in progress. We expect to release regular updates and to expand our library of narratives. We would like to invite all of you to contribute by offering your feedback, sharing the narratives you have been using, and helping us contextualise our work to the various social, cultural, religious and other settings.

Who is this report for?

We hope that this report will be useful to everyone who works on gender justice, particularly with men and boys at different levels, and who wishes to inspire them to embrace more equitable, caring and positive masculinities. This includes but is not limited to:

- Social workers
- Sports coaches
- School teachers
- Faith teachers
- Team leads and DEI managers
- Medical care professionals
- Gender justice organisations
- Personal development coaches
- Human Resources professionals
- Change management specialists

We hope that our work might inspire you to develop better strategies for reaching and engaging boys and men: to help them reshape the social norms they perpetuate and are subject to, embrace policies aimed at building a fairer world, and see that they can thrive in that world, too.

We would also like to reach those who shape the social, cultural and economic systems we live in, and speak up in the public sphere, sharing and amplifying narratives which shape people's minds and opinions in local and global contexts. This includes but is not limited to:

- Social media influencers
- Bloggers and vloggers
- Faith leaders and preachers
- Media practitioners
- Politicians
- Environmental, women's rights, and other activists

Your words and actions can reach millions and we hope that our work might inspire you to spread a message that can sow unity, invite men to be a powerful force for positive change, and paint a picture of an equal world that benefits everyone – hence also boys and men.

Finally, this report can be useful to the professionals who already work with boys and men and have likely been practicing what we preach for years. It is thanks to your continuing efforts that our work is possible and a great deal of this report is inspired by consultations with the many activists, researchers and organisations active in the field. We hope that it might give you an opportunity to further improve your approaches, compare them with those used by others, and offer you a forum to share the narratives and practices you have yourselves developed with others who work in the field.



PathForge supports boys and men at forging meaningful, purpose-driven lives and taking on valued roles in fair and equal societies. Through research-based guidance, training, and narratives, we equip them, as well as organisations and professionals who work with them, with tools to improve well-being, build robust identities, and become better partners, fathers, and citizens.

Our team conducts independent research on masculinities, gender norms, equality, and ethics, to produce research-based reports, policy advice documents, and public outreach materials aimed at inspiring systemic change. To extend this work, we collaborate with universities and academics who seek to see their research applied in social work, advocacy, and activism, and we support them in accessing knowledge transfer opportunities. Building on this foundation, we design and deliver evidence-based training for businesses, organisations, and individuals.

Our outreach activities address challenges commonly faced by boys and men. We develop positively framed interventions that support critical engagement with traditional masculine norms and help them conceptualise their place in a fair and equal world. We promote pathways towards lives of purpose and personal fulfilment that are consistent with gender justice. This work is delivered through facilitating local and online men's groups, with selected activities made publicly available via recorded discussion groups, a blog, and a vlog.

Dr Simon Fokt is the founder and director of PathForge. He completed his PhD in Philosophy at the University of St Andrews (UK), lectures at HTW Berlin, and manages the Diversity Reading List, a leading resource promoting equality in the academia. He serves on the Board of MenEngage Europe, where he launched and facilitates the Working Group on Positive Narratives.



Find out more under <https://path-forge.org>



MenEngage Europe brings together more than 128 European members, with a shared focus on men and boys to achieve gender justice. From Georgia in the East, to Iceland in the West and North, to Turkey in the South, the network offers a unique space in the region for organisations, activists and practitioners to exchange, strengthen each other and build links and collaborations across borders.

The network provides a pro-feminist platform for networking, capacity development, and advocacy on issues relating to working with men and boys on gender equality. It works across borders and cultures in Europe to support boys and men to reflect on how their ways of being men influence their wellbeing and the people around them.

The Positive Narratives Working Group was launched in September 2024. It provides network members with a forum to discuss narrative-based interventions and to examine interventions they already deliver. This work was the direct inspiration for the present report.

Find out more under <https://menengage.org/networks/europe/about>

problem statement

07



The world is experiencing a backlash aimed at human rights, gender, diversity, and democracy.^{5,6} Populist movements exploit widespread dissatisfaction with modern life, advocating for a return to traditional social norms and structures.^{7,8} Powerful political and economic interests promote a resurgence of a systemically dominance-based world, aided by technologies which amplify extreme views by design.⁹⁻¹² Standing against them is hard, especially as this shift has deepened societal divisions and many men are becoming increasingly socially and politically conservative.^{13,14} But the backlash appeals to men not solely due to reactionary longing for real or imagined past privileges.

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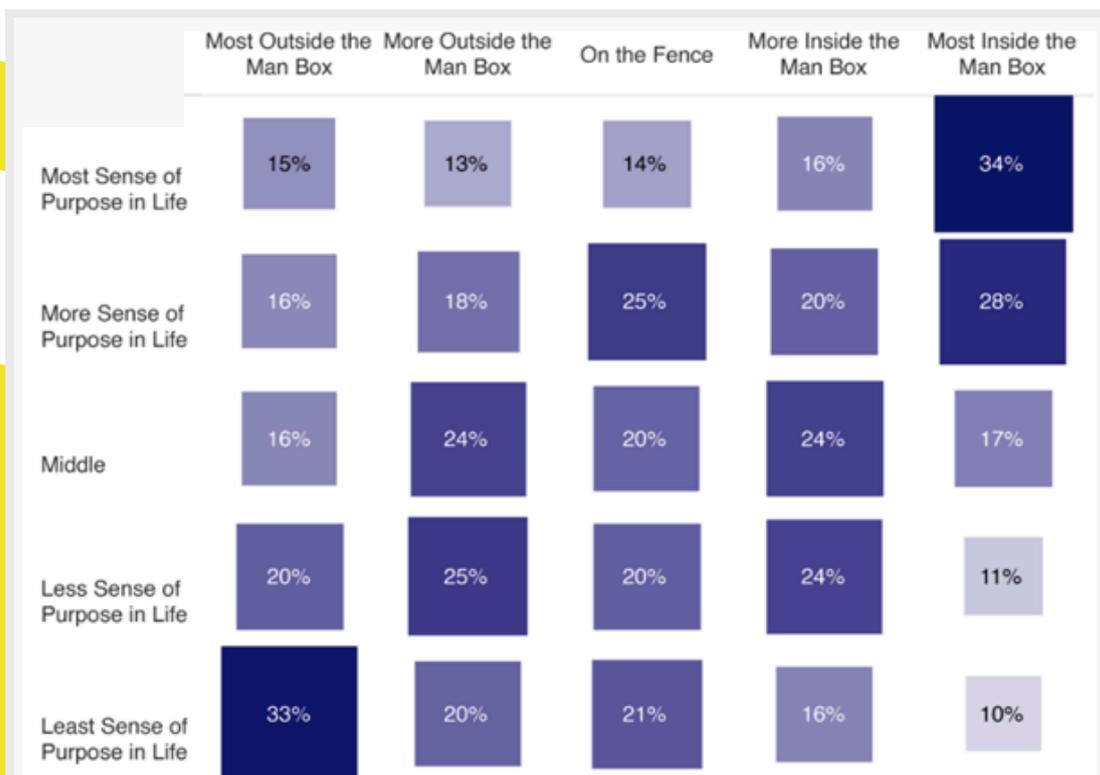
The world has changed under our feet and many men are genuinely lost. The conservative message of regaining security and control through rolling back social progress, has a big sway over men and boys whom it promises a new sense of identity, often based on outdated and misogynistic tropes.

There is a path forward and those working with men and boys offer guidance, but their reach is limited, resources scarce, and the systemic obstacles they face are huge. Meanwhile, those promoting gender justice more broadly tend to emphasise critiquing harmful behaviours and systemic inequities without simultaneously offering constructive guidance towards men's new roles in equitable societies or a positive plan for a systemic normalisation of healthier masculinities.¹⁵ In effect, most men and boys hear what not to do but are rarely given a clear vision of what they should do to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives without harming others. They are or become sceptical about gender justice and feel it holds no answers for them.⁸ When they hear that #MenAreTrash and 'The Future Is Female,' they unsurprisingly often react by becoming defensive.

But men and boys do need guidance. Many struggle with education, employment, loneliness,

and a sense of meaning.³ They have physical and mental health concerns 'associated with complex and diverse economic, biological, developmental, psychological, and socio-cultural factors'¹⁶ and face barriers to accessing gender-sensitive healthcare.¹⁷ Even when parents try bringing up their children with equality in mind, many of the environments they grow up in still encourage traditional, oppressive values, while recent technological and cultural changes leave them grappling with fundamental human questions about identity, purpose and value: *How do I contribute to my community? What is my worth? How can I build meaningful and lasting relationships?* In the absence of compelling progressive answers, conservative voices have stepped in with reassuringly clear narratives promoting a return to 'what worked before,' including traditional gender roles and value systems. These narratives offer certainty, belonging, and purpose – but also lead to inequality and division, and have little sensitivity to the fact that what was before did not in fact work for everyone. They can also use or manipulate men's sentiments and problems for political and economic gains.¹⁸

This is captured by perhaps the most troubling recent finding about men in the US and the UK: that having restrictive, traditional views about masculinity (a.k.a. being 'in the Man Box'), is positively correlated with a sense of purpose in life.^{3,19}



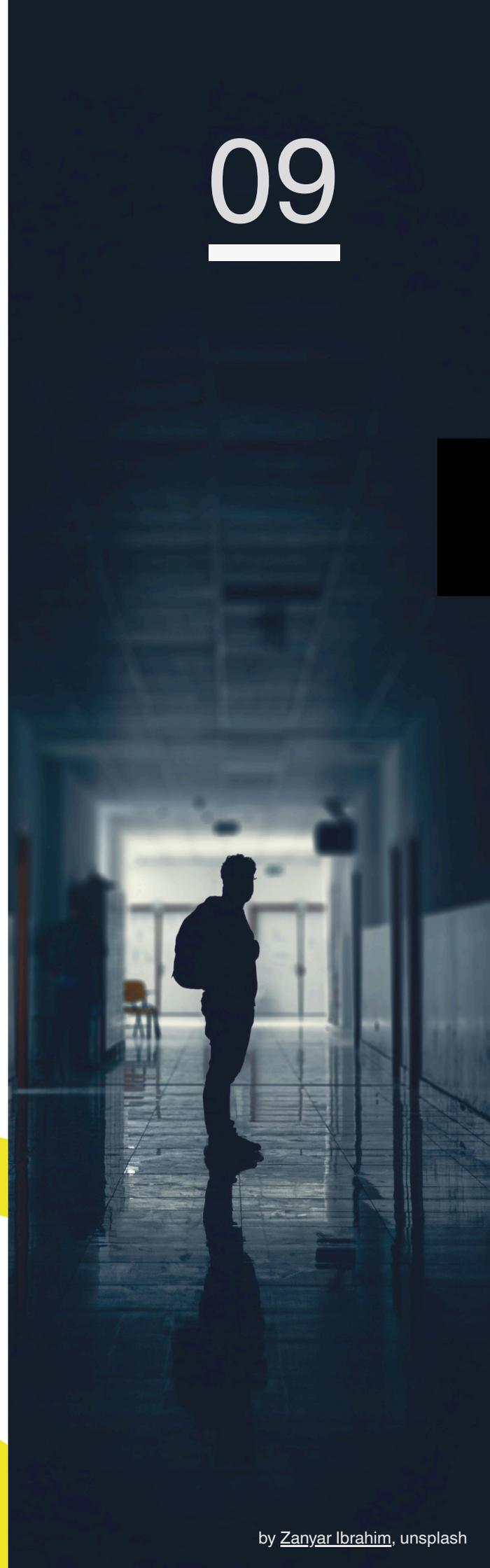
Equimundo (2024), *The State of American Men*.³

There are different ways to interpret these findings. It is true that 'For some men, holding on to power, to a belief in one's superiority, to trusted versions of manhood that have existed for centuries is the easiest way to get by.'¹³ But it is also true that conservative narratives often do or appear to address men's problems and do offer them community and purpose.²⁰ The real question therefore is not: 'What immoral things are *they* doing to give men a sense of purpose?' The real question is: 'What can *we* do better to give men a sense of purpose that is transformative and promotes equality for all?'

