RESPECT VICTORIA

WILLING, CAPABLE AND CONFIDENT

MEN, MASCULINITIES AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Exploring the Man Box 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living cultures.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside First Nations communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of these communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

VICTIM SURVIVOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive and to their loved ones.

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THE MEN'S PROJECT, JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES

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AUTHORS

Dr Innocent Mwatsiya, Senior Adviser, Research and Translation

Dr Shelly Makleff, Senior Adviser, Research and Translation

Hazel Donley, Senior Adviser, Research and Translation

Dr Stephanie Lusby, Manager, Research

FOREWORD

Steven Roberts; Board Director, Respect Victoria; Professor of Education and Social Justice, Monash University

RESEARCH AGENCY

Wallis Social Research

To receive this document in another format, email contact@respectvictoria.vic.gov.au.

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FOREWORD

We know the heartbreaking truth. The number of women killed by men's violence in Australia is devastatingly high. There are growing accounts of brazen misogyny and sexual harassment against women teachers and girls in schools – both private and public – up and down the country.

Regressive masculine norms have come back into public focus, peddled vociferously by social media 'manfluencers' as optimal modes of gender practice for boys and young men. Transphobia and gender nonconformity abuse is on the rise. Intersectional analyses point to profoundly exacerbated injustices for First Nations women, women of colour, women with disabilities and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The grounds for hope for the pursuit of a socially just and gender equitable society feel exceptionally fragile.

And yet... we know from decades of research into men and masculinities, the drivers of this reality include changeable cultural and individual level endorsements of harmful, patriarchal masculine norms. We also know that, as per the Man Box data in 2018 and in 2024, while a significant minority of Australian men condone and perpetrate violence against women, and are homophobic or transphobic, the majority of men reject these ideals. Indeed, *The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia* shows vividly that this rejection happens in a context where men perceive there to be widespread social pressures to conform to narrow definitions of what it is to be a man. This gives us practitioners, activists, researchers, policy makers and people across communities working to prevent violence reason to stay the course and commit to gender-transformative change at scale.

The question remains, how do we go about addressing the traction of harmful masculine norms? There has been a recent turn in research and scholarship on considering the attitudes, behaviours and stories of men not aligned with these damaging ideals. A growing number of scholars argue that focusing only on those who subscribe to harmful masculinities can narrow the possibility for change. However, spotlighting changed or alternative ways of practicing masculinity – and the personal and societal benefits that such changes can produce – is an essential part of normalising these very alternatives. Through this process of demonstrating that subscription to harmful definitions of masculinity is not required, not ordinary and not for the majority, we can collectively do more to undermine the social pressure to conform to those norms.

It is here where *Willing, capable and confident: men, masculinities and the prevention of violence against women* makes an important contribution. This report gets into the detail of the ways that men can push back against social pressures to conform, as well as exposing the impediments for them to do so. Potential routes to overcome such barriers and build men's capacity to combat the gendered drivers of violence are offered as vital insights for thinking though primary prevention approaches for awareness raising and attitudinal change.

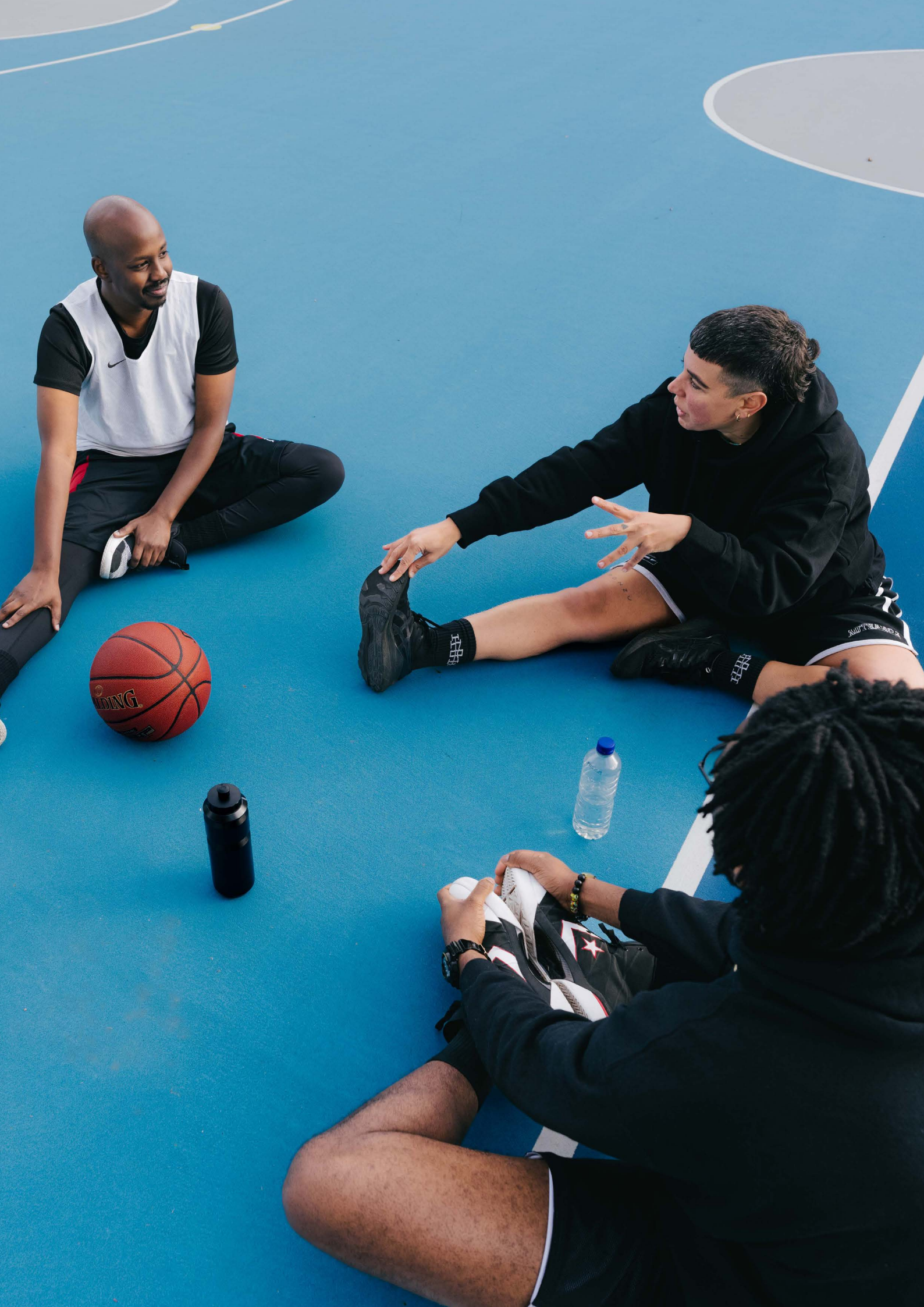
Reflecting on the five key findings that the report produces, what is striking to me is that they all in different ways situate men as deeply relational beings. This is against the grain of the common trope of men idealising autonomy. Through understanding this relationality, the role of different social contexts for further

capacity building more fully emerges – families, partners, peer groups and workplaces are all vital resources and domains in which positive change can be and is inspired, supported, and recognised. Media landscapes, social structures and institutions are of course all implicated, and change in these is a two way and reciprocal process that sits in dialogue with the relational domains of men's broader lives.

The contextual backdrop to this report is grim, but the research evidence in the report is promising. Reflecting on this duality, I am reminded of the words of feminist scholar Lynn Segal from over 35 years ago. In the introduction to her book on masculinity and social change, *Slow Motion*, Segal suggests that, 'It is possible to steer a course between defeatist pessimism and fatuous optimism'. As we set out to catalyse men's willingness to further reject harmful masculine norms, this report can help us steer that course.

STEVEN ROBERTS
BOARD DIRECTOR, RESPECT VICTORIA
PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, MONASH UNIVERSITY

Victim survivor of patriarchal violence



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Men's violence against women in Australia is a national crisis. Decades of research and practice evidence show this violence is preventable, if action is taken across whole populations to challenge the harmful gender norms that allow it to occur.

This study explores how to support men's engagement in the prevention of violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence. Research that builds what we know about how people understand the ways they can address the gendered drivers of this violence is critical. Better evidence about what it means to help more men to actively engage in prevention is key to developing more effective solutions to an entrenched social problem.

This report explores men's perspectives about the ways that they navigate, challenge or conform to masculine norms across different aspects of their lives. In doing so, it contributes to:

- understanding how to build men's willingness, capability and confidence to engage in prevention
- clarifying future directions for how prevention efforts might further engage with men.

METHODS

Willing, capable and confident: men, masculinities and the prevention of violence against women (Willing, capable and confident) is the second publication from the Man Box 2024 study. This project was led by The Men's Project, an initiative of Jesuit Social Services, in partnership with Respect Victoria. *The Man Box 2024* study updates and expands upon findings from the first Man Box study in 2018. It investigates relationships between men's attitudes towards stereotypical masculine norms – framed across the study as the Man Box 'rules' – and other attitudes and behaviours that can cause harm to themselves and the people around them.

The Man Box 2024 is a mixed-method study comprised of:

- a nationally representative survey of more than 3,500 Australian men aged 18 to 45
- seven focus group discussions with a total of 33 men aged 18 to 45.

The focus group discussions were designed to provide deeper insight into men's attitudes and behaviours related to masculine norms. *Willing, capable and confident* centres on Respect Victoria's analysis of these focus group discussions. It complements and expands upon analysis of survey and focus group data presented in *The Man Box 2024: re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia* report, published by Jesuit Social Services in February 2024.

The focus group discussions were designed to understand the perspectives of men who do not personally endorse some or all of the Man Box rules, even if they feel social pressure to conform to them. This meant excluding men from the study who, by virtue of their higher level of endorsement of Man Box rules, are more likely to condone violence against women or have perpetrated violence against women.

The Men's Project and Respect Victoria categorised participants into focus groups to generate a range of perspectives about navigating masculine norms based on common experiences. These included:

- age
- educational and occupational pathways
- fatherhood
- self identification as gay, bisexual, transgender or gender diverse.

Men were also organised into groups according to their level of endorsement of Man Box rules (i.e. low or moderate). This reduced the risk of conflict over differences in belief systems within each group, and the risk of discomfort to participants when encountering potentially extreme views about violence and gender.

FINDINGS

In *Willing, capable, and confident* we consider:

- how men experience pressures related to social scripts about how they should behave and relate to others
- the ways that men navigate these pressures across relationships and environments.

The report finds that a significant number of men who participated in the study talked about their **willingness** to prevent or repair the negative impacts of harmful masculine norms in their lives. However, they were sometimes unsure of their **capability** to act on these desires or lacked the **confidence** to take action to prevent the negative impact of masculine norms.

The findings in this report are intentionally framed as strengths-based, to highlight their potential use in helping men see themselves as capable of challenging the gendered drivers of men's violence against women. We do this to increase understanding of the ways that men's willingness, capability and confidence to engage in gender-transformative action for prevention can be supported through systemic, structural, and settings-based efforts.

HOW MEN EXPERIENCE PRESSURE TO CONFORM TO MAN BOX RULES

Men experience different pressures of what it means to be a man in Australia, including how they should behave and relate to others. Focus group participants experienced pressures to conform to various masculine norms, consistent with rules described in the Man Box 2024 study. Their discussions focused on three themes in particular:

- acting tough and being stoic
- creating financial stability as breadwinners in heterosexual relationships
- complying with heteronormative and heterosexual masculine norms.

Men's experiences of these pressures are shaped by different social relationships, contexts, and personal histories. For instance, some participants described how pressure to act tough and be stoic has a significant impact upon their ability to express particular emotions in public.

> *I feel like it'd have to be an extreme context and very public in order for [men crying in public] to come through as alright. Let's say you had a major accident and one of your mates just passed away in public, people would understand. But there has to be a solid reason. A death.* ***Participant working in a male-dominated trade, with low level of endorsement of the Man Box rules***

Several participants experienced such pressures as unfair or as having negative effects on their ability to seek help from friends, colleagues, family members and intimate partners. Even where they

did not personally agree with Man Box rules, participants felt pressure to conform regardless. This resulted in behaviours that were consistent with harmful masculine norms, often due to feared social consequences if they did not conform.

> *I'd like to say I don't [relate to the strong man stereotype], but I feel like internally that's not the truth. I don't feel comfortable crying in front of anyone. I don't see it as a thing of weakness from anyone else, but I don't have the same acceptance of it [for myself] … There's the fear of judgement.* ***Participant working in a male-dominated trade, with low level of endorsement of the Man Box rules***

Concerns that they would face social exclusion, judgement, or rejection from others influenced how most participants in the study described choosing to either conform to or resist Man Box rules.

> *I feel like talking about your feelings or emotions gives a perception that you are weak, and you are not at the same level as the others around you. Sometimes you can feel very small and tiny as a result. It's generally your positives like excitement and happy, and all of those positive emotions are fine, because they are all upbeat and signs of strength, and when you are showing vulnerability, that's where people perceive it as weakness.* ***University-educated participant, with low level of endorsement of the Man Box rules***

Study participants described the comparative freedom they experienced when they felt they could manage potential judgement from others or felt they were in a safe environment and could express themselves differently. This demonstrates how men in the focus groups resisted or conformed to masculine norms in context-specific ways. It suggests that men's behaviours are being shaped by their own personal beliefs about masculine norms, their perception of what others expect them to do, and their perception of the consequences of acting outside of those expectations.

Willing, capable, and confident explores focus group participants' perceptions of ways that social pressures to conform to harmful masculine norms have changed over time for them personally, and across generations. While pressures to be a 'real man' still have tangible impacts on men's lives in Australia, many of the men in our study indicated that they were happy that these pressures have shifted and were appreciative of the role of various forms of media in reshaping masculine norms.

> *The introduction of podcasts a few years ago. Hearing other men's stories about struggling and mental health, stuff like that. It enabled me to open up a lot more. You're able to think, it's not just me, there are other people out there with similar thoughts.* ***Participant working in a male-dominated trade, with low level of endorsement of the Man Box rules***

The findings in this report support previous research and practice evidence highlighting the crucial role of context – and in particular peer relationships – in how men decide to conform to or challenge masculine norms.

I'D LIKE TO SAY I DON'T [RELATE TO THE STRONG MAN STEREOTYPE], BUT I FEEL LIKE INTERNALLY THAT'S NOT THE TRUTH. I DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE CRYING IN FRONT OF ANYONE.

Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement

Pivotal to preventing men's violence is understanding how to enable men to practice equitable forms of masculinity in their intimate, peer and professional relationships. This report supports existing evidence that demonstrates that by itself, individual attitudinal change may not be sufficient to change men's behaviour. Population-wide efforts are required to complement changes that may be achieved through prevention work with individual men, in order to transform the social environments where masculine norms are shaped and practiced. This affirms the important role of primary prevention efforts that engage with men as individuals, while also addressing the social systems, structures, organisations and communities that create and enable these masculine norms.

HOW MEN NAVIGATE PRESSURE TO CONFORM TO MAN BOX RULES

Focus group participants shared various strategies they employed to navigate Man Box rules across different social and relational settings. Strategies vary according to context, which can influence men's sense of how willing, capable and confident they are to actively address the gendered drivers of violence against women.

Some men described the ways that they might selectively modulate their behaviours to conform to their peers.

> *I'll be dead honest with you. I think being younger … and being pretty immature, I reckon everyone would think it's funny or whatever [if a friend yells a suggestive comment to a woman on the street]. But I think a certain few and I feel like myself, obviously depending on what it is but you might think, … 'That was funny'. But then you'd go, 'Come on, mate. You're not gaining. You're just putting someone down'. You'd tell them to pull their head in. You know what I mean?* ***Participant working in a male-dominated trade, with moderate level of endorsement of the Man Box rules***

Understanding the strategies men use to navigate social pressures is an important finding for prevention work that seeks to develop men's capacity to intervene against harmful attitudes and behaviours. It provides a frame from which to consider why men might make decisions about the attitudes and behaviours they express, challenge, avoid, agree with, or ignore in different aspects of their lives.

Willing, capable, and confident demonstrates the value men place on their friendships, family relationships and intimate partnerships, and their connections with colleagues, teammates, and community. Engaging men in primary prevention means acknowledging the richness of their relationships and the ways that protecting a sense of belonging can shape men's behaviours.

Where men feel greater pressure to conform to harmful gender norms, the value they place on maintaining these relationships and their social safety can mean that they dismiss, ignore, reinforce or encourage violence-supporting attitudes and behaviours.

> *The pub test is that we should be standing up for the right thing, but it's the confrontation and the friendship and the relationship. I don't want to ruin the relationship.* ***University-educated participant, with moderate level of endorsement of the Man Box rules***

This report supports the assertion made in primary prevention frameworks that shifts in individual attitudes and behaviours are more sustainable when enabled by structural, institutional, and organisational change, and when there is a critical mass of support for healthier versions of masculinity – from family members, partners, employers, friends, workmates, the media and online networks.

OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD MEN'S WILLINGNESS, CAPABILITY AND CONFIDENCE TO ENGAGE IN PREVENTION

Many men understand that adhering to Man Box rules may cause harm for themselves and others around them. A significant number of focus group participants also identified examples of how the gendered drivers of men's violence against women play out in the places where they live, work, learn, socialise and play. Many participants expressed how these examples caused them discomfort and did not align with their personal values.

This provides an opportunity to further engage men who are already questioning or disconnected from harmful masculine norms. This report demonstrates five key opportunities for building men's willingness, capability and confidence to address the gendered drivers of violence against women across five broad themes:

- Men see and understand the benefits of emotionally supportive, safe and equitable **intimate partner relationships** for themselves and their partners.
- Fathers understand how gender norms can influence their **parenting** and impact their children.
- Men's **families and social networks** can support them to let go of harmful ideas about what it means to be a man and can encourage healthy forms of masculinity.
- Men's increased openness to discuss their **mental health and wellbeing** can be built upon with gender-transformative primary prevention efforts.
- **Workplace initiatives, cultures and reforms** provide opportunities to challenge harmful ideas about what it means to be a man.

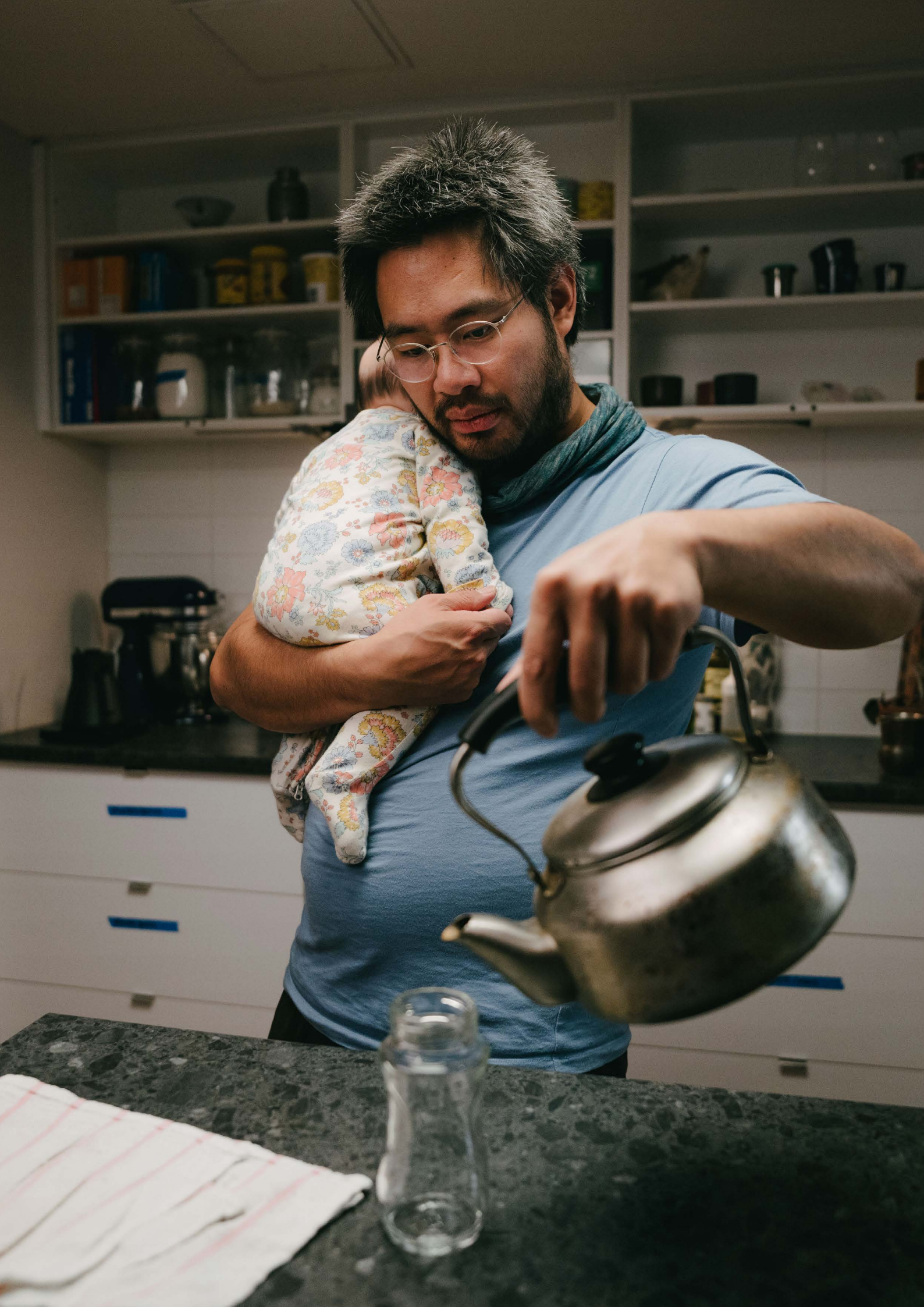
FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION

For many people working in primary prevention policy, program design and practice, the findings of this report are likely to affirm decades of experience and practice evidence that speak to the barriers and opportunities related to engaging men and boys in gender-transformative work. To further prevention work with men, it is critical for the sector to:

- embed approaches to working with men that are consistent and coordinated across prevention, early intervention, response and recovery
- build evidence about what works to shift harmful masculine norms across whole populations, within different settings and cohorts, and to test that knowledge in policy and practice
- support media to build men's willingness, capability, and confidence to be part of prevention.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND



1.1 INTRODUCTION

Men's use of violence against women remains devastatingly commonplace across Australia. However, such violence – and the personal and societal consequences it creates – is preventable (1–3). Coordinated action to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women can stop this violence from occurring (1) and also help to address other forms of gender-based violence (4–6).

Australian policy and practice frameworks for primary prevention of violence against women highlight the critical importance of challenging harmful gender stereotypes and addressing male peer relationships and cultures of masculinity that emphasise dominance, control and aggression (1, 2, 7). This approach is informed by considerable efforts from practitioners, researchers and policymakers to understand how to engage men as active participants in prevention, and how to work across the population to challenge harmful ideas of what it means to be a man (8–11).

BOX 1: WHAT IS PRIMARY PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

Primary prevention applies whole-of-population approaches to change the conditions that allow violence against women and gender-based violence to thrive. These conditions include individual attitudes and behaviours, experiences of and exposure to different social norms throughout one's life and relationships, organisational cultures and practices, policies, laws and institutions. Primary prevention addresses these conditions in mutually reinforcing ways across the life course, in all the different places where people live, learn, work, socialise and play (12).

Primary prevention works together with approaches that intervene early when there is higher risk of violence (i.e. secondary prevention or early intervention), respond after an occurrence of violence (i.e. tertiary prevention or response), and support victim survivors and perpetrators in recovery. Effective primary prevention therefore requires a well-resourced family violence sector across the prevention continuum, from prevention through to early intervention, response and recovery (1).

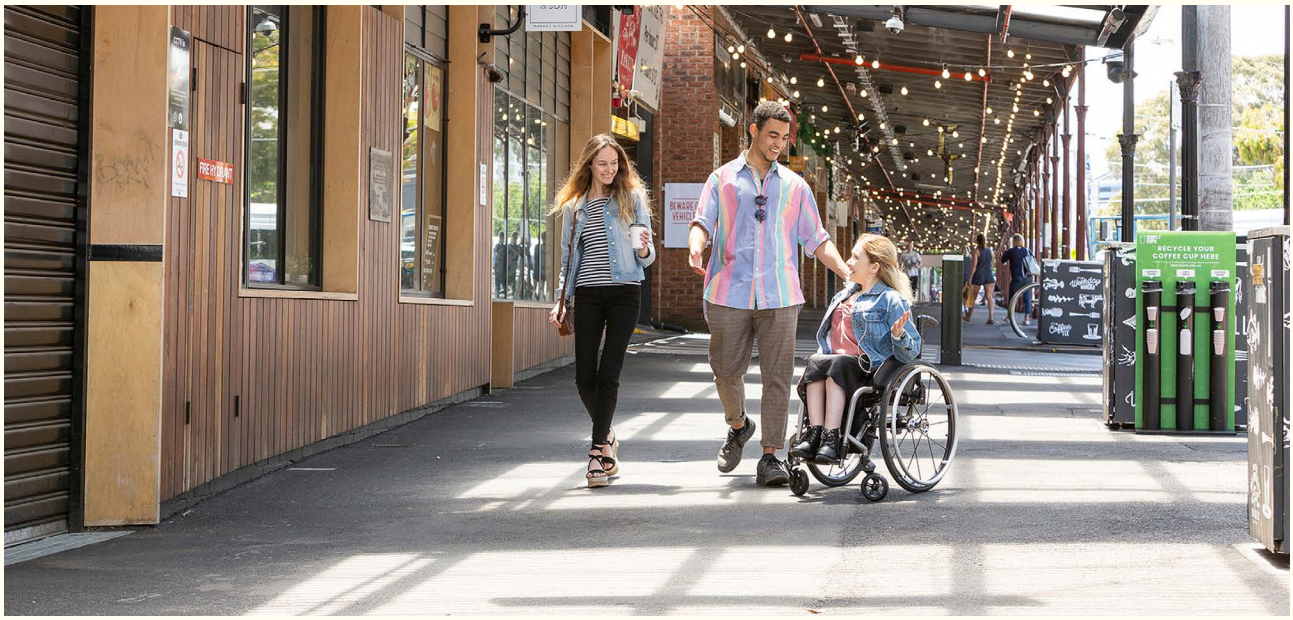
This report is a contribution to collective efforts to prevent men's violence against women, and other forms of gender-based violence. In this report we draw on data collected by The Men's Project, an initiative of Jesuit Social Services (see Box 2), for *The Man Box 2024: re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia (The Man Box 2024)* report (13), to explore how men understand and experience pressure to conform to masculinities in Australia. In doing so, we aim to:

- better understand how to build men's willingness, capability and confidence to take action to prevent violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence
- consider future directions for strengthening how primary prevention efforts engage with men.

We look at the ways that men's perceptions of pressures to conform to stereotypical masculine norms inform their attitudes and behaviours, and how they navigate these pressures across different parts of their lives. We also look at the ways that men's behaviours and attitudes align both with the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, and with heteronormative and homophobic attitudes that drive other forms of gender-based violence and discrimination. Our analysis focuses specifically on men's situational, dynamic and varying relationships with masculine norms (10 p 30–31) so as to advance understandings about how to build men's willingness, capability and confidence to actively participate in efforts to prevent violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence.

This report is presented in five chapters:

- **Chapter 1** highlights the importance of engaging men and boys in the prevention of violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence, and introduces relevant frameworks, theories and concepts.
- **Chapter 2** presents the Man Box 2024 study and the methodology for our qualitative analysis, along with limitations of the research.
- **Chapter 3** describes the ways focus group participants have experienced and perceived the social pressures related to what it means to be a man.
- **Chapter 4** shows how focus group participants have responded to those social pressures, including through their behaviours and attitudes.
- **Chapter 5** presents key findings of the research and considers future directions for strengthening how primary prevention efforts engage with men.



BOX 2: THE MAN BOX 2024 STUDY AND PARTNERSHIP

This report is the second publication from the Man Box 2024 study, a project led by The Men's Project, an initiative of Jesuit Social Services, in partnership with Respect Victoria (13). The Man Box 2024 study updates and expands upon findings from the first Man Box study in 2018 (11, 14). It investigates relationships between men's attitudes towards stereotypical masculine norms and other attitudes and behaviours that can cause harm to themselves and the people around them. The study includes a nationally representative survey of more than 3,500 Australian men aged 18 to 45, and seven focus group discussions to provide deeper insight into men's attitudes and behaviours (13).

The Men's Project work focuses on 'engaging with young people and community leaders to prevent violence, piloting interventions for boys and men at risk of using violence and building the evidence base about how to do this effectively across Australia' (13 p 19). Respect Victoria collaborated closely with The Men's Project at key stages of the design of the survey and focus groups for the Man Box 2024 study, contributing prevention expertise to support data analysis and interpretation of results. Respect Victoria also supported development of The Men's Project's report (13).

