

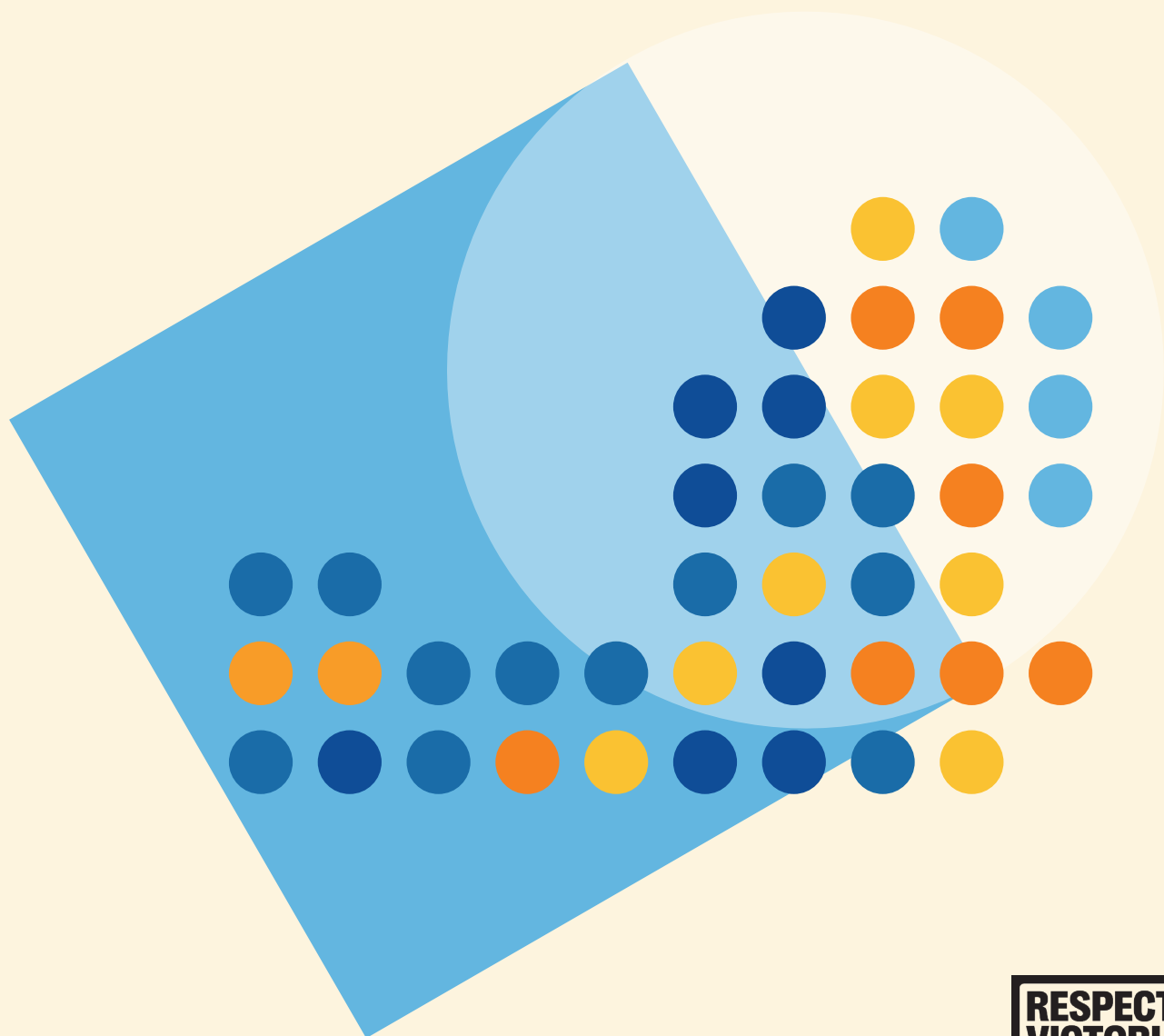
# The Man Box 2024

## Executive Summary

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

the men's project

A Jesuit Social Services initiative



This study was made possible by the support of Respect Victoria

# Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we work and live. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We also acknowledge the women, allies and feminist organisations who have worked for decades to prevent violence and achieve gender equality. This report and the work of The Men's Project would not be possible without the progress made by these committed trailblazers.