Many men and boys dive into, and get stuck in the Manosphere*, because it 'creates a sense of common purpose, belonging, recognition, or encouragement, offering [...] emotional validation [...] aspirational outlooks [and] accountability to a group.'²⁰ It does this through the same means populism used for millennia: validating entitlement and providing enemies to rally against.²¹ But while offering community, solutions, and purpose at the expense of women and others is deeply problematic, conservative narratives do offer them.^{6,22,23} Meanwhile, the progressive discourse often makes men and boys feel excluded and guilty for even having problems, provides difficult and relative solutions, and promotes pluralism requiring everyone to work out their own purpose. This complexity and freedom might sound exciting to some, but they are overwhelming and confusing to others who might lack the time, financial security, confidence or education to engage with them. Perhaps it is not surprising that commitment to revising gender norms is directly correlated with class and race privilege.^{3,8,13,15}

Furthermore, in absence of adequate self-reflection, the progressive focus on fighting harmful behaviours and ideologies leaves many men feeling attacked or ashamed, leading to defensiveness and susceptibility to voices which may seem reassuring.²⁴ Whether or not these feelings are justified, their effects are tangible: they contribute to resistance and fuel the cultural backlash, including an increasing political divide between men and women.¹⁴

While it is crucial to challenge and dismantle harmful ideologies and their underlying systems, critique alone is insufficient. Without providing alternative, positive narratives that resonate with men's needs for community, meaning and purpose, embedded in supportive systemic changes, we risk leaving a vacuum that will be filled by new iterations of regressive rhetoric. We need affirmative, constructive, and solution-focused narratives which uphold the goals of gender justice while promoting the structural, societal and institutional changes required to build a fair



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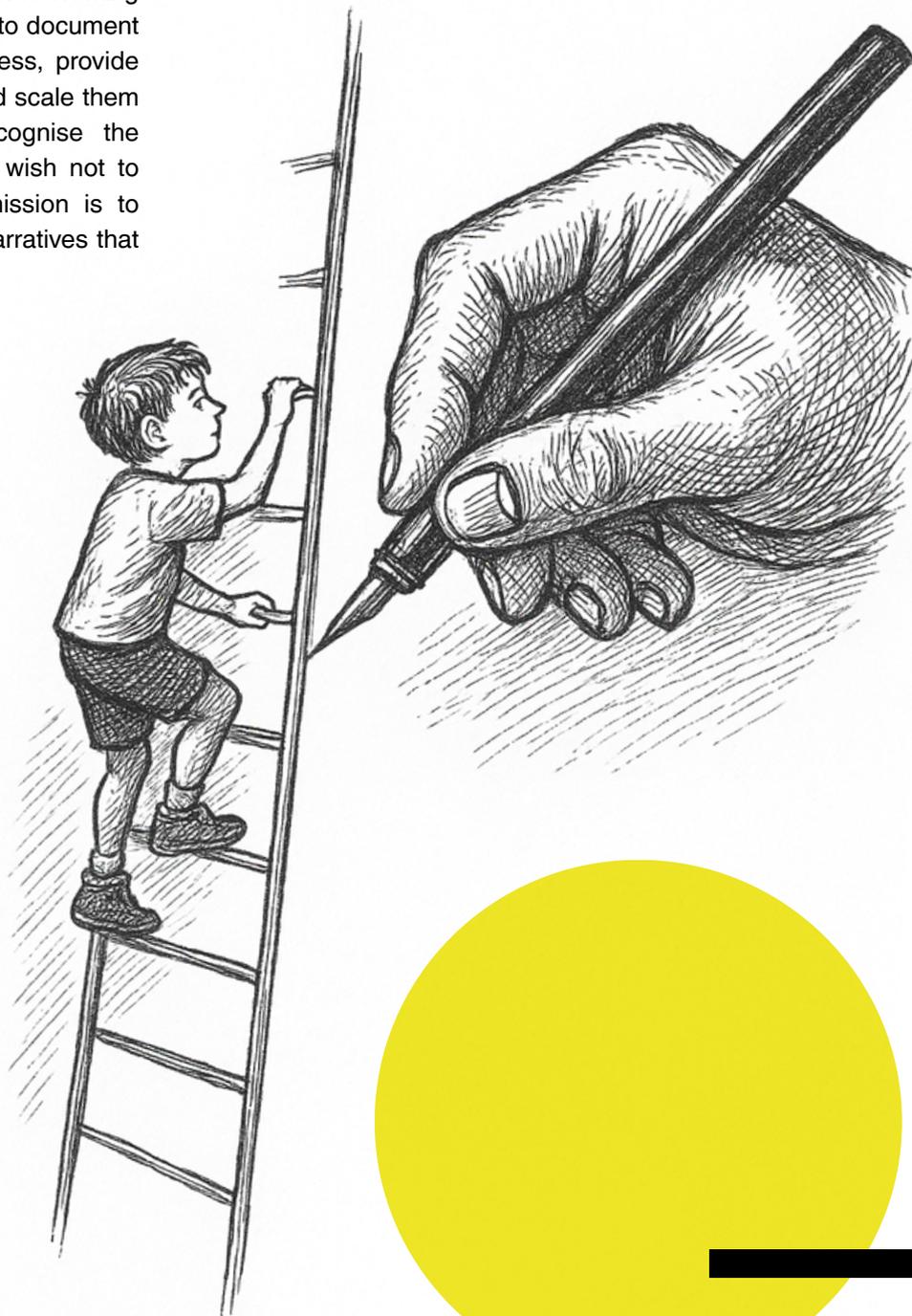
and diverse society - and which also show men and boys that there is a place for them in it, and it's a good place. Such narratives must abandon the zero-sum game approach and instead address legitimate concerns related to jobs, relations, (mental) health, housing, etc., and inspire men to embrace valued roles in creating just societies that benefit everyone. They also need to offer them solutions, community, and purpose – just not ones that oppress women or anybody else.

Elements of this positive narrative approach already exist in various local and national contexts and a narrative shift is spoken about and practiced.^{25,26}

The MenEngage Europe Positive Narratives Working Group coordinated by PathForge aims to document these efforts, evaluate their effectiveness, provide a forum for sharing good practices, and scale them for broader implementation. We recognise the continuing need for critical work and wish not to replace but to supplement it. Our mission is to research, test, and promote positive narratives that inspire men and boys towards positive masculinities – not out of moral duty or under critical pressure, but because they offer pathways to purpose, belonging, health, and personal fulfilment, while also preventing harm and building an equal society.

This report aims to start a conversation on this topic and present preliminary findings, offering organisations and professionals a glimpse into possible strategies and solutions.

Overall, we envisage positive narratives as a ladder which can inspire and empower men and boys as they take steps towards revising gender norms and embracing more positive masculinities. At every step, they aim to sound attractive and relatable to boys and men on that step, and to lead them to the next one. Those already capable of nuanced and critical engagement and motivated to put theory into action, will likely no longer need the ladder and even see it as limiting. But although they no longer need it, they might be best placed to pass it on to others climbing up behind them.



what is a narrative?

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by Klim Sergeev, unsplash

For the purpose of this report, we adopt the Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts developed by FrameWorks, which defines a narrative as a ‘common pattern that both emerges from a set of stories and provides templates for specific stories.’²⁷ The model further specifies that ‘cultural narratives shape how we think about our social world because they cut across and pervade our discourse; they provide common ways of organizing and making meaning across the different contexts in which we communicate with one another through words and images.’

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Here is a familiar example of a gendered narrative:

Protector and Provider

A man works hard and overcomes obstacles, proving himself to be a great protector and provider. This attracts a woman who admires him, and together they build a family in which she takes care of the home and supports him in his pursuits.

Countless books, films, myths, dating guidebooks, celebrity biographies, influencer videos, memes, and real life stories follow this pattern. Each one of them has different characters, a different plot, and differs in many details, but they all communicate the same narrative which shapes our collective beliefs about gender roles and relationships. Following the FrameWorks model, the narrative has:

1. A story world with:

- **characters** – a man and a woman
- **plot** – the man's efforts lead to a reward in the form of a traditional family life
- **setting** – a traditional society

2. The way the story is told:

- represents a **point of view** and serves the interests of a specific group: men (although it aims to obscure this by pretending to take an 'objective view,' which is typical of narratives which serve a dominant social group)
- makes value judgments – protecting and providing is valorised for men, while homemaking and supporting their husbands is valorised for women.

3. The way the story is received:

- **an intended audience** – young people looking for a partner; women
- activation of **cultural and social contexts** – traditional family values; hetero-normativity; gender binarism; nuclear family model; belief in the 'natural' difference between the roles of men and women; women seen as servants, objects, or rewards for men.

Feminist movements have successfully unpacked and challenged this narrative. Criticising it outright is a great way to expose the hidden viewpoint and the interests it serves, to question the values it promotes and the socio-cultural assumptions it perpetuates, and to caution its intended audiences. All this can greatly reduce the sway it holds over our minds and cultures.

Another way to affect cultural change, is to craft, develop and promote counter-narratives which provide a different way of thinking or promote different values. This might be useful at an individual level, convincing particular people to change their minds and adopt new values. On a systemic level, it can lead to a narrative change, where the counter-narrative replaces the previously dominant narrative in the social discourse and becomes dominant itself. Now *it* determines how gender roles are perceived, creating social pressure on institutions to adapt. In our example, the following counter-narrative has been very successful:

Independent Woman

A woman meets a man but refuses to accept the assumed housewife role, instead demonstrating she can protect and provide for herself. They either form an equal partnership, or she leaves him after he fails to become what she considers a good partner, and continues to be happily single.

Although it is often criticised now, this narrative has become very popular in recent decades, successfully impacting how we perceive gender roles and relationship dynamics. It is often told through social media posts, personal stories, blogs, and other media where women can more easily make their voices heard. Note that, apart from having a different plot and making different value judgments, it takes the point of view and interests of women – often white middle-class women - and has mostly women as its intended audience. Stories following this narrative can also represent men as stuck in the past, unsatisfactory as partners, or abusive.