Willing, capable and confident: *men, masculinities and the prevention of violence against women* centres on Respect Victoria's analysis of the seven focus group discussions alongside the survey data. Respect Victoria authored this report and The Men's Project provided feedback during initial phases of data analysis and report drafting.

1.2 THE GENDERED NATURE OF VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

Violence in Australia is gendered: population-level data demonstrates that presumptively cisgender men are most likely to use violence, and women are more likely to be victims of family violence and sexual violence perpetrated by men (see Box 3) (15, 16). Recognising the gendered nature of violence is important to build understanding of why various forms of violence occur and what can be done to prevent them (1, 17).

BOX 3: MEN'S USE OF VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

- **More than 1 in 3 women in Australia (37%)** have experienced physical or sexual violence perpetrated by a man since the age of 15 (16).
- The majority (95%) of Australians who have experienced physical or sexual violence **report experiencing violence perpetrated by a man** (18).
- **Men are most at risk of experiencing violence from other men**, most often strangers or acquaintances (16, 19).
- **Cisgender men** are the most common perpetrators of emotional abuse, verbal abuse and social isolation in LGBTIQA+ relationships (20).

Research and practice evidence demonstrates that men are more likely to hold attitudes and beliefs that endorse violence and support gender inequality than women or non-binary and gender diverse people (1, 17). *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (Change the story)* illustrates the social conditions that drive men's violence against women (the 'gendered drivers'), which derive from a broader context of gender inequality that manifests in individual attitudes and behaviours; in intimate, peer and family relationships; and across communities, organisations, societal norms and legal, governmental, political, institutional and other structures (see Box 4).

Importantly, addressing gender equality overall is not the sole focus or sufficient for prevention of men's violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence. Actions to address the gendered drivers of this violence concentrate on changing particular norms and cultures of masculinity that are embedded across society (21). These gendered drivers are intertwined with other forms of structural, systemic and interpersonal discrimination and oppression such as racism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, ableism, ageism and homophobia. In combination, these can increase the risk of violence against some women. Groups of women who are more likely to experience higher rates or specific forms of men's violence are: First Nations women; women from migrant and refugee backgrounds; women and gender diverse people from lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQA+) communities; women with disabilities; older women; and young women (1, 4, 5, 10). As such, effective primary

BOX 4: THE GENDERED DRIVERS AND REINFORCING FACTORS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Change the story (1) identifies four gendered drivers of men's violence against women:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

Each of these drivers can be addressed through four key actions that support the prevention of violence against women. Understanding these drivers – and importantly, the actions to prevent them – is an important foundation for primary prevention efforts. Alongside the gendered drivers, *Change the story* identifies additional factors that can reinforce violence against women. These on their own do not predict violence against women, but may influence the likelihood, prevalence or dynamics in different settings and contexts:

- condoning of violence in general
- experience of, and exposure to, violence (particularly during childhood)
- factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (e.g. disasters and crises; settings where there is heavy alcohol consumption)
- resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts.

Understanding the drivers, the reinforcing factors and the actions to prevent them is an important foundation for primary prevention efforts. Primary prevention work helps us to understand the dynamics that allow violence to occur, including how gender, power and control are central to the occurrence of violence.

prevention focuses not only on the gendered drivers of violence, but also the ways in which other forms of discrimination drive violence. In addition, there are a number of reinforcing factors that make violence against women and gender-based violence more likely to occur or more likely to result in greater harm to victim survivors, where the gendered drivers are also present (see Box 4). Efforts to minimise harms resulting from these reinforcing factors are important in and of themselves. When made in conjunction with actions to address the gendered drivers of violence, they play an important role in holistic attempts to prevent violence against women and other gender-based violence.

1.3 SOCIALLY DOMINANT FORMS OF MASCULINITY AND THE MAN BOX RULES IN AUSTRALIA

The social conditions that drive men's use of violence also create unrealistic and harmful expectations of and for men. These expectations set out rigid and narrow ideas of the 'right ways' of being a man, which we discuss here as 'dominant forms of masculinity'. Dominant forms of masculinity represent the norms, stereotypes, attitudes and behaviours that men are commonly expected to support, conform to or participate in (1, 10, 22). In Australia, dominant forms of masculinity are characterised by social norms that emphasise dominance and control; aggression; hypersexuality; homophobia and transphobia; stoicism and suppression of emotion; toughness; independence and self-reliance; competitiveness; and risk-taking (13, 14). Men, their families and communities might see these as representing 'the right way' of being a man, because they see the ways that these characteristics are valued in different settings and structures encountered throughout their life.

Whether men then behave in this 'right way' means they will be either 'rewarded' or 'punished' in their relationships with partners, families, friends, communities and social networks, workplaces, educational settings, the media and broader societal systems and structures (1, 10, 23). These rewards and punishments include various ways in which men can be accepted or rejected within these different settings.

The Man Box 2024 study captured data on some of these dominant social norms in a set of 19 Man Box 'rules' (13). The Man Box rules capture some socially dominant ideas about how men are expected to behave, look and feel in Australia (see Box 5). These rules do not represent the only ways that men are expected to behave, but together demonstrate some of the socially dominant ideas about the 'right' way to be a man in Australia.

There are clear links between dominant forms of masculinity and various adverse outcomes for men who endorse and behave according to these rules. The Man Box 2024 found that the more men personally agree with the Man Box rules, the more likely they are to hold attitudes and behave in ways that cause harm to themselves and others (13). For example, men who most strongly agreed with the Man Box rules were most likely to report having perpetrated physical and sexual violence against an intimate partner, to frequently use violent pornography, and to hold attitudes supportive of violence against women and gender inequality (13). As such, dominant forms of masculinity increase the likelihood of several poor outcomes for men, including the risk of men causing harm to others around them.

Yet not all men experience the same pressures to enact the same forms of dominant masculinities. How men experience masculinities may differ relative to other parts of their identities such as their race, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation. This is tied to the intersectional nature of men's identities, which we discuss in more detail in the following section. In addition to how men experience dominant masculinities variably, some aspects of stereotypical masculine characteristics are not inherently harmful when considered in isolation. For example, there are times where being willing to take risks or being independent can be helpful for people of any gender. However, the expectation that men should take risks that put others or themselves in danger to prove their masculinity or should assert independence by not asking for help when they need it is unrealistic, harmful and sets up the conditions for men to perceive that they have failed if they do not manage to conform to these expectations.

BOX 5: THE MAN BOX PILLARS AND RULES

The 19 Man Box rules are organised under seven themes, or pillars:

1. Self-sufficiency

- A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears and problems shouldn't really get respect.
- Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help.

2. Acting tough

- A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak.
- Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside.

3. Physical attractiveness

- It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good.
- A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly.
- Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair and skin.

4. Rigid gender roles

- It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house or take care of younger children.
- A man shouldn't have to do household chores.
- In heterosexual relationships, men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women.

5. Homophobia and transphobia

- A gay guy is not a 'real man'.
- A transgender man is not a 'real man'.
- It's not okay for straight guys to be friends with gay guys.
- It's not okay for straight guys to be friends with trans or gender diverse people.

6. Hypersexuality

- A 'real man' should have as many sexual partners as he can.
- A 'real man' would never say no to sex.

7. Aggression and control

- Men should use violence to get respect if necessary.
- In heterosexual 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.

The Man Box 2024 study (13) measured how much men aged 18 to 30 felt social pressure to conform to these rules and how much they personally agreed with these ideas. For example, men were asked how much they agreed that 'Society tells me that a man shouldn't have to do household chores', as well as how much they agreed that 'In my opinion, a man shouldn't have to do household chores'. Across all Man Box rules, perceived social pressure was higher than personal endorsement: that is, men were more likely to say they felt pressure from society to act in certain ways to 'be a man' than they were to believe these messages themselves. For example, while 33% of men agreed that society tells them men shouldn't do chores, only 19% of men personally agreed with this. For more information about these Man Box rules and pillars, see The Men's Project's report *The Man Box 2024* (13).

1.4 MEN VERSUS MASCULINITIES

Existing policy frameworks, practice evidence and research findings demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between masculinities as a category of gendered social norms, structures and systems, and men as individuals (1, 2, 7, 10, 13). Masculinities are not confined to the attitudes and behaviours of individual men – people of all genders can reinforce them, and they extend to broader societal structures and systems that uphold expectations of how men should behave (10). Men are not always able to live up to masculine social expectations, may not want to conform to them, or may have inconsistent experiences with these expectations (10, 22, 24, 25).

While anyone can enforce (or challenge) masculinities, it is predominantly men who ultimately enact masculine norms and who experience the most pressure to conform to those norms. Men are therefore crucial to prevention efforts, not just because they are the most likely group to use violence but because they have a pivotal role to play as active participants in challenging the gendered drivers of violence (1). This highlights the importance of ensuring that men are active participants in efforts to shift norms and transform the social conditions that inform harmful or unhealthy masculinities.

The category of 'men' describes a broad and diverse range of individuals spanning different racial, ethnic, class, sexual orientation, religious and other identities. These different identities intersect with each other and mean that men can experience both power and oppression at different times or simultaneously (10, 24, 26). In Australia, colonisation has contributed to the continued disempowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (1, 10, 27). Men from culturally and racially minoritised communities and men with disabilities also have different access to power and experience multiple forms of oppression (28). Primary prevention approaches therefore need to consider men's different experiences of power and oppression and what they mean for pressures to conform to dominant forms of masculinity.

Masculine norms, like all social norms, are not fixed (10). Over time and across different geographic locations, the expectations for how men should behave are different. As the Man Box 2024 study demonstrates, over time, men's personal endorsement of the Man Box rules and their perceived social pressure to conform to those rules are shifting in ways that are supportive of the broader goals of prevention (13). These shifts demonstrate that it is possible to influence masculine norms, particularly those that promote and drive gender inequality and various forms of violence.

1.5 ENGAGING MEN IN PRIMARY PREVENTION

While there are differing approaches to effectively engaging men in the prevention of violence against women (9, 10, 21, 29), there is broad consensus in the prevention sector that this engagement should be 'gender-transformative' (9, 21). That means prevention work with men should promote critical examination of gender norms to transform beliefs, attitudes and behaviours to be more gender equitable, and to transform how particular norms and cultures of masculinity are embedded at all levels of society – in policy, institutions, organisations and communities (21). Using a gender-transformative approach helps to centre the importance of engaging with men in efforts to address the gendered drivers in ways which do not reinforce the gendered power dynamics that drive men's violence in the first place (10, 30).

Effectively engaging men in prevention requires a broader approach than once-off interventions or campaigns that are not supported and reinforced by settings-based programs, because these have limited capacity to provide opportunities for sustained gender-transformative work. The analysis we present in this report is informed by three complementary categories of engaging men in gender-transformative approaches to primary prevention, as identified by Casey and co-authors (21).

These categories are:

1. outreach to and recruitment of previously unengaged men[1]
2. changing men's attitudes and behaviours[2]
3. social action to end violence as part of broader gender justice work.[3]

This framework emphasises that engaging men is not the end goal in prevention, but rather a way to bring men along on the whole-of-population journey to transforming gender norms and challenging gender inequality at all levels of society. This is important in light of concerns that a focus on men in prevention may take much-needed resources away from existing prevention work with women and gender diverse people, or from early intervention and response programs supporting victim survivors (8).

The three categories that Casey and co-authors set out (21) help to conceptualise a spectrum of strategies that might be used to engage men with different levels of understanding of their role in primary prevention. In this report,

1 This includes embedding prevention into settings and places where men live, work and socialise, and adopting strengths-based approaches that emphasise men's willingness to engage in shifts in culture (as opposed to deficit approaches, which may be perceived as blaming).

2 This includes community mobilisation through training community activists, using media to promote conversations around shifting men's attitudes and behaviours, and deploying school-based programs. Evidence shows this type of engagement is more likely to succeed if it uses a gender-transformative approach and where it is delivered at multiple levels of the social-ecological model.

3 This aims to foster men's involvement as social change agents in their communities. Men's participation in prevention as social change agents means that they have and are able to activate the skills to agitate for policy and social norm change with relative independence.

we also consider how these might translate to different outcomes for men as they more actively position themselves in primary prevention efforts over time.

1. Outreach to unengaged men helps to grow their **willingness** to do more to take action against the gendered drivers.
2. Changing men's attitudes and behaviours helps to build their **capability** in knowing when to take action, including when to give space to cis and trans women and other trans and gender diverse people.
3. Over time, this will build greater **confidence** to fully engage in social action to end gender-based violence.

We use these three ways of understanding degrees of engagement – willingness, capability and confidence – throughout the report to consider how prevention efforts might connect more with men.

Research and practice evidence illustrates it is necessary to carefully consider the ways that unequal gendered power dynamics can play out as a result of men's participation in prevention work. For example, positioning of men as role models may enforce the idea of men as society's natural leaders and protectors, particularly where male role models are not encouraged to reflect on their own alignment with harmful gender norms (31). This points to the importance of reflective practice that encourages examination of and challenges to gender hierarchies and the ways that they are reinforced (31).

It is also crucial to be aware of the ways some men may resist prevention messaging. Resistance to gender equality and prevention efforts is common, and it can be conceptualised along a continuum from passive to active resistance: denial, disavowal, inaction, appeasement, appropriation, co-option, repression and backlash (6, 32–34). While men are more likely than people of other genders to have attitudes that support some forms of violence and deny the existence of gender inequality, resistance can be enacted by people of all genders and upheld by wider social narratives (17, 35). This emphasises the importance of engaging men in prevention as part of whole-of-population approaches (13).

