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For researchers, policymakers and  
health promotion practitioners

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## **Masculinities and health: Attitudes towards men and masculinities in Australia**

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## Introduction

There is growing attention in Australia and around the world to the gendered attitudes, practices, and relations associated with men and boys and their implications for health, violence and gender inequality. There are several signs of this: intensified public debate over codes of masculinity, increasing scholarship on the links between masculinities and various social issues, and growing streams of health promotion self-consciously aimed at men and boys.<sup>[1]</sup> In short, men and masculinities are on the public agenda.

There is a wealth of evidence that masculinities – the social organisation of men’s lives and relations and the meanings given to being male – are influential determinants of men’s health and wellbeing, their likelihood of perpetrating domestic and sexual violence, their involvements in fathering, their risks of suicide and a host of other issues. Given this, there is increasing interest in addressing those aspects of masculinity that are unhealthy, limiting, or dangerous and in promoting other, healthier masculinities.

One key dimension of masculinity is *attitudinal* – to do with men’s and women’s attitudes, their personal beliefs about manhood and gender. Another dimension, overlapping with this, is *normative* – to do with ‘norms’ of masculinity, that is, beliefs about what (other) men do and what is expected of men. Social norms are “the informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable, appropriate and obligatory actions in a given group or society”.<sup>[2]</sup>

Various terms have been used in scholarship and popular commentary for societal expectations of men: ‘sex roles’ and ‘gender roles’, ‘sex role stereotypes’, ‘traditional masculinity’, ‘hegemonic masculinity’, and lately, ‘toxic masculinity’. Whatever term is used, it is clear that men’s conformity to masculine norms has important consequences, at individual, interpersonal and societal levels.

At the individual level, men who endorse stereotypical masculine beliefs are more likely than other men to have poor mental health, consider suicide, and take risks at work and on the road.<sup>[3]</sup> At the interpersonal level, men who endorse stereotypical norms of masculinity are more likely than other men to perpetrate violence against women, perpetrate violence against other men and refrain from involved fathering. There is increasing evidence too that it matters *which* norms men endorse: men’s endorsement of some stereotypical masculine norms can have positive outcomes for their health, whereas endorsement of others has negative associations.<sup>[4]</sup> At the societal level, stereotypical masculine norms are embedded in media and popular culture, shape the cultures and social relations of workplaces, sports, and religion, and inform government policies on parenting, work and other areas.

Masculinity is not comprised only of attitudes and norms. Other important dimensions of masculinity include the behaviours or practices associated with being a man, the interpersonal relations among men and between men and women and children, and the institutional and structural organisation of men’s lives. Although gender attitudes and norms are the focus of a growing range of health promotion and violence prevention efforts, to focus single-mindedly on them is to neglect the institutional and structural determinants of gender relations.<sup>[5]</sup> Addressing masculine attitudes and norms is, nevertheless, a vital part of a wider project of change.

## Values-based messaging for health promotion

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) began in 2018 a program of work on ‘Masculinities and Health’. This starts from the premise that healthier expressions of masculinity may be one key way to promote gender equality and improved wellbeing. The research described in this report was commissioned by VicHealth as part of the Masculinities and Health program. The program has included:

- stakeholder and community consultations, including events in June 2018 and July 2019
- a scoping review on masculinities and health<sup>[6]</sup>
- the development of a framework, *Masculinities and health: A framework for challenging masculine gender stereotypes in health promotion*<sup>[7]</sup>
- research on values-based messaging for healthier masculinities, the focus of this report
- a *Framing masculinity: message guide*.<sup>[8]</sup>

As part of its health promotion work, VicHealth explores the strengthening of public support for health promotion. VicHealth has worked with Common Cause Australia, an organisation focused on values-based messaging,<sup>[9]</sup> and Common Cause collected the data on which this report focuses, providing detailed reports on the findings. These findings were then summarised and analysed by Dr Michael Flood.

What kinds of public messaging will be persuasive in promoting healthy masculinities – in fostering positive identities, practices and relations among men? What values, messages, appeals or frames should we use in social marketing, communications and other health promotion efforts? To develop persuasive public messaging about masculinities, two interconnected tasks are vital. First, we need to know about existing attitudes towards and norms of masculinity. Second, we need to know how to shift them – what kinds of messages will be effective and how to mobilise these. The research reported on in this report contributes to both tasks.

Before outlining the data collected for this survey, we explain the concepts of attitudes and norms.

### The difference between attitudes and norms

Attitudes and norms are distinct. Although they have often been conflated in health promotion efforts, they are not the same. ‘Attitudes’ refer to internally motivated judgements that people make about something, for example about what they like or do not like. ‘Social norms’ refer to beliefs about what other people do and approve of. They involve perceptions of “where a social group *is* or where the social group *ought to be* on some dimension of attitude or behaviour”.<sup>[10]</sup> Social norms thus may be *descriptive* (identifying the typical attitudes and behaviours of the group) or *injunctive* (identifying the desirable attitudes and behaviours of a group).

To illustrate the differing concepts of attitudes, descriptive norms and injunctive norms, consider the example of intimate partner violence:

- Attitude: “I believe it is acceptable for me to hit my wife,” “I believe it is acceptable

for men to hit their wives.”

- Descriptive norm: “In our community men typically hit their wives.”
- Injunctive norm: “In our community it is acceptable for men to hit their wives.”

Norms thus include beliefs about what others in one’s group or a particular group do (descriptive norms) and beliefs about what others approve and disapprove of (injunctive norms).<sup>[2]</sup> The literature on efforts to shift social norms emphasises that it is vital to distinguish between these types of norms, as targeting one rather than the other may be more effective depending on the context.<sup>[11]</sup> Although attitudes and norms are distinct, they are related, in that either can influence the other.

The relationships between attitudes and norms vary. They may be aligned, where people’s personal attitudes align with perceived descriptive and injunctive norms, as is the case in the example for intimate partner violence above. However, attitudes and norms may also misalign. An individual may have the attitude, “I believe it is *not* acceptable for me to hit my wife,” and also believe that “In our community men typically hit their wives” or “In our community it is acceptable for men to hit their wives.” The literature on efforts to shift social norms also stresses that our efforts should vary depending on the relation between people’s attitudes and norms.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Common Cause survey<sup>[14]</sup> measures people’s attitudes towards masculinity, that is, people’s personal beliefs regarding men and masculinity. Many of the survey items ask about people’s agreement or disagreement with various statements about men and masculinity. A survey focused directly on social norms would require a different approach, asking respondents about their perceptions of what others do (descriptive norms) and/or what others think should be done (injunctive norms). Data on individuals’ attitudes are seen by some commentators as an inappropriate source of data on collective norms, although they can be treated as providing information about perceived norms.<sup>[12]</sup> On the other hand, various studies do treat aggregate data on attitudes as an indicator of social norms or at least as a proxy for data on social norms. In one understanding, the term ‘norms’ refers simply to the collective attitudes shared by members of a society.<sup>[13]</sup> Aggregate data on attitudes in a particular setting or country has been treated as an indicator of the social norms present in that setting.<sup>[2]</sup> We could therefore refer to this survey data as indicating ‘collective attitudinal norms’, or simply, norms. In any case, the data provides valuable information about patterns of masculinity-related beliefs in Australia.

### Australian data on attitudes towards masculinity

This report is based on three streams of data, using three distinct methods, as follows:

- 1) Discourse analysis: an analysis of the dominant frames used by Australians to think and talk about masculinity, and interviews with key advocates in Australia addressing gender and masculinity.
- 2) Survey: a representative survey of 1,619 respondents in Australia.
- 3) Message testing: ‘dial testing’ to test participants’ responses to a series of possible messages about masculinity.

The three streams of data collection took place in the order listed above, with the later

methods building on the earlier ones. Further information on each of the methods is given in Appendix A.

This report focuses on the second and third of these three streams of data, the quantitative survey and message testing. The survey was an online, nationally representative survey, 20 minutes in duration, with the sample of 1,619 respondents drawn from a panel and weighted to be representative of the Australian population by age, state and gender. It provides valuable data on attitudes related to masculinity in Australia, drawing on patterns of response to 50 or so questions and statements focused on men, masculinities and gender, and to messages about masculinity. This report includes summaries of more detailed data in reports provided to VicHealth.<sup>[14, 15]</sup>

The survey used three forms of question:

- 1) *Agree/disagree statements*: Respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about men, masculinity and gender, using a five-point Likert scale to respond (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree).
- 2) *Forced choice statements*: Respondents were presented with a forced choice between two statements: shown two statements and asked which one they agree with most. The survey used a 'split sample' method to test different versions of these statements. The sample was split randomly into two groups, with each presented with different versions of the question.
- 3) *Ranked lists*: Finally, in a small number of questions, respondents were presented with a fixed list of qualities and asked to rank them.

This data complements other sources of data on gender attitudes and norms in Australia. Of the four most recent sources, the first is the largest, a periodic, representative population survey of the Australian population's knowledge and attitudes regarding violence against women. The National Community Attitudes Survey (NCAS) includes questions focused on attitudes towards gender, alongside a large variety of questions on domestic and sexual violence. A national survey of 17,500 Australians aged 16 years and over, it has had three waves of data collection thus far, in 2009, 2013 and 2017.<sup>[16]</sup> The second is a national survey in March 2018 of 2,122 Australians aged 16 and above, titled *From Girls to Men: Social attitudes to gender equality issues in Australia*.<sup>[17]</sup> The third is *The Man Box*, a survey of 1,000 young men aged 18 to 30 undertaken in 2018.<sup>[3]</sup> Finally, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, a household-based panel study of over 17,000 people in Australia, provides data on community attitudes to marriage, parenting and work. These quantitative surveys are complemented by qualitative research on masculinities in Australia, including historical, ethnographic and other research.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See this online bibliography of scholarship on men and masculinities in Australia: <https://xyonline.net/books/bibliography/15-race-ethnicity-countries-and-cultures/b-masculinities-particular-countries-regions-and-contexts/h-oceania/2-australia>

## Findings: Supporters, persuadables and opponents

In measuring people's support for or opposition to a particular issue, value or agenda, one simple way of describing the resulting patterns is in terms of supporters, opponents, and between these two, persuadables. This segmentation of populations has been used most prominently in accounts of electoral politics, describing clusters of voter opinion and behaviour,<sup>[18]</sup> but it also can be used for other fields including health promotion. People's attitudes towards the proposition that traditional masculinity is problematic can be arranged along a continuum, from strong support for this notion to strong opposition. At the same time, by looking at the clustering of people's responses across the survey, we can also segment this continuum to identify key attitudinal groups. In this report, survey respondents were placed into one of the three categories – supporters, persuadables or opponents – depending on their overall patterns of response to the survey. In reporting on people's responses to each statement, the report uses these overall attitudinal clusters, rather than examining how people's responses cluster for each statement.

The report thus refers to three attitudinal segments among the survey respondents:

- 1) **Supporters:** people who strongly agree with messages suggesting traditional masculinity is problematic;
- 2) **Persuadables:** people who hold more ambivalent attitudes overall and tend to move between oppositional and supporter perspectives;
- 3) **Opponents:** people who strongly agree with messages suggesting concerns about traditional masculinity are exaggerated.

Another way of understanding these segments is that they represent progressive, neutral and conservative understandings of gender. Supporters show the highest levels of support for gender equality, persuadables show lower levels, and opponents show the lowest levels – they are 'opposed' to gender equality and to typical feminist positions on gender.

Dividing survey respondents into these three attitudinal segments, we see that about one-quarter of people are supporters, one-quarter are opponents, and the remaining half are persuadables, as the right-hand column in Table 1 shows.

**Table 1: Supporters, persuadables and opponents, by gender**

	Women	Men	All
<b>Opponents</b>	16.0%	35.6%	25.9%
<b>Persuadables</b>	51.3%	46.8%	48.9%
<b>Supporters</b>	32.7%	17.6%	25.1%

The three attitudinal segments show differing demographic profiles. Twice as many men as women are 'opponents': 35.6% of men and only 16% of women. That is, about one-third of men and one-sixth of women are opponents, opposed to critiques of traditional masculinity. Similar proportions of men and women are 'persuadables', about half each for women and men. Twice as many women as men are 'supporters': 32.7% of women and only 17.6% of

men. So about one-third of women and one-sixth of men agree that traditional masculinity is problematic in important ways.

These gender contrasts are unsurprising given the well-documented gap between men’s and women’s attitudes towards gender equality in general and various gender issues in particular. Other studies find that men’s attitudes to gender are consistently less progressive than women’s.<sup>[19]</sup> Both Australian and international studies document that men are less supportive than women of principles of gender equality,<sup>[17]</sup> less likely to see sexism against women as extensive and systematic,<sup>[16, 17, 20]</sup> and more likely to endorse male dominance: in workplaces, politics, and in relationships and families.<sup>[16, 21]</sup>

Supporters in this survey are more likely to be female, younger (18–34), working full time, have a university qualification, to vote Green and ALP, to consider themselves “left wing”, and to report being “very interested” in current affairs. Persuadables largely reflect the general population. They differ from supporters and opponents in that they are more likely to vote for a major party or be undecided, they identify as “centre” politically, and they are “not very” or “not at all” interested in current events. Opponents are more likely to be male, with a higher household income, in full-time work, more certain of their voting choices, more likely to vote for the Liberal National Party or small right-wing parties, and they describe being “very interested” in current affairs.