Other narratives might go even further in this direction, for example:

The Incel*

A man repeatedly fails at adapting to women's needs and thus forming a relationship. He develops or deepens his misogynist views and grows increasingly frustrated until he becomes violent and harms women.

Sadly, too often stories following such narratives are based on facts.

But narrative change is not permanent. The present anti-feminist backlash involves attempts at restoring the old narrative, reversing the change, and displacing the feminist narratives with new counter-narratives, such as:

Women's Unreasonable Requirements

A woman meets a man, refuses to take the housewife role or 'bring anything to the table', but at the same time expects him to provide for her and be perfect in every way. She rejects him and many others, and ends up being alone, sad, and bitter.

The Nice Guy

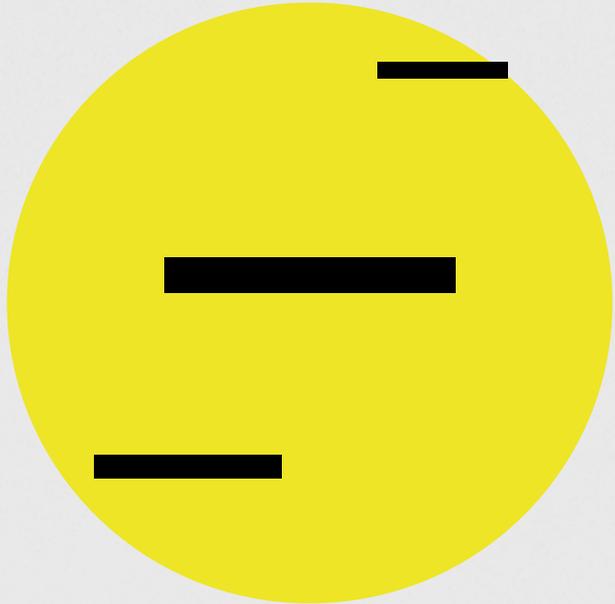
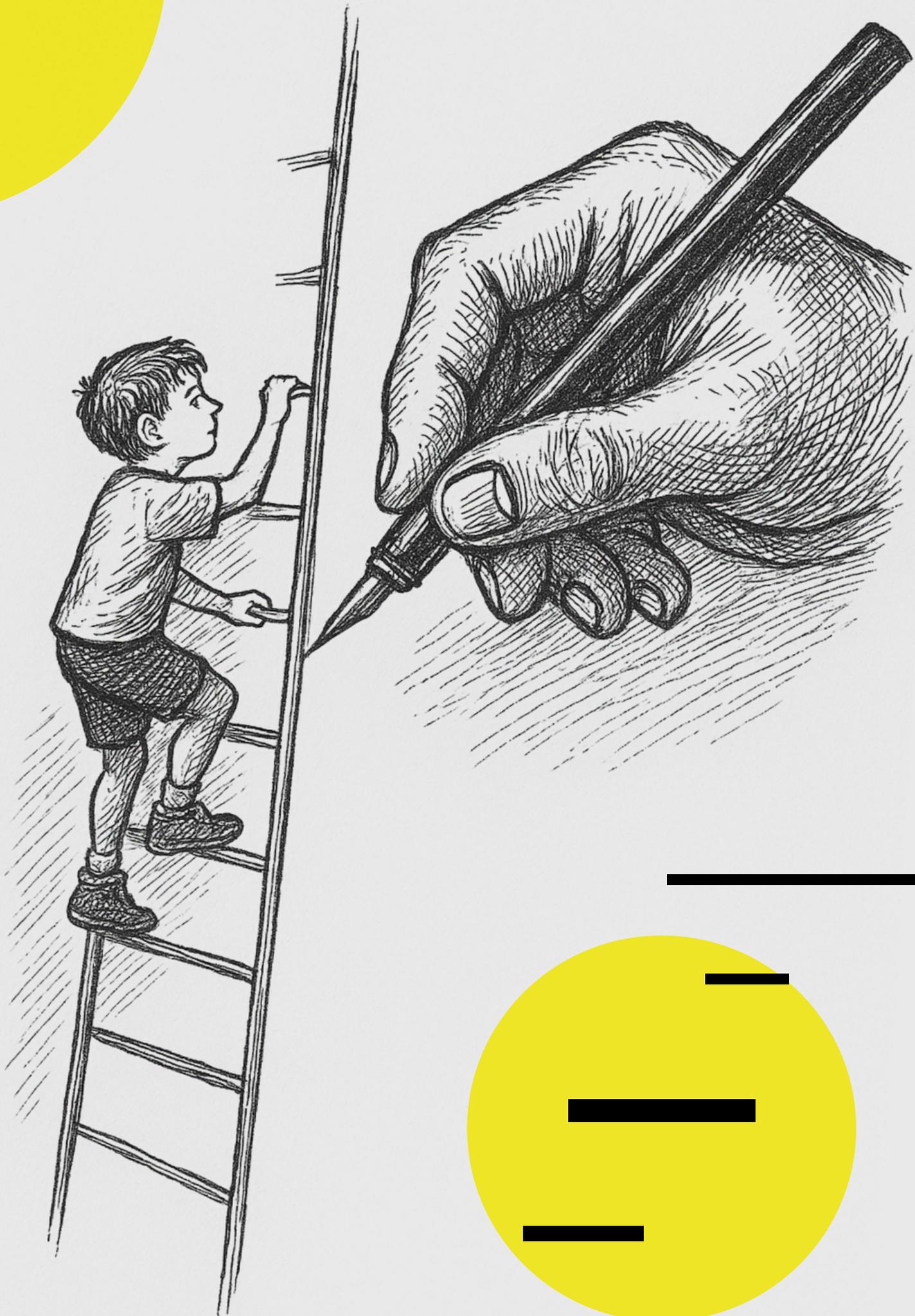
A man tries to match the needs of independent women, but ends up becoming a 'feminised' 'nice guy' who always gets 'friend-zoned' and 'finishes last', finding no love from women and losing the respect of men. He might then learn to be a 'real man' and after doing so become romantically successful.

The Trad Wife

A woman observes other women trying to be 'independent women' and sees this only makes them unhappy. Instead, she finds happiness in a return to a traditional family model often based on traditional religious views.

These have become very popular in the Manosphere and elsewhere online. They have captured the imaginations of many and started to inform how they see gender roles and relationships.

The aim of our method is to consciously enter this process to craft and popularise counter-narratives which communicate progressive values – in a way that is fun, attractive and relevant to boys and men, thus capturing their hearts and minds.



guiding principles

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by [Jordan Madrid](#), unsplash



Using positive narratives isn't just about having the best arguments – it's about using the right strategies to reach the right people in a way that will lead to positive change. In practice, it is less about what we are saying (our narrative's characters, plot, or values) and more about what's in between the lines (the setting, point of view, intended audience, and socio-cultural contexts). Principles 1-3 outline whom we address and what is their path, and principles 4-8 detail how we can inspire them to walk it.

1. Speak to the men in the middle

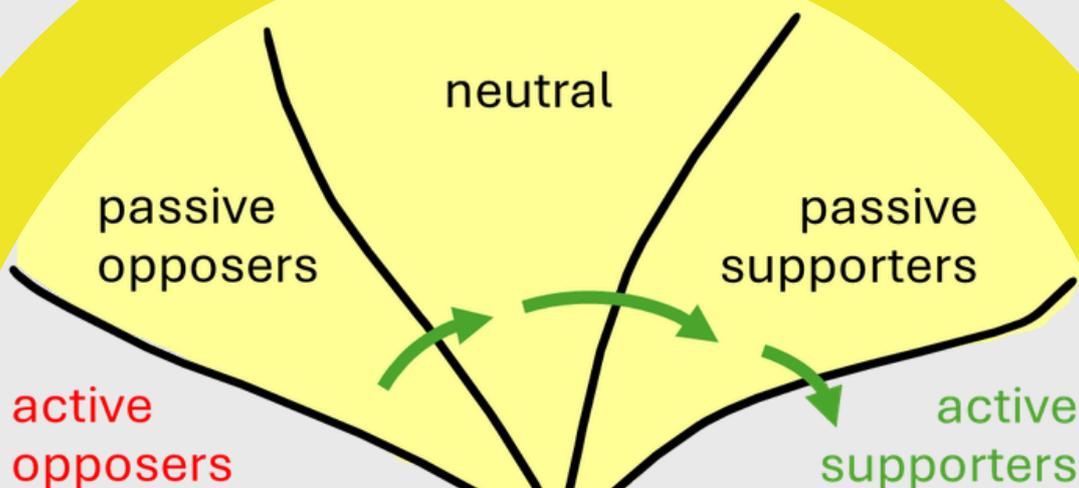
Most men and boys are neither strongly committed to revising traditional masculine norms nor deeply resistant to it. Most fall somewhere in between – unsure, indifferent, or inconsistent in their beliefs, often because they follow their group without reflecting on what those norms are and what impact they have on the lives and wellbeing of others – or themselves.^{3,28-30} Preaching to active supporters doesn't lead to change, and engaging with those who are actively opposed is often a waste of energy. The real opportunity lies with those in the movable middle of the Spectrum of Support – the passive opposers, those who are neutral, and those who support us in theory but not in practice.³⁰⁻³² Those who haven't fully made up their minds or followed through with actions. They should be our intended audience.

Although the men and boys in the middle can – consciously or not – behave in sexist, patriarchal ways, they are not deeply hostile to gender justice. Shaming, blaming and direct attacks might be necessary in fighting against the entrenched misogynists, but will often alienate most men in the middle.³³ We should expect accountability but concentrate on criticising acts, not people.

Narratives such as **The Incel** tend to be seen as implying that men are evil, get egos involved, inspire a defensive 'NotAllMen' reaction, and make those who deliver them seem alien and extreme.³⁴ They can also fan the flames of self-victimisation and aggrieved masculinity which thrive on confrontation and playing devil's advocate.^{18,35} This is often exploited by others, who present themselves as more approachable and caring of men, and pull those in the middle towards them.^{18,20}

This is particularly relevant when addressing young men and boys who are both more open to change (as they are less likely to be strongly committed to any social norms yet), and also more likely to fight those who shame and blame them – often just for fun. Many simply behave as they think they are expected to within their group. Finding ways to address them is a unique opportunity to socialise them in a way that does not follow harmful social norms. As a consequence, addressing parents in a similar way is also vital – especially since many have very limited understanding of their children's online and even offline lives, particularly at teenage level.^{18,20,36,37}

Our narratives should assume that most men and boys are unaware or misguided but not intrinsically evil. Hence, we need to avoid lumping them together with committed misogynists, and instead approach them as a potential part of the solution, focusing on encouraging them rather than fighting against them.