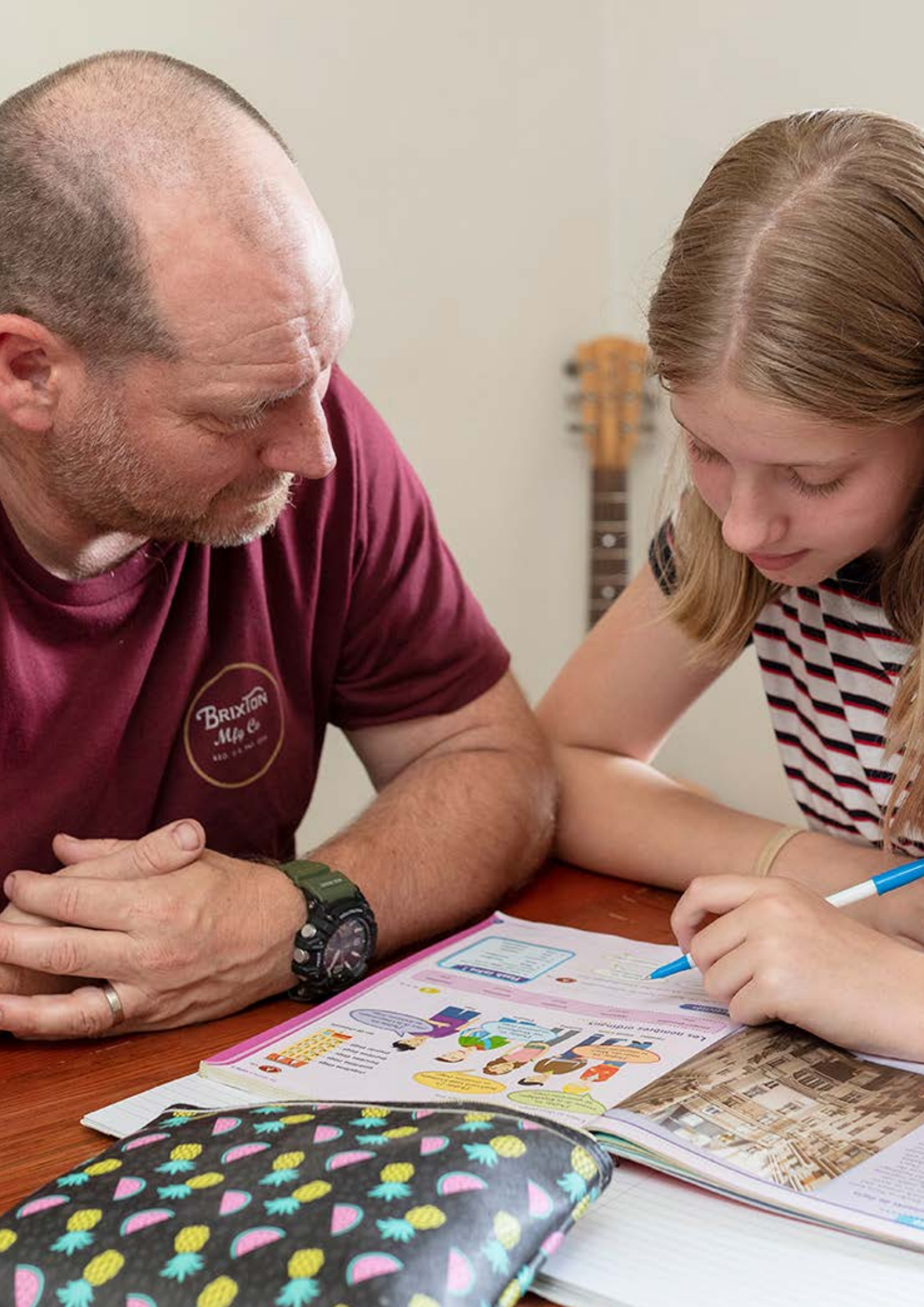
THAT CHANGE IN MINDSET [IS HAPPENING]. EVEN ON THE WORKSITE... THE CHATS YOU OVERHEAR... THEY'RE A LOT MORE PERSONAL, THEY'RE NOT THE 'MANLY CHATS' YOU WOULD EXPECT.

Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement

1.6 BUILDING ON THE EXISTING POLICY AND EVIDENCE BASE

The findings in this report build on an existing base of practice and research evidence related to men, masculinities and primary prevention in Australia (8, 9, 30, 36, 37). This work includes the second edition of *Change the story*, Australia's national primary prevention framework, which places a strong focus on men's perpetration of violence against women and the role of masculinities in driving violence. The *Men in focus – Evidence review* (10) provides a comprehensive exploration of the links between masculinities and violence against women and ways to engage men and boys in prevention efforts. Alongside the evidence review, the *Men in focus – Practice guide* offers strategies to help put these findings to work when designing and implementing primary prevention initiatives (38). Publications from the 2018 Man Box study (11, 14), published by The Men's Project, have also laid a strong foundation and advanced understanding of contemporary masculinities in Australia.

Reshaping masculinities as part of a broader movement to end violence against women and family violence is a key policy priority for Victoria and Australia, reflected in the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (2) and *Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence* (3), a precursor to the third Rolling Action Plan (currently under development) under *Ending Family Violence: Victoria's 10-year plan for change* (39). Other key reforms in Victoria and nationally relating to gender equality, parental leave, affirmative consent and respectful relationships education contribute to prevention by creating avenues to shift gender roles and norms – including for men (40–43). These frameworks and reforms demonstrate critical shifts towards healthier masculinities and in working with men to challenge the underlying social conditions that drive violence (12).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CHAPTER 2

STUDY METHODS

The Man Box 2024 is a mixed methods study that collected data using a national survey of Australian men and focus group discussions.

The Men's Project led the research with support from Respect Victoria's research team. Respect Victoria provided subject matter expertise on primary prevention and technical advice to inform all stages of research design, implementation and analysis. The Men's Project engaged Wallis Social Research and CloudResearch to collect, clean and analyse the survey data, with guidance from staff at The Men's Project. Wallis Social Research recruited focus group participants and facilitated the focus group discussions. The Jesuit Social Services Human Research Ethics Committee approved all components of the study. An advisory group convened by The Men's Project helped guide analysis and identify risks throughout 2023.

The Men's Project authored the research report *The Man Box 2024* (13), which primarily focuses on findings from analysis of survey data. Professor Michael Flood, part of the research team who designed the Australian Man Box tool, provided expert commentary on these findings, which is included as a chapter in the report. Respect Victoria worked in close collaboration with staff from The Men's Project throughout preparation of the publication.

Respect Victoria conducted the qualitative data analysis and interpretation presented in this report.

2.1 QUALITATIVE FOCUS GROUP METHODS

STUDY DESIGN

The Man Box 2024 study included a qualitative exploratory study using focus group discussions to elicit conversations with men about how they experience masculine norms and what factors influence their attitudes and behaviours related to these norms.

The qualitative phase of data collection was designed to understand the perspectives of men who do not personally endorse some or all of the Man Box rules, even if they feel social pressure to conform to those rules. This meant excluding men from the study who, by virtue of their higher level of endorsement of Man Box rules, are more likely to condone violence against women or have perpetrated violence against women (13). This choice was made for two reasons.

First, it allows a focus on men who are more likely to be open to discussions about how their attitudes and behaviours in relation to the Man Box rules – and by extension, the gendered drivers – align or diverge and why. This helps to address an ongoing gap in primary prevention research around how to engage more men in primary prevention. It is critical to understanding how to design approaches to primary prevention that resonate with the majority of Australian men.

The findings presented in this report are therefore intended as complementary to efforts to build more and better understanding about how to shift the attitudes and behaviours of men who are more likely to condone and/or perpetrate violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence. The *Australian National Research Agenda* (44) highlights work with men who use or are at higher risk of using violence as a priority to support the aims of the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (2). The analysis presented in this report supports this work through considering how other men can do more to shift gendered social norms such that discriminatory or violence-supporting attitudes and behaviours are no longer socially rewarded or accepted.

Second, Respect Victoria and The Men's Project research teams identified that including focus group participants who highly endorse the Man Box rules, and who are therefore more likely to have perpetrated violence against women (13), raised ethical considerations for the study. These included considerations of safety and comfort of other participants, and additional demands on focus group moderators to manage the potential risk of participants who might seek to dominate discussion or collude with other participants by encouraging sexist or violence-supporting views. Managing these ethical considerations would have logistical implications requiring time and resourcing to address; doing so within the parameters of the project would have limited the total number of focus group discussions conducted for the study. Ultimately, the combined research team chose a study design that allowed for seven discussions, including with fathers, and with gay, bi+ and trans men.

TABLE 1: FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS, BY GROUP

Group	Man Box endorsement	Age cohort	Gender and sexuality	Employment/ study status	Fatherhood status
1	Low	18–30	Cisgender and heterosexual	Working in male-dominated trade	Did not say
2	Low	18–30	Cisgender and heterosexual	Studying at university or employed (degree)	Did not say
3	Moderate	18–30	Cisgender and heterosexual	Working in male-dominated trade	Did not say
4	Moderate	18–30	Cisgender and heterosexual	Studying at university or employed (degree)	Did not say
5	Low	18–30	Trans, gender diverse, gay or bi+	Varied	Did not say
6	Low	31–45	Cisgender and heterosexual	Varied	Has a child/children
7	Moderate	31–45	Cisgender and heterosexual	Varied	Has a child/children

(Source: Adapted from *The Man Box 2024*, p 149)

ELIGIBILITY AND RECRUITMENT

Eligible participants were those between the ages of 18 and 45 who identified as a cisgender or transgender man, and resided in Australia. In August and September 2023, Wallis Social Research recruited focus group participants based on a screening phone call to determine key characteristics for group segmentation of age, parental status, sexual orientation, education, occupation and the degree to which they endorsed the Man Box rules.

The Men's Project and Respect Victoria then categorised participants into focus groups (see Table 1) to generate a range of perspectives about navigating masculine norms based on common experiences including fatherhood; gay, bi+ and trans identity; or educational and occupational pathways. Men were also categorised by their level of endorsement (low and moderate) of four Man Box rules.[4] This reduced the risk of conflict over differences in belief systems within each group, and the risk of discomfort to participants when encountering potentially extreme views about violence and gender.

4 Man Box endorsement was based on responses to four items from the Man Box scale: (1) In my opinion, men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help; (2) In my opinion, a man who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak; (3) In my opinion, a man should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside; (4) In my opinion, it is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house or take care of younger children. A participant was categorised as 'low endorsement' if they disagreed with all four statements, 'moderate endorsement' if they agreed with one of the statements, or 'high endorsement' if they agreed with two or more of the statements. These screening questions were selected based on advice from the recruitment team that recruitment would be less likely to alienate men if the selected questions did not elicit strong emotion and did not introduce the theme of violence.

DATA COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT

In August and September 2023, Wallis Social Research conducted seven focus group discussions with a total of 33 men from across Australia in groups of four to five participants. Participants came from varied metropolitan, regional and rural locations, and included men from culturally diverse backgrounds. Discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes and were based on a semi-structured discussion guide with questions addressing:

- perceptions of masculine norms and influences
- expressions of emotional vulnerability
- expectations for intimate partnerships
- intended bystander actions in cases of homophobic bullying and street harassment of women.

Participants received e-vouchers valued at $100 from The Men's Project in recognition of their time and participation. Discussions were conducted via Microsoft Teams and were audio-recorded, transcribed and securely stored. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 14 for analysis.

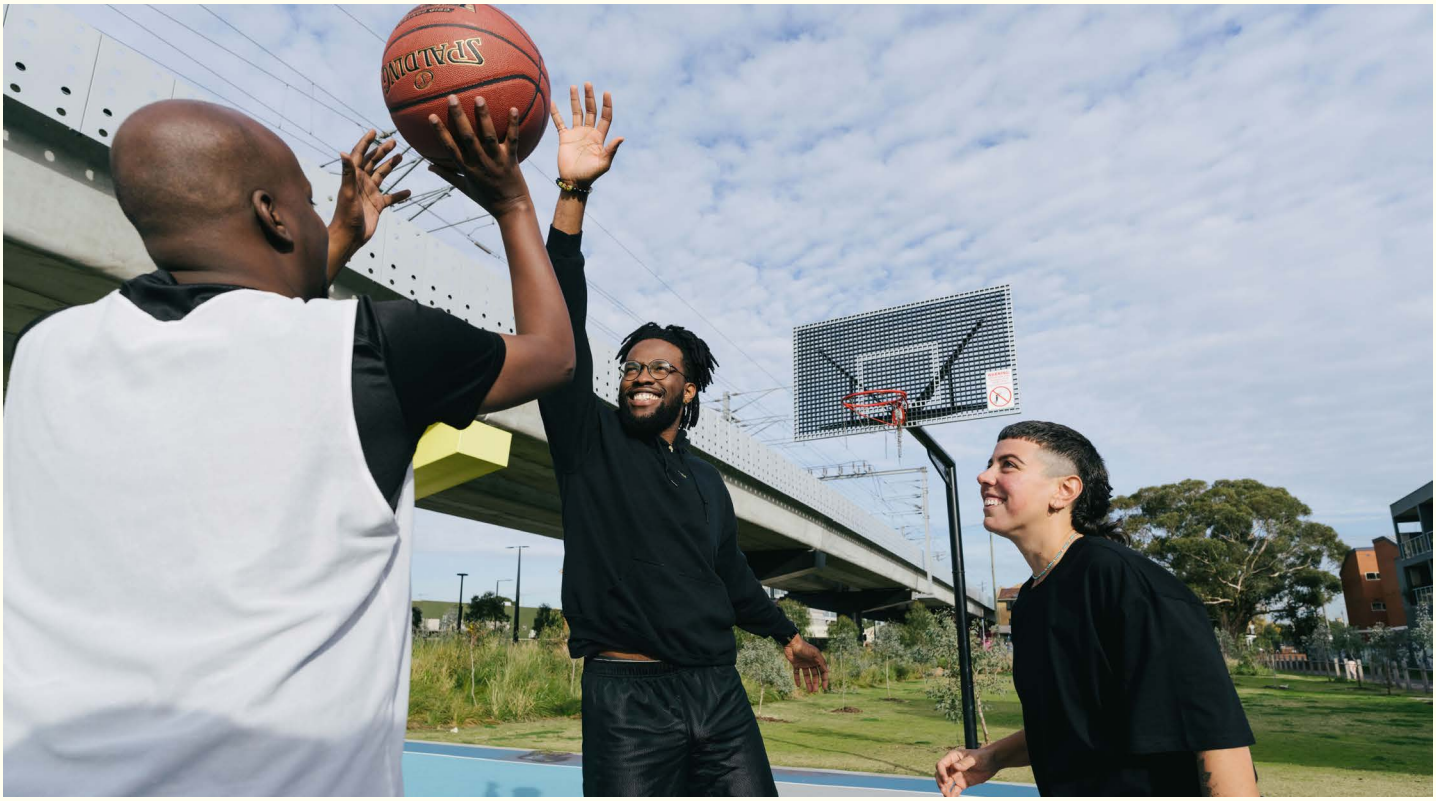
TABLE 2: TARGETED DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Demographic characteristic	Cohorts recruited for
Fatherhood status	▪ Has a child/children ▪ Does not have children
Education level	▪ Year 12 or below ▪ TAFE, certificate level ▪ Bachelor degree or above
Employment status	▪ Unemployed ▪ Student ▪ Employed ▪ Home and caring duties
First Nations status	▪ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ▪ Not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
Language spoken at home	▪ A language other than English ▪ English
Disability	▪ Has a disability, health condition or injury that has lasted, or is likely to last, six months or more (includes stress-related, mental health and intellectual as well as physical conditions) ▪ No disability
Geographic location	▪ Capital city ▪ Regional town ▪ Rural/remote

(Source: Adapted from *The Man Box 2024*, p 150)

I FEEL LIKE TALKING ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS OR EMOTIONS GIVES A PERCEPTION THAT YOU ARE WEAK... SOMETIMES YOU CAN FEEL VERY SMALL AND TINY AS A RESULT.