Another way to examine these patterns is to look at the composition of the attitudinal segments. Table 2 shows what proportions of opponents, persuadables or supporters are women or men. Among opponents, two-thirds (67.6%) are men and one-third (32.4%) are women. Among supporters this is reversed, in that two-thirds of supporters (66.6%) are women and one-third (32.7%) are men. Persuadables are comprised of slightly more women than men, 53.9% and 46% respectively.

**Table 2: Women and men as supporters, persuadables or opponents**

	Hard opponent	Opponent	Persuadable	Supporter
<b>Women</b>	27.9%	32.4%	53.9%	66.6%
<b>Men</b>	72.1%	67.6%	46.0%	32.7%
<b>Other</b>			0.1%	0.2%

Table 2 includes a fourth category, ‘hard opponents’. This was a category that emerged in further analysis of the survey findings, a subset of opponents who are particularly strongly opposed to desirable messages about masculinity. Close to three-quarters of the hard opponents (72.1%) are men.

Breaking all respondents into these four attitudinal segments rather than three, hard opponents comprise 8%. That is, treating the survey sample as representative of people in Australia, about 8% of people are hard opponents. A further 18% are soft opponents, with opponents overall making up 26% of the population. Persuadables comprise 48% and supporters comprise 27%. Table 3 below is a version of Table 1, but now with the hard opponents category included. While this report comments at some points on the fourth category, hard opponents, the reporting of the survey results concentrates largely on the



three categories identified.

**Table 3: Supporters, persuadables, all opponents and hard opponents, by gender<sup>2</sup>**

	Women	Men	All
Hard opponents	5%	13%	8%
(All) opponents	16%	36%	26%
Persuadables	50%	46%	48%
Supporters	34%	18%	27%

### Findings: Attitudes towards masculinity in Australia

Do people in Australia agree that traditional masculinity is problematic, because it constrains men’s and boys’ lives or it feeds into social problems such as violence against women? Or, do people agree that concerns about traditional masculinity are exaggerated, and even that men are now ‘under attack’? Or, are they somewhere between these, with more ambivalent and pliable attitudes?

We turn now to the further detail of the survey findings. The survey asked a wide variety of questions about men and masculinity, and this report clusters them into the following:

- *Beliefs about men and masculinity in general:* the harms of traditional masculinity, the benefits of change in masculine stereotypes or norms, what qualities are important in men, whether it is important for males to be ‘good men’ or ‘good people’, and the kinds of role models that boys need
- *Specific masculine norms:* compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia, men’s domination and control of women, and men’s roles in parenting
- *Gender:* gender as biologically determined or socially constructed
- *Changing gender:* opening up gender roles, and men’s roles in positive change
- *A war on men:* anti-feminist accounts of men and gender

In this report’s account of the survey results, ‘net agreement’ is comprised of agreement minus disagreement. It may be positive, signalling net agreement (where more people agree than disagree) or negative, signalling net disagreement (where more people disagree than agree). For example, if 60% agree with a statement and 40% disagree, then net agreement will be 20%. On the other hand, if 40% agree and 60% disagree, net agreement will be -20%. The report also uses the term ‘overall agreement’ as synonymous with net agreement. References to proportions agreeing with a particular statement refer to the sum of the proportions responding with either “Agree” or “Strongly agree”. The report uses the terms

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the columns do not sum to 100% as the ‘Hard opponents’ category is a subset of the ‘All opponents’ category.

'young women' and 'young men' for the samples of 16-17 year-old women and 16-17 year-old men respectively, and the terms 'adult women' and 'adult men' for the samples of over-18 women and over-18 men respectively.

### The harms of traditional masculinity

There is widespread agreement among survey respondents that traditional gender stereotypes are limiting and harmful, for boys and men and for children in general. There were three agree/disagree statements in the survey focused on the general idea that gender stereotypes or masculinity are harmful or constraining, and they received substantial support. Ordered from higher to lower levels of overall support, they were as follows.

- There is high endorsement of the idea that “Expectations about masculinity force some people to suppress parts of themselves” (54.8%). Few people disagree with this: 8.2% of respondents overall, 4.2% of supporters, and still only 11.2% of opponents. Young women are particularly strong supporters of this idea, with net agreement at 84.4%, whereas adult women and young men show similar levels of support (61.9% and 59.4% respectively) and adult men’s support is lowest (47.4%).
- There is also high overall agreement that “Traditional gender stereotypes for both boys and girls limit our children’s potential”, at 26.6%. This is particularly high among young women under 18 (with net agreement at 68.1%), young men under 18 (44.5%) and adult women (35.7%), while lower among adult men (17.5%), but levels of support among opponents (25.9%) are similar to those for the sample overall.
- There is general agreement that “Traditional masculinity harms both men and women” (24%). Close to half of respondents (45.3%) agree with the statement, although one-third (33.5%) are unsure. Again young women show the highest level of net agreement (75.6%), considerably higher than that of young men (36.8%) and adult women (31%) and far higher than that of adult men (16.4%).

Further elements in the survey spoke to the notion of traditional masculinity as constraining men or as giving them helpful guidance. For example, respondents had to choose between the following two statements:

- “Expecting men to be ‘masculine’ traps them in boxes and stops them from living full and happy lives.”
- “Traditional ideas of masculinity give men helpful guidance for living full and happy lives.”

Three-fifths of the sample (61.8%) chose the first statement. There were strong contrasts among the attitudinal segments in preferences. In line with their endorsement of the harms of traditional masculinity, supporters showed the highest support for the first statement, at 88.5%, this declined to 57.8% for persuadables, and the majority of opponents instead chose the second statement (59.4%).

Women in both age groups were more likely than men to choose the first statement, in which masculine expectations trap and constrain men. Close to nine in ten young women (87%) and two-thirds of adult women (67%) did so, compared to 57% of adult men and 54% of young men.

A second version of this forced-choice item involved different wording for the first item. Rather than referring to expectations, it referred to 'outdated ideas', reading as follows:

- "Outdated ideas of masculinity trap men in boxes and stop them from living full and happy lives."

The patterns of response were similar to that for the first pair. Overall endorsement of the first rather than second statement was at similar levels, with 57.9% choosing it. Both young women and adult women again showed stronger support than young men or adult men for the notion of masculinity's constraints on men. Four-fifths of young women (80%) and two-thirds of adult women (67%) did so, compared to 49% of adult men and 65% of young men.

The statement worded in terms of 'outdated ideas' rather than expectations attracted lower support among adult men (49%, down from 57%), but higher support among young men (65%, up from 54%). Here, it may be that young men under 18 were more comfortable than older men with the notion of certain ideas of masculinity being 'outdated', associated with an older generation of men.

Women consistently agree more often than men that gender stereotypes are harmful or constraining. They do this for gender stereotypes in general, but also for *masculine* gender stereotypes in particular, as a 2017 US survey of 2,023 15–24 year-olds illustrates. Only about one-quarter (26%) of young men reported that there is a great deal of pressure on men to conform to traditional ideas of masculine behavior, while nearly four in 10 (39%) women said the same.<sup>[20]</sup>

In the Common Cause survey, respondents were also presented with two statements identifying "traditional ideas about masculinity" as contributors to *specific* social problems – men's health problems and violence against women – and they showed net agreement with both. In the first, respondents were asked, "In Australia, men's rates of suicide, depression and anxiety are very high. Do you agree or disagree that traditional ideas about masculinity have contributed to this problem?" There was substantial overall agreement (44.8%) with this, including 58.6% of people agreeing or strongly agreeing. Agreement was particularly high among supporters (with 76% agreeing), but opponents and persuadables also showed majority agreement with the statement. Opponents in fact agreed more than persuadables, with 57.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing, compared to 50.1% of persuadables. Among the demographic groups, young women under 18 were particularly likely to agree that traditional ideas about masculinity contribute to the men's health problems named, with 86.3% agreeing, while young men under 18 also agreed more than both adult men and adult women (with agreement at 69.7%, 53.9% and 62.8% respectively).

The other statement linked "traditional ideas about masculinity" to sexual violence against girls and women. Respondents were asked, "In Australia, 1 in 5 women (including girls as young as 15) have experienced sexual violence. Do you think traditional ideas about masculinity have contributed to this problem?" Again, there was overall agreement (35.2%), although lower than for the first statement. Half of people (51%) agreed or strongly agreed, while one third (33%) were not sure. Supporters showed high levels of agreement, with 70.8% agreeing, but lower proportions of persuadables and opponents endorsed this statement, with 42.1% and 49% agreeing respectively. Again, young women showed the highest level of agreement. Close to four-fifths (78.1%) endorsed the notion that traditional

masculinity contributes to sexual violence against women and girls. Net levels of agreement were lower then, in order, among adult women, young men and adult men, and in all three demographic groups about one-third of respondents were 'unsure'.

For both these statements, opponents showed slightly higher levels of agreement than persuadables that traditional ideas about masculinity contribute to these social problems. That is surprising given their overall greater rejection of critiques of masculinity and it is not clear why that might be the case.

A third statement also linked traditional masculinity to violence against women, but this time phrased in an *undesirable* direction, disavowing masculinity's contribution to the problem: "Traditional masculinity in no way contributes to violence against women." There was overall *disagreement* with this statement, albeit just barely, with net agreement at -2.6%. One-third of the sample (32.5%) agreed, another third (32.4%) were unsure and 35.1% disagreed. Supporters were particularly sceptical of the statement, with net agreement of -60.2% and only 11.4% agreeing. Opponents, in stark contrast, were supportive of the notion that "Traditional masculinity in no way contributes to violence against women," with net agreement of 48.2%, 63.7% agreeing and only 15.6% disagreeing. Close to half of persuadables (46.4%) were unsure, while about one-quarter (26.9%) agreed. Among the demographic groups, young women showed the highest overall levels of rejection of this statement, then adult women, then young men and then adult men.

From the findings above, there was a gender gap in beliefs about the contribution of traditional masculinity to sexual violence against women and girls, but not in beliefs about the contribution of traditional masculinity to men's rates of suicide, depression and anxiety. (For the latter, young women's *and* young men's agreement were higher than for adult men or women.) Some other data shows a more consistent gender gap in beliefs about the effects of pressure to conform to masculinity. In a US survey of 15–24 year-olds, young women were more likely than young men to say that societal pressure to act masculine prevents young men from expressing their emotions in healthy ways (69% vs. 52%), limits the type of friendships men can have with other men (56% vs. 44%), leads men to treat women as weaker and less capable (58% vs. 41%), encourages sexually aggressive behavior (54% vs. 37%), encourages violent behavior in general (53% vs. 34%), and encourages homophobic attitudes (54% vs. 39%).<sup>[20]</sup>

A different strategy for examining people's understandings of masculinity and men's health problems came elsewhere in the survey, with respondents presented with two statements about the causes of male suicide and asked to choose which one they agreed with most. The first such question was as follows:

- Which statement do you agree with most? One of the causes of high male suicide rates is:
  - "...men worry about being judged if they talk about their emotions."
  - "...society doesn't allow men to be real men anymore."

Three-quarters of respondents (76.2%) opted for the first statement, with most therefore endorsing the notion that men are concerned about gendered judgement and/or rejecting the notion that the problem is that men are 'not allowed to be real men anymore'. Whereas

nearly all supporters (94.9%) chose the first statement, close to half of opponents (44.3%) chose the second. Levels of support for the second statement among young men and adult men (32% and 30%) were higher than among adult women and young women (18% and 14%).

A second version of this question involved a revision to the wording of the first statement, so that it now read, "... men don't know how to talk about their emotions." This made no difference to overall agreement across the sample, with again three-quarters (73.4%) selecting this first statement. Patterns of support were similar across the other attitudinal and demographic segments.

Three statements in the survey focused on the benefits to men of progress towards gender equality: "Increasing gender equality for women will also be good for men"; "Breaking free of traditional masculine stereotypes will improve health outcomes for men"; and "Men will be better off if they break free from narrow gender stereotypes." While three of the four statements above express the point that men's lives are limited or constrained by gender, these statements make the complementary point that men will benefit from changes in gender and gender stereotypes.

The idea that men will benefit from progress towards gender equality is a common theme in efforts to engage men in building gender equality and ending violence against women.<sup>[22, 23]</sup> This typically takes the form that men are constrained by dominant constructions of masculinity and that gender equality will benefit men themselves, the women and girls in men's lives, and the communities in which men live and work. Men are represented in the 'engaging men' field as partners and co-beneficiaries in gender equity work, although it also has moved towards more nuanced accounts of benefits and costs to men.<sup>[11, 24]</sup>

To what extent do people in Australia agree that men will benefit from progress towards gender equality?