2. Meet men where they are

Our narratives should take a **point of view** that is relatable to their intended audience, and work in **settings** and **socio-cultural contexts** familiar and acceptable to them. This is particularly relevant to young men and boys, who often actively wish that their parents, teachers and other adults would better understand them – especially when it comes to their online lives.^{18,36,37}

Most men and boys do not view themselves as gendered beings.³⁸ If they are conscious of their masculinity, they are rarely critical of it, ready to think in terms of ‘masculinities,’ or to move beyond them.²⁹ They haven’t reached those steps of the ladder yet. Explicitly talking about ‘masculinities’ or gender theory activates socio-cultural settings which likely seem foreign and irrelevant to them. Many feel alienated or attacked by the critical discourse around gender and thus using words such as ‘patriarchy’, ‘toxic masculinity’ or ‘feminism,’ is likely to trigger avoidant or defensive responses. Moreover, progressive intellectualism strikes many men as contrived or inauthentic – and they value authenticity.¹⁸ Whether their point of view is right or not, meeting them where they are means using a language they can be receptive to.

In terms of complexity, most humans have not studied gender theory and may or may not have the skill or the time to engage with it in any great detail. They might have the capacity to grasp it in principle, but our narratives should adjust to their current ability. This will often mean keeping things simple and assuming no background knowledge. While this can involve losing some nuance at the start, this nuance can be regained at the higher steps of the ladder.

In terms of space, most men and boys are not found at gender theory workshops, feminist rallies, or academic conferences. Instead, they are on YouTube, Tiktok, Instagram, X, or Discord, at family dinners, school, work, or playing sports and games. Effective narratives should invoke and be designed to function in those offline and online settings – using their language, aesthetic, and contexts.

Finally, we must avoid the traps of gender essentialism*. Men and boys are all different and not all in the same space, and thus they won’t all be convinced by the same narratives.^{15,39} Certainly not by those which appeal to researchers and activists who are mostly middle-class, well educated, financially secure, socially progressive, and psychologically open to novelty. We must engage men with different identities, at different levels of understanding and commitment, unpacking ‘not only the gendered but also classed-ed and racialised dimensions of their experiences’¹⁶ and using different strategies for different audiences.

Regressive narratives such as **The Nice Guy** are great at all this: they spread online and in locker rooms, speak in very simple terms to those who feel alienated, left out and lonely, and have variations attractive to different demographics. Our narratives should do the same – just carry a better message.

3. Focus on the next step

Naturally, it’s not enough to recognise where men and boys are. We want to inspire them to adopt new values – move away from masculinities rooted in dominance and oppression, and towards co-creating and thriving in a world of fairness and equality. But ladders have steps for a reason: it’s hard to jump from bottom to top in one big leap. Ideological leaps are no easier. When presented with new ideas, most people see them in the context of what they and their social group already believe, or what psychologists call their ‘cognitive anchors’.³⁶ Anything that seems too far removed is likely to inspire disbelief and defensiveness.^{41–43} In practice, people are most likely to accept new beliefs when they are challenged within the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ – just beyond their (or their social group’s) current level of understanding but not so far beyond it that the task feels impossible or alienating.^{34,42,44}

The Men in the Middle are at various steps of their journey and only few have the top of the ladder within reach. Our narratives should guide the rest through consecutive progressive shifts in thinking and offer ongoing opportunities for reflection, engagement, and action – each step reinforcing the next. By respecting the natural process of change and self-questioning, we make deeper, more sustainable progress. The remaining principles expand on how to guide this progress.

4. Use sticks less

For the male audience, narratives such as **The Incel** or **Independent Woman** are sticks. They say: ‘don’t be like that, this is wrong’ and: ‘you need to change or no one will want you.’ But attempting to entice men and boys to accept progressive ideas or gender-transformative perspectives through moralizing, guilt, or intellectual superiority, is likely to backfire and lead to backlash and resistance.⁴⁵

Moral arguments are commonly used as sticks. Men should be motivated to dismantle patriarchy and give up traditional privileges simply because it is morally right. But we all should follow moral imperatives even if doing so is hard, costly and inconvenient – yet this is not how (most) real humans are. Most of us regularly fall short of this ideal. We are often motivated by selfish reasons, prioritise our in-group, and rationalise our failings. We sometimes wiggle out of our duties, go on holiday for money which could save lives, buy clothes made in sweatshops, and watch TV instead of volunteering for charity. When our pursuit of happiness, beauty, or knowledge conflicts with what’s morally right, we don’t always choose the latter. This tendency has no gender, sex, race, or class. Most humans aim not for moral sainthood but a moral middle, and push back against those whom they perceive as sanctimonious and moralising.^{46,47} And men are humans.

Another stick is social exclusion. Men who don’t heed the progressive calls for change will be cancelled, single, and unloved. Ostracism can inspire change, particularly when those excluded have nowhere else to go. But when they do have somewhere else to go, studies find that ostracized individuals can become more receptive to extreme groups which validate them.⁴⁸ This applies to humans of all sexes and genders, but modern men and boys in particular do have somewhere to go: the Manosphere. The same stick which tells them: ‘we won’t accept you until you change’, drives them towards narratives such as **Women’s Unreasonable Requirements** and those who say: ‘we will accept you just the way you are.’^{45,49}

Our narratives cannot be based solely on moral arguments and the threat of social exclusion. Naturally, it is vital that to recognise, acknowledge and punish what is morally wrong: discrimination, harm and abuse, in both their individual and systemic forms. It is also important that victims of such discrimination, harm and abuse, whether women, men or anybody, can speak their minds, seek justice, and draw public attention to their suffering and the systems which cause and perpetuate it. Changing those systems and educating men and boys, needs to go hand in hand with protecting and supporting those who suffer from the harm they cause.

But the public discourse needs little encouragement to focus on moralising, blame and exclusion. It is offering positive reinforcement that lags far behind and needs more deliberate work.

5. Use more carrots

Already behavioural psychologists realised that carrots are better at shaping behaviour than sticks.⁵⁰ Modern behaviour modification studies consistently find that ‘positive reinforcement works exceedingly better and faster than punishment’⁵¹ and change is best inspired by gentle, well-designed cues and nudges rather than direct commands or coercion.^{52,53} Meanwhile, educational psychology has found consistent evidence that positive reinforcement and guiding people toward new ideas – rather than forcing knowledge upon them – leads to deeper learning, acceptance, and lasting change.^{44,54,55} Models such as The Good Behaviour Game or Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports successfully apply these findings in education and social work.^{56,57}

Positive narratives should function as carrots. They should make men and boys think: ‘Wow, it would be awesome to do that!’, not: ‘Damn, it would be wrong to not do that...’

On the individual level, they should tie what’s right with what’s seen as personally beneficial, cool, prestigious, fun, status-enhancing, and/or fulfilling. On the systemic level, they should present creating a world of equality as an act of collectivism and solidarity, a source of community and liberation for everyone, including men and boys. They should highlight the rewards of revising old gender norms and showcase the benefits of adopting equitable models of masculinity – for me, for you, for us, for democracy, for the planet, and for the future generations.

The following principles explain what can constitute good carrots in the context of narratives.

6. Engage Emotionally

Reading the above points is likely to leave one frustrated: 'But it is true that men are wrong and must change! Why should we coddle them?'

Facts and arguments are important, but emotions, identity, and social dynamics play a much bigger role in shaping human beliefs.⁵¹ Nobody wants to feel stupid, excluded, or attacked, and people will resist the most logical arguments if they come packaged in guilt, shame and blame. Ridiculing those who are trying to improve, discourages them and others following their lead – but simple verbal praise is a powerful tool inspiring intrinsic motivation.⁵⁸ As we push against the regressive 'stoic invulnerability' norm, let's acknowledge that men and boys do, indeed, have feelings, those feelings can be hurt, and this can impact their capacity to listen and engage.

This is why we should use narratives, not just arguments: narratives appeal to emotions.^{25,26} They can make the right things feel good. Make men proud of being present fathers and respectful partners, good friends, co-workers, and neighbours; focus on the inspiring, rewarding and exciting aspects of building fair systems; link social change and just institutions with hope for a happier, healthier life, and a better tomorrow. Meanwhile, directly arguing against misogyny, whilst often necessary, might be less effective than making it feel embarrassing and socially unacceptable.

Social feelings are particularly important here. Conservative influencers succeed largely because they promise community, acceptance, and status.²⁰ We should offer a more attractive alternative. Our narratives should openly celebrate men who try to improve and create welcoming spaces for those who are not fully perfect but trying. They should show men and boys healthy paths to acceptance, recognition and respect, make them feel encouraged rather than judged, and present being 'one of us' as achievable and desirable. We need to build a system that makes men and boys feel great about equality – and that system is us.

7. Inspire, don't lecture

Most humans are much more likely to listen to a story that is fun and sounds awesome, over one they find tedious and boring. It is irrelevant which one is more true or morally good if the audience has fallen asleep. Countless educational films, games, and stories flop because they just aren't fun to engage with.⁵⁹ What inspires people to be open to new ideas, is when they are wrapped in a sense of joy, autonomy, and curiosity.⁵⁵ This is a big part of why education experts suggest we move away from 'teaching' and towards 'scaffolding learning:' providing just enough support to help learners progress and figure things out themselves. This approach is particularly effective when it comes to grasping 'threshold concepts' such as 'privilege' or 'gender norms' and their impact on others.^{55,60-62}

Importantly, what is fun and inspiring to some people, might not be to others. Narratives such as **Independent Woman** might be inspiring to many women and girls, but not to an average teenage boy. Our narratives should aim to be inspiring to the different groups of men and boys in the middle, capturing what *they* find fun and relatable. We can use humour and lived experience to present new perspectives in ways they find engaging and compelling. The less our narratives feel like boring lectures to just accept as truth, the more they are like exciting adventures which invite to discover, the more attention they will grab and the bigger impact they will have.