## Respect Victoria

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Wallis Social Research

The Men's Project would also like to express our gratitude to the men who gave their time and shared their experiences to inform this research report. We would also like to thank Brian Heilman from Equimundo, The Men's Project team and Jesuit Social Services staff more broadly, as well as our colleagues in the sector whose work has informed this report.

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## Executive summary

It's been over five years since we published *The Man Box: A study on being a young man in Australia* (The Men's Project and Flood, 2018). This was the first Australian study to explore the association between attitudes to masculine stereotypes and the behaviours of men aged 18 to 30. The Man Box study was followed by the *Unpacking the Man Box* report, released in 2020, which drew on the same data to complete more detailed analyses of the impact of "Man Box" rules, controlling for demographic variables such as level of education, occupation, where men live, and sexuality.

The Man Box 2024 study sets out to update and expand on the findings of the 2018 and 2020 studies, and see how the results have changed over time. In line with these previous studies, it considers whether Australian men perceive social messages that a "real man" thinks and acts a certain way, whether men personally agree with these messages, and also explores whether men's attitudes predict a range of behaviours and life outcomes.

The Man Box 2024 study expands the age group under consideration, adding men aged 31- to 45-years-old to the younger cohort (18 to 30) in both the survey and focus group samples. This study also broadens the scope of the attitudes and behaviours measured, including additional survey questions on men's attitudes towards, and use of, violence – in particular violence against women. In addition, the questions on risk-taking behaviours have been expanded to include illicit drug use, problem gambling, and dangerous behaviour when under the influence of alcohol and illicit drugs.

This study was conducted by surveying more than 3,500 Australian men<sup>1</sup> between the ages of 18 and 45, using an online survey of a representative and random sample of men from across the country. Seven focus groups were also held in order to hear more about the experiences of Australian men, and to provide additional insight into the survey results.

## Key findings

The “Man Box” describes a set of beliefs within and across society that place pressure on men to act in a certain way. The Man Box consists of 19 rules that represent a socially dominant form of masculinity. These “rules” include statements such as “Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside” and “In heterosexual relationships, men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women”. These rules are organised into seven thematic pillars. This section outlines the four key findings from this work.

### Finding I.

#### Almost four in ten men feel pressure to conform to Man Box rules<sup>1</sup>

A significant minority (37%) of 18- to 30-year-old men perceive pressure to conform to Man Box rules. This pressure was felt most strongly for the rules in the “Acting tough” pillar. These two rules require men to always act strong, and to fight back. Almost half (50% and 44% respectively) of 18- to 30-year-old men reported that they were told this is how a “real man” behaves.

The other social pressures felt by more than four in ten men were those requiring men to be the primary income earner; reject trans men’s masculinity; never say no to sex; look good; and keep their worries, fears and problems to themselves.

Alarmingly, many of the Man Box rules where men perceived pressure to conform were those that may be harmful to those around them. Four in ten men (39%) perceive social messages that men should have the final say about decisions in their relationship. More than a third of men (35%) believe that society says men are entitled to know where their partner is at all times and a similar proportion perceive that society expects men to “Use violence to get respect if necessary” (34%) and avoid responsibility for household chores (33%).

The older age group (31- to 45-year-olds) reported experiencing slightly lower levels of social pressure to conform to Man Box rules than the younger men. Across all Man Box rules, on average, 22% of older men reported they agreed with Man Box rules compared to 26% of younger men. The most notable difference was for the Man Box rule “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary”. Of the older age group, 24% said they felt social pressure to conform to this rule, compared to 34% of younger men.

<sup>1</sup> Average agreement for each Man Box rule, averaged across all Man Box rules.