- There is widespread support for the idea that "Increasing gender equality for women will also be good for men," with net agreement at 53.2%. Close to two-thirds of people (62.6%) agree with the statement, one-quarter (28.1%) are unsure, and one in 10 (9.3%) disagree. As one would expect, supporters are in very strong agreement with the benefits to men of increasing gender equality for women: 88.7% agree and only 2.2% disagree. Persuadables and opponents also tend to agree with the statement, albeit at lower levels. Substantial proportions are unsure (39.1% and 25.5% respectively), but most agree (53% and 55.5% respectively). Looking at demographic patterns, net agreement is highest among young women (at 71.3%) but lowest among young men (41.9%), with adult women's and adult men's overall agreement between these at 59.6% and 47.1% respectively. Proportions agreeing that "Increasing gender equality for women will also be good for men" comprise 76.9% of young women, 66.4% of adult women, 58.7% of adult men, and 58.1% of young men.
- The claim that "Breaking free of traditional masculine stereotypes will improve health outcomes for men" receives slightly lower endorsement, with net agreement at 48.1%. A slightly lower proportion agree (57.9%) than for the previous statement, and a slightly larger proportion are unsure (31.8%). Looking at demographic

patterns, as with the previous statement young women show the highest overall agreement (80%), but now adult women are next at 57.8%, then young men (47.7%) and adult men (38.7%). Proportions agreeing that “Breaking free of traditional masculine stereotypes will improve health outcomes for men” comprise 81.9% of young women, 64.4% of adult women, 60.2% of young men, and 52.1% of adult men.

- There is also high endorsement of the idea that “Men will be better off if they break free from narrow gender stereotypes” (46.5%). A majority of people (56.5%) agree, only 10% disagree and 33.6% are unsure. Even among opponents a similar proportion as for the overall sample agree (57.7%) and only 17.5% disagree. Supporters show very high agreement: 88.1% agree with the statement and 10.9% are unsure. Proportions agreeing included 71.9% of young women, 62.1% of adult women, 58% of young men, and 51.2% of adult men

A further statement in the survey focused on pressure on men to live up to masculine stereotypes, although not phrased in terms of harms to men. There was a high level of overall agreement (56.7%) with the statement that “There’s still a lot of pressure on men to live up to traditional masculine stereotypes”, as high as for the first statement above. Two-thirds of respondents (66.8%) agreed. Supporters were particularly likely to agree, with 81.1% doing so, but opponents and persuadables too showed reasonably high levels of agreement, at 69.8% and 57.9% respectively.

Only one statement in the survey focused on people’s perceptions of the state of gender inequality in Australia: “Even today, women and girls receive fewer opportunities and unequal treatment in many areas of life compared to men and boys.” (Some other statements do bear on people’s perceptions of gender equality, including those asking about agreement about a “feminist war on men” or whether “most men are good and decent”. These are discussed further below.) Respondents showed net agreement (37.6%) with the statement, with over half (56.5%) agreeing, one-quarter (24.5%) unsure and one-fifth (19%) disagreeing. As one would expect, supporters were most likely to agree, with 79.8% doing so, compared to 47.6% of persuadables and 50.7% of opponents. Opponents thus showed similar levels of direct agreement to persuadables with the idea that women and girls receive fewer opportunities and unequal treatment than men and boys, but also higher levels of disagreement: 31.4% disagreed, compared to 17.6% of persuadables. Respondents in the ‘hard opposition’ segment, the 8% of the sample with high levels of opposition to progressive messages about gender, strongly disagree with the statement: 63% disagree, including 37% who strongly disagree. Only 14% of hard opponents agree with the statement about gender inequalities, compared to 50.7% of opponents overall.

Other Australian data, similarly, finds that there is significant lack of recognition of gender inequality and discrimination as problems within Australian society. In a recent national survey of community attitudes among people in Australia, two in five (40%) believed that “many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia,” and one in 10 (10%) agreed that “discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the workplace in Australia.” The latter has declined slightly from 2013 and 2009, when agreement was at 13% and 11% respectively.<sup>[16]</sup> In another national survey of 2,122 Australians aged 16 and above, 85% of men and 91% of women agreed that “inequality between men and women (including boys and girls) is still a problem in Australia today”.<sup>[17]</sup>

Other Australian data also suggests that young people's lack of recognition of gender inequalities – their belief that gender equality has been achieved – is as high, if not slightly higher, than that among older people. While a similar proportion (11%) of 16–24 year-olds as people in general believe that “Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the workplace in Australia,” a slightly higher proportion (45%) of young people than people in general believed that “many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia”.<sup>[25]</sup>

Men's recognition of gender inequality is poorer than women's. In the Common Cause survey women's endorsement of the claim that “women and girls receive fewer opportunities and unequal treatment in many areas of life compared to men and boys” was significantly higher than men's, with large gaps in their net agreement. Whereas two-thirds to three-quarters of women (65.6% of adult women and 75% of young women) agreed with the statement, only around half of men (47.8% of adult men and 53.6% of young men) did so.

This matches other Australian data finding that men are less likely than women to recognise gender inequality and to see it as pervasive.<sup>[16, 17, 21]</sup> For example, in the recent ANROWS survey, 45% of men compared to 35% of women agreed that “many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia”.<sup>[16]</sup> This gender gap in recognition of gender inequality persists among young people. In the youth segment of the ANROWS survey, aged 16 to 24, three times as many young men as young women (15% vs. 6%) agreed that discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the workplace, and more young men (52%) than young women (37%) agreed that many women exaggerate gender inequality.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Important qualities in a man

The survey asked respondents to select three qualities that they think are most important for a man, from a fixed list of 14 qualities.<sup>3</sup> There are both similarities and contrasts in the three attitudinal segments' views of the qualities that are most important in a man. There is consistent support across the segments, although at varying levels, for the qualities 'respectful', 'caring' and 'loving'. However, the degree of support varies somewhat. Opponents selected similar qualities to other segments, but also were more likely to select traditional masculine qualities.

Opponents' top three qualities are 'respectful' (42.5%), 'caring' (30.4%) and 'loving' (29%). 'Strong' is close behind, at 28.5%. Persuadables' top three qualities are the same, although with greater weighting on these three: 'respectful' (61.4%), 'loving' (38.1%) and 'caring' (36.3%). High proportions of persuadables also selected 'thoughtful' (29.5%), 'kind' (28.3%) and 'strong' (23.1%). Supporters too chose 'respectful' (70.3%) and 'caring' (43.9%), but chose 'thoughtful' (40.8%) just in front of 'kind' (38.5%) and 'loving' (37.8%). Only 10%, on the other hand, chose 'strong', one-third the proportion of opponents who chose this (28.5%).

Opponents give greater weight than others to traditionally masculine qualities such as

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<sup>3</sup> The list included: Tough, Strong, Self-sufficient, Provider, In control, Risk-taking, Thoughtful, Kind, Loving, Emotional, Sensitive, Caring, Respectful, Sharing.

strength, control, self-sufficiency, providing and risk-taking. While they agree with persuadables and supporters that qualities such as being respectful, caring and loving are the most important ones for men, they give these slightly less weight. Across the entire sample, adult women and men share the same top three qualities: respectful, loving and caring. 'Respectful' is the most frequently chosen quality for both men and women, but women give more weight than men to it, with 70.4% of women nominating this compared to 52.1% of men.

The popularity of the quality 'respectful' as important for men may rest in part on the flexibility and ambiguity of the term, its ability to be used in both conservative and feminist ways. On the one hand, from a conservative viewpoint, to be 'respectful' could mean to give due consideration to traditional values and institutions. Men's 'respect' to women, for example, could involve what some have called 'benevolent sexism', a form of sexism based on paternalism, complementary gender differentiation and heterosexual intimacy. Benevolent sexism involves notions that women should be protected and provided for by men, and while its idealisation of women appears positive it implies and involves women's inferiority.<sup>[26]</sup> On the other hand, from a feminist viewpoint, to be 'respectful' is to be egalitarian and to give due consideration to others' rights, needs and experiences. This is reflected in the widespread phrase 'respectful relationships education', describing education in schools and elsewhere intended to prevent and reduce intimate partner and sexual violence. In any case, the survey finds that the term 'respectful' is a popular one among desirable qualities for men. The same is true in other surveys too, such as a US survey of young men aged 11–24.<sup>[27]</sup>



### Beyond gender: from real men to good people

The survey explored people's understandings of desirable qualities in men and the extent to which these are seen as exclusive to men, and whether people see it as more important for males to be 'real men' or 'good people' – their openness, that is, to degendered standards of personhood. Three statements were particularly relevant here:

- “What we value in a man is what we should value in all people – men and women alike.”
- “Being a good man is really just about being a good person.”
- “These days, not enough men know how to be a man.”

These statements work in opposite directions, with the first two implying degendered standards for personhood and the third endorsing specifically male standards for men.

Net agreement with the first statement was high, at 69.7%, and higher among supporters than among opponents and persuadables, at 87.3%. Persuadables' net agreement was 62%. However, opponents' net agreement was higher than this, at 67%, and virtually the same as overall levels of agreement.

A second statement again endorsing degendered standards of personhood in the survey was, “Being a good man is really just about being a good person”. Again, net agreement was high at 72.4%, and this time with no difference between adult men's and women's levels of agreement. Among younger respondents there was a gender gap, with young women's agreement higher at 83.1% than young men's agreement at 68.4%. Supporters again showed higher levels of agreement that “Being a good man is really just about being a good person,” with 90.5% agreeing and only 2.8% disagreeing. While persuadables' and opponents' endorsement of the statement was not quite as high, most too agreed, with 71.8% of persuadables and in fact 77.5% of opponents agreeing.

Responses regarding these first two statements, and particularly opponents' high levels of agreement with them, may reflect subtle differences in understandings of the statements and of desirable qualities in men, women and people. It may be that opponents understand the statements to say that male definitions of personhood are primary: men set the standards, so what we value in men should set the standards for everyone. On the other hand, supporters probably are more likely to understand the two statements as endorsing degendered standards for personhood.

The third statement here works in the opposite direction, implying a need for men to know “how to be a man”. There was only moderate agreement with the notion that “These days, not enough men know how to be a man”. Net agreement was at 19.2%, again with men's net agreement higher than women's: 25.6%, compared to women's 13.1%. Opponents overall agree with the statement, with net agreement at 55.6% and 69.2% agreeing. Persuadables show lower levels of agreement, with 46.9% agreeing, and a large minority (40.1%) neither agree nor disagree. Supporters largely reject the sentiment that “These days, not enough men know how to be a man”: only 13.6% agree, and 21.9% neither agree nor disagree.

## Role models for boys

In popular discussions of boys, men and gender, one important area of concern is the 'role models' that boys have. This rests on an understanding of adult figures, whether parents or others, as important socialising influences on boys' emerging identities and behaviours. The survey explored people's perceptions of appropriate or desirable 'role models' for boys, through an agree–disagree statement and a series of forced-choice questions.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed that "Boys and men need better role models to break free from harmful forms of masculinity". Net agreement was at 57.6%. Two-thirds of people (65.5%) agreed that "Boys and men need better role models to break free from harmful forms of masculinity", one-quarter (26.5%) were unsure and few (8%) disagreed. Persuadables and opponents showed similar levels of net agreement, at 47.2% and 54.6% respectively, whereas supporters' net agreement was very high at 81%. Looking at the demographic patterns, there was less contrast by gender or age in patterns of response. Young women showed the highest levels of net agreement (77.5%), then adult women (64.5%), young men (53.5%), and adult men (51.4%).

The survey's content on role models also involved two sets of forced-choice questions, with the wording manipulated to compare responses to different versions of statements in the two pairs per set of statements. For these questions, the sample was split randomly into two groups, with one version of the paired statements tested on one group and the other version tested on the other.

Respondents in one half of the sample were asked which of the following statements they agreed with most:

- "Boys need both women and men as role models."
- "Boys especially need men as role models."

Four-fifths of people (81.1%) chose the first statement. Supporters did so overwhelmingly (95.4%), but persuadables (83.4%) and opponents (61.6%) also were more likely to do so.

Other respondents were presented with a second version of these paired statements, with the wording varied in the first statement so that it did not refer to "both women and men as role models" but stated, "Boys just need good role models and it doesn't matter what their gender is". With this change in wording there was less support for the first statement, although it was still the majority choice. With this different wording, under two-thirds of people (62.2%) chose the "it doesn't matter what their gender is" statement. Supporters and persuadables still were more likely to agree with the statement than with the "especially need men" one, but at lower levels, with 78.4% and 62.7% agreement respectively, and opponents now were more likely to agree with the latter statement, with 53% choosing this.