University-educated, low Man Box endorsement



ANALYSIS

Our research team developed a codebook (45) based on themes from the discussion guide of relevance in the places where men live, work and socialise (46). This draws on Change the story's definition of settings relevant to prevention as 'environments in which people live, work, learn, socialise and play' (1 p 136). We piloted the codebook by coding three transcripts, each of which was coded independently by two researchers. We then refined the codebook based on discussion of the coding process. After initial coding of all seven transcripts in NVivo 14, we re-organised the codebook under the following themes found to be prominent in the data:

- fatherhood
- gender equality in households
- online spaces
- partnerships
- peer interactions
- public safety (focusing on sexual harassment and homophobic harassment)
- workplaces.

This phase of analysis focused on identifying participants' experiences of competing pressures related to gendered norms, and the different ways they enacted masculine norms in different contexts, as well as barriers and levers influencing how they enact those norms within each theme. This lens for analysis draws on the view that masculinities are multiple, dynamic and situational, as articulated in the *Men in focus – Evidence review* (10 p 30–31).

We exported all quotes under each code into Excel to organise and refine analysis within each theme, iteratively combining and expanding themes through a reflexive writing process (47). We engaged in periodic coding workshops to discuss emerging findings and iteratively refine analytic approaches.

All quotes presented in this report include a reference to the population segment the group comprises and the group's level of endorsement of the Man Box rules (see Box 6 for more detail).

BOX 6: A NOTE ON FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

This report presents quotes from the focus group participants to illustrate the discussion. With the exception of men in the gay, bi+ and trans focus group, all focus group participants identified as cisgender heterosexual men. The following notation is used to indicate which focus group the quote is drawn from.

University-educated
Men who were studying at university or employed with a university degree.

Male-dominated trade
Men who were employed in a trade that has been historically male-dominated, such as carpentry or mechanics.

Fathers
Men who had children. Men employed in any industry were included in these groups.

Gay, bi+ and trans
Men who identified as gay, bisexual or a sexuality other than heterosexuality, as well as men who identified as trans or gender diverse.

Low Man Box endorsement
Men who indicated low levels of agreement with a short-form Man Box measure used to assess overall endorsement of Man Box rules.

Moderate Man Box endorsement
Men who indicated moderate levels of agreement with the short-form Man Box measure.

See Table 1 for more information about the focus groups.

2.2 QUANTITATIVE SURVEY METHODS

STUDY DESIGN

The Man Box 2024 study included an online survey designed to measure men's perception of social pressure to conform to 19 stereotypical masculine norms that require men to be stoic, aggressive, emotionally invulnerable, physically attractive, in control of their partner, the breadwinner, unengaged in domestic labour, heterosexual and frequently seeking out sex (see the Man Box rules in Box 5). The survey also sought to measure how much they personally agree with these norms, as well as a range of attitudes, behaviours and experiences that impact the safety and wellbeing of themselves and others.

PARTICIPANTS

The survey sample was comprised of 3,519 cisgender or transgender men who resided in Australia, with 2,523 participants aged 18 to 30 and 996 participants aged 31 to 45. The participants were broadly representative of the population of Australian men.

For further information on the quantitative research methods, see *The Man Box 2024* (13 p 20–27, 135–148).

ANALYSIS PRESENTED IN THIS REPORT

Alongside findings from Respect Victoria's analysis of the focus group data presented in Chapters 3 and 4, we include boxes with key findings drawn from survey analysis in *The Man Box 2024* (13). These findings have been selected to:

- complement themes that emerged in focus group discussions
- highlight the differences in men's perception of social pressure to adhere to masculine norms and their personal belief in these norms
- examine how these reported social pressures and personal attitudes have changed over time through comparing 2018 and 2024 Man Box study findings.

2.3 LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this research that should be considered when reading this report.

The sampling approach for the qualitative study was designed to engage men with a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds. However, the recruitment approach and design of the discussion guide created limited opportunities for participants in most of the groups to discuss how social pressure to perform masculinity can vary based on one's cultural or racial background, trans identity, sexuality, faith, disability and other factors. This restricted the depth of our application of an intersectional lens throughout the analysis (28). As such, the data does not allow for specific recommendations for work with men with different lived experiences of discrimination, or in-depth analysis of how intersecting forms of oppression shape masculinities, and what this means for preventing violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence. We integrate discussion of intersectionality in this report to the extent possible based on the nature of the focus group data. In particular, we apply this lens to the data from the gay, bi+ and trans men's focus group, which explored experiences of the intersection between gender, sexuality and masculinities.

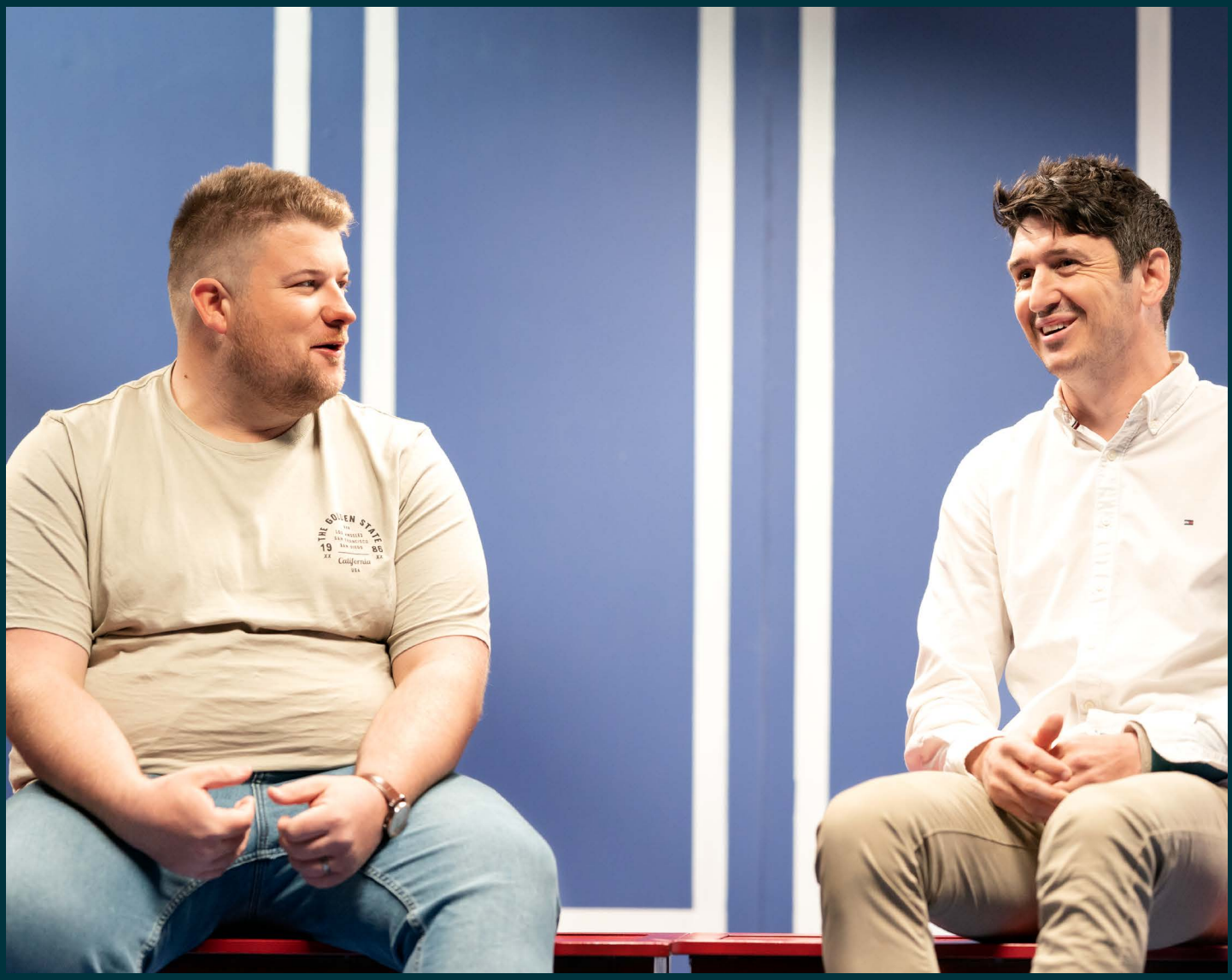
This study did not include participants under the age of 18. Different study design and ethical considerations are required in considering research with children and young people, and these were out of scope for this project. As such, this data reflects only the attitudes and beliefs of men considered as legal adults in Australia. Our analysis includes their observations and memories of how masculine norms have shaped their attitudes and behaviours across their life course rather than representing contemporary experiences of boys and adolescents.

As described in Section 2.1, men who demonstrated high endorsement of the Man Box rules during participant screening were excluded from the focus groups. As a result, this report does not include findings about how men who are more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence discuss their relationship to the Man Box rules. The quantitative phase of the study, however, did include men of all levels of endorsement of the Man Box rules, generating insights about this group. For information on the impacts of men's level of Man Box endorsement, see *The Man Box 2024* (13).

The discussion guide had more questions than could be asked in the allotted time of 90 minutes per discussion, so not all groups were asked all questions. The semi-structured discussion guide also focused on a smaller subset of themes than the full quantitative survey. Future qualitative research could explicitly examine, for example, the relationship between men's endorsement of traditional masculine norms and their attitudes towards sexual violence, use of violent pornography and their perpetration of sexual violence.

CHAPTER 3

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF THE SOCIAL PRESSURES ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN



This chapter explores how men in the focus groups described, perceived and experienced social pressures about acceptable and unacceptable ways of relating to others and behaving as a man. It also examines how men perceive shifts in these pressures over time.

We look at the three key pressures that focus group participants raised in relation to being a man in contemporary Australia:

- acting tough and avoiding expressions of emotional vulnerability
- conforming to the masculine provider role
- complying with heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality.

We examine each of these pressures separately to provide insight into the lived experiences described by focus group participants, while acknowledging that – like the Man Box rules – these pressures are interrelated, overlapping, mutually influencing and underpinned by similar social norms.

3.1 ACTING TOUGH AND AVOIDING EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY

MEN FEEL PRESSURE TO ACT TOUGH

The Man Box 2024 shows that some men feel social pressure to act tough, and personally endorse the norms that enforce this pressure (see Box 7) (13). In the focus groups, participants primarily described acting tough in relation to neglecting concerns for their own safety while simultaneously being attentive to women's safety, particularly in public spaces.

Some men said their attitudes towards safety differed when they were in the company of men compared to women in their peer groups.

> *Normally when I'm around my male friends, safety is not something I would consider that much of a priority. We'll do things that are adventurous, and safety is not the first thing that you think about. But then you have female friends around, whether it's on a night out or even going to sport or anything, safety is one of the first two or three things that we think about.* ***University-educated; low Man Box endorsement***

Some participants discussed the need to challenge the pressure to act tough within their peer groups. One participant discussed the potential harms of masculine norms around acting tough, which encourage disregard for men's safety. He described this lack of concern for men's safety as a 'stigma' and identified a need to transform these attitudes.

> *Yeah … safety is something that we always take … always think about when we are around females. And when we are the guys, that's not our topmost priority as well. But I feel if you have a close-knit group of even guy friends, that's a stigma that needs to be [gotten] rid of as well. Like, if you have two mates of yours, the safety should be in there as well.* ***University-educated; low Man Box endorsement***

The idea that safety is a relevant consideration for women and not for men is consistent with rigid gender stereotyping of men as strong and tough, and women as weak and vulnerable (11, 48–50). These constructions of masculinity can lead to perceptions that men need to protect women, including from other men (50). As shown in *The Man Box 2024* (13) and elsewhere (1, 51), such rigid gender stereotypes have harmful effects for both men and women and reinforce hierarchical power structures (1, 50, 51).

Most of the focus group participants also acknowledged that their awareness of men's use of violence, particularly in relation to sexual harassment and assault, was a key reason for their concerns about women's safety in public spaces. For example, participants in the gay, bi+ and trans group discussed their concerns about the safety of their friends who were women, attributing these concerns to the behaviours of 'straight men [they] don't know'.

> *I definitely am a lot more hypervigilant when I'm out with girls that I know but I'm going to a place that's predominantly straight people I don't know, or straight men I don't know … I think personally I'm less trying to watch or protect them, but I'm vigilant and mentally aware.* ***Gay, bi+ and trans; low Man Box endorsement***

Similarly, cisgender heterosexual men across the focus groups described risks to women in terms of how groups of men commonly perpetrate street harassment.

> *Let's say a beautiful woman walks past and one bloke calls out, if she hears it or not, usually you get other blokes backing him up. 'Oh you're right, might have a go at that', et cetera. They join in … It's just that group mentality. They're untouchable.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

As the quote above demonstrates, some focus group participants were aware of particular forms of violence experienced by women and perpetrated by men in public spaces. These risks are reflected in literature showing that women are more likely than men to experience sexual harassment in public spaces, such as when using public transportation (52, 53). As such, while there is some truth to the participants' views about the risks to women, these risks do not mean that men should disregard their own safety. Further, men's role in preventing violence by other men should not be confined to them acting as a hero or protector for women. Active bystander behaviour by men to help interrupt violence or harassment can be important and laudable (54, 55), but must take place within broader gender-transformative efforts. Sometimes, such actions by men to intervene and 'protect' women are based on ideas about women's inherent vulnerability or inability to protect themselves, or are used to demonstrate that bystander's masculinity and toughness. Where this occurs in the absence of working towards broader normative change, such as challenging sexist jokes made by their friends

BOX 7: YOUNG MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL PRESSURE AND PERSONAL BELIEFS ABOUT ACTING TOUGH

Social pressure

Findings from *The Man Box 2024* (13) show that a substantial minority of young men aged 18 to 30 felt social pressure to act tough in social situations. Half (50%) believed that society tells them 'guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside', and 44% believed society tells them 'a guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak'.