## Comparison of 18- to 30-year-old and 31- to 45-year-old men's perception of social pressure to conform with Man Box rules

Percentage of survey respondents who reported that they agreed or strongly agreed they felt social pressure by each Man Box rule

Man Box pillar	Man Box rule	18- to 30-year-old men	31- to 45-year-old men	Percentage point difference
<b>1. Self-sufficiency</b>	A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect.	40%	35%	5
	Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help.	34%	32%	2
<b>2. Acting tough</b>	A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak.	44%	44%	0
	Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside.	50%	55%	-5
<b>3. Physical attractiveness</b>	It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good.	41%	43%	-2
	A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly.	33%	28%	5
	Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair and skin.	37%	31%	6
<b>4. Rigid gender roles</b>	It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house or take care of younger children.	28%	26%	2
	A man shouldn't have to do household chores.	33%	28%	5
	In heterosexual relationships, men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women.	42%	39%	3
<b>5. Homophobia and Transphobia</b>	A gay guy is not a "real man".	35%	33%	2
	A transgender man is not a "real man".	42%	48%	-6
	It's not OK for straight guys to be friends with gay guys.	31%	27%	4
	It's not OK for straight guys to be friends with trans or gender diverse people.	33%	30%	3
<b>6. Hypersexuality</b>	A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can.	35%	35%	0
	A "real man" would never say no to sex.	42%	39%	3
<b>7. Aggression and control</b>	Men should use violence to get respect if necessary.	34%	24%	10
	In heterosexual relationships, a man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage.	39%	40%	-1
	If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time.	35%	33%	2

## Finding II.

### A quarter of Australian men aged 18 to 30 personally agree with Man Box rules

On average, a quarter (26%) of 18- to 30-year-old men surveyed for this study personally agreed with Man Box rules. While this is a significant minority, in good news, the majority of men surveyed didn't agree with these rules, highlighting the diversity that exists in relation to attitudes towards masculinity. However, there was substantial variation in these results, with more men agreeing with some rules than others. There was also some variation by demographic factors. For example, men aged 18 – 30 who most strongly endorse the Man Box are more likely to identify as being heterosexual and religious.

The Man Box rules with the strongest endorsement are those requiring emotional stoicism and self-sufficiency – that guys should always act strong (42% of men agreed), fight back when pushed around (30%), and figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help (28%). Other rules with substantial endorsement were that trans men are not “real men” (39% of men agreed), that guys need to look good to be successful (35%) but shouldn't fuss about their appearance (32%), and that men should be the ones to provide for their family financially (31%).

The rules with the lowest personal agreement were those about boys and men not needing to do household chores (18% agreed boys shouldn't be taught to cook, sew, clean and care for younger children and 19% agreed men shouldn't have to do household chores), having as many sexual partners as possible (21% agreed), and not being friends with trans and gender diverse people (22%).

Men in the 31- to 45-year-old age group reported marginally lower personal agreement with Man Box rules than the younger men. Across all Man Box rules, on average 22% of older men reported they agreed with Man Box rules compared to 26% of younger men. Again, the most notable difference was for the Man Box rule “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary”, which only 11% of the older age group personally agreed with compared to 22% of younger men.



## Comparison of 18- to 30-year-old and 31- to 45-year-old men's agreement with Man Box rules

Percentage of survey respondents who reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with each Man Box rule

Man Box pillar	Man Box rule	18- to 30-year-old men	31- to 45-year-old men	Percentage point difference
1. Self-sufficiency	A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect.	23%	19%	4
	Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help.	28%	24%	4
2. Acting tough	A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak.	30%	27%	3
	Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside.	42%	41%	1
3. Physical attractiveness	It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good.	35%	34%	1
	A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly.	23%	17%	6
	Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair and skin.	32%	24%	8
4. Rigid gender roles	It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house or take care of younger children.	18%	13%	5
	A man shouldn't have to do household chores.	19%	11%	8
	In heterosexual relationships, men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women.	31%	22%	9
5. Homophobia and Transphobia	A gay guy is not a "real man".	25%	19%	6
	A transgender man is not a "real man".	39%	43%	-4
	It's not OK for straight guys to be friends with gay guys.	23%	17%	6
	It's not OK for straight guys to be friends with trans or gender diverse people.	22%	17%	5
6. Hypersexuality	A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can.	21%	16%	5
	A "real man" would never say no to sex.	23%	17%	6
7. Aggression and control	Men should use violence to get respect if necessary.	22%	11%	11
	In heterosexual relationships, a man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage.	24%	20%	4
	If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time.	22%	24%	-2

### Finding III.

#### Men who most strongly agreed with Man Box rules were more likely to have perpetrated violence, hold violence-supportive attitudes, and have consumed violent pornography