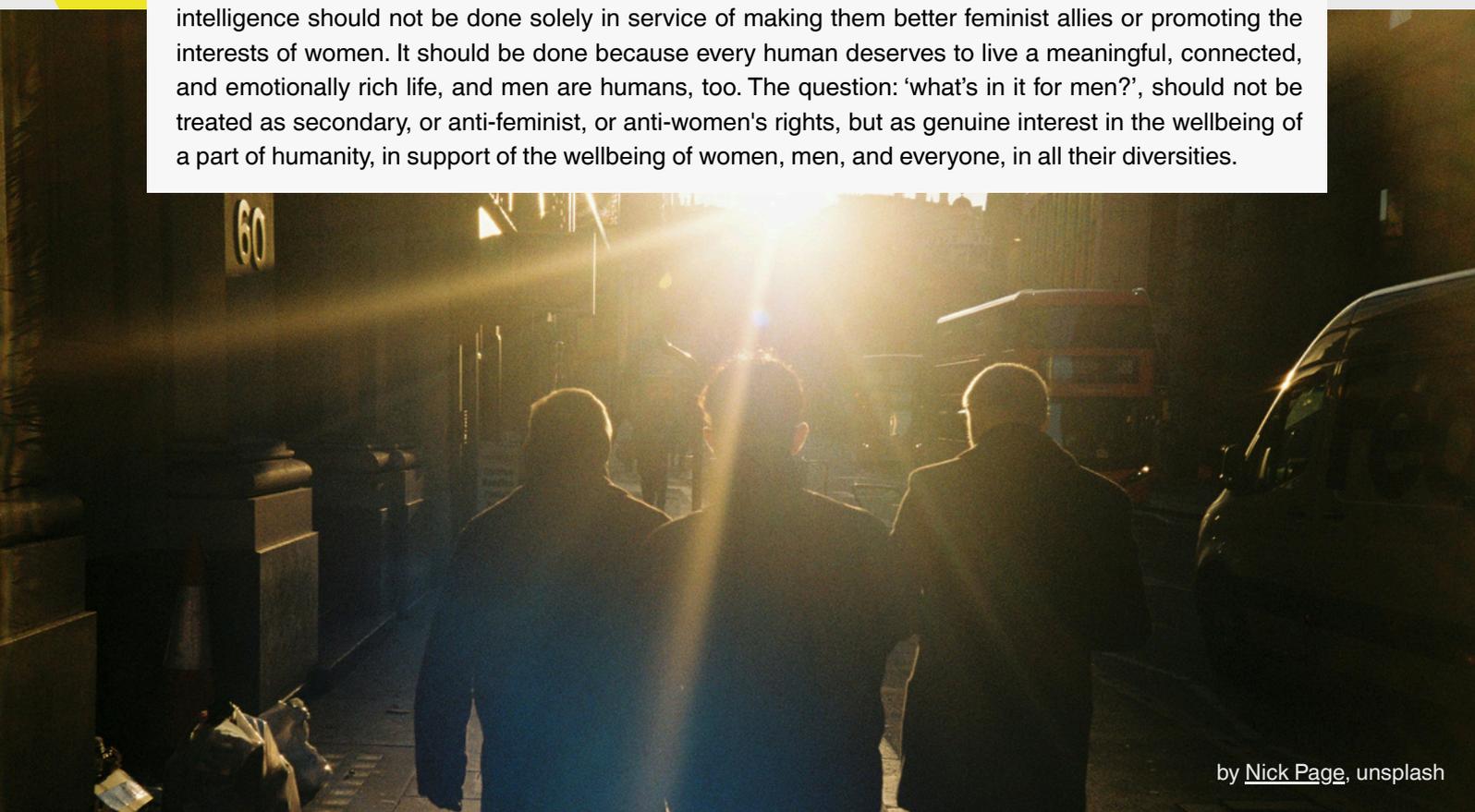
8. Address Men's Problems

Men and boys have legitimate problems and questions. Many genuinely struggle to find their place in a changing world. The worldwide drive to improve women and girls' education, confidence and equal opportunities for jobs and leadership positions, has made remarkable progress. While there is still a lot of work to be done in support of women, many men got stuck and stagnant as their privileged economic and social position wanes and traditional roles such as protector/provider lost in value.^{63,64} While some of it boils down to lost privileges, most has to do with the changing political, economic, social and technological landscape. Traditional male jobs are automated, community roles rendered obsolete, and courtship rituals digitalised for profit. Social media, pornography, and games offer easy distractions which replace off-line human connections and dissolve motivation to achieve. Convenience culture removes life's hurdles – and a sense of purpose with them. While changes affect everyone, combined with masculine gender norms which effectively prevent flexibility and connection, they leave many men really struggling with 'employment, health, sense of purpose, educational aspirations, mental and emotional well-being, loneliness, and relationship challenges.'^{3,65} This is the **setting** and **socio-cultural context** of our narratives.

From a narrative perspective, this is great news. Problems to solve and obstacles to overcome are what moves the plot forward and makes stories engaging.⁶⁶ Acknowledging them and promising solutions, is a fantastic carrot. This is why the Manosphere and narratives such as **The Nice Guy** are so successful. Failing to acknowledge them makes it all too easy to point and say: 'they do not care about you, we do.'

We should listen to and recognise boys and men's problems and offer paths towards solutions, with the genuine aim to support them at forging better and happier lives and co-creating systems in which they – and everyone – can thrive. Naturally, such solutions must be consistent with promoting progressive values and gender justice. But there is no tension here, as studies show that men and boys genuinely benefit from equality, experiencing greater well-being, having better education and salaries, and enjoying more relationship and sexual satisfaction.⁶⁷⁻⁶⁹ If our solutions are better than the ones offered by the Manosphere, more men will prefer them.

Our narratives must not treat such solutions instrumentally, as a mere means to promote the interests of other groups. Helping men and boys find their purpose, build genuine connections, or develop emotional intelligence should not be done solely in service of making them better feminist allies or promoting the interests of women. It should be done because every human deserves to live a meaningful, connected, and emotionally rich life, and men are humans, too. The question: 'what's in it for men?', should not be treated as secondary, or anti-feminist, or anti-women's rights, but as genuine interest in the wellbeing of a part of humanity, in support of the wellbeing of women, men, and everyone, in all their diversities.



Summary: A pragmatic approach

Promoting gender justice through positive narratives is a pragmatic venture. The aim is not to be entirely correct, preserve ideological purity, follow rigid moral principles, or demand instant perfection. The aim is not to have nuanced and in-depth discussions with those who already climbed the ladder, understand the concepts we use and are open and motivated to change. The aim is to pass the ladder to the men and boys who are not there yet, and do what works to inspire as many of them as possible to adopt as many values associated with positive, inclusive and equitable masculinities as possible, as quickly as possible.

'As possible' does not mean 'at any cost.' Pragmatism is not Machiavellianism and positive narratives should avoid manipulation, deception, or coercion. They should instead have men and boys' genuine best interest at heart and simply promote the ways to achieve it which are ethical and foster gender justice.

Neither does 'as possible' mean 'not trying hard enough'. The best way to avoid alienating men and boys is to demand no change at all, but that is not the point. Positive narratives must be effective at getting them on board and should be evaluated against the effectiveness of other methods – but not against the ideal of achieving perfect gender justice yesterday.

'As possible' means acknowledging that the world is not ideal, social change does not happen overnight, and people do not always act based on moral principles or rational arguments. 'As possible' recognises that demanding perfection or immediate change tends to have the opposite effect to the intended, leading to alienation or resistance. 'As possible' accepts that individual progress can't happen in a vacuum but requires systemic changes as well as changes in the social contexts and setting in which men and boys live: partner, peer group, friends, parents, larger family, religious groupings, work place culture, etc. 'As possible' acknowledges that even though *we* may no longer need the ladder and *we* see how imperfect it is, it might still assist *others* to move up – and be discarded once *they* no longer need it.

'As possible' – and all of the above principles – aim to prevent the ideal from being the enemy of the good.

Cultural sensitivity

Not every narrative will make sense or be convincing everywhere across the world. Religious, economic, historic and cultural differences will impact what kinds of messages boys and men find appealing, what problems they struggle with, what solutions are needed, and whom they are ready to listen to.

In this preliminary report, we propose some narratives which we think can be broadly relevant in the context MenEngage Europe operates in: Europe. Even here, there is a great and growing diversity to be mindful of. In the future and with the help of member organisations, we will seek to offer culturally contextualised versions. Over time, we would like to broaden the scope and invite members of the worldwide community to lend their local expertise and help us collectively present an even broader picture of what works in different contexts and why.



limitations and accountability

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Positive narratives are a tool. A ladder. They are not a magic cure, and they can be applied in ways that cause more harm than good.

Ensuring that they are used for good and to their full potential is a careful balancing act. It is important to be aware of possible pitfalls, be self-critical and open to improvement. Following the MenEngage accountability guidelines is an excellent way to do this.⁷⁰ It will also be important to seek the views and potential support of other organisations working for gender justice.



don't make it a competition

Positive narratives are not meant to replace existing methods for working with men and boys, nor are they meant to imply that the more critical work is not valuable. They are to be used in addition to these other methods, in contexts in which they are useful.

stick to areas of application

One area in which other methods are better, is fighting against overt misogyny and active opposition. The role of positive narratives is not to defeat the enemy, but to lead the undecided and the inactive towards embracing more equitable masculinities and to prevent them from becoming radicalised themselves. Applying this method in discussions with active opposition is likely to backfire or at least be a waste of time and resources.

include youth voices

The speed of technological and cultural development creates a generational gap which might be hard to bridge.^{36,37} Adults who work on narrative change might have limited understanding of the realities boys and young men live in today, and thus produce narratives which might seem stale and unconvincing to them. Including youth voices in developing narratives aimed at younger audiences will be important to ensure their relevance, stylistic attractiveness, and use of appropriate media for spreading.

avoid focusing excessively on individuals

While positive narratives will often be used in work with individuals, they should aim to promote social and systemic changes aimed at dismantling oppressive gender norms and power structures, and replacing them with ones which are equitable, caring and pro-social.⁷¹ Engaging men and boys might require appealing to their own longer term self-interest or focusing on their personal experiences and the roles they play, but it should also highlight the relational character of their personal experience and ultimately promote the creation of and participation in better systems.

avoid oversimplifying

It might not be easy for those using positive narratives to strike a balance between keeping things simple enough for those who have limited skill or time to understand the finer nuances of gender theory, yet complex enough to avoid 'dumbing down' and inspire actual learning. Gaining proficiency in simplifying things to just the right point is vital. Often, it might be less about being easy and more about being relatable. Referring to men and boys' lived realities, openly asking what makes them happy, what concerns them, and the questions they already have, can trigger very honest discussions and be particularly efficient at shaping a message they are ready for.

avoid slowing down progress

Likewise, there is a fine balance between moving slow enough to avoid jumping too far beyond the current level of understanding and triggering defensiveness, yet fast enough to guide change within a reasonable timeframe. It might be easy to keep things comfortable while not actually moving anywhere.³⁹ Using positive narratives requires some proficiency in finding the right balance and adjusting it to a given audience.

avoid patronising

There is a danger of using positive narratives as a way for 'elite' men to help 'problematic' men to 'evolve.' Instead, one should aim to facilitate men and boys' own growth, making them aware of the gender norms they are subject to, empowering them to change them, and encouraging them to connect with their own healthy masculinities. This will likely include the questioning of the (social) privileges (upbringing, opportunities, class, etc.) of the facilitators.

don't hold on to the ladder

Positive narratives are meant to support those who have not had the opportunity or need for thinking about gender norms, who have not embraced more equitable and healthy masculinities or even knew they existed, as well as those who might have done some thinking but are reluctant to or feel they are socially unable to turn it into action. The further these men and boys are on their journey for positive change, the less they need the ladder. In time, the ladder might become limiting, potentially even preventing deeper, individual and moral thinking. At that point, there are better tools to inspire growth and positive narratives should be set aside.

stay accountable

Using the positive narratives method and especially developing and using new narratives, should be done in an accountable way. The MenEngage Alliance Accountability Standards offer practical guidance to doing so.⁷⁰ Thus, using positive narratives should mean working in tandem with feminist, women's rights, queer rights, LGBTQ+ rights, social, environmental and economic justice and progressive youth organisations, ensuring our work is intersectional and supports human rights for all. We should stay receptive to and actively seek out constructive criticism, and be ready to change course in light of evidence that this might better serve the aim of promoting gender justice.

Doing so can prevent us from falling into any of the above mentioned pitfalls, inspire a high standard and efficiency as well as effectiveness of our work, and keep it in synergy with the work done by others. Moreover, it can ensure that our narratives are effective at promoting positive masculinities but also avoid implicitly promoting ideas harmful to members of marginalised communities, jeopardising progress done elsewhere, or even unwittingly reinforcing harmful gender norms or power structures.