This perception of social pressure to be tough and strong has dropped since 2018, when 69% of men surveyed agreed that society tells them men should act strong when they are scared or nervous and 60% believed society tells them men are weak unless they fight back when pushed around.

Personal beliefs

When asked if they personally agreed with these masculine ideals, 42% said they personally believed men should 'act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside' and 30% agreed that 'a guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak'.

Compared to the large change in social pressure between 2018 and 2023, these personal beliefs have only decreased slightly from 47% and 34% respectively in 2018.

or taking up an equal share of unpaid household labour, they can reinforce rather than disrupt the rigid gender norms that can act as a driver of men's violence against women.

MEN FEEL PRESSURE TO RESTRICT THEIR EMOTIONAL RANGE

Another manifestation of the social pressure to act tough relates to men concealing 'soft' emotions such as sadness, anxiety or fear; for a discussion of soft emotions, see Reigeluth et al. (56). Most focus group participants said they feel that society expects them to avoid showing emotional vulnerability in different aspects of their lives. Emotional vulnerability encompasses several overlapping concepts:

1. the ability or willingness to admit feeling 'softer' emotions as opposed to 'harder' emotions such as anger (56, 57) or 'positive' emotions such as happiness or excitement
2. the ability to make these 'softer' emotions visible, either through emotional displays or disclosures (57)
3. the degree to which men feel that they needed to restrict outward displays of these 'softer' emotions (58).

Many focus group participants described that the social pressure to act tough has shifted over time, which we discuss in more detail below. At the same time, they felt that expressing emotional vulnerability remains socially unacceptable, especially in public. One participant described how sharing 'feelings or emotions' can demonstrate weakness. This was positioned in contrast to sharing positive emotions such as excitement or happiness, which participants felt are accepted for men because they show strength.

> *I feel like talking about your feelings or emotions gives a perception that you are weak, and you are not at the same level as the others around you. Sometimes you can feel very small and tiny as a result. It's generally your positives like excitement and happy, and all of those positive emotions are fine, because they are all upbeat and signs of strength, and when you are showing vulnerability, that's where people perceive it as weakness.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Further, some participants described expectations for men to be publicly stoic in the face of most personal hardships. This was reflected in the perception that men crying in public may be viewed negatively by others around them. Participants described limited reasons that might justify crying as socially acceptable, such as the death of a friend.

> *I feel like it'd have to be an extreme context and very public in order for [men crying in public] to come through as alright. Let's say you had a major accident and one of your mates just passed away in public, people would understand. But there has to be a solid reason. A death.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

The quote above demonstrates how perceived social pressures can shape men's behaviour. Similarly, *The Man Box 2024* found that men were more likely to perceive pressure to be stoic

than to personally agree with this pressure (13). Focus group participants also described the ways in which this perceived pressure continues to influence some men's willingness to express softer emotions in public. This suggests that men's reduced personal endorsement of norms around masculine stoicism is not yet sufficient to effect shifts in behaviour for all men. Men may continue to shy away from publicly displaying soft emotions even when they do not personally agree that this is the 'right' way of being a man. Prevention work focuses specifically on creating new expectations for how men should act and behave, not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes (1).

Several participants mentioned their perceptions of the gendered differences related to the acceptability of expressing emotional vulnerability. They described situations in their personal and professional lives where women who express vulnerability receive support, while men who do so are judged or ignored.

> *I've seen it maybe once or twice in my entire life, where a bloke's just inconsolable in public, and nobody does anything to help. But then you see that in women and there's always a dozen people, strangers, rushing, like if you saw a car accident.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

> *I've worked with a lot of female colleagues in the past … They'd get a slightly rude customer, and they'd hang up the call, break down in tears. You'd get management coming over, everyone consoles them. But one time I had a really bad day, and I just completely shut myself off from everyone. Nobody batted an eye, asked if I was alright. Management, HR, nothing. It's just not very equal there.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

Although the participant in the second quote describes shutting himself off as opposed to being vulnerable, the overall message by most participants was that some men did not feel that they had permission to display vulnerable emotions because of the responses they observed from others around them. Another participant described these gendered differences as unequal, suggesting the need for more work to shift these divergent expectations of men and women.

> *If a female co-worker suddenly lost her job, her crying would be acceptable. But if a male lost his job and he started crying, the prejudice would be … you know why. And why is that not equal? And that's where the biggest struggle is, at the moment.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

These quotes denote the ways in which patriarchal norms construct men as invulnerable and limit their capacity to seek and receive help. The sense of discontent and the perception that public responses are unequal illustrate the harms to men that result from contemporary masculine gender norms.

Participants also described how they approached displaying emotional needs and vulnerability in their intimate partnerships with women. One participant talked about the tension between wanting to be genuinely emotionally connected with his partner, stepping away from

masculine norms of stoicism and toughness, while also facing internalised pressure (i.e. rooted in his own personal beliefs rather than his partner's) to be an 'emotional rock' in their relationship.

> *Yeah, I think to show … fortitude might not be the right word. Maturity, to show your emotional maturity as you go through the journey, and not just your reaction. And then you're at a different stage, being vulnerable in that aspect … sometimes you also seem to want to be the emotional rock, too, for them [your female partner] because they may want somebody to be able to confide in. Or they … you know, I found that I need to be the reliable one for them to share and vent and go through all their particular stuff.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

This participant is describing his experience of showing vulnerability in relation to the way he engages with his intimate partner. He describes the idea of emotional maturity that is centred around his perception that men should provide stability for and protect their partner. This way of constructing men's emotional connections with their intimate partners is reflected in other literature (10, 13, 59). The views of this participant, alongside the results we discuss throughout this chapter, bring into focus the need to create broader social acceptance for men to talk about their emotions with friends, peers and family, or if helpful, mental health providers or other professionals. Having multiple options for talking about emotions might mitigate the risk of men feeling as though they are burdening their partners or that they should provide support and disregard their own emotional needs.

The examples in this section demonstrate how inequitable gender norms create contexts where expressions of sadness, fear or anxiety are framed as weakness, and where men perceive that they are more likely to be shunned rather than supported for expressing these emotions. These dynamics reinforce pressures on men to restrict their emotional range or channel all feelings into anger (26, 58). This anger may weaken prosocial behaviours and reduce empathy and concern for others, reinforcing men's use of violence against women (1). Further, the same social messages that restrict men's ability to express vulnerability also reinforce sexist ideas that women are fundamentally 'weak', particularly in comparison to men (50). As such, stereotypes that position emotional vulnerability as feminised weakness not only create risk or perceived risk of negative judgement for men who publicly express these feelings, but also contribute to the risk of men expressing difficult feelings as anger and frustration – a common excuse for perpetrating many forms of violence against women (10).

MEN USE ALCOHOL TO BOTH FACILITATE AND SUPPRESS EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY

Some participants described alcohol use as a way to suppress emotional vulnerability. For example, one participant described how it was commonplace for peers to encourage each other to repress and 'forget' their emotions by consuming alcohol.

> *With male-on-male friendships, the stoicness, that sort of stereotype, the kind of idea [is] that, you know, that the influence that*

a male friend has on another male friend is that they help them forget about their problems. Like, insofar as, 'Oh, you're going through a tough time, let's go get drunk, or let's go out and meet some girls', whatever – is really antithetical to the idea of support. ***Fathers; low Man Box endorsement***

The quote above highlights the ways in which men may use alcohol consumption as a way to supress experiencing emotional vulnerability. This finding illustrates how the social pressure for men to be stoic can limit their ability to connect socially and offer genuine support to their friends. This in turn can contribute to unhealthy forms of emotional processing and coping (such as excessive alcohol use) within men's peer groups. By extension, higher rates of risky alcohol consumption are also correlated to higher endorsement of Man Box rules as demonstrated in *The Man Box 2024* (see Box 8). Thus, in addition to the limiting effects of alcohol consumption on men's ability to genuinely support their peers, excessive alcohol consumption is also linked with rigid masculine norms and can also be a reinforcing factor for intimate partner violence among men who hold sexist attitudes (1, 60).

Other participants described interpersonal relationships in some male-dominated workplaces as characterised by excessive alcohol consumption and a lack of meaningful emotional connections. One participant contrasted this with his experience in workplaces with greater gender diversity.

I can think of [male-dominated] workplaces where, you know, it's sort of absolutely toxic and where you have to basically drink [alcohol] very regularly and you have to, you know, sort of talking in bawdy ways. And, you know, sort of just getting on the talking footy and never talking emotions. And I've worked in other places where, you know, it's really even male–female balance and just seems a lot more, yeah, even. So, yeah, I think the … yeah, there's different environments. ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

This quote indicates the potential to purposefully and proactively mitigate the adverse impacts of hypermasculine cultures through, among other strategies, creating more gender diverse and gender equal social and workplace environments (61).

While alcohol was presented as a way to avoid sharing emotions, participants also talked about cultures of social drinking as a means for men to 'open up' to their friends (62). Drinking together with friends was described as creating an environment where men might feel a greater sense of social safety to act in less stereotypical ways, particularly regarding emotional vulnerability.

Ah, there's lots of things about alcohol, but I mean, focusing on this issue of people talking and conversing, it could be a positive thing, because it gets people out of their comfort zone to open up after having a few drinks. Not to be intoxicated fully, I'm just saying a few drinks and then people open up more about their feelings or – you really try to – you start to understand the person a little bit more, 'cos they open up to you. ***University-educated; low Man Box endorsement***

This focus group participant indicates that while there is recognition in his peer group of the benefits of sharing feelings, it can be challenging to start these conversations while sober. While the participant describes how alcohol can facilitate conversations, it is also important to note its negative impacts on men's health and wellbeing, and the welfare of people around them (63), as discussed above.

The potential for negative outcomes from alcohol use and the disinhibiting effects of alcohol are important to consider in the context of informal or peer-focused settings where men might be supported to discuss their emotions or seek help. However, describing 'going for a drink' as a way to be in a space where it feels possible to discuss challenging emotions with peers also suggests that men want spaces where they have social permission to seek informal support or be emotionally vulnerable. Men's Sheds, for example, provide spaces not centred on alcohol consumption, where men can socialise and engage with each other in ways that facilitate supportive peer interactions (64). However, these are predominately oriented towards providing social spaces for older men. Different approaches are needed for younger men and cohorts of men with different interests to ensure access to emotionally supportive peer interactions, including in the context of online communities (65).

BOX 8: YOUNG MEN'S SELF-REPORTED ALCOHOL USE

The survey in the Man Box 2024 study (13) asked men how often they drink alcohol, and how much alcohol they consume on a standard occasion. The findings show that around 1 in 3 men (28%) aged 18 to 30 reported binge drinking behaviours – that is, consuming more than five standard drinks on one occasion. One in 10 men (10%) reported frequent drinking behaviour, drinking on five or more days a week. This study also found that men who most endorsed the Man Box rules were more likely than men who less strongly endorsed the Man Box to engage in these risky drinking behaviours.

These findings are consistent with other research, which shows 1 in 3 (34%) men aged 15 to 44 exceed the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines on reducing health risks from drinking alcohol, and that these men are twice as likely to binge drink as women of the same age (66).

However, the National Drug Strategy Household Survey has shown a steady downward trend in excessive alcohol consumption since 2007 and suggests that drinking cultures are shifting (67). While the prevalence of risky drinking among men aged 18 to 24 remains high (45% in 2022–23), these findings suggest promising shifts in young men's relationship to binge drinking.

ONE THING I WAS SHOCKED BY WAS WITH MY BOSS... A FEW OF THE BOYS WERE GOING THROUGH SOME HARD STUFF, AND **HE TOOK THE TIME TO PULL EVERYONE APART SEPARATELY AND ASK THEM HOW THEY WERE.**

Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement

BOX 9: YOUNG MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL PRESSURE AND PERSONAL BELIEFS ABOUT EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY

Social pressure

The Man Box 2024 (13) found that 1 in 3 men (34%) aged 18 to 30 felt that society tells men to 'figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help', and 40% felt that society tells them men 'shouldn't really get respect' if they talk a lot about their worries, fears and problems.

This perception of social pressure to be stoic and emotionally self-sufficient has dropped considerably since the first Man Box study in 2018, when around half of young men surveyed agreed with these statements.

Personal beliefs

Positively, in 2024 men were less likely to personally agree with these ideas. Around 1 in 4 personally agreed that 'men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help' (28%) and 'a man who talks a lot about his worries, fears and problems shouldn't really get respect' (23%).

Unlike perceptions of social pressure, however, these figures remained largely the same from 2018 to 2024, reflecting little change in men's personal agreement with these norms.

MEN PERCEIVE A SHIFT IN PRESSURES TO ACT TOUGH, WITH VULNERABILITY BECOMING INCREASINGLY ACCEPTABLE

While social pressure to be stoic still has tangible impacts on men's lives, focus group participants also described the ways in which 'softer' expressions of masculinity were, over time, becoming increasingly normalised in social, professional and household settings. This aligns with survey findings from *The Man Box 2024* that show men's perceptions of the pressure to not show emotional vulnerability have reduced slightly since 2018 (see Box 9) (13).

Participants in multiple focus groups discussed a sense of relief linked to their perceptions that stereotypical ideas about how men should act and behave are being disrupted. One participant observed how expectations had changed.

> *As a society it's become more of an expectation that not everyone's like that [stereotypical man]. That's made it easier, it's no longer a mould you have to fit in … It's more accepted for men to be softer.*
> ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

The quote above shows the participant's awareness of the shifts in masculine norms over time. However, some participants indicated that their knowledge of increased social acceptability for men to express softer emotions is not enough for men to feel entirely free to do so. One participant described his experience of wanting to defy stoic masculine stereotypes while simultaneously fearing judgement for crying.

I'd like to say I don't [relate to the strong man stereotype], but I feel like internally that's not the truth. I don't feel comfortable crying in front of anyone. I don't see it as a thing of weakness from anyone else, but I don't have the same acceptance of it [for myself] … There's the fear of judgement.
Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement

This quote illustrates how shifting beliefs and attitudes is a gradual and non-linear process. Importantly, these changes do not always translate directly to changes in behaviour (68, 69). Different men may require different approaches to change their beliefs and behaviours. They may also achieve these changes at different paces. Mutually reinforcing prevention efforts are required to achieve sustainable shifts (1) in expressions of masculinity, acknowledging that different individuals will have different pathways to change.