There was greater support for the notion that "Boys need both women and men as role models" (81.1%) than for the notion that "Boys just need good role models and *it doesn't matter what their gender is*" (emphasis added) (62.2%). The latter message is explicitly de-gendered, whereas the former message's reference to "both women and men" speaks perhaps to a more familiar, even traditional account of mothers and fathers as the desirable agents of boys' socialisation, and it is likely to be this that boosts its relative support.

The second set of statements focusing on role models included this pair:

- If we want boys and young men to live happy and fulfilled lives:
  - “...they need role models who show them that there are many ways to be a good man.”
  - “...they need male role models who show them how to be real men.”

There was strong support for the “many ways to be a good man” response. Over four-fifths of respondents (85.6%) chose this statement over the “show them how to be real men” one. Supporters again did so almost universally (98.2%), but persuadables (88.8%) and opponents (69.8%) also were more likely to do so. Among demographic groups, support for the “real men” statement was highest among young men, then adult men, then adult women, and then young women.

In the second version of these paired statements, the wording of the first statement did not refer to “many ways to be a good man” but to “being a good person”. The second statement again stayed the same:

- If we want boys and young men to live happy and fulfilled lives:
  - “...they need role models who show them that being a good man is really just about being a good person.”
  - “...they need male role models who show them how to be real men.”

The change in language from “a good man” to “a good person” here seems to have had little effect on the patterns of response. Overall agreement with the “good person” statement was at a similar level to that for “many ways to be a good man”, with 83.7% of respondents choosing this. Supporters again were almost unanimous in their agreement with the first statement over the second (97.9%), and persuadables (85.8%) and opponents (67.4%) also were more likely to side with this sentiment. One-fifth of both young men and adult men (21%) opted for the “real men” statement, as did lower proportions of adult women (11%) and young women (7%).

The survey also included statements focused on specific masculine norms, regarding sexuality, men’s domination and control of women in relationships, and men’s parenting.

### **Compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia**

Among respondents a definition of manhood in terms of compulsory heterosexuality seems weak. There is overall disagreement with the statement that “A gay guy isn’t a real man”, with 63.8% disagreeing. However, with one-fifth of the sample (19.9%) responding that they are ‘not sure’ or ‘don’t know’, net agreement is just under half at 47.5%. Opponents however show far higher agreement with the idea that “A gay guy isn’t a real man”: 40.2% agree, compared to 10.8% of persuadables and 2.4% of supporters.

Adult men agree more than adult women with the notion that “A gay guy isn’t a real man”, although only 20.6% do so (compared to 11.9% of women). Young men show the highest levels of support for the statement, with over one-quarter (26.4%) agreeing, whereas young women’s support is at the same, lower level as adult women’s, at 11.3%. The proportion of young men endorsing this statement is nearly identical to the 28% of young adult men aged

18–30 who endorsed the same statement in *The Man Box*, another Australian survey in 2018.<sup>[3]</sup>

There is high overall agreement (75.3%) that “Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal”. Fewer than one in 20 people (4.3% of the sample) disagree. Even opponents endorse the statement, again with only 5% disagreeing. Men’s endorsement of this anti-homophobic sentiment is lower than women’s sentiment. Three-quarters of adult men (75.1%) agree and one-fifth (19.6%) are unsure. Among younger men 74.9% agree, including 45.2% who strongly agree. The same statement was used in *The Man Box* survey of 1,000 young men aged 18 to 30 in Australia, and here 83% agreed.<sup>[3]</sup>

Looking at the demographic groups, endorsement of men’s use of violence to get respect is strongest among young men, although still at low levels, and weakest among young women and adult women. Over one-fifth of young men under 18 (22.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary,” and this proportion is close to the 20% of young adult men aged 18–30 who endorsed the same statement in another Australian survey in 2018<sup>[3]</sup>. This is higher than direct agreement with the statement among adult women (7.3%), young women (8.3%), and adult men (15.3%).

Traditional definitions of masculinity in terms of the rejection of all things feminine also are not universal. There is overall agreement (54%) with the statement that “If a boy chooses a female character for a fancy dress event at school, that’s totally fine.” Few people disagree: 11.8% of the overall sample, 15.3% of men, and 17.1% of opponents. However, this is the only statement in the survey directly testing the definition of manhood as not-feminine.

### **Men dominating and controlling women**

There is generally a strong rejection among the survey respondents of the idea that men should dominate and control women in relationships. Three statements in the survey focused on this area.

There is generally high net disagreement with the notion that “If a guy has a girlfriend or wife he deserves to know where she is all the time”. It is troubling to note, nevertheless, that close to one in five respondents (18.7%) agree with the statement. Furthermore, opponents overall agree: 47.9% of opponents agree or strongly agree with this statement, and another 18.9% are not sure or don’t know. Thus only one-third of opponents (33.3%) disagree with the statement. Levels of disagreement otherwise are high, although lower among under-18 males. As one might expect, supporters are particularly strong in their rejection of the idea that men should dominate and control women in relationships, with 96.1% disagreeing with the statement that “If a guy has a girlfriend or wife he deserves to know where she is all the time”.

Focusing on the demographic segments, there is net disagreement among both men and women, adult and younger, although this is weaker among males than females: 15.4% of adult women, 20.7% of young women, 22.1% of adult men, and 27.1% of young men agree that “If a guy has a girlfriend or wife he deserves to know where she is all the time”. The same statement was used in *The Man Box*, an earlier survey among young men aged 18 to 30 in Australia, and there 37% of young men supported it.<sup>[3]</sup>

There is a similar pattern for the statement, “A man should always have the final say about

decisions in his relationship or marriage.” Only 14% of respondents agree with this notion, contributing to net agreement of -53.9%. However, among opponents the proportion who agrees is 47.3%, while another 18.7% are not sure or don’t know, generating overall net agreement (13.3%) among opponents. Supporters show a near universal rejection of the statement, with 97.2% disagreeing. People’s overall level of endorsement of men’s “final say” in relationship and marital decisions is similar to that for a similar statement in the National Community Attitudes Survey, “Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household”. About one in six people (16%) agreed with this sentiment.<sup>[16]</sup> Levels of agreement were virtually identical among young people aged 16 to 24, with 17% agreeing, down from 22% in the previous survey in 2013.<sup>[25]</sup>

Again troubling, is the support among men for men’s “final say” in relationships and marriages. Among the age and sex categories, young men show the highest levels of agreement with the notion that “A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage,” with 29.7% agreeing and 15.5% unsure. Among adult men, close to one-fifth (18.7%) endorse the statement. These levels of agreement are higher than those among young women and adult women, at 12.5% and 9.3% respectively. The same statement was used in *The Man Box* survey, and there 27% of young men aged 18–30 supported it.<sup>[3]</sup>

Men’s higher endorsement of male power and control in relationships and marriages in this survey is similar to that documented in the National Community Attitudes Survey. Asked whether “Men should take control in relationships and be head of the household,” almost twice as many men (21%) as women (12%) agree.<sup>[16]</sup> This gender gap persists among younger people aged 16–24: 22% of men, compared to 12% of women, agreed with this sentiment.<sup>[25]</sup> These levels of agreement have declined slightly since the previous survey in 2013, in which 27% of young men and 17% of young women agreed that “Men should take control in relationships and be head of the household”.<sup>[21]</sup>

The third statement in the survey related to power and violence, not focused on men’s domination of women but endorsing men’s use of violence to ‘get respect’, receives even less support. Only about one-tenth of respondents (11.2%) agree that “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary,” contributing to net agreement of -67.3%. Supporters are almost universal in their rejection of the statement, with 99.6% disagreeing, including 92% strongly disagreeing. Persuadables too reject the statement, with 80.2% disagreeing. Opponents are more receptive to men’s use of violence, with one-third (33.2%) agreeing that “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary.” Still, over half (55%) disagree.

Looking at the demographic groups, endorsement of men’s use of violence to get respect is strongest among young men, although still at low levels, and weakest among young women and adult women. One-fifth of young men aged under 18 (20.6%) endorsed the idea that “Men should use violence to get respect if necessary,” and this proportion is nearly identical to the 20% of young adult men aged 18–30 who endorsed the same statement in *The Man Box* survey.<sup>[3]</sup>

### Men’s roles in parenting

The survey’s content on men and parenting comprised two sets of forced-choice questions, with the wording manipulated to compare responses to different versions of statements. Respondents in half the sample were asked:

- Which statement do you agree with most?
  - Men who stay home full-time to care for their children and men who go to work are both good role models.
  - It's important for children, and especially boys, to see their fathers go to work and earn a living.

There was strong endorsement for the first statement rather than the second, with 80.7% agreement. Supporters were almost unanimously supportive (98.6%), and there was endorsement too from four-fifths of persuadables (78.5%), two-thirds of opponents (65.5%), and over half (59%) of the hard opposition. Among demographic groups, support for the first statement was highest among young women, at 92%, and lowest among young men, at 64%. One-third of young men (36%) instead agreed, "It's important for children, and especially boys, to see their fathers go to work and earn a living." This suggests a large gender gap in young people's support for stay-at-home fathering.

What about when the choice is between fathers who go to work and fathers who stay home? Respondents in the other half of the sample were asked a second version of these questions, with the first statement now reading, "Men who stay home full-time to care for their children are good role models." With this revised wording omitting the option of "men who go to work", support for the first statement was significantly lower. Total agreement now was at 55.9%. Among the attitudinal segments the same ordering of support was visible, but now at far lower levels: 77.5% of supporters, 56% of persuadables, 36.7% of opponents and 20% of hard opponents. Young women and adult women endorsed men staying home full-time at similar levels, at 65% and 63% respectively, fewer young men (57%) did so, and adult men now showed the lowest levels of support (50%). The gender gap in support for men's caregiving went from 28% among young people and 7% among adults for the first pair of statements, to 8% and 13% for the second pair of statements.

People thus are less supportive of men as role models for children in general, or boys in particular, when those men are full-time parents at home than when they are full-time parents *or* in paid work. They are more comfortable with an account of men's roles in which full-time parenting is one option or variation, alongside men's paid work, than with an account in which men stay home to care for children. It may be that the latter message moves too far from stereotypical notions of men's roles as paid workers and breadwinners. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents (55.9%) do endorse the 'staying home' statement, and higher proportions of young women and adult women.

Other Australian data also finds a gender gap in attitudes towards families and parenting roles, with men more supportive than women of male breadwinner and female caregiver roles and 'traditional gender roles' more generally. In the 2018 survey *From Girls to Men*, there were statistically significant differences between men's and women's agreement with each of the statements listed in Table 4.<sup>[17]</sup> On the other hand, there were not significant gender differences in endorsement of the statements "Women prefer to stay at home with young children" (with 29% overall agreement) and "Caring for children and elderly parents is best done by women" (with 25% overall agreement). Men also show slightly more traditional attitudes towards parenting and paid work in another dataset, the HILDA Survey, a household-based panel study of over 17,000 people in Australia from 2005 to 2015. This finds that attitudes have become less traditional over time, across all groups.<sup>[28]</sup>

**Table 4: Endorsement of traditional gender roles, *From Girls to Men* survey (2018)**

	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>All</b>
Women are best suited to be the primary carer of children	40%	31%	35%
Domestic work should be shared equally between partners regardless of gender	80%	89%	85%
It is important to maintain traditional gender roles so that families function well and children are properly supported	37%	26%	31%
It is important to maintain traditional gender roles so that Australia remains globally competitive with a well performing economy	27%	22%	24%

The survey also tested people’s understandings of gender roles and relations as biologically determined or socially constructed.

### **The social construction of gender**

There is broad support for an understanding of gender as socially constructed – for the understanding that boys’ and men’s lives and relations are shaped by social messages, by gender socialisation, as much as they are by biology. For example;

- There is overall agreement (38.2%), and little direct disagreement, with the statement that “Traditional masculine attitudes and behaviours are learned, not part of men’s biology”. Even most opponents agree (38.1%), and their net agreement is higher than that of persuadables. At the same time, relatively high proportions of respondents also indicate being unsure or not knowing, including one-third (32.1%) of the sample overall and 44.8% of persuadables.

While there is widespread support for the idea that attitudes and behaviours are learned, there is also support for the notion of ‘natural’ differences between men and women:

- There is a high level of agreement with the notion that “It’s natural for men and women to think and act differently to each other.” Net agreement is at 68%, with very few people (6.3%) disagreeing. Even among supporters, only 11.4% disagree with this statement and 70.8% agree. Net levels of agreement with the statement are highest among opponents, as one might expect, but also in the majority among persuadables and supporters. All the age and sex categories show net agreement of between 60% and 70%.

This suggests that a general notion of gender differences is widespread, even alongside an acknowledgement of the fact of gender socialisation, and that a simplistic language of gender sameness will be rejected. The term ‘natural’ here may not necessarily mean, ‘based in biology’ or hardwired in some sense. It may mean something more ‘everyday’, a recognition that men and women often think and act in contrasting ways and that this is



therefore common, expected or 'natural'.