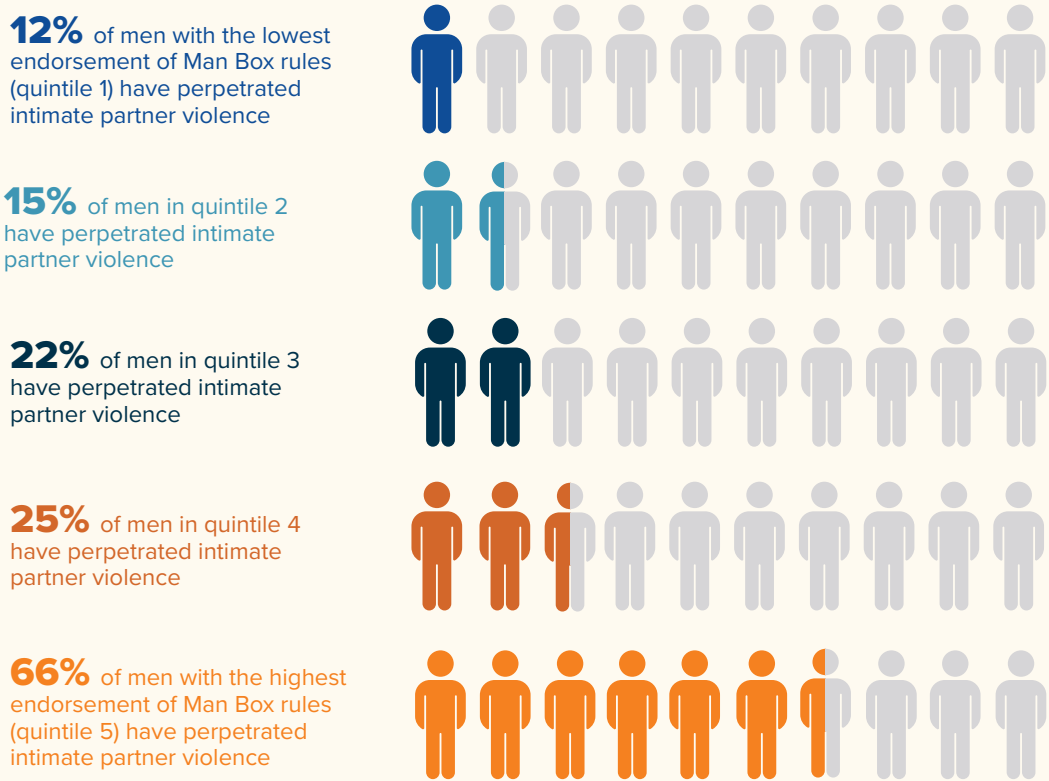
Men were asked about their perpetration of, or attitudes towards, various forms of violence, in particular violence against women. The results were both stark and concerning.

Men who most strongly agreed with Man Box rules were more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes, more likely to have used violence in their intimate relationships, and more likely to have perpetrated bullying and sexual harassment. They were also less likely to be bothered if they witnessed violence, and less likely to say they would intervene to prevent violence.

In fact, compared to men who least endorsed Man Box norms, men who most strongly endorsed Man Box norms were more than:

- **35 times more likely** to have frequently perpetrated verbal sexual harassment against a woman or girl in a public place
- **17 times more likely** to express violence-supportive attitudes
- **11 times more likely** to have frequently perpetrated verbal, online, or physical bullying
- **Eight times more likely** to have perpetrated sexual violence against an intimate partner (including 28 times more likely to have used fear to coerce a partner into having sex)
- **Six times more likely** to be unconcerned witnessing a male friend verbally abusing their female partner
- **Five times more likely** to have perpetrated physical violence against an intimate partner (including 17 times more likely to have hit a partner with a fist or something else that could hurt them)
- **Five times more likely** to disbelieve experiences of gender inequality
- **Four times more likely** to be unconcerned witnessing male-to-male violence, and
- **Three times more likely** to have viewed violent pornography at least once a week.

