

# From Toxic to Positive - Can Scotland lead the way in reframing masculinity?

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## BACKGROUND

Positive masculinity benefits everyone, not just boys and young men. Talking about positive masculinity promotes healthier gender norms and create a more equitable and inclusive society. Positive masculinity benefits everyone.

### **Can Scotland lead the way in reframing masculinity?**

The speakers at the CPG and their topics included:

Emma Davidson from University of Edinburgh – *Why masculinity matters?*

Dr Emma Davidson is currently a lecturer in social policy and qualitative research methods and Director of The Binks Hub and is also Director of the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships.

Jenni Snell and Rebekah Cheung from The Young Women's Movement – *Towards gender equality.*

Jenni Snell is the CEO of the Young Women's Movement. Rebekah Cheung from White Ribbon Scotland is part of the Young Women's Movement advisory collective (30 young women under 30)

Vicki Ridley from YouthLink Scotland – *What is needed: Imagine a Man and 'positive masculinity'.*

Vicki Ridley from YouthLink Scotland led on Scotland's first positive masculinity programme, *Imagine a Man* which is now entering its fourth year, and works on the violence prevention programme No Knives Better Lives.





## CONTEXT

### **Why it matters – a crisis of masculinity?**

Emma Davidson, a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy and a co-director at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), emphasises the importance of addressing masculinity. Her research focuses on youth and community studies, particularly the experiences of working-class young people. Davidson discusses how societal anxieties about antisocial behaviour, educational disengagement, and mental health issues disproportionately target boys and young men, especially from working-class backgrounds. These youths often face punitive policies and stigmatisation, which compound their struggles with identity and marginalisation.

Dr Davidson critiques the term "toxic masculinity" as oversimplifying the issue by blaming individual behaviours rather than addressing underlying structural problems. Her research reveals that the behaviours labelled as "toxic" often stem from a survival tactic in response to social and economic marginalisation. She notes that within safe and supportive environments, boys and young men can develop alternative, positive forms of masculinity characterised by care, friendship, respect, and self-reflection.

Dr Davidson underscores the role of supportive social infrastructures, such as youth services, in nurturing these positive masculinities. She highlights ongoing initiatives and research by her CRFR colleagues aimed at promoting healthier gender dynamics. This includes Dr Fiona McQueen's study on the pressures faced by young men in Scotland and Professor Anna Tarrant's work on the benefits of positive father involvement. Additionally, Dr Ruth Lewis is involved in projects addressing gender-based violence in schools and promoting gender-equitable attitudes among young men.

Dr Davidson concludes that masculinities matter significantly because they continue to shape societal dynamics and the lives of young people. There is a need for continued efforts to foster positive masculinities and address the complex challenges young men face in contemporary society.

## REFRAMING

### **Towards gender equality**

The Young Women's Movement (YWM) emphasises the importance of reframing masculinity to foster a society where both young women and men can thrive. As Scotland's national organisation for young women's rights, YWM has advocated for young women for 100 years, integrating their perspectives into research and campaigns. The discussion on positive masculinity is vital to address the impacts of toxic ideologies like incel culture and the 'manosphere' that harm both young men and women.

YWM acknowledges that harmful masculine behaviours stem from societal pressures on young men to conform to rigid, often violent, stereotypes. This not only affects men's mental health but also perpetuates violence and discrimination against women. Collaborative efforts with organisations like Scottish Women's Aid <sup>1</sup> reveal that a significant number of young women have experienced abuse from male partners, highlighting the urgent need for change.

Referencing Norway's "Gender equality's next step" report, YWM argues for a holistic approach to masculinity, emphasising multiple ways to be a man and supporting men's identification with gender equality without detracting from women's rights. Young women from YWM's advisory collective support discussing masculinity positively, but caution against simplistic labels like "positive" or "toxic." They suggest "healthy masculinity" as a more nuanced term.

YWM calls for male role models and youth workers to lead initiatives that allow young men to explore masculinity in safe, supportive environments. Programmes like 'Many Good Men' and 'Imagine a Man' are essential for fostering these discussions with a foundation in gender equality. YWM commits to supporting these efforts as allies, advocating for a collaborative approach to achieving gender equality.