Net agreement with another biologically determinist statement is lower overall. Only 34.9% of people agree that "People who advocate gender equality want men to behave in ways that go against their natural instincts", and 35.2% are unsure, meaning that net agreement is at 5%. Agreement with this statement may be lower given the phrasing of 'natural instincts', which invites a more strictly biologicistic reading. However, there is very high agreement with this notion among opponents. Net agreement is at 79.3%, with 81.4% of opponents agreeing. The gender gap in attitudes is particularly evident here, with large gaps in responses between young men and young women and between adult men and adult women. Nearly twice as many young men as young women agree that "People who advocate gender equality want men to behave in ways that go against their natural instincts", 39.4% and 21.9% respectively. Older respondents were similar, with far more men (42.3%) than women (27.3%) agreeing.

A statement said to excuse or justify males' anti-social behaviour as inevitable, natural or biological is that "Boys will be boys". Levels of agreement and disagreement among Australians with the notion that "Boys will be boys" are evenly split: one-third (32.4%) disagree, over one-third (38%) agree, and close to one-third (29.6%) neither agree nor disagree, meaning that overall sentiment tips slightly towards net agreement at 5.6%.

However, there is a substantial gender divide in support, with far higher support for the statement among men. Adult men's net agreement that "Boys will be boys" is 22%, while adult women's is -11.5%. For example, 45.7% of adult men, but 30.1% of adult women, agree with the notion. There is a similarly large gender gap between young men and young women: while among under-18 men net agreement is at 18.1%, among under-18 women it is at -24.4%. Opponents show far higher levels of support than other segments, with 64.1% agreeing with the statement, and the gap between their attitudes on this statement and those of persuadables and supporters is far greater than for the two other statements here. A little over one-third of persuadables (36.6%), but only 14% of supporters, agree that "Boys will be boys".

Other Australian data also finds gender gaps in attitudes towards gender as biologically determined or socially constructed. A 2018 survey, *From Girls to Men*, found that men were more likely than women to agree that "Women are not naturally ambitious" (14% and 9%).<sup>[17]</sup> (This survey also found that men were more likely than women to agree with statements about differences in men's and women's level of ambition, suitability for leadership roles, and skills and talents, but responses here may be based on appraisals of typical social differences rather than fixed biological attributes.)

The notion of 'masculinity' in scholarship is built on a social constructionist approach, in which the term refers to the meanings given to being male and the social organisation of boys' and men's lives and relations. However, the term 'masculinity' is not necessarily widely understood in these terms. Instead, it may be understood as referring simply to 'men' or 'what men are'. This also means that the phrase 'toxic masculinity' may be misunderstood as conveying the message that men *per se* are toxic.

It may be this confusion that we can see in the evenly split support for the contrasting statements "Masculinity and femininity are naturally determined by biology" (49.6%) and



“Masculinity and femininity are stereotypes imposed on people from a young age” (50.4%). Respondents were presented with a forced choice between the two statements. Supporters show stronger support for the social constructionist statement (with 71.9% choosing this), opponents and adult men show stronger support for the biological statement (with 64% and 61.4% respectively choosing this), and adult women’s overall support is split evenly between the two. Persuadables too are evenly split between the two statements, while supporters side with the social constructionist statement, with 71.9% choosing this.

Having explored people’s understandings of the harms of traditional masculinity and the benefits of change, the survey also explored their agreement with the need to open up or transform gender roles.

### Opening up gender roles

There is widespread recognition among survey respondents of the need to open up gender roles for men, particularly with regard to gender roles that constrain males’ own health and wellbeing. This includes strong levels of agreement with statements endorsing the need for men and boys to be free of gender stereotypes or harmful forms of masculinity; for boys to cry; and endorsing the idea of diversity in ways of being a man. For example:

- Net agreement that “People should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes” is at 65.5%. Over two-thirds of people (72.1%) agree with this sentiment, and only 6.6% disagree. Supporters are overwhelmingly positive about this idea, with 94.2% agreeing and less than 1% disagreeing. There is reasonable agreement among persuadables and opponents, with 62.8% and 68.1% agreeing respectively.
- Most people agree that “It’s time for men to escape narrow gendered stereotypes the same way women have in recent years,” with net agreement at 53.8%. More than half of people (61.8%) agree, including 82.7% of supporters, 51.9% of persuadables and 60.5% of opponents. Among the demographic groups, young women show the highest levels of overall agreement that “It’s time for men to escape narrow gendered stereotypes the same way women have in recent years” at 73.8%, with only 2.5% disagreeing. Then come adult women, young men, and finally adult men.

Two statements here receive particularly high levels of endorsement, as follows.

- “There is more than one way to be a man” receives high net agreement, at 77.2%. Four-fifths of the sample (80.4%) agree with this statement. Adult men and women show similar levels of agreement, and even opponents show net agreement (75.9%), slightly more than that of persuadables (69.9%).
- “We need to teach our boys that it is okay to cry” receives high net agreement, at 76.8%. Four-fifths of people (80.6%) agree with the statement, and only 3.8% disagree. There is greater endorsement of the statement among adult women, under-18 women, and supporters in particular, with levels of agreement at 87.9%, 93.1%, and 95.8% respectively. Even among opponents and adult men, three-quarters agree with this sentiment, with agreement at 77.1% and 73.5% respectively.

There is widespread agreement with the norm of men sharing emotions when times are tough, although support is lower among men than women. Respondents were presented with a forced choice between two statements, “It’s important for a man to share his emotions when times are tough,” and “It’s important for a man to show strength when times are tough.” Three-quarters (74.4%) of the sample chose the first statement. Support for the notion of men sharing emotions, as indicated by choice of the first statement rather than the second, was lower among men (62.5%), and particularly low among the ‘hard opponents’ (43%).

### Men’s roles in positive change

Most statements in the survey addressed general perceptions of men, masculinity and gender and explored general ideas of the need for positive change in gender roles. However, one item focused on men’s active roles in positive change. Respondents were asked about their agreement or disagreement with the statement, “There are things that all men can do to help prevent violence against women.”

There is very high, and almost universal, agreement among the survey respondents that men can play a role in preventing violence against women. Net agreement was at 75.4%. Just under four out of five respondents (79.4%) agreed with the statement, with this comprised almost evenly of agreement and strong agreement. About one in six respondents (16.6%) were unsure, and only 4.1% disagreed. Adult men’s endorsement of men’s roles in preventing violence against women is slightly lower than women’s, with net agreement of 71.2% and 79.4%, and proportions agreeing of 76% and 82.6%, respectively. The gender gap is larger for younger respondents, because whereas young men agree more than older men with the statement (with net agreement of 76.1%), young women agree substantially more than older women (with net agreement of 90%).

Agreement that “There are things that all men can do to help prevent violence against women” was visible across the three attitudinal segments. Even amongst opponents, for example, 77.1% agree and 18% are unsure. As one might expect, supporters show near universal agreement: 94.1% agree, including 64.3% strongly agreeing, 3.5% are unsure and only 2.3% disagree. Hard opponents, however, are particularly unlikely to endorse this sentiment: 30% are not sure, 22% disagree and just under half (49%) agree.

The survey, finally, examined people’s endorsement of conservative and anti-feminist understandings of men and gender: that traditional masculine qualities have served men well, men are being excessively and unfairly criticised, or even that there is now a ‘war on men’.

### A war on men

So far, this report has highlighted a wide range of ways in which most survey respondents agree with desirable statements regarding men and gender, endorsing a critique of the limiting character of traditional masculinity and supporting the need to break free of gender stereotypes and open up gender roles for men. These patterns were evident largely in response to statements phrased in desirable terms. Yet when we phrase statements instead in undesirable terms, endorsing anti-feminist perspectives, this support for progressive views of men and gender appears weaker.

When statements about men and gender are framed in *anti-feminist* terms, then

opponents' views tend to be markedly more conservative, and often to differ from those of persuadables and supporters. In fact, on some anti-feminist statements, overall levels of sympathy – and not just those among opponents – are troublingly high.

The survey's agree–disagree content included four statements framed in anti-feminist terms:

- “The focus these days on harmful masculinity is part of a feminist war on men.”
- “Criticising masculinity is unfair because most men are good and decent.”
- “Men are being lectured too much about toxic masculinity.”
- “Traditional masculine qualities have served society well.”

Survey respondents showed overall agreement with all four statements. Levels of net agreement vary from lows of 7.6% and 13.2%, for the first and fourth statements above respectively, to 17.2% for the third statement, to 47.6% for the second one. Thus, while there is net agreement with all four statements, this is weakest for the notion of a “feminist war on men” and strongest for the notion of most men as “good and decent”.

Taking the first statement, there is substantial, although minority, direct agreement with the notion of a “feminist war on men”. Respondents show net agreement, although at a low level (7.6%). This is because about one-third of the population (34.3%) agree, another third (38.8%) are unsure, and only one-quarter (26.8%) disagree. Men in general show higher agreement, for example with 41.3% agreeing and net agreement of 21.2%, whereas women overall disagree, with net agreement at -6.5%. Opponents show very high levels of agreement with this notion of a ‘feminist war on men’, with 83.4% agreeing, 14.7% unsure and only 1.8% disagreeing. Supporters, of course, reject the notion, with only 6.1% agreeing, although 21.8% are unsure or don't know.

Support in this survey for the notions of a feminist attack on men is echoed in an earlier Australian survey. In a national survey of 2,122 Australians aged 16 and above in March 2018, there were significant levels of agreement with statements such as “Gender equality strategies in the workplace do not take men into account” and “Men and boys are increasingly excluded from measures to improve gender equality”.<sup>[17]</sup> More detail on these findings is below.

The notion of a feminist attack on men overlaps with the notion that men in general, or masculinity, are being unfairly criticised or tarnished, and this is the focus of the second statement above. There is net agreement (47.6%) that “Criticising masculinity is unfair because most men are good and decent.” Over half of respondents (58.9%) agree with the statement, and 29.8% are unsure or don't know. Four out of five opponents (79.7%) agree with this, with net agreement at 73.9%. Even among supporters there is net agreement (24.5%), with just under half (48.2%) agreeing with the statement. Young women's level of agreement that “Criticising masculinity is unfair because most men are good and decent” is particularly low, with 38.8% agreeing but about the same proportion (37.5%) unsure, and thus net agreement at only 15%. Young men are much more supportive of the statement, with net agreement at 40.6%, and 54.9% agreeing.

The sentiment in the statement that “Criticising masculinity is unfair because most men are

good and decent” is similar to that in “#NotAllMen”, the hashtag that emerged in 2014 as a popular response to feminist criticisms of men’s violence against women and men’s sexism more widely. #NotAllMen was criticised as a defensive side-tracking of attention to men’s violence. The point that ‘most men are good and decent’ can serve to obscure the actual extent of men’s involvement in sexist and violent behaviours and neglect the unfair privileges many men receive as men. At the same time, it is vital to recognise that many men do not perpetrate violence or sexism and that men’s involvements in these vary markedly.<sup>[11]</sup>

There is also net agreement (17.2%) with the third statement above, that “Men are being lectured too much about toxic masculinity.” Close to half of men (48.6%) agree, as do close to one-third (30.2%) of women. Opponents are particularly supportive of this notion, with 85% agreeing and only 2.1% disagreeing. Over half of persuadables (53.5%) are unsure or don’t know, while 29.3% agree. On the other hand, supporters are more likely to disagree. Just over half of supporters (53%) disagree that “Men are being lectured too much about toxic masculinity,” and another third (34.5%) are unsure. Males, both those under 18 and adult men, overall agree with the statement at similar levels, with agreement at 50.3% and 48.6% respectively, whereas only 30.2% of adult women and 27.5% of young women agree.

Net agreement that “Traditional masculine qualities have served society well” is not quite as low as for the “feminist war on men” statement, but still relatively visible at 13.2%. About one-quarter of the sample (23.9%) disagree. Disagreement is far lower among opponents (9.2%), and supporters generally disagree (54.2%). As with the previous statement, both adult men and young men tend to agree with this statement, a lower proportion of adult women do so, and few young women agree. Levels of agreement with the statement for these four groups are at 43.8%, 41.3%, 30.2% and 21.9% respectively.

There are three points to take from these findings regarding anti-feminist attitudes. First, anti-feminist messages do have a general currency among people in Australia. If people are offered anti-feminist messages, then substantial proportions will endorse them.

Second, while a pre-existing anti-feminist opposition shows some agreement with desirable messages, it does not take much to make them look and act like an opposition when they hear anti-feminist messages e.g. of a ‘war on men’.

Of these four statements, the one about ‘criticising masculinity as unfair because most men are good and decent’ attracted the most support, although there was net agreement with all four. This suggests, and this is the third point, that critics of masculinity must be careful to avoid the perception that they are suggesting that most men behave badly. If the term ‘masculinity’ is understood as synonymous with ‘men’, then any criticisms of masculinity may be misheard as blanket criticisms of men, generating defensive and hostile responses.