MEN TALK ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA AND PODCASTS FOCUSED ON MENTAL HEALTH AS SUPPORTING SHIFTS IN THE ACCEPTANCE OF EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY

Focus group participants discussed social media and podcasts as mechanisms that have helped to shift social norms in recent years by increasing awareness of the need to improve men's mental health. Most men in the low Man Box endorsement focus groups described how these forms of media provide avenues to see other men model vulnerability and asking for help, normalising and destigmatising these behaviours.

What social media's allowed us to do, a lot of people are sharing their personal thoughts and views. You see a lot of people coming out and saying how they feel, being open about it. It's a chain reaction, it's encouraged a lot [of] males in general to be like, I'm allowed to be myself and share my feelings.
Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement

The introduction of podcasts a few years ago. Hearing other men's stories about struggling and mental health, stuff like that. It enabled me to open up a lot more. You're able to think, it's not just me, there are other people out there with similar thoughts.
Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement

These quotes illustrate the importance of role modelling healthier masculine norms and the potential positive impacts of media and social media in enabling shifts in masculinities and encouraging men to become active participants in prevention. Mental health is often used as a way to talk about increasing men's willingness, capability and confidence to express greater emotional vulnerability. Discussions of men's mental health commonly refer to the challenges men face with making social connections that foster emotional support. Decreasing social pressures to repress emotional vulnerability can therefore support improved mental health outcomes (70, 71).

This finding is important, particularly given the existence of misogyny; transphobia, homophobia and biphobia; and other harmful discourses found in male-dominated media, social media and other

online spaces known as the 'manosphere'[5] (72, 73). Online communities outside of podcasts and social media may similarly hold potential as virtual spaces that can demonstrate and encourage healthier masculinities as a counterpoint to the 'manosphere' (although research is divided as to whether these offer equivalent opportunity for prosocial support as in-person spaces) (72).

MEN PERCEIVE SOME WORKPLACE CULTURES SHIFTING AWAY FROM PRESSURES TO BE STOIC

Participants in the focus groups with male-dominated workplaces (mainly 'tradies') discussed how their workplaces are increasingly supportive of men expressing their emotions.

> *Definitely, that change in mindset [is happening]. Even with the blokes that are on [the work]site, the groups that're formed, the chats you overhear and take part in … they're a lot more personal, they're not the 'manly chats' you would expect.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

They described experiences in which managers had discussed mental health and modelled expressions of vulnerability.

> *One thing I was shocked by was with my boss. This happened last year. A few of the boys were going through some hard stuff, and he took the time to pull everyone apart separately and ask them how they were. That makes a big difference.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

Some participants also said that emphasis on mental health through workplace structures and programs enabled discussion of emotions and mental health among staff.

> *In construction, what's happening these days is a lot of focus on mental health in men. Stuff like Mates in Construction, R U OK Day. There's a shift, and a lot more open discussions on, it's okay to not be okay. Asking the people you're working with if they're okay. Having an open channel of communication.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

These findings highlight how industry-wide awareness campaigns and social change messages are well positioned to promote behaviours and interpersonal interactions between colleagues that are less aligned with stereotypical expressions of masculinity. Normalising support for wellbeing and seeking help for emotional distress or mental health concerns in a workplace can help to destigmatise these expressions of emotional vulnerability in other spaces.

Other participants spoke of the gender distribution of the workforce as changing workplace cultures related to masculine stoicism. A participant shared that in his experience,

5 The manosphere refers to diverse websites, social media accounts, chat forums and other online communities formed as backlash to the perceived threat of feminism, feminists and women (or people of any gender who are seen to disrupt rigid gender norms and ideas of 'natural' patriarchal power). The manosphere can include spaces where issues such as men's health and wellbeing are discussed, but these may include or overlap with forums where participants' resentments or sense of disenfranchisement are aired in ways that promote or feed into male supremacist and misogynistic views.

gender diverse workplaces created environments that enabled him to challenge masculine stereotypes. His exposure to different types of workplaces encouraged reflection about, and questioning of, masculine stereotypes and how these played out in different contexts.

> *I feel like I reflect on these [masculine] stereotypes more depending on the environment I'm in. My current workplace is significantly more male-dominated, which has made me reflect more on the negative stereotypes. Where the previous workplace was a lot more diverse, and I thought it was a better environment for me to not fill some of those stereotypes.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

This finding illustrates the important role of workplaces in creating environments where men can either be enabled or inhibited from challenging masculine stereotypes. The gender composition of the workforce is a significant consideration in the quote above. This is similar to how gender composition of the workforce came up when men spoke about alcohol consumption, as discussed in the previous section. This finding points to the importance of challenging the ways that particular industries and professions are gendered (and valued). Encouraging people of all genders to participate in more spaces, workplaces and roles can help to transform the gendered stereotypes that may dominate those spaces and create environments that challenge masculine stereotypes.

MEN FIND IT EASIER TO SHOW VULNERABILITY WHEN THEY BECOME FATHERS

Focus group participants described fatherhood as having a profound effect on their ability to feel safe and express vulnerability. Fathers described how becoming a father made them acutely aware of the broader social acceptance of masculine vulnerability and discussed wanting to progress these advances through their parenting. Several participants expressed not wanting to replicate the parenting styles they had experienced as children, which they described as being built on expectations of masculine invulnerability, self-sufficiency and toughness.

> *I guess what we were told growing up, that we had to man up and just deal with it, I didn't want to push that on my kids, because I know what it [has] done to me … So, if I can show them that it's okay to have emotions, it's okay to break down, it's okay that, like, if they want to play with the girls' toys or whatever, we don't stop them from doing what they want to do.* ***Fathers; low Man Box endorsement***

This finding reflects the importance of a life course approach to prevention, as we described in Chapter 1. In this context, embedding prevention across all stages of men's lives is important, given how their parenting stems in part from their experiences as boys. Men's willingness to reflect on their attitudes during fatherhood also attests to how this point in their lives is an opportunity to start the conversation about their attitudes and attachment to gender norms that enable violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence.

WE WERE TO
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Fathers; low Man Box endorsement

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3.2 CONFORMING TO THE MASCULINE PROVIDER ROLE

MEN CONTINUE TO FEEL PRESSURE TO BE THE FINANCIAL PROVIDER AT HOME

The Man Box 2024 found that many men feel social pressure to create financial stability as the breadwinner in their relationships, and nearly a third of survey participants also personally believed that it is primarily a man's responsibility to financially support their family (13) (see Box 10). In the focus groups, one participant shared his fear or anxiety about being judged as inadequate or not 'a good man' if he is unable to financially provide for his family.

> *But stereotypically, if you say, 'I'm a house-husband', though, I don't know how the other people will see it, right? So, although they may be taking care of all the housework, taking care of all the kids, taking care of all the whatever stuff that in the house, they will still think that, 'Oh, you're not the main person who [provides] ... for the income for the family', they may stereotype you. Are you a good man? Are you good enough to, you know, to support the whole family?* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

The quote above demonstrates the participant's experience of the pressure to provide financially for his family. Similarly, a substantial number of survey participants in the Man Box 2024 study felt that society tells them they should not have to participate in house and caregiving work (see Box 10). Rigid adherence to the idea that men should provide financial stability and manage finances, while women should do the bulk of unpaid household labour, can contribute to inequitable or controlling partnerships (10). Control over finances can enable financial or economic abuse, a mechanism of control linked to other forms of intimate partner violence (74). Broader acceptance of these normative gendered roles across communities can make it difficult for women to seek help and for friends, families and service providers (including financial institutions) to identify financial abuse (75). One focus group participant described seeing financial control play out within his social networks.

> *I've seen other husbands kind of say, 'Oh, no, you can't buy that, or you can't do this'. And so, they use that financial power for their own entitlement.* ***Fathers; low Man Box endorsement***

The quote above illustrates how some participants saw that men insisting on having financial power in a relationship could be a warning sign of entitlement or coercive control. In general, participants did not discuss anything inherently positive about men being the main breadwinner. Instead, the importance of being the primary income earner in a household was described almost entirely in terms of staving off judgement from others about being inadequate (as the first quote above demonstrates). This is reflected in the findings reported in *The Man Box 2024*, which showed that while around 1 in 3 survey participants believed that men should be the primary income earner, a larger number felt social pressure to take on this role (see Box 10). The two quotes above illustrate this social pressure and the idea that even where men do not personally agree with particular norms, they may behave in ways that are consistent with these norms in order to avoid judgement from others. This judgement, and conversely the acceptance men may receive

BOX 10: YOUNG MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL PRESSURE AND PERSONAL BELIEFS ABOUT RIGID MASCULINE NORMS

Social pressure

The Man Box 2024 (13) found that 1 in 3 men aged 18 to 30 felt that society tells them men and boys should not have to do domestic tasks, with 33% agreeing that society says men 'shouldn't have to do household chores' and 28% agreeing that 'it is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house or take care of younger children'. A higher proportion of men (42%) felt social pressure for men in heterosexual relationships to be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families.

While perceptions of social pressure across these rigid masculine norms decreased between 2018 and 2024, the greatest decrease was in perceptions of pressure to be the sole breadwinner. This may indicate greater acceptance of women taking on breadwinner roles or economic necessity for dual-income households.

Personal beliefs

The proportion of men personally agreeing with these rigid masculine norms was lower, with around 1 in 5 believing that boys should not be taught domestic caregiving skills (18%) and that men should not have to do chores (19%). Similar to perceptions of social pressure, men were more likely to believe that men should be the primary breadwinner, with 31% agreeing that 'in heterosexual relationships, men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women'.

The proportion of men who believed in these rigid masculine norms only decreased a small amount since 2018, indicating that while social norms may be shifting, men's attitudes may be slower to shift.

for adhering to particular norms, represents part of the system of rewards and punishments that underlies masculine and other social norms (76).

MEN DESCRIBE CONFLICTING PRESSURES AS THEY ENGAGE IN ACTIVE PARENTING

Some participants described that, while moving beyond stereotypical masculine norms to embrace active caregiving roles is hugely rewarding, the effort required to work against social expectations in order to do so can be taxing. This includes managing and navigating the discomfort of family members who disapprove of men taking up greater caring responsibilities for children.

> *In [the country where I was raised], there are … activities which are very related to a specific gender. So, for example, babysitting … [is] just not a male thing. And so, you know, I'm kind of torn between these two images … When you meet people or family visiting from overseas, they're like, you know, there's a bit of a tension for them to see you do things which they've never done. So, it's a massive burden on me. And you know, for them … I will do laundry for my kid; I will go pick him up … I enjoy doing it, you know? He's my first child and it's a joy beyond limit.*
> ***Fathers; low Man Box endorsement***

This quote highlights the distinct sets of social expectations men experience in different contexts, shaping how they parent and engage in household labour. It demonstrates the importance of an intersectional approach to prevention work that considers the different ways in which men experience masculine norms subject to other parts of their identities (28, 77).

Other participants described similar experiences of navigating conflicting social pressures related to stereotypical masculine norms and the everyday activities of parenting.

> *I guess it depends on the situation that you're in. Like, if your own environment requires you to be strong and assertive and confident, you know, be that. But then there are other environments, you know, if I'm having to participate in a dancing concert for my 5-year-old daughter, then it's … you've gotta take humble pie at the same time. You know?* ***Fathers; low Man Box endorsement***

Several fathers discussed the ways that the gender stereotypes in parenting could result in men being praised for doing care work that might go unnoticed or deemed unremarkable when a mother performs it. Some fathers described how this construction of active parenting as a secondary role for men often sat uncomfortably for them.

> *Doing anything with your kids seems to get … applause … get recognition if you take on that, you know, the role of … 'I've got daddy daycare; you're babysitting'. It's like, 'No, I'm just being a dad' … A babysitter's a babysitter. Like, this isn't a babysitter's club, this is dad's action.* ***Fathers; low Man Box endorsement***

This frustration with persistent gender stereotypes that position men as inadequate carers reflects considerable progress over recent decades in shifting how parenting responsibilities are thought of in Australia. Focus group participants' desire to break these traditional gendered social expectations may reflect the downstream impacts of significant progress in policy and practice, such as more equitable parental leave policies (78) and programs that focus on supporting men as fathers (79). It also may reflect changes in how media and popular culture portray fathers. One focus group with fathers spoke enthusiastically about the character of Bandit, the father in a family of cartoon dogs in the children's series Bluey. Bandit's active parenting and willingness to engage in imaginative play with his daughters has been much lauded for disrupting common television stereotypes of incompetent dads (80). There are therefore possible benefits to prevention work when men are encouraged to take a more active caregiver role as fathers and challenge the traditional masculine norm of breadwinner.

MEN FEEL SOME PRESSURES RELATED TO GENDERED HOUSEHOLD ROLES THAT HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME

Despite still feeling external social pressure to act as the primary financial provider, men in the focus groups described having equitable gendered dynamics in their own households, compared to what they witnessed in their parents' or grandparents' generations.

Most participants who were in heterosexual intimate relationships said they lived in dual-earner households and shared the household

labour, highlighting the material and economic conditions that, at times, necessitated dual-income households.

> *I think it used to be [that] one income can support [a] family. In today's world, I don't think under any economics, in the last 20 years, one person working is able to support the whole family. They're so expensive for everything, so I think that, you know, [it has] become a trend that both parents have to work.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Several participants said they actively worked to ensure that there was a more equal division of household labour within their intimate relationships, compared to previous generations.

> *Back in the day … one parent could work and then the other parent could stay at home, whereas today both parents have to work. But it's better now that it's more shared. The load is shared fifty-fifty, more so. I think it's definitely helped for the better. Yeah, it's not, 'Oh, I worked eight hours and come home and the tea's cooked for me'. It's both chip in, and we both do the house cleaning.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

However, the idea that both partners in a heterosexual relationship might need to work to meet the financial needs of their household does not necessarily mean that there is no pressure for a man to feel they should be, and be perceived as, the main income earner. Nor does it equate to an equal share of household labour. The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey shows that around 8 in 10 Victorian men believe that both partners should share equally in the housework and care of children if they are both in paid employment, compared to 9 in 10 women (81). However, this belief has not yet translated into everyday life for many Australian households. HILDA labour data shows that while men work more hours in paid employment than women, women work significantly more hours per week combined across paid employment and unpaid housework and care for children (81).

3.3 COMPLYING WITH HETERONORMATIVITY AND COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

MEN DESCRIBED 'FEMININE' ATTRIBUTES AND BEHAVIOURS THAT REFLECT A BINARY VIEW OF GENDER

Participants discussed their awareness of the set of (often unspoken) rules about behaviours or attributes thought of as feminine (or 'feminine-coded') that might cast doubt on someone's manliness. They spoke about how everything from regular use of sunscreen or moisturiser, to getting your nails done, to the breed of dog you own can be framed as stepping outside of normative ideas of masculinity.