#### Proportion of men who have perpetrated intimate partner violence, by Man Box quintile, 18- to 30-year-old men





## Finding IV.

### The men who most strongly agree with Man Box rules have a range of poor health outcomes

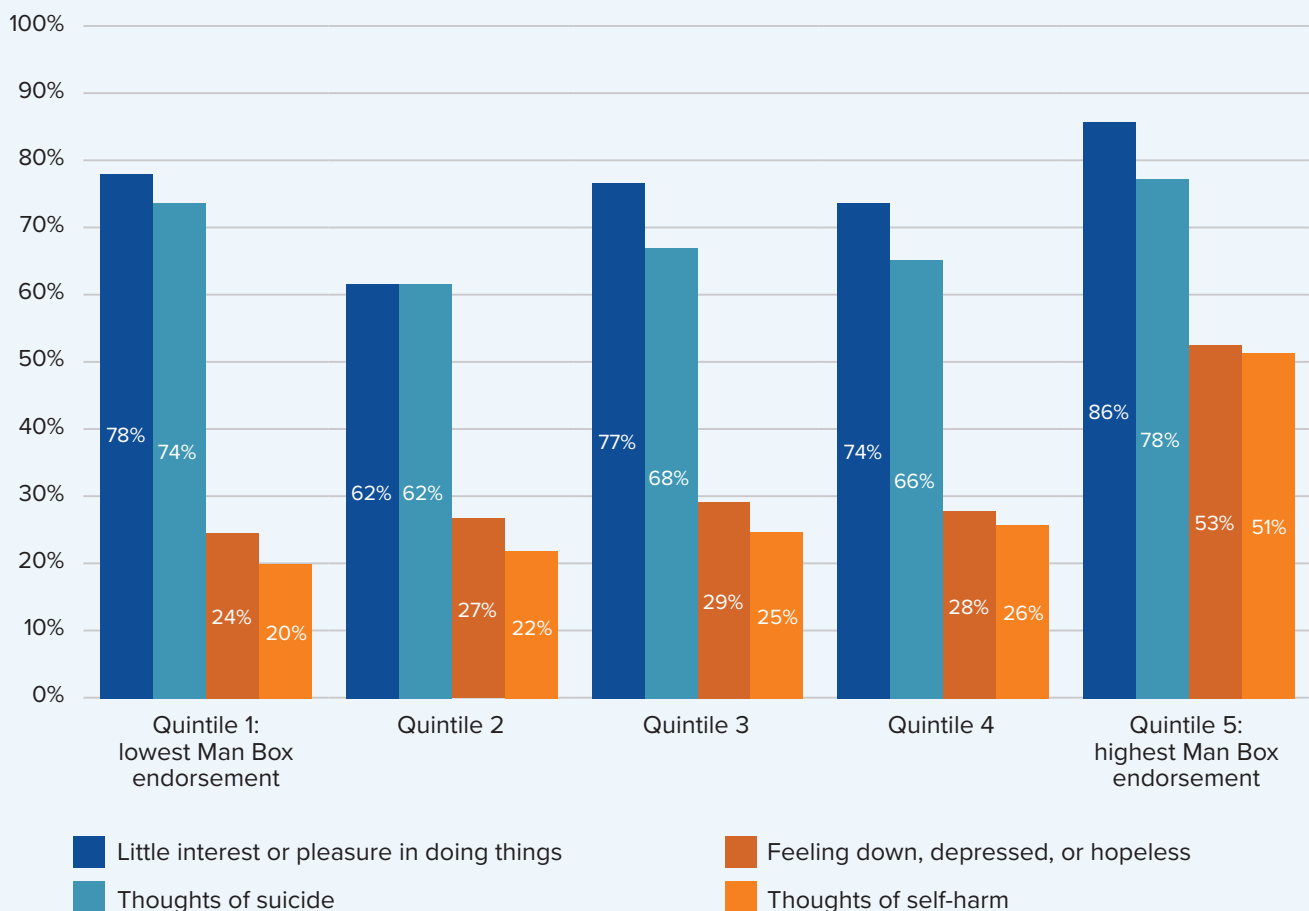
Men were asked a range of questions that provide insight into their mental health and risk-taking behaviours. The link between agreement with Man Box rules and poor health was not as stark and consistent as the link between Man Box endorsement and violence. However, Man Box beliefs do appear to be associated with some worrying health outcomes for men themselves.