Returning to the first point, two Australian surveys corroborate the point that significant proportions of the population will endorse anti-feminist beliefs that men are treated unfairly or discriminated against. *From Girls to Men*, a national survey of 2,122 Australians aged 16 and above, included a number of statements offering a regressive or opposition framing of men and gender,<sup>[17]</sup> shown in Table 5. Note that the first two statements in the table are somewhat ambiguous: agreement could reflect an anti-feminist concern about discrimination and injustice suffered by men, or a feminist concern that men’s potential

roles in building gender equality are being neglected.

**Table 5: Endorsement of regressive statements, *From Girls to Men* survey (2018)**

	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>All</b>
Gender equality strategies in the workplace do not take men into account	42%	26%	34%
Men and boys are increasingly excluded from measures to improve gender equality	42%	23%	32%
Political correctness gives women an advantage in the workplace	41%	23%	31%
Political correctness means I cannot say openly what I think about gender equality	54%	40%	47%

The *From Girls to Men* survey also documents generational differences in support for these and other statements about gender. Among males for example, there were uneven relationships between support and age. Millennial males (in their mid-20s to late 30s) and older males (aged 73+) showed the highest levels of agreement that “Gender equality strategies in the workplace do not take men into account”, at 45%, compared to 38% of Gen Z males (aged 16–23) and 39% of Gen X men (aged 39–53).<sup>[17]</sup> Asked whether “Men and boys are increasingly excluded from measures to improve gender equality,” again, Millennial men (in their mid-20s to late 30s) were significantly more likely (48%) to agree or strongly agree, but this time followed by Gen Z males (aged 16–23) at 44%.<sup>[17]</sup>

Evidence for the currency of anti-feminist beliefs among people in Australia also comes from the ANROWS survey <sup>[16]</sup>. Substantial proportions endorse statements suggesting a general hostility towards or criticism of women and women’s efforts to gain equality (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Endorsement of regressive statements, National Community Attitudes Survey (2018)**

	<b>All</b>	<b>All young people 16–24</b>	<b>Young men 16–24</b>	<b>Young women 16–24</b>
Many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia	40%	45%	52%	37%
Many women mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist	50%	49%	57%	41%
Many women fail to fully appreciate all that men do for them	36%	29%	33%	25%
Women often flirt with men just	20%	15%	20%	11%

to be hurtful				
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All four statements above are instances of what some have called ‘modern sexism’ or ‘neosexism’, characterised by a denial of discrimination against women and resentment of complaints about sexism and efforts to assist women.<sup>[26]</sup> The first of these statements suggests that women deliberately exaggerate the extent of gender inequality, and 40% of Australians agree. The second statement allows that women simply make mistakes in naming sexism, and half agree. The last represents a view of women as malicious towards men, and one in five people in Australia agree.

These forms of sexist denial and resentment are, predictably, more common among men than among women. Among young people in Australia, young men were significantly more likely than young women to agree with each of the four statements.<sup>[25]</sup><sup>4</sup> Overseas data also shows that substantial proportions of young men endorse anti-feminist sentiments. For example, in a US survey of young men aged 11–24, three-quarters (74%) did not dispute that “men/boys are held to a higher standard than women/girls” (43% agreed and 31% were neutral), two-thirds of young men (64%) did not challenge the assertion that “men/boys are punished just for acting like men/boys today” (32% agreed, 32% neutral), and two-thirds of young men (67%) did not disagree that “women/girls receive special treatment” (37% agreed, 30% neutral).<sup>[27]</sup>

### Findings: Patterns of opposition, support and ambivalence

This section offers some reflections on the patterns of support, resistance and ambivalence documented in this report.

The ‘opponents’ are one quarter of the sample (25.9%). However, they are a relatively weak opposition, in that sometimes their views are similar to those of the ‘persuadables’. The framing of messages seems to matter. For example, when statements on gender are framed in terms that we see as desirable, members of the opposition segment often agree with these to similar degrees as members of the persuadable segment (but not to the same degree as supporters). However, when statements on gender are framed in opposition terms, members of the opposition segments show responses significantly different from persuadables (and even more different from supporters).

For example, members of the opposition and persuadable segments show similar levels of agreement with statements that:

- Endorse a social constructionist understanding of gender
  - Traditional masculine attitudes and behaviours are learned, not part of men’s biology.
  - It’s natural for men and women to think and act differently to each other.
- Overlapping with this, recognise the pressures on boys and men to act in certain

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<sup>4</sup> Gender breakdowns for each statement for the entire sample, and not just young people, are not available.

ways and/or the harms of traditional gender stereotypes:

- There's still a lot of pressure on men to live up to traditional masculine stereotypes.
- Traditional masculinity harms both men and women.
- Expectations about masculinity force some people to suppress parts of themselves.
- Traditional gender stereotypes for both boys and girls limit our children's potential.
- Men will be better off if they break free from narrow gender stereotypes.
- Increasing gender equality for women will also be good for men.
- Call for opening up gender roles and/or moving past gender stereotypes
  - People should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes.
  - It's time for men to escape narrow gendered stereotypes the same way women have in recent years.
  - We need to teach our boys that it is ok to cry.
  - Boys and men need better role models to break free from harmful forms of masculinity.
  - Breaking free of traditional masculine stereotypes will improve health outcomes for men.
  - There is more than one way to be a man.
- Recognise gender inequalities that disadvantage women and girls
  - Even today, women and girls receive fewer opportunities and unequal treatment in many areas of life compared to men and boys.
- Diminish the primacy of a gender binary in desirable traits
  - What we value in a man is what we should value in all people – men and women alike.
- Support other progressive gender beliefs regarding heterosexuality
  - Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal.
  - If a boy chooses a female character for a fancy dress event at school, that's totally fine.
- Endorse men's roles in building gender equality or challenging violence against women
  - There are things that all men can do to help prevent violence against women.

On the other hand, when statements are framed in terms aligned with opposition perspectives, members of the opposition segment then show levels of agreement significantly higher than those of persuadables. That is true for statements:

- Praising traditional masculinity
  - Traditional masculine qualities have served society well.
  - Criticising masculinity is unfair because most men are good and decent.
- Suggesting there is a ‘war on men’
  - The focus these days on harmful masculinity is part of a feminist war on men.
  - Men are being lectured too much about toxic masculinity.
- Supporting male dominance and control in relationships
  - A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage.
  - If a guy has a girlfriend or wife he deserves to know where she is all the time.
- Endorsing biological essentialism
  - It’s natural for men and women to think and act differently to each other.
  - People who advocate gender equality want men to behave in ways that go against their natural instincts.
- Supporting other conservative gender beliefs regarding violence and heterosexuality
  - Men should use violence to get respect if necessary.
  - A gay guy isn’t a real man.

When we frame things from an opposition perspective, the opposition looks like the opposition. But when we frame things from more positive perspectives, the opposition segment’s responses look similar to those for persuadables.

It is important to note too that the ‘positive’ statements include ones which we might have expected would challenge traditional forms of gender conservatism, including challenging the defence of patriarchal masculinity, rigid boundaries between male and female, homophobia, biological essentialism and denial of gender inequalities that disadvantage women. The ‘positive’ statements take a variety of forms, including statements that emphasise that boys and men are constrained by gender roles and that patterns of gender are socially constructed. The positive statements also include even more explicitly feminist ones, that there are gender inequalities that disadvantage women, and men can help to prevent violence against women.

Note that the patterns of agreement and disagreement do not map straightforwardly onto the *domain* or *dimension* of gender under discussion – in other words, onto what one might think of key streams of feminist, non- and anti-feminist discourses regarding gender. Let us focus for example on biological essentialism or biological determinism. Presented with a biologically essentialist statement, “People who advocate gender equality want men to



behave in ways that go against their natural instincts”, members of the opposition segment agree far more than other segments with this. Four-fifths (81.4%) agree, compared to 26% of persuadables and 4.5% of supporters. But presented with a social constructionist statement, “Traditional masculine attitudes and behaviours are learned, not part of men’s biology”, the opposition segment in fact agrees more with this than the persuadable segment (57.9% agree, compared to 39.1% of persuadables). That is, the impact of the *framing* of the statement seems to have a greater impact than the *issue or area* addressed in the statement.

### Persuadables

A further pattern in the findings is that there is a substantial proportion of people, the ‘persuadables’, who seem uncertain or ambivalent about or unused to considering issues of masculinity and gender.

Persuadables often seem unsure of their positions, for example, on the 10 or so statements about masculinity and gender presented early in this report. Substantial proportions, often one-third or close to half, choose the “Not sure/don’t know” option when presented with these statements, as Table 7 below shows. This suggests that many of this attitudinal segment are unused to thinking about men and masculinities and do not have firm or settled attitudes towards these issues.

Persuadables are more consistently unsure, and often far more unsure, than the other two attitudinal segments. The proportions responding with “Not sure / don’t know” are 15% to 20% greater than for supporters or opponents for all but three of the 11 statements below. They are still higher for these three, but by a smaller margin, because of “Not sure” responses among opponents on three statements: “We need to teach our boys that it is okay to cry” (for which 15.4% of opponents were unsure); “People should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes” (for which 21.6% of opponents were unsure); and “There is more than one way to be a man” (for which 13.4% of opponents were unsure).

**Table 7: Persuadables’ levels of “Not sure/don’t know” response to selected statements about masculinity and gender**

Statement	Proportion responding “Not sure/don’t know”
“Expectations about masculinity force some people to suppress parts of themselves”	41.1%
“Traditional gender stereotypes for both boys and girls limit our children’s potential”	40.9%
“Traditional masculinity harms both men and women”	44.4%
“Increasing gender equality for women will also be good for men”	39.1%
“Breaking free of traditional masculine stereotypes will improve health outcomes for men”	38.5%

“Men will be better off if they break free from narrow gender stereotypes”	49.9%
“People should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes”	29.4%
“Boys and men need better role models to break free from harmful forms of masculinity”	36.6%
“It’s time for men to escape narrow gendered stereotypes the same way women have in recent years”	41.3%
“There is more than one way to be a man”	24.1%
“We need to teach our boys that it is okay to cry”	22.2%

The persuadables also show high levels of uncertainty or ignorance in response to the statements linking traditional masculinity to specific social problems. Table 8 below shows the proportions of persuadables responding with “Not sure / don’t know” to the three relevant statements. Around one-third, and close to half, of persuadables do so. The proportions responding in this way to the three statements below are substantially higher than for supporters or opponents: 12%, 15% and 25% higher than the next highest proportion responding “Not sure / don’t know” respectively.

**Table 8: Persuadables’ levels of “Not sure / don’t know” response to selected statements about masculinity and social problems**

Statement	Proportion responding “Not sure / don’t know”
“In Australia, men’s rates of suicide, depression and anxiety are very high. Do you agree or disagree that traditional ideas about masculinity have contributed to this problem?”	35.8%
“In Australia, 1 in 5 women (including girls as young as 15) have experienced sexual violence. Do you think traditional ideas about masculinity have contributed to this problem?”	42.2%
“Traditional masculinity in no way contributes to violence against women.”	46.4%

## Findings: Responses to messages about masculinity

Alongside the survey, this research involved an examination of people’s responses to specific framings of masculinity. The survey respondents were presented with five 30-second audio messages about men and masculinity, using a dial they could turn to signal their agreement or disagreement with each message as it played aloud. The resulting data indicates both the path of participants’ responses over the course of the spoken message and their mean levels of agreement with the message.<sup>[15]</sup> This ‘dial testing’ thus indicates responses, in real time, to a message, and may give a greater indication than survey data of people’s emotional responses.

Five spoken messages were used to test different framings of men and masculinity. Most of these came from the discourse analysis of public discussions of men and masculinity. The first four messages represent alternative ways of framing positive messages about men and masculinity, whereas the fifth represents an oppositional framing.<sup>[29]</sup> The first three were the most visible of the ‘healthy’ or desirable messages in the discourse analysis, whereas the ‘Gender Bender’ one was less visible but still important to test. The following lists and summarises the five messages. Appendix B provides a more detailed account of each message, including the transcript of the 30-second messages.

- 1) Free Men: men and boys are restricted by masculine stereotypes and should be freed from them.
- 2) Man Made: socially constructed models of manhood are unhealthy for men, and we should build new, healthier models of how to be a man.
- 3) Context Matters: masculine traits are suitable for some times and places but not others, and we need more flexible models of manhood.
- 4) Gender Bender: men and boys should think of themselves as people or human beings first, rather than as men.
- 5) Opposition Message: men are largely good and decent, but are now being attacked and shamed.

Table 9 shows the dial means for each message, by attitudinal segment.

