

Act tough and hide weakness: research reveals pressure young men are under

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A rigid construct of how “real” men are supposed to behave leaves many feeling trapped, new research we carried out suggests.

While most support gender equality, the young men in the UK, US and Mexico reported feeling pushed to live in the “man box”. They feel pressure to act tough, hide weakness and “look good”. This can have damaging effects on their health and wellbeing, as well as their relationships with each other, and with women and children.

Alongside online surveys conducted for this international study, we convened focus groups with men between the ages of 18 and 30 in London and the north of England, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, religion and class.

The men we spoke to were keenly aware of influences – from family, peers, teachers, media – encouraging them to conform to certain models of masculinity. One said: “There is pressure everywhere to tell you what man you should be.” Another added: “You have

to be a young man who's got a nice house, who's got a nice car, who's got a family with kids, who's got a good job." At the same time, many felt that these images were difficult to live up to and remote from their experience.

The young men in our groups supported gender equality in theory. But many held on to traditional ideas about gender roles. They saw men as "breadwinners" or "protectors" and women as "carers" and felt that societal attitudes hadn't changed dramatically.

"The jobs that society has a higher regard for ... fall to men," one said. Nevertheless, a small number expressed resentment at what they regarded as the more favourable treatment of young women – including young mothers, when it came to custody issues or domestic disputes. "In the eyes of social media, social services and the law, the girl's always right when it comes to the child," said another.

Most of the young men in our focus groups claimed to be tolerant towards homosexuality – "you wouldn't discriminate against a gay person" – while recognising that prejudice still exists in wider society. However, sexuality was clearly a topic that some found difficult to talk about in a group setting.

Under pressure

The young men we spoke with were aware of pressure to "look good". Many had gone through a phase of working out but most had concluded that it was unhealthy and unfulfilling. That said, they thought the pressures on young women to conform to a particular body image were more intense than for young men.

Violence is still a feature of many young men's lives, with some regarding it as a way of maintaining status and an inevitable part of becoming a man. "It shapes young boys into men," said one. But some resented being seen as a threat and felt targeted by the police when out in public simply because they were young and male.

Some saw admitting to emotional problems as a sign of weakness. One spoke of dealing with mental health issues by "disconnecting myself a lot from other people, because I thought that was the manly thing to do". Others admitted that they found it difficult to express their feelings and were reluctant to seek help when distressed. One said: "Men, we just deal with it differently ... we've got other channels of expressing our feelings." Others admitted that if they were having problems they would just "bottle it up and get on with it" or even "turn it into a bit of a joke".

Personal relationships were important for these young men. Many spoke warmly about the support they had from their families. As one put it: "They always had my back." A number had grown up without a father, but many had positive relationships with their mothers and other female relatives.

Friendships were important too, with one young man saying that with friends “you don’t feel like you have to put up a front”. But others expressed regret at the prospect of losing close male friendships as they grew older, highlighting the risks of isolation and loneliness.

These focus groups have been part of a wider international study, which argues that breaking free from the “man box” is not something young men can do on their own. It concludes that parents, educators, the media, teachers, girlfriends, boyfriends, and others need to be part of the process of reinforcing positive, equitable, unrestrictive ideas of manhood.

Our discussions present a similarly complex picture. They confirm the importance of listening to young men’s own perspectives on their lives and demonstrate that they need support in resisting pressures to conform to the expectations and in realising their full potential.

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