Positive narratives should:

- Address an issue that men and boys already recognise as a problem they struggle with or as an opportunity to excel.
- Present guidance which is consistent with and promotes equality and justice.
- Formulate guidance in terms of what to do, rather than what not to do.
- Communicate in a simple way that is accessible to broad audiences and appropriate for the communication channels which those audiences already use.
- Highlight personal gains and collective benefits of following the guidance, with a focus on emotional and social aspects.
- Treat helping men as an end in itself, not as means to other ends.
- Approach men as part of the solution, as naturally preferring to promote equality and justice, even if they are sometimes misguided or engaged in wrongful actions.
- Avoid urging men to change or accept a perceived loss for moral reasons alone.
- Avoid using partisan rhetoric or trigger words which can lead to defensiveness.
- Adjust the details to account for cultural, educational, economic, age, and other differences between audiences.
- Relate issues addressed at personal level to the need for social and systemic change.

narrative ideas

by Ari He, unsplash



The following pages present three examples of positive narratives. Each is accompanied by a detailed description and aligned with our guiding principles. We show where they fit on the 'ladder' by defining their target audiences, their intended impact, and what next steps to take once their aims are met. In line with FrameWorks recommendations, we demonstrate their applicability through sample stories spanning diverse media and intervention types.²⁷ While these examples are currently illustrative, we invite readers to contribute real-world case studies for future editions. Finally, we contrast each positive narrative with the negative alternatives commonly found in public discourse.

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join the masculinity revolution!

A man tries his best to embody traditional masculinity, but keeps failing in his personal and professional life. He feels confused by conflicting messages, feels trapped and unable to do anything right. Some event inspires him to rebel. In a series of adventures, he challenges the traditional and oppressive social norms which frustrated him, fights against the system which creates them, learns who he really is, meets people who went through this journey, and together they build something new and more progressive that works for them and everyone around them.

The key to this narrative is to present revising masculine norms not as a moral imperative or hard work, but as an exciting adventure. The question of whether it is right is secondary; the primary focus is on making it fun, cool, and awesome. The 'crisis of masculinity'* is not something to dwell on and lament – it's an invitation to rebel.

The story arc is a journey of self-discovery and social revolution: from crisis – feeling miserable in a system that tells the character to be something that doesn't feel right or fulfilling – through revolution – adventures in which he challenges the system, discovers what does work for him, and finds a community – to a better tomorrow – feeling amazing after working it out, creating connections and working towards a new, better system. The revolution thus happens on both personal and systemic levels, as the character realises that personal success will not last unless the systems, institutions, social context and norms which kept him trapped in the first place are changed.

The setting of the narrative could underline the historical and systemic approach. The masculine norms the character is trapped in are a result of our ancestors' attempts to fight against even older norms they felt trapped in. Their biggest struggles were to ensure basic safety and eradicate poverty, and they have made massive gains – at least a very large part of humanity no longer lives in a world of constant danger and scarcity. But the world they created comes with new challenges which call for new ways of overcoming them: accumulation of power by massive corporations and shareholders'

might, mental health epidemic, economic shifts induced by AI, climate crisis, and many others. As the character rebels against those, he must step into new roles with courage, not fear, and embrace the kind of masculinity that enables change. He is not a relic of the past reluctantly changing under pressure – he is a pioneer of the future eager to build a better tomorrow. He doesn't reject masculinity – he improves it. He keeps the best of what came before – strength, courage, leadership – and pairs it with what the world now needs: emotional intelligence, compassion, and collaboration. It's not about fitting a mould or pleasing anyone. It's about thriving in this new age with authenticity and purpose, building happier and more fulfilling lives for everyone.

This approach can help counter backlash narratives which create false dichotomies that blame feminism and 'woke culture' for men feeling 'left behind'.^{16,72} Many men genuinely struggle, economically or otherwise, and are susceptible to voices which give them scapegoats to focus their anger on. This narrative can help redirect their anger towards the real culprits: corporate greed, neoliberal economics, and exploitative power structures.

We should further ensure that we don't present this path as only available to boys and men. All humans are perfectly capable of rising up to those challenges and the character can do so arm in arm with women and everybody else. Instead of fighting against each other, we can be allies and build a better world shaped not by scarcity, fear, and dominance, but by connection, purpose, and fairness, and respect for all living beings and environments.

1. **Targets the Men in the Middle.** Most boys and men are fatigued by the crisis rhetoric and being told to change because something is wrong with them. A revolution frames change as something exciting and purposeful.
2. **Meets Men Where They Are.** The themes of legacy, pride, and progress are emotionally and culturally salient to many men and offer them a way to feel needed.
3. **Focuses on the next step.** The character focuses on creating better masculinities and systems which promote them, not yet on discarding gender as social construct altogether.
4. **Uses no sticks.** The change is not a duty or moral imperative, it's an adventure.
5. **Uses carrots.** Joining the revolution brings confidence, respect, relationships, and a sense of purpose.
6. **Engages Emotionally.** Hope, pride, legacy, courage are core emotions. Paint change as fun and brave, not humiliating. Social feelings are engaged with an appeal to the sense of identity, belonging and the deeply human desire to be part of something bigger.
7. **Inspires, Doesn't Lecture.** This call to adventure invites boys and men to be brave in a world that often makes them feel expendable or attacked. It evokes emotion and agency rather than compliance.
8. **Addresses Men's Problems.** Men lack purpose. The revolution rhetoric energises and offers a challenge, a generational task – something to rise to, not escape from.

Intended audience: Men and boys who are conscious or even critical of their gender and gendered behaviour, but unlikely to see it as a conscious social construct to maintain power. Likely to feel they don't fit in. Likely confused by all the conflicting cultural messages and exasperated with the 'crisis of masculinity' narratives. Not ready to discard the concept of masculinity altogether.

Aims: To inspire understanding of gender as a social construct which can be changed; to present different masculinities as personally achievable possibilities.

Next steps: This narrative opens up opportunities for introducing the concept of gender as a social construct which traps not only men but everyone, and that men should work in solidarity to free them as well. It can show that gender constructs are something we can question, change, or abandon altogether.



30 example story ideas

Course advertisement

Are you feeling stuck in a spiral of stress, anxiety and burnout? Do you feel pushed into a box you don't want to be in? Trapped without an exit? Enough! Join the men who are seeking another way, discover how to break out of the system and build the life you want – and a world that can support it.

University student's union email: What's a Fraternity? You decide!

Hi [First Name],

Many students worry about joining a fraternity, team, or society, because they heard that it can get pretty rough: hazing, humiliation, 'traditions' that get pretty extreme. But if that's you, you are forgetting that now it is your turn to make the rules. Flip the script and do it your way! You didn't come here just to fit in – you can build something. How? Join our *Intro to Fraternities* workshop!

Who's invited? Freshers, members who want to modernise their group, and anyone curious. No lectures – just practical tools, real talk, and a bit of fun.

Bring: One tradition you want to keep, one you'd change, and one idea to try.

See you there,
Your Student's Union

Film

Steve works in a corporation with a culture of hegemonic masculinity. His boss is horrible, his colleagues burnt out, he is constantly stressed and wrecks his personal life by acting out at home. His childhood friend, a travelling street artist, tells him to quit, but he feels he can't and he needs to conform. Tension rises until Steve snaps, publicly tells his boss what he thinks, and quits. He joins his friend's tour and they have great adventures with a common theme: Steve instinctively behaves in the dominant way he knows, but learns that it doesn't work and meets men who embody a more caring masculinity. Meanwhile, the corporation is starting to fail as others quit, quoting Steve's leaving tirade as their motto. Steve invites them and his new friends to build a new, competing business, but with a company culture where men are caring and supportive of each other and women are respected and treated as equal. In the end, his company outperforms the old one, and Steve manages to mend things with his family who see how much he has changed.

bad alternatives

Masculinity Is Broken. Men are in crisis because masculinity itself is inherently flawed. The sooner men give up their outdated identity, the better. There's no place for traditional masculinity in a just society.

Men see the path this narrative offers as requiring them to abandon their identity. It triggers shame, defensiveness, and resistance instead of growth.

Men Just Can't Keep Up. While women have evolved and adapted to the modern world, men are stuck in the past. Men feel confused and left behind because they can't keep up and instead cling to outdated roles.

This narrative humiliates rather than motivates. It frames men as losers in the gender game, which breeds resentment and aligns with regressive talking points.

Men Just Don't Want To Give Up Privilege. The 'crisis' is just men selfishly refusing to admit that for centuries they have been oppressors and accept that women and others deserve equality.

This polarising approach focuses solely on one aspect of the problem and doesn't acknowledge that most men genuinely struggle. It makes it easy for regressive voices to gain attention by stoking the resentment growing from feeling misunderstood and vilified.

aim for the golden middle

A man is worried about being not enough of a man. Trying to prove his manliness, he ends up hypermasculine in ways which are harmful to himself and others. People turn away from him and he does not get what he wants. Eventually, he finds the courage to reflect and see that being too much is as bad as being not enough, and to pursue the ‘middle path’ of embodying just the right amount of traditional and new positive masculine traits. Doing so wins him appreciation of others and success and happiness in life.

Most men worry about ‘under-doing’ masculinity – being ‘not man enough.’ This narrative presents the other extreme – hypermasculinity – as a case of ‘over-doing’ it which is just as bad or worse. Healthy traits such as emotional control, self-reliance, or leadership skills, become harmful when taken up to unhealthy levels, turning into emotional suppression, isolation, or aggressive dominance. But instead of criticising them as ‘toxic,’ which runs the danger of presenting masculinity as essentially bad and alienating men and boys, this narrative frames them as a case of ‘overdoing’ something that, when in the right balance, is good.

Different stories based on this narrative can focus on different aspects: being strong yet vulnerable, independent yet connected, forceful for change but not violent or overpowering, emotionally intelligent but not stunted or overwhelmed. They should present balance as personally fulfilling – leading to better mental and physical health, relationships, and life satisfaction – but also socially valuable, as it enables men to contribute constructively to their families and communities. They should also present these attributes as accessible to anyone, not just men. Wherever possible, they could show how systems and institutions built on such an approach benefit communities.

Framing masculinity in this way encourages men and boys to see personal growth not as giving up their identity, but as cultivating the best version of it.

It is an invitation to calibrate rather than a condemnation or rejection. It reduces defensiveness by portraying problematic behaviours as misdirected attempts at something good – too much of a good thing – rather than evidence of inherent flaws. At the same time, it invites empathy and systemic reflection by asking why some men feel the need to overdo certain traits and how society might support them in finding balance.

The narrative might be particularly useful when aimed at the many men who seek self-improvement content online, as such content often assumes a veneer of ancient philosophy. This presents practitioners with an interest in philosophy with powerful opportunities to meet men where they are by tracing this narrative back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle who argued that aiming for the golden middle is a path of virtue leading to a flourishing life, or linking it with Confucius and Buddha who praised temperance and moderation as central to human happiness and fulfilment.