**Table 9: Dial means for messages, by segment**

	<b>Supporter</b>	<b>Persuadable</b>	<b>Opponent</b>	<b>Hard opponent (subset)</b>
<b>Free Men</b>	75.7	66.3	62.1	46.4
<b>Man Made</b>	74.0	65.7	63.6	49.7
<b>Context Matters</b>	68.6	63.5	62.1	55.1
<b>Gender Bender</b>	75.2	66.6	62.3	49.0
<b>Opposition Message</b>	47.2	61.9	66.8	72.6

Looking at Table 9 above, opponents show a consistent degree of support for the first four messages, but higher support, as one would expect, for the opposition message. However, opponents' level of support for the first four messages also is reasonably high. That is, when opponents are presented with a desirable message, they are relatively supportive of it, and only slightly less supportive than persuadables. In other words, opponents act like a persuadable audience when we put forward our case. Opponents can be persuaded that men and boys should be freed from narrow masculine stereotypes ('Free Men'), that we should build new, healthier models of how to be a man ('Man Made'), that we need more flexible models of manhood ('Context Matters'), and even that men and boys should be freed from gender stereotypes and gender binaries and be good human beings or people ('Gender Bender'). The hard opponents, a subset of the opponents with more consistently conservative views, do show significantly lower levels of support for the first four messages. Returning to the opposition overall, their level of support for an 'opposition message' is not very high, at 66.8, and lower than supporters' levels of support for any of the four desirable messages.

In turn, when persuadables are presented with an opposition message, that feminists and others are "waging a war on men" and so on, they are reasonably supportive of it. Looking at dial responses as the Opposition Message plays, persuadables' levels of support remain steady as the backlash themes of 'gender equality going too far' and feminists 'waging a war on men' are introduced. (See Appendix B for the transcripts of each message.) In contrast, when supporters hear this they withdraw their support. Supporters' levels of agreement stay up during the opening text on "good men who provide protection and strength", but rapidly drop away as the backlash themes are introduced. Supporters' agreement rises and falls as further elements are introduced, and some of this may reflect some support e.g. for criticising 'attacking men for the crime of being masculine' and 'shaming men', but their levels of agreement remain low.

Supporters show the strongest levels of overall support for the Free Men, Gender Bender, and Man Made messages. Support for the Context Matters message is lower, perhaps because this message takes a more ambivalent position on stereotypical masculine qualities.

None of the messages generate a strong divide in support between opposition and persuadable segments. The largest gap is less than five percentage points. This may be an artefact of the dial testing method, in that its workings may tend to produce only small gaps in levels of support. On the other hand, it may also suggest the malleability of responses across the attitudinal segments and the influence of message framing itself.

Respondents were asked not only to signal their agreement or disagreement with each message, but to rate how 'convincing' they found it. At the end of each audio message, respondents were given a sliding scale between 0 and 100 to rate how convincing they found the message. Scores 50+ were judged as "convincing" and scores 80+ were judged as "very convincing".

**Table 10: Ratings of messages as convincing, by segment**

		<b>Supporter</b>	<b>Persuadable</b>	<b>Opponent</b>	<b>Hard opponent (subset)</b>
<b>Free Men</b>	Convincing	94.9%	86.0%	82.9%	47.3%
	Very convincing	70.3%	36.6%	37.5%	13.8%
<b>Man Made</b>	Convincing	95.3%	85.8%	82.4%	54.0%
	Very convincing	62.7%	36.6%	38.2%	15.6%
<b>Context Matters</b>	Convincing	94.1%	87.4%	85.3%	62.6%
	Very convincing	65.2%	38.2%	37.3%	18.6%
<b>Gender Bender</b>	Convincing	95.3%	88.2%	81.5%	55.1%
	Very convincing	71.8%	42.4%	33.7%	11.4%
<b>Opposition Message</b>	Convincing	50.3%	83.0%	91.9%	83.5%
	Very convincing	17.9%	31.6%	50.1%	49.9%

The data on people’s perceptions of these messages as ‘convincing’ or not shows similar patterns to their patterns of agreement or disagreement. All three attitudinal segments rate the first four messages about men and gender as convincing. Supporters give higher ratings than persuadables or opponents, as we might expect, but at least four-fifths (80%+) of persuadables and opponents find the four desirable messages convincing, with opponents only slightly less convinced of each than persuadables. Among opponents however, the subset who are particularly strongly opposed to desirable messages about masculinity, the ‘hard opponents’, are highly unconvinced by the first four messages about men and gender, providing low ratings of each, well below those of their ‘soft’ opponent peers.

When opponents (and persuadables) are presented with progressive messages about men and gender, not only do most support these, but most find them convincing as well. This is the case not only for messages about restrictive masculine stereotypes (‘Free Men’) and the need for healthier or more flexible models of manhood (‘Man Made’ and ‘Context Matters’), but also for messages endorsing the need to move beyond gender binaries (‘Gender Bender’). While some may assume that people with ‘opposition’ attitudes will be quick to reject a ‘gender bender’ message, this does not seem to be the case. Still, opponents and persuadables are less convinced of the four messages than supporters, with significantly fewer of these two attitudinal segments than supporters rating the messages as very

convincing. In addition, ‘hard opponents’ are particularly unconvinced, although they seem least persuaded by the ‘Free Men’ message than say the ‘Gender Bender’ one.

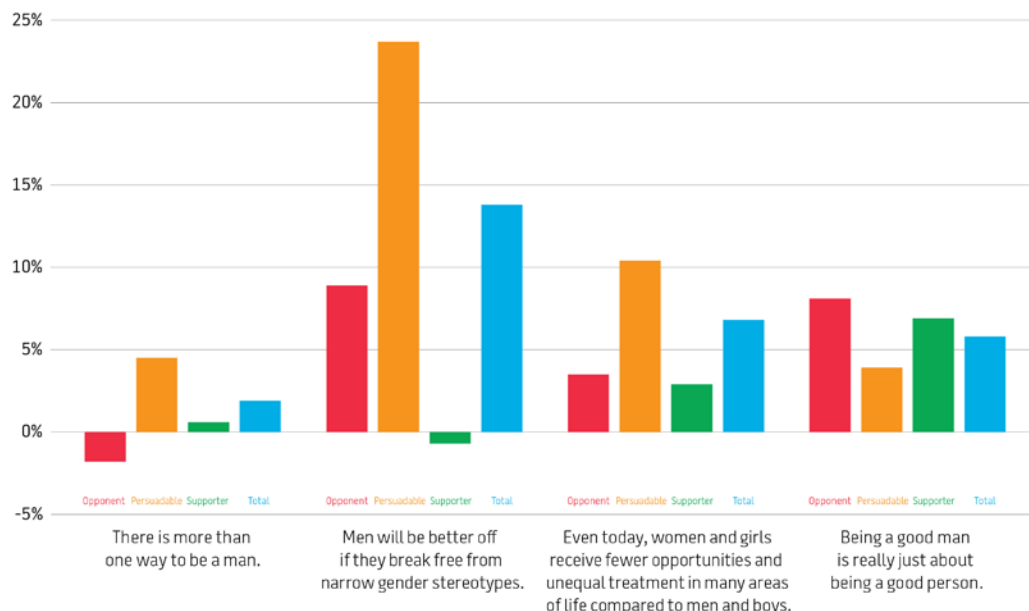
However, when presented with an opposition message, opposition respondents find it more convincing than they do any of the other four messages. Over nine in 10 (91.9%) rate it as convincing, higher than the 81.5% to 85.3% that had rated other messages as convincing. Over four-fifths (83.5%) of hard opponents rate the opposition message as convincing, far above their ratings for the other messages. In contrast, supporters’ ratings drop from proportions in the 90s to 50.3%, while persuadables’ rating stays at a level (83%) close to their other ratings. Although the oppositions’ level of agreement with an ‘opposition message’ was not especially high (see above), they certainly find it convincing, and to a slightly higher degree than they find the four other messages convincing.

### Findings: Attitude shifts

The final data in this report focus on whether respondents’ attitudes shift after being presented with the five messages above. Immediately after listening to the five messages, respondents were asked 12 of the questions again from the earlier survey.<sup>5</sup> The following three figures show four questions each, with the pattern of change for each. The columns show the degree of change, positive or negative, per segment and overall. Columns above the 0% line represent increased agreement, while columns below the 0% line represent decreased agreement.

**Figure 1.**

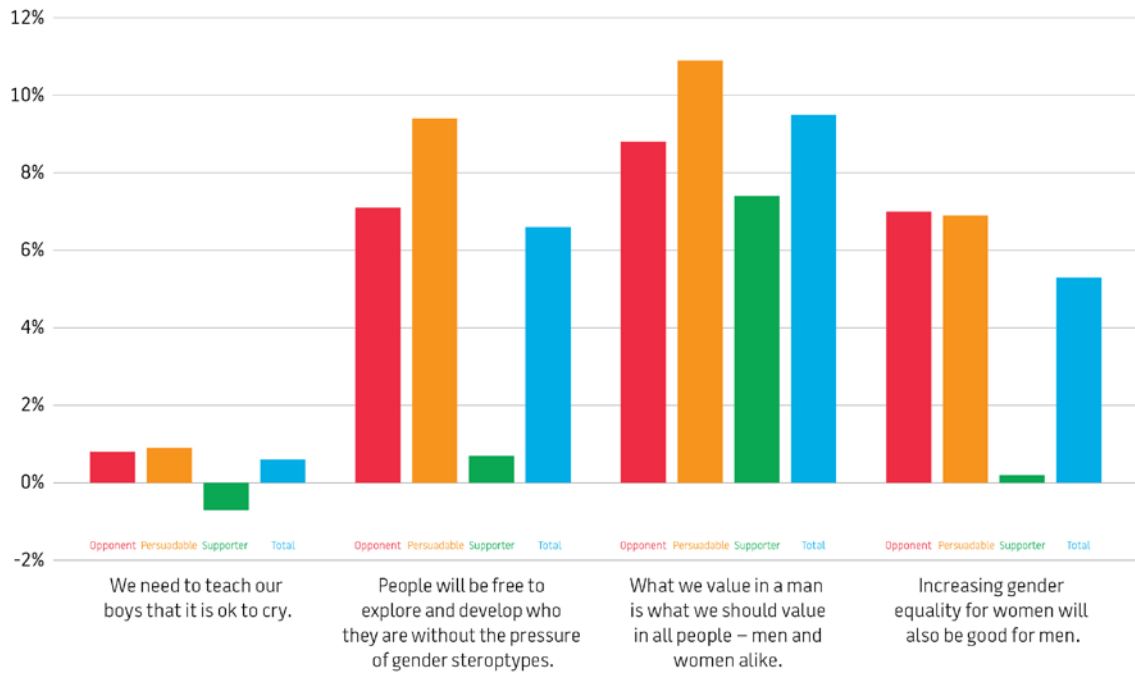
#### Attitude shifts after hearing messages about masculinity



<sup>5</sup> Before being shown the repeat questions, respondents are told the following: “It’s not unusual to change your mind over the course of a survey. We’re now going to ask you just a few more questions which are similar to the earlier questions. It’s okay to give a different answer if your opinion has changed, or if you can’t remember what you answered the first time.”

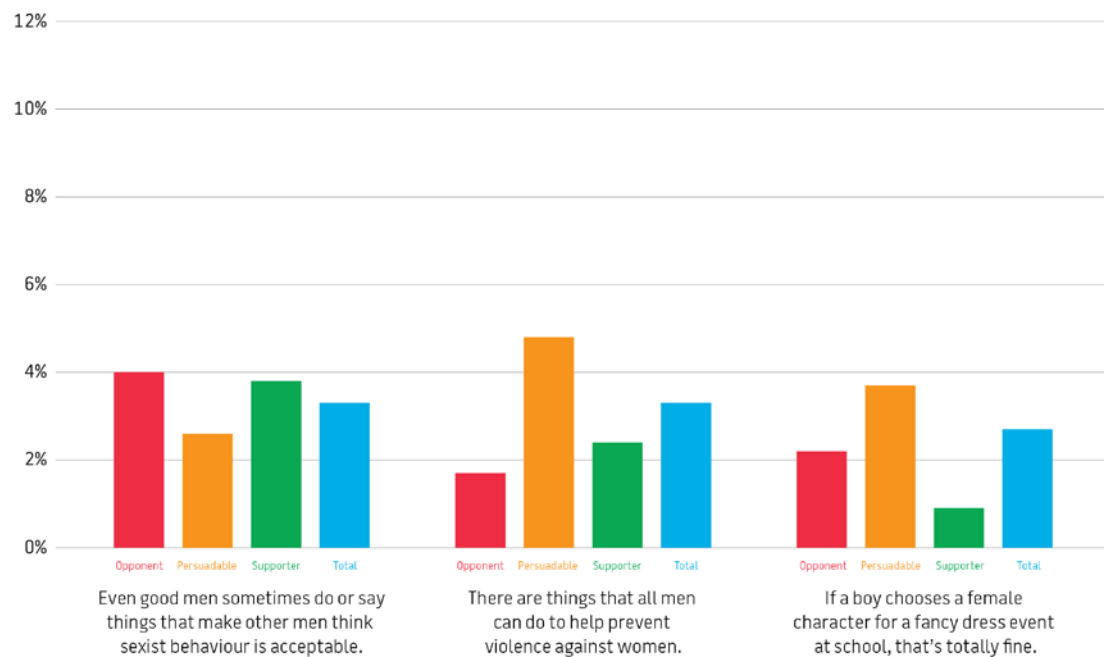
**Figure 2.**

**Attitude shifts after hearing messages about masculinity**



**Figure 3.**

**Attitude shifts after hearing messages about masculinity**



Across these 12 statements, it is clear that it is possible to generate change in people's patterns of agreement with statements about men and gender. More specifically, it is possible to increase people's agreement with desirable messages about men and gender. Persuadables, for example, showed substantial increases in their support for statements such as "Men will be better off if they break free from narrow gender stereotypes", "What we value in a man is what we should value in all people – men and women alike", and "People should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes". Increases in agreement with these statements among persuadables were in the order of 10 to 23%, with the biggest increases seen for the first of the three statements mentioned.