In particular, when men who most strongly endorse Man Box rules (quintile 5) were compared with men with the lowest endorsement of Man Box rules, they were:

- **Eight times more likely** to have had thoughts of suicide nearly every day
- **Six times more likely** to have had thoughts of self-harm nearly every day
- **Six times more likely** to have been displaying signs of problem gambling in the previous six months (in fact, more than half of the men with the strongest agreement with Man Box rules exhibited signs of problem gambling)
- **Three times more likely** to have experienced little interest or pleasure in doing things nearly every day in the previous two weeks
- **Two and a half times more likely** to have engaged in a potentially dangerous behaviour while intoxicated in the previous six months, and
- Almost **twice as likely** to have consumed alcohol at least five days a week over the previous 12 months.

### Proportion of men experiencing symptoms of poor mental health, by Man Box quintile, 18- to 30-year-old men

Percentage of respondents who experienced the symptom in the two weeks prior to the survey



## Recommendations

It is clear that the Man Box is having profound impacts on life in Australia today. The following recommendations are informed by this study, as well as by the violence-prevention, early intervention, and advocacy work of The Men’s Project. They relate to four main areas:

- I. **Policy change**
- II. **Workforce capacity building**
- III. **Community awareness raising**
- IV. **Future research.**

In outlining these recommendations, we use the term “healthier masculinities” to refer to work that increases awareness of the harms of the Man Box, highlights the diversity that exists in relation to attitudes towards masculinity, and promotes positive alternatives to the Man Box (Tyler, 2022). Taken together, implementing these recommendations would go some way towards weakening the cultural grip of the Man Box and thus improve the well-being of all genders.

### Recommendation area 1: Policy change

There has been significant policy progress in recent years. The Federal Government’s National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 explicitly acknowledges the importance of supporting men and boys to develop healthy masculinities and positive, supportive relationships with their male peers. At a state and territory government level, the approaches taken to violence prevention and early intervention vary, although we have seen an increasing emphasis placed on engaging men and boys in violence prevention efforts. A good example of the type of leadership that can be provided by government agencies is the Healthier Masculinities Framework for Gender Equality, a framework published in 2020 by VicHealth (Victoria’s health promotion agency) to guide health promotion with men and boys.

Leadership in violence prevention and/or the well-being of men and boys does not need to be limited to agencies with explicit responsibility for these areas. For instance, Victoria Police’s Equal, Safe and Strong: Victoria Police’s 10-year Gender Equality Strategy acknowledges the harmful impacts of stereotypical masculine norms, stating, “Strict adherence to gender stereotypes has negatively impacted police culture and amplified inequality ... The less stereotypical masculine traits and gendered stereotyping, the less gendered workplace harm” (Victoria Police, 2020).

While there has been some progress in recognising the importance of engaging men and boys in violence prevention, and the need to include a healthier masculinities approach when addressing a number of social and economic problems including men’s health, there are still significant opportunities to strengthen both policy foundations and associated implementation.

### We recommend that government:

- I. **Develop strategy:** Every state and territory government should develop a violence prevention and early intervention strategy which foregrounds working with men and boys, including reducing attachment to harmful rigid ideas about what it means to be a man and related attitudes that are linked to the use of violence.
- II. **Develop an action plan:** Informed by the lessons learnt during the forthcoming Healthier Masculinities project trial, the Federal Government should develop a National Healthier Masculinities Action Plan that is aligned with The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. The Action Plan should set out how healthier masculinities will be embedded into violence prevention and early intervention work with men and boys, including how healthier masculinities relates to other violence prevention approaches. This should include establishing a set of standards based on available evidence of what is expected from programs seeking to deliver healthier masculinities work.
- III. **Review policy frameworks:** The Federal Government, working closely with state and territory governments, should commission an independent national review of relevant policy frameworks to determine where and how a greater focus on promoting healthier masculinities could be incorporated (e.g., violence prevention, mental health, gambling, alcohol and other drugs, healthy eating, criminal justice, social procurement, child and family services, occupational health and safety, road safety). This review should include thorough community consultation to build an understanding of what “healthier masculinities” means, taking an intersectional and trauma-informed approach.

<sup>2</sup> “Workforces” refers to anyone in a position to positively influence gender norms in the course of their work, which could include any workforce. However, we recommend focusing on workforces in the following sectors: education and training, health, child and family services, justice, sport, local government, and communications (Family Safety Victoria, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> An example of this type of campaign is <https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/campaigns/respect-starts-with-a-conversation>.