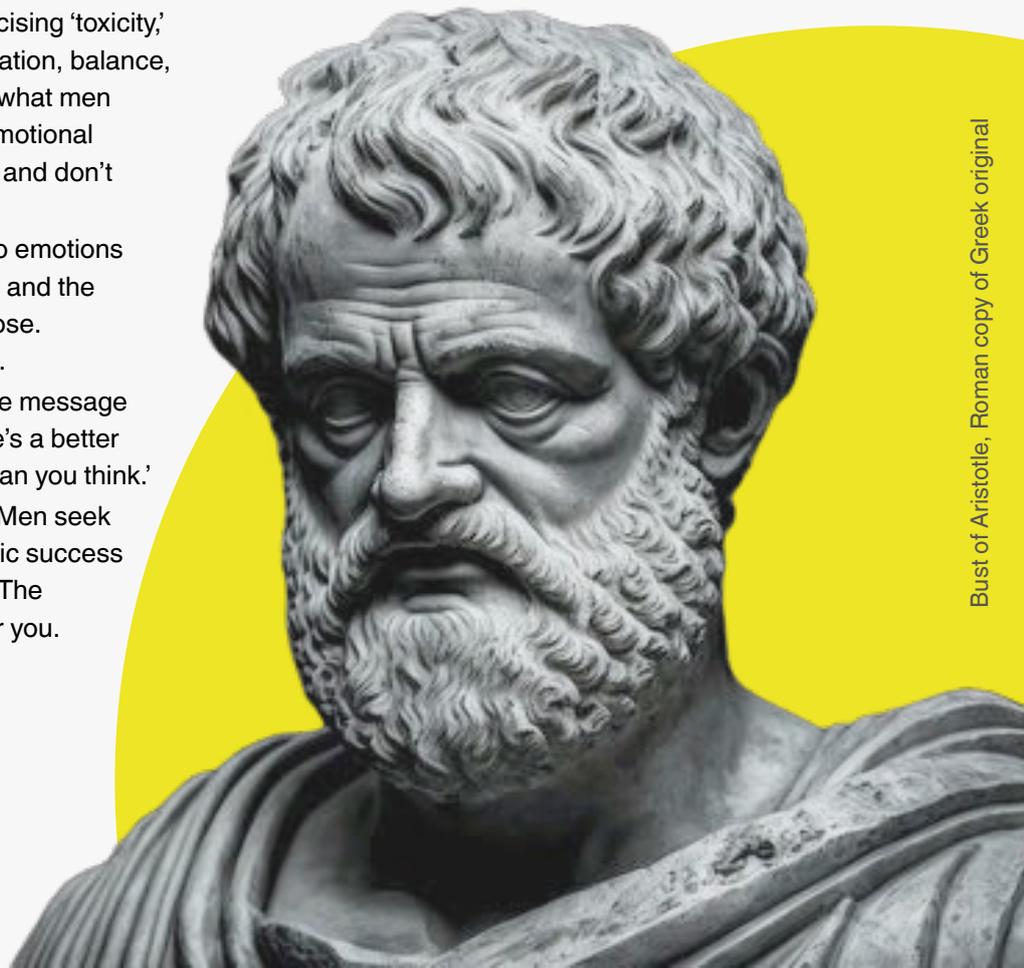
Furthermore, many men follow the modern descendants of the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement*, which tend to conceptualise masculinity through Jungian Archetypes* such as the Warrior, King, Magician and Lover. Practitioners familiar with these might meet their audiences where they are by linking ‘overdone’ masculinity with the negative ‘shadow’ of each positive archetype, e.g. Warrior - Sadist, King - Tyrant, etc.

Intended audience: men and boys who might be conscious of their gender and gendered behaviour, but are unlikely to be critical of it or see it as a social construct. Likely to feel the pressure to 'be a man' and to prove themselves as men. Unsure whether toxic masculinity actually exists, might reply to its criticisms with #NotAllMen. Not ready to embrace the idea of plurality of masculinities.

Aims: The primary aim is to inspire men and boys who behave in ways often described as 'toxic', to see why this is problematic and learn to embody less harmful models of masculinity; to move from a narrow Man Box to a bigger, less harmful box; to prepare the idea of getting out of the box completely.

Next steps: Once men and boys accept that there are different ways to be a man and that it is possible to overdo or under-do it, they can better see that masculinity is something we perform, and we can perform it in different ways. This should prepare the ground for asking or examining which ways are better than others, who decides that, and thus for introducing the idea that gender is socially constructed (and discarding the limiting archetype framework). We can then show that there are many right ways, and thus many masculinities.

1. **Targets the Men in the Middle.** Condemnation or rejection should be reserved for committed misogynists. Acknowledge that men can do evil but are not evil, thus inspiring accountability but leaving the door open for growth.
2. **Meets Men Where They Are.** Most men who hear they're 'toxic' are not trying to be evil and will get defensive when accused of it.
3. **Focuses on the next step.** The aim is to get men from a smaller box to a bigger box, not to fix them in one move.
4. **Uses no sticks.** There is no moralising or blaming, just showing that overdoing it doesn't lead anywhere.
5. **Uses carrots.** Rather than criticising 'toxicity,' celebrate the benefits of moderation, balance, and personal growth. Highlight what men gain – stronger relationships, emotional wellbeing, leadership respect – and don't use guilt or fear as motivators.
6. **Engages Emotionally.** Tap into emotions such as pride, dignity, empathy, and the desire for connection and purpose. Show moderation as a strength.
7. **Inspires, Doesn't Lecture.** The message is not: 'You're wrong,' but: 'There's a better way – and you may be closer than you think.'
8. **Addresses Men's Problems.** Men seek social, professional and romantic success and the middle path leads to it. The message is: balance is good for you.



Bust of Aristotle, Roman copy of Greek original

Course ad: Real Strength — A 4-Week Calibration Course for Men

You don't need to become someone else. You just need to dial in what you already have. If you've ever pushed too hard – at work, in arguments, in the gym – and watched people pull back, this course shows you how to keep your edge without giving up who you are. For men who value discipline, leadership, and self-reliance, but have seen how overdoing them is counterproductive. In four weeks you'll learn to find the golden middle: the right dose of strength, drive, and composure – so you're solid, not stonewalled; confident, not controlling; independent, not isolated. Sign up now and calibrate your life.

Social media campaign: 7-Day Calibration for Dating Success

7 videos with a speaker using a physical dial prop ranging from Too Soft to Too Hard, with Gold in the middle. Each video features performed examples of actions at different levels of the scale, with ones deemed Too Soft and Too Hard looking cringe and unattractive, but in a funny way that encourages laughing at such mistakes. Gold options look smart and attractive. Sound effects and emojis indicate what to think of them.

- Introduce the dial and the 'calibrate' mindset
- How can non-verbal behaviour influence your message?
- How to make a smooth exit if interest isn't returned?
- Early-conversation pacing with a 60/40 listening ratio
- First touch and flirting, recognising clear, enthusiastic interest and consent
- Sexual health and negotiating boundaries confidently
- A mock date recap using the GOLDEN score, make a pledge, and challenge viewers to a 7-day calibration streak.

Video game

A fantasy warrior professing to be the embodiment of courage, goes through a series of quests where the player can make choices in which the warrior can be either craven or reckless. Everything he does fails until he meets an old master who helps him realise that the real courage he seeks is in the middle. Pursuing it requires that he levels up new skills, and as he does so, he starts succeeding and can win the game.

bad alternatives

Men Are the Problem. Masculinity is inherently toxic. The world would be safer and more equal if men simply stopped trying to be men.

This attacks male identity at the root and offers no pathway for growth, only rejection. It suggests that men must entirely disown the sense of self they've been socialised with. This breeds resentment, alienation, and defensiveness, pushing men toward regressive identities where they feel more accepted.

It's About Your Character. Every time you do something wrong you prove that you are toxic. You're not a regular person who tries to be good but fails – you're a bad person.

This framing doesn't acknowledge human limitations or the impact of the environment, and fuels the belief that there is no point in trying because nothing will ever be good enough.

You're Either With Us or Against Us. If you at any point do or say anything that can be labelled as 'toxic', even by mistake, you prove yourself to be part of the problem and cannot be one of us.

Instead of encouraging men to grow and learn, this framing punishes them for not already knowing everything. It presents allyship as a moral test you either pass or fail – not a journey you can join. Most men will opt out before they ever begin.



emotional intelligence is for you

A man claims to be ‘stoic’ but actually struggles to regulate his emotions and makes himself and everyone around him miserable. He dismisses the calls to improve and eventually spirals out of control. Some event forces him to admit the problem. He realises he was never taught emotional intelligence and goes on a challenging journey of self-discovery that makes him stronger. His mental health and relationships improve, and he decides to help others who, like him, were never taught to regulate their emotions.

This narrative follows a classic Hero’s Journey: in a crisis (men’s lack of emotional intelligence), the hero refuses a call to adventure until he is forced to go on a path of trials from which he returns with something that enables him to improve the world. The narrative not only taps into a universal pattern which has moved the imaginations of humans for centuries – it also presents developing emotional intelligence as a brave challenge, something to be proud of and aspire to.

The character’s initial struggles might be about his unresolved anger, depression, incapacity to express love, or other emotions. Taking steps towards regulating them is presented as a form of self-care, personal growth, and resilience. It is not just about avoiding suffering, but about building a life where he can thrive, contribute, and connect to his friends, his partner, and himself.

Instead of blaming the hero for his incapacity to emotionally self-regulate, the narrative focuses on the systems which failed him. This avoids presenting the issue as a moral test and thus better bypass defensive reactions to feeling attacked for personal failings. It can also inspire actual systemic change which men might undertake with pride and desire to make the world better for others.

This narrative also offers three opportunities for countering the backlash. Firstly, the Manosphere

often presents emotional intelligence as part of the ‘feminising’ of men and boys, as something unnatural to men and forced onto them by women. Instead, our narrative presents it as unrelated to women and simply good for you.

Secondly, the Manosphere presents men and boys as powerless victims suffering in silence because women refuse to regulate their emotions through emotional labour and sex. Instead, this narrative identifies systemic sources of men’s problems to inspire them to empower themselves and improve their own lives without waiting for external help. It should also clearly identify that while a healthy social life is great for emotional regulation, it is not limited to romantic relationships, but includes friendships, family, and professional relations.

Thirdly, men’s unprocessed pain is politicised, used to divide, and turned into grievance and resentment against women, gender queer communities, or the ‘woke’ culture which allegedly doesn’t care about them. We should acknowledge that men’s suffering is real, but show that its cause is not progress but a systemically perpetuated lack of emotional skill. A retreat to outdated ideals doesn’t solve it: we must develop systems which equip men and boys with the tools of self-awareness, emotional regulation, connection, and growth – and make that part of their new expression of masculinity.

Intended audience: Men who believe they should be 'stoic' and see emotions as unmanly – including empathy, which means they are unlikely to be motivated by how they affect others. Likely to be gender-essentialist and not ready to discard traditional masculine norms. Likely to see themselves as victims who are suffering in silence as nobody sees their pain.

Aims: To reframe emotional intelligence as a skill and a strength that should be a part of a man's skillset. Motivate critical assessment of systems which deprive boys of that skill and a desire to change them.