Positive change is apparent particularly among the persuadables, but also among opponents. For example, opponents increased in agreement by about seven or eight percentage points with five of the 12 statements: "Men will be better off if they break free from narrow gender stereotypes", "Being a good man is really just about being a good person", "People should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes", "What we value in a man is what we should value in all people – men and women alike", and "Increasing gender equality for women will also be good for men." Opponents also showed positive shifts, albeit smaller ones, on all the other statements other than one for which their shift was negative, "There is more than one way to be a man."

It must be borne in mind that the change documented here is measured only immediately after the intervention, and we do not know whether it will last. Other studies of the impacts of interventions document that changes often decay or 'rebound' to pre-intervention levels weeks or months after the intervention.<sup>[11]</sup> At the same time, there is evidence that well-designed social marketing and communications strategies can produce substantial and lasting shifts in attitudes and behaviours, particularly if they are intensive, involve exposure to messaging through more than one component, and/or are complemented by on-the-ground strategies.<sup>[11]</sup>

There are some tentative conclusions to draw from this data on shifts in attitudes. First, the persuadables are persuadable. That is, the portion of the population defined as in the 'the middle' are in fact a 'movable middle'. This segment comprises half the population (48.9%).

Why might the persuadables be so 'movable'? One possibility is that issues of men, gender and masculinity are new ones for them, and that positive and appropriate framings of these issues effectively can increase their desirable attitudes. They already have relatively desirable attitudes, conducive to a support for gender equality, and exposure to positive messages thus intensifies their support.

The supporters generally do not show much shift across the 12 statements, although they show positive shifts similar to those for other segments for statements such as "Being a good man is really just about being a good person", "What we value in a man is what we should value in all people – men and women alike", and "Even good men sometimes do or say things that make other men think sexist behaviour is acceptable." It could be that their support for desirable views of men, gender and masculinity already is at high on many statements, so there is little room for further positive change. For instance, for the three statements here, the proportions of supporters who agreed or strongly agreed were at 78%,



89.6% and 57.8% respectively.

The opponents, or at least many of the opponents, also are capable of attitudinal change. Comprising one-quarter (25.9%) of the population, they too are movable, although to a smaller degree than the persuadables.

There is also evidence of further segmentation among opponents, with some opponents 'rusted on' to strongly conservative understandings of gender. Further analysis of the survey data did suggest that there is a 'hard opponent' subset of opponents, 8% of the total population, with particularly conservative attitudes towards gender. Nevertheless, the degree of change visible among opponents suggests that many are persuadable at least to some degree.

## Conclusions

This report provides a snapshot of contemporary attitudes towards men, masculinity and gender in Australia. It documents that there is widespread agreement that traditional gender stereotypes are limiting and harmful, for boys and men and for children in general. Most people agree that there is pressure on men to live up to traditional masculine stereotypes. Most believe that masculine expectations or outdated ideas of masculinity constrain men and prevent them from living full lives. There is majority agreement that traditional ideas about masculinity contribute to social problems, including men's poor health (suicide, depression and anxiety) and, to a lesser extent, violence against women.

Support for traditional definitions of masculinity in terms of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia is weak in Australia. There is also only weak support for the patriarchal idea that men should dominate and control women in relationships, although troublingly there is acceptance of this among large minorities of men and particularly young men. There is majority agreement there are gender inequalities in Australia that disadvantage women and girls relative to men and boys. Most people endorse non-gendered standards of personhood. Most people believe that boys need both women and men as role models, rather than especially men. There is strong support for both men who parent full-time and men who participate in paid work as good role models for their children.

There is widespread recognition among survey respondents of the need to open up gender roles for men, particularly with regard to gender roles that constrain males' own health and wellbeing. People in Australia show especially strong support for the acceptance of diversity among men, the idea that there is more than one way to be a man. There is strong support for fostering boys' and men's emotional expressiveness: for teaching boys 'that it is okay to cry' and for men 'sharing their emotions when times are tough'. Most people agree that progress towards gender equality will be good for men, as will breaking free of gender stereotypes.

There is broad support for an understanding of gender as socially constructed – for the understanding that boys' and men's lives and relations are shaped by social forces as much as they are by biology, particularly when presented in these terms. On the other hand, there is greater endorsement of biologically essentialist and determinist ideas that biology underpins or drives gender roles when presented instead in these terms. Moreover, the term 'masculinity' is not necessarily understood as referring to this social analysis of masculinity, and for some may simply mean 'men'.

Regarding men's active roles in positive change, there is almost universal agreement among the survey respondents that men can play a role in preventing violence against women.

The framing of statements about men and gender matters. When statements are framed in progressive terms, they attract significant support, including among opponents. On the other hand, when statements are framed in regressive or anti-feminist terms, people's support for progressive views of men and gender appears weaker. Indeed, there is substantial support for sexist denials of the reality of gender inequalities and hostile views of women's efforts to address these.

'Opponents', one quarter of the sample, comprise a relatively weak opposition, in that sometimes their views are similar to those of the 'persuadables'. This is particularly the case

when statements on gender are framed in desirable terms: members of the opposition segment often agree with these to similar degrees as members of the persuadable segment (but not to the same degree as supporters). Opponents generally support such messages, and they find them convincing as well. But when statements on gender are framed in opposition terms, members of the opposition segments show responses significantly different from persuadables and even more different from supporters.

This data also documents that exposing people to short, positive messages about men and gender can generate change in their attitudes, at least in the immediate short term. Positive change is apparent particularly among the persuadables. However, when presented with progressive messages about men and gender, even opponents are supportive, and only slightly less supportive than persuadables. If a positive case for freeing men from traditional stereotypes and building healthier models of manhood is put forward, opponents too are persuadable.

This report has documented the character of attitudes towards men and masculinity in Australia. The next step is to use this to explore how to promote healthier, more egalitarian constructions of masculinity.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: The methods and data

This project has involved the collection of three streams of data, using three methods:

- 1) Discourse analysis and interviews.
- 2) Survey.
- 3) Message testing.

#### 1) Discourse analysis and interviews

The discourse analysis involved an examination of the dominant frames used by Australians to think and talk about masculinity. During August 2019, Common Cause Australia collected over 20,000 words of data from publicly available sources of discourse on masculinity in Australia, including advocate websites, media articles and social media. It also conducted 17 one-on-one interviews with advocates for healthier masculinities in Australia.

These sources yielded close to 800 discrete language samples split into four categories:

- Advocate – people and organisations supportive of healthier masculinities.
- Opposition – people and organisations who argue against healthier masculinities.
- Media – journalists and other public commentators in the media.
- Social – comments from the general public on Twitter, news articles and blogs.

These language samples were then coded for common framing elements including metaphors and values. An analysis was then conducted to identify dominant patterns in the way the different groups think and talk about the issue and the likely persuasive effect of these different frames.<sup>[29]</sup> These frames later were tested among respondents, in the message testing described below.

#### 2) Survey

The survey was a nationally representative online survey of 1,619 respondents, representative of the Australian adult population by age, state and gender. The survey includes an over-sampling of 16 and 17 year-olds. Results reported (excluding the 16 and 17 year-old specific reports) are weighted to be nationally representative.

The survey comprised seven demographic questions, six questions about political orientations, and then approximately 50 questions focused on men, masculinities and gender.<sup>[14]</sup>

*Net agreement and disagreement:* In reporting on the survey, 'net agreement' is comprised of agreement minus disagreement. It may be positive, signalling net agreement (where more people agree than disagree) or negative, signalling net disagreement (where more people disagree than agree). For example, if 60% agree with a statement and 40% disagree, then net agreement will be 20%. On the other hand, if 40% agree and 60% disagree, then net agreement will be -20%.

*Attitudinal segments:* Reporting on results refers to three categories of respondent: supporters, persuadables, and opponents, organised by their overall patterns of support for or opposition to gender equality. ‘Supporters’ are in favour of gender equality, ‘persuadables’ vary in their support or opposition, and ‘opponents’ are opposed. A fourth category, a subset of opponents described here as ‘hard opponents’, shows a more consistently oppositional response to statements in favour of gender equality.

These categories of respondent are based on a cluster analysis across the entirety of the survey responses. Respondents were placed into one of these categories depending on their overall patterns of response. Reporting on patterns of response to each statement in the survey uses the overall categories of respondent, rather than dividing respondents into these categories on the basis of their response to each statement.

### 3) Message testing

The third stream of data involved mapping participants’ responses to a series of possible messages about masculinity. This used the same sample as for the survey.

Respondents listened to spoken messages about men and masculinity, while holding a slider dial going from “Agree” to “Disagree”. Each message was an audio message, about 30 seconds in length. Respondents were instructed that when they felt they agreed with the message, they should move the slider up towards “Agree”, and when they felt they disagreed with the message, they should move the slider down towards “Disagree”. This generated data showing the path of participants’ responses over the course of the 30-second spoken message, and the dial mean.<sup>[15]</sup> Five types of spoken message were used, each representing a different framing of men and masculinities,<sup>[29]</sup> as noted in Appendix B.

At the end of each audio message, respondents also were given a sliding scale between 0 and 100 to rate how convincing they found the message. Scores 50+ were judged as “convincing” and scores 80+ were judged as “very convincing”.

## Appendix B: Five framings of masculinity

The dial testing involved five spoken messages, each representing a distinct framing of masculinity. The first four messages represent alternative ways of framing positive messages about men and masculinity, and all but the 'Gender Bender' one came from the discourse analysis. A fifth message represents an oppositional framing.<sup>[15, 29]</sup>

The five framings are as follows:

- 1) Free Men
- 2) Man Made
- 3) Context Matters
- 4) Gender Bender
- 5) Opposition

The transcript of each message is given below.

### Free Men

We should all be free to live open, honest and meaningful lives.

But too many men and boys are still trapped by outdated ideas about being a 'real man'. These unwritten rules put pressure on them to suppress parts of who they are. It's unhealthy for anyone to live a lesser life because they feel like they have to hide their true selves.

It's time to free men and boys from the shackles of narrow stereotypes. Everyone should feel comfortable being themselves and carve out their own unique path in life.

### Man Made

All men need to feel connected and supported. They need opportunities to be heard, to grow and contribute to their families and communities.

But for too long, the way our society has been shaping boys into men has left them less than whole. Things that don't fit the masculine mould have been carved off. It's why so many men tend to bottle their emotions. And it's not healthy.

We need to redesign masculinity and move towards healthier, more diverse approaches to being men. That means keeping the good bits, improving others and creating healthier role models for young boys to follow

### Context Matters

There's been a lot of talk recently about masculinity and whether traits often associated with men – like aggression and suppressing emotions – are healthy or harmful. The reality is, it's all about context.

In certain situations, keeping our emotions in check can be positive. The problem is when suppressing our emotions becomes a lifelong habit. Rigidly following narrow ideas about 'manliness' is as harmful to men and boys as it is to women and girls.



We need flexible versions of masculinity that allow men to help themselves when needed and ask for help at other times. It's really just about being balanced human beings.

### **Gender Bender**

Being a good 'man' or a good 'woman' is really just about being a good person.

Thankfully, women and girls have made huge progress in recent years in escaping feminine stereotypes. Yet men and boys are still being told to 'toughen up' or 'act like a man'. Isn't it time we allowed men to move on from gender clichés too?

We should stop allowing gender stereotypes to limit our children's potential. Let's teach our boys to be good human beings, not just 'good men'. What we value in a man should be what we value in all people.

### **Opposition**

For as long as humans have existed, good men who provide protection and strength have been important to the success of our society.

But the ideas behind gender equality have now gone too far. Feminists and other gender-bending 'experts' are waging a war on men – treating masculinity as if it were a disease.

Attacking men for the crime of being masculine benefits no one. We need to stop shaming men for being different to women. That's just how men are. Instead, we should celebrate the vast majority of good and decent men and let our boys be boys.



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VicHealth is committed to health equity, which means levelling the playing field between people who can easily access good health and people who face barriers, to achieve the highest level of health for *everyone*.



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VicHealth acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land. We pay our respects to all Elders past, present and future.