## Recommendation area 2: Workforce capacity building

There is increasing recognition that workforces need support in order to understand and confidently challenge stereotypical gender norms. These workforces can positively influence men and boys every day in settings where they learn, work and play. This has been demonstrated through The Men's Project's work in Victoria where, with support from the Victorian Government, we have worked on a project with staff across 60 schools to build their knowledge, skills and confidence to promote healthier masculinities in their school communities as part of implementing the Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships initiative.

Building on emerging work such as this, **we recommend that:**

### IV. Government invests in workforce capacity building:

State and territory governments should focus on workforce capacity building to promote healthier masculinities in sectors where there are significant opportunities to reduce the harms of the Man Box. The sectors include (but are not limited to) education and training, health, child and family services, justice, sport, local government, and communications.

- V. Tertiary education curricula include healthier masculinities content:** Healthier masculinities content and capability building should be included in higher education curricula for workforces such as teachers, social workers, and psychologists, to support them to effectively model healthier alternatives to stereotypical masculine norms and support the populations they work with to adopt healthier and more flexible masculinities.

## Recommendation area 3: Community awareness raising

In the face of increasing awareness of online content reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes, there is a risk that the proliferation of this online content far surpasses the impact of an approach which relies on separate programs delivered to specific audiences (e.g. workshops with teachers, social workers, or sports coaches; curriculum delivered directly to adolescents). To address this, whole-of-population approaches such as public campaigns should be funded alongside primary prevention and early intervention programs. Additionally, greater attention should be given to ensuring diverse masculinities are represented in public media and campaigns not directly related to healthier masculinities (road safety or healthy eating campaigns, for instance).

The funding required to achieve the required reach through programs alone is not likely to be obtainable and, depending on program design and setting, there is also a risk that program participants are predominately those who are already aware of the Man Box and its associated harms. To mitigate against these risks, **we recommend that:**

### VI. Governments fund population-level campaigns:

Federal, state and territory governments should provide funding to agencies which specialise in the primary prevention of violence and/or in health promotion to run population-level, evidence-based campaigns to promote healthier masculinities. These campaigns should be run in collaboration with other primary prevention initiatives that work with schools, community groups, and workplaces.

### VII. Place-based approaches are funded:

Funders adopt a place-based approach in which community consortiums lead healthy masculinities work with multiple and reinforcing approaches across schools, sports clubs, community service organisations and local councils.



#### Recommendation area 4: Future research

As the Australian National Research Agenda to End Violence against Women and Children (ANRA) 2023–2028 outlines, there are a number of areas where further research is necessary to understand more about how to ensure that healthier masculinities are widespread. It is also important that research into the impact of masculine gender norms on behaviour is ongoing, so that prevention and early intervention programs are informed by up-to-date evidence on what promising practice looks like.

While there is a significant evidence base to draw on already, we wish to highlight one area that we believe requires urgent action: facilitating a better understanding of what works to shift the impact of attitudes towards masculinity amongst men who most strongly endorse the Man Box. As this report shows, these men are significantly more likely to use and experience violence, as well as experience a range of poor health outcomes.

**We recommend future research on:**

#### **VIII. Reducing the impact of harmful gender norms amongst the men who most strongly endorse them:**

Research should aim to understand the most effective ways to decrease the impact of stereotypical masculine norms among those men who most strongly endorse the Man Box. This research should be done in collaboration with partners that have expertise in masculinities research and/or practice. This is a substantial research agenda

that should be completed across various settings (e.g. schools, workplaces, residential settings) and cohorts (including diverse cultures, religions, sexualities, ages and abilities). Research questions should look at:

- The most promising opportunities for effective intervention, informed by ongoing work to understand the mechanisms through which attitudes related to masculinities are developed and what factors moderate the impact of attitudes on behaviour.
- The effectiveness of various practice approaches, including not only approaches focussed on raising awareness of attitudes and encouraging change, but also those that improve emotional literacy and problem-solving skills, which may moderate the impact of endorsing stereotypical masculine norms on behaviour.
- The impact of practice approaches on life outcomes such as use of violence and mental health across different contexts, with a particular focus on behaviour in response to life events that pose significant risks (e.g. post the breakdown of an intimate relationship).
- How, and in what contexts, specific aspects of masculinities can have a protective, positive and healthy impact on behaviours and life outcomes.



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