Next steps: This narrative can inspire critical assessment of gender norms and thus open men and boys to considering gender as a social construct. It might start as an individualistic self-improvement strategy, but should draw attention to the systemic nature of the problem.

1. **Targets the Men in the Middle.** Most men feel criticised for their lack of emotional fluency but were never taught how to name what they feel, regulate it, or share it safely with others; nor are many women taught to accept and trust men being more emotionally fluent.
2. **Meets Men Where They Are.** Men already acknowledge the impact of stress, pressure and mental health issues, talk about high suicide rates and acknowledge gaming or porn as ways of coping.
3. **Focuses on the next step.** Men and boys won't become emotionally fluent, vulnerable, or go to therapy overnight. They must move in steps and simultaneously ask for space from the women in their life, whether at home, at work, or in their friends circles and social life.
4. **Uses no sticks.** This framing makes no appeal to moral duty. Instead, it appeals to self-interest and pro-social feelings.
5. **Uses carrots.** Pride, resilience, connection, purpose, are powerful carrots. Men are not broken – just unequipped – so there is hope. Frame emotional regulation as strength, not loss of masculinity.
6. **Engages Emotionally.** Mental health issues, suicide, and being overwhelmed are parts of the emotional reality many men and boys experience, while community and relationships is what they seek, providing motivation.
7. **Inspires, Doesn't Lecture.** Emotional intelligence isn't something you 'should' have – it's what makes your life better. You deserve it.
8. **Addresses Men's Problems.** Men worry about mental health, disconnection, pressure to perform, lack of support. Frame emotional skills as tools for solving their own problems and living happier lives, not just serving others' needs.



36 example story ideas

Coaching ad: Stronger Under Pressure

The system has failed us. We were taught to be tough and stoic when the pressure spikes, but all we got from it is burnout, isolation and anxiety. This practical coaching program is built on my own journey out of depression, that treats emotional management as a skill stack you can train. No lectures, no shame, just drills that make work, friendships, and daily life smoother. Learn the clear communication, conflict fluency and recovery loops that will allow you to have fewer blow-ups and shutdowns, more ease with friends and family, and think clearly when it counts. For men who are ready to level up.

Competition for fathers

Today's world rewards emotional self-regulation, but our boys are sometimes still shamed for it. Show the next generation how you built yours. Record a 60–90 second video on your phone, telling a story about a time when you nearly lost it, what you did to steady yourself, and what changed afterward. Include three beats: What I noticed, What I tried, What it gave me. Post it under #DadsJourney and tag two other fathers. Aim for honesty over perfection, offer a concrete tool anyone can copy, and a message your child could understand. The best entries will be compiled into a free resource for schools, teams, and community groups.

Cooperative card game

Players assume the roles of friends having a heated discussion. Resource cards are used to play actions. Resource-cheap actions represent emotionally inept words and behaviours that insult other players, sound cringe, and make the 'discussion' worse. Gaining resources allows playing more expensive actions which exhibit more emotional intelligence and actually steer the conversation towards a resolution that wins the game. The game has different discussion scenarios to ensure replayability, and cards are all funny and silly, making it enjoyable.

bad alternatives



Men Just Don't Care. If men really wanted to be emotionally intelligent, they would've figured it out by now. Their inability or refusal to do so just shows they don't care about others.

This assumes lack of emotional ignorance is a choice rather than a consequence of social conditioning and education. It ignores the systemic problems in favour of focusing on individuals, dismisses men's internal struggles, expects instant change, and focuses on blame which inspires defensiveness.

Do It For Women. Women have had enough of mothering emotionally inept men. No woman will want you if you won't evolve. Women are miserable because you can't open up. Fix yourself for their sake.

This frames emotional growth as an obligation and a chore. It's about escaping blame and criticism, not celebrating growth. This inspires defensiveness and deepens resentment, especially as emotional intelligence does not guarantee romantic success.

Boys Should Cry. It's all about how important it is that men cry. Crying is a strength, not weakness. Crying prevents bottling things up until they explode in anger which harms women.

Most men think: 'Is that what's in it for me? I'll be able to cry more? Pass.' They won't inquire to understand that crying exemplifies a capacity for emotional expression and release. Reactionary voices can exploit this to paint progressives as weak and wanting to 'turn men into cry-babies.'

call to action

This report is a starting point, not a conclusion. It introduces a framework for crafting constructive and motivating narratives around masculinity and offers some examples. Now, more work is needed to refine the framework and show how it can be applied. We invite your continuous feedback as we produce new versions of this report. To build on it further, we will take the following steps:

■ **Positive Narratives Library.** We will create an online database of narratives already used by organisations and individuals, available to anyone looking for inspiration.

■ **Empirical testing and development of narratives.** The narratives and stories presented in this report are just a proposal. We want to empirically test how effective at inspiring men and boys they – and other narratives already used by practitioners – actually are. Then, we want to improve them and develop more narratives which follow the most effective patterns.

■ **Deep-dive into specific topics.** The kinds of narratives that will work in the context of caregiving and fatherhood will differ from ones relevant in the context of prevention of gender-based violence, political and civic engagement, or workplace equality and leadership. We would like to team up with specialists from different areas of practice to explore such subject-specific narratives in-depth.

■ **Contextualisation.** What resonates with some men or boys may fall flat or even backfire with others. We want to explore what makes a narrative effective across different cultural contexts and target audiences. We must investigate what works, where, with whom, and why – taking into account intersecting factors such as gender, race, class, religion, geography, age, and the geo-political and economic contexts at a given time.

■ **Youth focus.** We acknowledge that particular attention should be paid to the differences between adult and youth audiences. Not only do boys and young men require a different approach, they are also a vital demographic to engage if we want to build a better future.

Your thematic and local expertise is needed to build on this report. Tell us how it all looks from your cultural perspective. Share the approaches which worked for you. Collaborate with us on any of the above next steps – or propose new ones.

Let's shift the narrative, together.

**get
involved**

- Develop a funded project with us
- Contribute to the Positive Narrative Library
- Help us contextualise the narratives we've built
- **Contact us today on: contact@path-forge.org**

acknowledgements

This report builds on decades of work by feminist scholars, activists, and organisations who have transformed how we understand gender, power, and equality. The insights and vocabulary that make our work possible were developed through their tireless commitment to justice, social change, and feminist-inspired system change.

We owe particular gratitude to the countless feminist and gender justice movements that have fought to challenge patriarchal norms, dismantle structural inequalities, and expand opportunities for women and girls worldwide. Their advocacy has also created the space for men and boys to explore freer, more caring, and more authentic expressions of masculinity. The vision of gender equality they advanced – one that liberates everyone from restrictive roles and harmful systems – remains the foundation on which we stand.

We also recognise the many organisations and initiatives that work directly with men and boys, developing programmes that promote positive masculinities, prevent violence, and foster empathy, inclusion, and accountability. Much of what we describe in this report is already being realised through their ongoing efforts. Our work was directly informed by a number of interviews, consultations and an online survey with which we have gathered their insights.

Our thinking has been inspired not only by those cited in our reference list, but also by the broader communities advancing intersectional approaches to gender justice, linking gender to struggles for racial equity, decolonisation, disability inclusion, youth empowerment, climate justice, and LGBTQ+ rights. Together, they continue to show that transforming gender relations requires transforming the structures that shape our societies.

We are particularly grateful to the members of the MenEngage Alliance for their generous feedback on early drafts of this report, and for their leadership in promoting accountability and partnership in work with men and boys.

This report is intended as an ongoing and collective effort. We invite members of all of the above groups, and anyone who wishes to build a fair, caring, and equal world for everyone, to offer expansion ideas, constructive criticism, and own experiences which will help us update and improve this report and all the projects it inspires.

Story. A tale about particular events and people. Stories both give rise to and draw from narratives.

Narrative. Pattern of meaning that both emerges from a set of stories and provides a template for specific stories. Abstracted from particular events and people, it focuses on the types of events, characters, settings, values, etc. common across many stories. E.g., the Hero's Journey narrative.

Framing. The way an issue is presented across narratives: what is and isn't emphasised, how it is explained, what connections are made, which contexts are invoked. E.g. 'masculinity is toxic' or 'men are left behind.'

Archetypes. Originally theorised by C.G. Jung as recurring symbolic patterns in myths and psychology. Popularised in men's movements and coaching via R. Moore and D. Gillette's *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* framework. Often used as an accessible growth language, but widely criticised as gender essentialist, culturally narrow, and prone to rebranding the Man Box rather than challenging patriarchal norms.

Incel. Short for "involuntary celibate": a person, typically a man, who wants romantic or sexual intimacy but feels unable to obtain it. In online subcultures, the term is often linked to biological determinism, grievance narratives, and misogyny, sometimes encouraging and leading to harassment or violence.

Crisis of masculinity. A contested term for claims that social, economic, and cultural change has destabilised familiar male roles and status. It can describe real pressures and disorientation, but is also used rhetorically to resist gender equality or to frame men as uniquely harmed by social progress.

Gender essentialism. The belief that women and men have fixed, natural, largely universal 'essences' that determine traits, roles, or capacities. In gender justice work, it is criticised for erasing diversity, justifying hierarchy, and treating social norms as biology.

Gender norms. Shared expectations about how people should look, feel, think, and behave based on gender, reinforced through families, peers, media, institutions, and policy. Norms shape incentives and sanctions, and they can vary across cultures and change over time.

Man Box. A shorthand for the narrow set of masculine gender norms (for example: stoic, tough, dominant) often involving negative norms (not feminine, not gay, not allowed to wear dresses or make-up), policed through shame, status, and threat of exclusion. The concept highlights how restrictive norms can limit and harm men and those around them.

Manosphere. An umbrella term for loosely connected socially conservative online spaces focused on men and masculinity, including men's rights activism, pickup advice, incel communities, and others. It ranges from self help to overt misogyny, and often promotes hegemonic masculinity and reinforces patriarchal norms through amplifying grievance, conspiracy style narratives, and gender hostility.

Masculinities. Used in the plural to emphasise that there are many socially shaped ways of 'being a man,' not one natural masculinity. Some concepts are well-defined, including 'hegemonic masculinity' (theorised by R.W. Connell and focused on dominance, hierarchy, control) or 'caring masculinities' (K. Elliott: care, emotional engagement, rejection of domination), but many more are commonly used in the public discourse, relying on a shared pre-theoretical understanding, e.g. 'positive', 'equitable', '(un)healthy', 'toxic', 'aggrieved' etc. In this report, 'traditional masculinity' refers to patriarchal norms that confine men to the Man Box.

Mythopoetic Men's Movement. A late 20th century current that used myth, ritual, storytelling, and men's groups or retreats to explore male identity and healing. It offered an alternative to rigid machismo, but was criticised for limited attention to power, gender justice, and structural inequality. Today, continued through informal men's circles and formal men's groups such as the ManKind Project.

Zero-sum game. A belief that progress for one gender must come at the expense of another, for example gains in women's rights necessarily mean losses for men, or attention to men's problems may dilute focus or funding for women and girls. In reality, many reforms (safer workplaces, better parental leave, less violence) can benefit people of all genders, but zero-sum framing fuels grievance, backlash, and resistance to equality.

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