[1. The Young Women's Movement and Scottish Women's Aid, \*The Rise Report: Supporting young women facing abuse in their intimate relationships\* \(2021\)](#)

## WHAT IS NEEDED?

(This includes recommendations from all speakers, evidence gathered from the *Imagine a Man* initiative as well as feedback from the two breakout discussions) To 'reframe the narrative' on masculinity we need to consider the following measures:

### Stop talking about 'toxic' and start talking about 'positive' masculinity

#### **Give boys and young men a version of 'feminism' they can get behind – fill the void that harmful influencers fill**

When boys and young men don't have a vision to believe in, or a language to express themselves or their aspirations, then 'toxic' influencers fill the void. Share positive news stories that support the aspirations of boys and young men. Make positive masculinity a tangible thing that boys and young men can embrace. Avoid where possible a binary notion of good/bad and embrace other expressions such as manhood, or healthy masculinity.

### Early Years and families

#### **This work needs to start earlier**

There needs to be strong foundations of love, care and positive role modelling. Professor Anna Tarrant's (Lincoln University) work takes fathering as her focus. Her work has shown that when men are positively involved in family life as fathers and in their wider roles as family members, that this is beneficial for family dynamics across generations, and wider societal well-being.

### Teach positive masculinity

#### **Improve the confidence of all practitioners regardless of gender to discuss masculinity**

Include positive masculinity in the curriculum – make it a 'right' that boys and young men are taught about positive masculinity. Make it a 'right' for all boys and young men to have brave spaces to discuss their masculinity, challenge harmful stereotypes and work out their ideals and aspirations about manhood. Allow boys and young men the place, the time and space to learn about empathy, caring, humour and strength in a supportive environment.

## **Model and support positive masculinity**

### **Youth workers have 'lived experience' to engage with those most at risk**

Youth workers can offer strong protective factors to mitigate the risk of boys and young men acting out with harmful traits. Youth work has been starved of funding – support, fund and develop more youth workers (of all genders) to support boys and young men and to act as positive role models in communities more at risk from harmful masculinity. All CPG speakers spoke to the under-resourcing around community-based support for boys through youth work.

## **Follow the evidence on positive masculinity**

### **Fund more research on the impact of positive masculinity on male behaviour**

Gather intelligence that supports the adoption of a narrative and curriculum on positive masculinity and how that impacts on everyone, not just boys and young men. If boys and young men understand and can articulate what positive masculinity is, then they are going to have the knowledge and confidence to withstand and reject harmful behaviours. It will benefit mental, physical health and allow boys and young men to flourish. Any proposal must build in evaluation to add to the knowledge base of what does and doesn't work.

## **Research into positive role models for boys and young men**

### **Who are they? Are they different for different groups of boys and young men?**

Support research into finding out what impact positive role models have on boys and young men. Intersectionality is the concept that individuals face overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination based on their intersecting identities, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. When it comes role models, we need to better understand who they are and why they have a positive impact.

## **Build a positive masculinity movement**

### **Involve a wide range of partners whose causes align with positive masculinity**

Build a movement of partners whose causes align – where supporting the development of healthy masculinities aids their own ambitions on gender equality. Organisations that work across; women's rights, education, health promotion, mental health and wellbeing, violence prevention and justice all have much to gain from a positive masculinity movement that seeks to extend gender equality.

## Different and marginalised views

### Further and wider discussions that embrace difference

Gathering data about positive changes is crucial in any new area of understanding and study. This work needs to evolve and include learning from our collective experience of delivering positive masculinity programmes. Within that, we need to listen and hear the voices of excluded young people including girls and young women and reflect on the different experiences of young people from an intersectional perspective considering ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation.

### Scotland can lead the world in reframing masculinity

### There are global export possibilities if Scotland takes a lead



Imagine a Man, Scotland's first positive masculinity programme is now entering its fourth year of research and development.

For further information on the Imagine a Man initiative, please contact Vicki Ridley, Senior Development Officer at YouthLink Scotland [vridley@youthlink.scot](mailto:vridley@youthlink.scot)