> *He tells me stories about going up to the bush when he was my age and all this [manly] stuff, but now he gets his nails done. You sort of see that and you're like, 'Oh, okay'. Nothing wrong with that but you just wouldn't pick it, that sort of thing.* ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *The guy I work with, I guess the most feminine thing is he's got a sausage dog, a dachshund … But if you saw him, you wouldn't really pick it to be his dog.* ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Similarly, men described their relative comfort in participating in and enjoying leisure activities that they felt might be seen as undermining their masculinity, such as knitting, theatre, cooking or dancing.

> *I love cooking. I've never heard another guy around my workplace say that, but I always bring in the best home-cooked lunches.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Focus group participants were aware of questions or judgement about participation in activities not perceived as manly. Some expressed a need to control how others perceived them in terms of their manliness and adherence to masculine norms.

> *I would be selective of who I tell [about non-stereotypical hobbies] … to avoid that judgement … Information is power, and you control your narrative, or the way people view you.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These statements reflect the concept of 'precarious manhood' – the idea that manhood is something that must be earned and proven, and can be lost. Men must remain 'vigilant' by reaffirming their masculine status and modifying their behaviour around peers to avoid losing that status (10, 82). Fear of losing masculine status is also linked in the literature to homophobia (82). Men's pursuit of feminine-coded activities might lead to the perception that they were gay, and in doing so could compromise their masculine status (82). This reflects the idea of compulsory heterosexuality, which is the belief that heterosexuality is the assumed default, is part of being a 'real man', and is something society enforces (24).

Participants in the gay, bi+ and trans focus group discussed similar ideas more explicitly, for example, joking that a man who cares for his skin must be gay.

I have a straight best friend who was obsessed with moisturiser and sunscreen. And I am just like, 'Admit it and come out'. And he is genuinely straight, and it's like, 'Good for you, I guess. You are glowing and we love that'. ***Gay, bi+ and trans; low Man Box endorsement***

These narratives illustrate gender stereotypes, and the ways heteronormativity can police men's behaviours, hobbies and day-to-day lives. Compulsory heteronormativity is shaped and reinforced by homophobia and transphobia, where trans and gay men are seen as not conforming to rigid ideas of what makes a 'real man' (1). This was evident in focus group discussions, particularly in the experiences of men in the gay, bi+ and trans group. Within their family and social networks, men in this group described being perceived as less masculine when they 'came out'. One participant shared how his family had interpreted him disclosing his sexual orientation as a 'funeral for [his] masculinity'.

I came out to my family, and my grandparents went, 'We can't go to the footy anymore and we can't go fishing'. And I was like, 'It doesn't change anything that I'm gay'. It was almost like there was a funeral for my masculinity … He's not a man anymore and we can't go fishing or [to] the footy. And it's like … I can still do those things. ***Gay, bi+ and trans; low Man Box endorsement***

The participant's experiences described in the quote above illustrate the Man Box rule that 'a gay guy is not a "real man"', a belief held by many of the survey participants (13) (see Box 11). These kinds of beliefs illustrate how assumptions that conflate manhood and heterosexuality can cause harm and exclude gay men from activities or social settings coded as stereotypically masculine (6). Heteronormativity and cisnormativity are part of the perceived pressures men experience to comply with the norm of compulsory heterosexuality; these pressures can generate fears or worries among men about being perceived as gay if they do not comply with rigid masculine norms (6, 83). Such fear may also be related to internalised homophobia or biphobia (84), and awareness of the discriminatory and even violent consequences of being made a target of homophobia (84, 85).

Some participants in the gay, bi+ and trans group also reflected on the harms of compulsory heterosexuality for heterosexual-identifying men. They shared that some men's desire to conform to these norms meant that they avoided behaviours thought of as 'gay' and restricted their own choices as a result (similar to how they limited their expressions of feminine-coded activities and hobbies).

I had a picture of me wearing a Speedo or something and [my friend] said, 'It's so good that when you are gay you can wear Speedos, because they look really good' and I told him, 'Anyone can wear Speedos'. ***Gay, bi+ and trans; low Man Box endorsement***

In contrast, most men in the gay, bi+ and trans focus group did not express this fear of being perceived as defying the norm of compulsory heterosexuality, particularly for those who were openly out. These participants spoke of how their identity shaped their behaviours among their peers by allowing them to step away from traditional expectations of how men should behave.

Participant 1: *You spend so long worrying, and then you come out of the closet and, in my experience – and this isn't everyone else's experience – it was like, 'That was completely fine, and I'm alive, and that was easy' … It kind of just changes your brain into thinking it doesn't really matter what people think and you don't have to worry about it, so you can be a lot more honest and a lot more open about your emotions.*

Participant 2: *When I came out, I knew that I wasn't the stereotypical man anymore, and I kind of just assumed that role, and the rest is history.* ***Gay, bi+ and trans; low Man Box endorsement***

This exchange suggests that in the process of accepting their sexuality, some men find increased confidence to move away from stereotypical masculine norms and embrace different ways of being. They may experience this move as beneficial and even liberating. Findings in *The Man Box 2024* support this, showing that men who least endorsed the Man Box rules were less likely than men who most endorsed them to have frequent symptoms of poor mental health (13). However, the likely mental health benefits of rejecting rigid gender norms may be compromised for men who belong to sexual or gender minorities. This is due to the discrimination these men may face because of gendered social pressures. LGBTIQA+ people have poorer access to safe services and experience homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, including violence and harassment as a result of structural discrimination, all of which contribute to poorer mental health outcomes among these communities (20, 86).

BOX 11: YOUNG MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIETAL HOMOPHOBIA, AND PERSONAL HOMOPHOBIC VIEWS

Social pressure

The Man Box 2024 (13) found that around 1 in 3 men aged 18 to 30 agreed that society sends them homophobic messages that 'a gay guy is not a "real man"' (35% agreed) and that 'it's not okay for straight guys to be friends with gay guys' (31% agreed).

Personal beliefs

Around 1 in 5 men personally held these homophobic views: 25% agreed that 'a gay guy is not a "real man"' and 23% agreed that 'it's not okay for straight guys to be friends with gay guys'.

IT WAS ALMOST LIKE THERE WAS A FUNERAL FOR MY MASCULINITY...
HE'S NOT A MAN ANYMORE AND WE CAN'T GO FISHING OR TO THE FOOTY.
AND IT'S LIKE...
I CAN STILL DO THOSE THINGS.

Gay, bi+ and trans; low Man Box endorsement

MEN PERCEIVE BEHAVIOURS FALLING OUTSIDE MASCULINE NORMS AS ACCEPTABLE – WITHIN LIMITS

Some participants described a tacit threshold that separates acceptable and unacceptable grooming and presentation for men. They perceived pressures to stay within certain limits of heterosexual-coded masculine behaviour but explained that it was also possible to 'push the limit' of that acceptability. For example, they observed peers distancing themselves from the fact they may have broken with heterosexual norms by attributing those behaviours to being intoxicated or claiming that they were 'joking around'.

> *I think people are just becoming more accepting of identifying with gay iconography. I don't think dancing with your hips is getting less gay, it's just getting more okay … But it's still mostly in jest [when straight men do it] and then there's the saying that a lot of truth is said in jest … All the straight guys I know still wouldn't do those things if they were sober. They would do it if they were drunk but it's still like, 'ha ha ha'.* ***Gay, bi+ and trans; low Man Box endorsement***

This quote suggests that there is a spectrum of non-stereotypical, feminine-coded behaviours that may be permitted for men, albeit in contexts where they use humour and alcohol as excuses. Men's use of excuses illustrates that the underlying social norms that shape, reinforce and reward particular expressions of masculinity are still active, though shifts in these norms have continued to occur over time.

Participants in several focus groups discussed the ways that men witness, assess and police each other's adherence to stereotypical masculine norms, particularly in peer relationships. One participant described how grooming habits reflecting cleanliness were acceptable to him, but anything categorised as feminine caused him discomfort.

> *I've got another friend that just loves doing his eyebrows and his feet just to stay clean. But if they're doing coloured nails and stuff like that, yeah, you're pushing the limit now.* ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These discussions of perceived limits to how far men can stray from the rules of masculinity again reflect the notion that manhood is precarious and must be constantly proven (82). The risk of losing masculine status influences how men behave with peers (10) and underpins the policing of masculinity through actions that seek to penalise 'insufficiently masculine' behaviour (87 p 78).

Research has also found that men who view manhood as precarious (82) use sexist or homophobic humour to reaffirm their masculinity, especially when they feel their masculinity has been threatened (88). These jokes targeting women and gay men are a way to distance themselves from femininity, which is constructed as the direct opposite of masculinity (88). In these ways, homophobia and sexism – both expressions of stereotypical masculinity – are partly driven by cisgender heterosexual men's inability to challenge social pressure around acceptable ways to enact masculinities. Men who transgress

masculine norms by virtue of belonging to a sexual minority may therefore be discriminated against in some ways that are similar to the sexism faced by women (88).

MEN TALK ABOUT FATHERHOOD AS AN AVENUE FOR ENFORCING, OR CHALLENGING, COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

Several fathers in the group with moderate Man Box endorsement – all cisgender heterosexual men – described hoping that their own children are not gay or gender diverse, while also expressing that they would like to be supportive if they did have a child come out to them. The internal conflict that these men described surfaced through discussion of their role as fathers, in which they recognised that supporting their children's whole self is a core parental responsibility. At the same time, these men also described the ways that their own alignment with compulsory heteronormative pressures might limit their children's self-expression.

> *So, for me, I don't mind seeing that [two men kissing], but I don't want my kids to be the same, honestly. So, that's my view. So, but I don't know how to explain it to [my children], it's their choice.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *I don't want to necessarily overly influence my kids' feelings towards that [LGBTIQA+ relationships], to make them be curious and want to try that, from my own personal upbringing. But if my kids feel, safely and everything else, that they are homosexual and they want to go through that, then yeah. If that's the person you love and that you're with and you want to show that affection, then by all means … But as they're growing up, what influence is going to give them on what they should do? I don't want to … 'You must be heterosexual' … I don't want to be giving them that drill. But you don't want to be going too far the other way, right?* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

The attitudes fathers expressed in these quotes may signal to their children that being gay is negative. Literature demonstrates the ways parents may view a gay child as a reflection of failed parenting because the child does not live up to patriarchal norms (89, 90). The characterisation of being gay as a 'choice', and that it is possible for parents to render their child gay or queer by being 'too supportive', points to a fundamental misunderstanding of why people may be same-gender attracted. This difficulty in moving past the binary of heterosexuality as 'normal' and anything else as 'abnormal' is an expression of resistance to shifting societal norms around sexuality (91). The views these participants shared may also reflect parents' fears of their children experiencing homophobic discrimination, and potentially their own shame and feared judgement because their child is gay. This highlights the importance of dismantling homophobic norms at the societal level (89).

Worrying about a child's wellbeing is normal, including a parent recognising that they may need to support their child to navigate prejudice. However, signalling that it is preferable to be heterosexual and cisgender, or that sexuality or gender identity are choices, causes harm (92).

Positive and affirming 'coming out' experiences, particularly to adult caregivers, are strongly correlated with young people's improved mental health and wellbeing, and the inverse is also true (90).[6] These findings suggest there is a need for resources and support to help fathers – and all parents – understand how to help their children feel safe disclosing their sexuality or affirming their gender (93).

MEN FEEL SOME HETERONORMATIVE PRESSURES HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME

Despite continued awareness of pressures to perform masculinity, participants across all focus groups described some level of reduced pressure to adhere to compulsory heterosexuality. The changing aesthetics or hobbies that are considered acceptable within dominant forms of masculinity may signify cultural shifts over time (such as shifts in fashion trends) but this does not necessarily mean masculinities are becoming more equitable (94). However, some focus group participants took pride in breaking the mould and portraying a more expansive expression of masculinity, aligned with the shifting norms of contemporary society.

> *I want to own it and be unique. I don't want to hide behind those norms. And I would be willing to share it, and if people think of me oddly, I think they are the ones that need to get on with the 21st century.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These sentiments aligned with what participants described as shifts in society, such as increased visibility and positive portrayals of LGBTIQA+ people, communities, families and relationships, including in the media. Some participants saw this shift towards inclusive representation as driving down the acceptability of homophobia, particularly among younger men.

> *I think modern television is becoming so progressive with the way that they portray it because, I think, society is becoming so progressive … And I think you see on TV, same-sex couples [inaudible] portrayed in Disney movies now.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *It would feel so out of the normal for someone to make a [homophobic] comment like that. Because it's not chill, it's not really welcome here … It would be quite strange for my [younger] generation.* ***University-educated; low Man Box endorsement***

These gains have been hard won over many years of activism and advocacy led by LGBTIQA+ communities (95). However, despite advances, there are still troublingly high levels of homophobia and transphobia across society (20, 96), as also shown in survey findings from *The Man Box 2024* (13). While we did not investigate

6 The focus group guide did not include questions about children who are trans or gender diverse. Coming out for trans and gender diverse people can be a more fraught experience, as articulated in *Writing Themselves In 4*. Similarly, the experiences of children born with an intersex variation are distinct from those of children who belong to sexual minorities (although people with intersex variation may also belong to sexual minorities or be trans or gender diverse, many are heterosexual and cisgender).

transphobic attitudes in the focus groups, the survey findings show that transphobia is one of the most commonly held Man Box beliefs, indicating that this issue requires much more work (see Box 12) (13).

Overall, the findings in this chapter demonstrate the multiple circumstances in which men show that they value their relationships and seek to be good friends, colleagues, partners and parents, and how this shapes their enactment of masculinities within their peer groups, families and households. Yet men do not always feel able to challenge the pressures they experience around different masculine norms. The pressures we looked at in this chapter include the pressures to act tough and be the provider, and the pressures related to heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Men experience these pressures differently, and what this chapter highlights is the importance of seeing men's attitudes and behaviours related to masculinities as relational and contextual, rather than individual and static. Workplaces, households and families are all contexts in which there are opportunities to build on societal shifts to continue to expand the range of behaviours that are perceived as acceptable for men.

BOX 12: YOUNG MEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIETAL TRANSPHOBIA, AND PERSONAL TRANSPHOBIC VIEWS

Social pressure

The Man Box 2024 (13) found that around 1 in 3 men aged 18 to 30 men perceived that society tells them 'it's not okay for straight guys to be friends with trans or gender diverse people' (33% agreed).

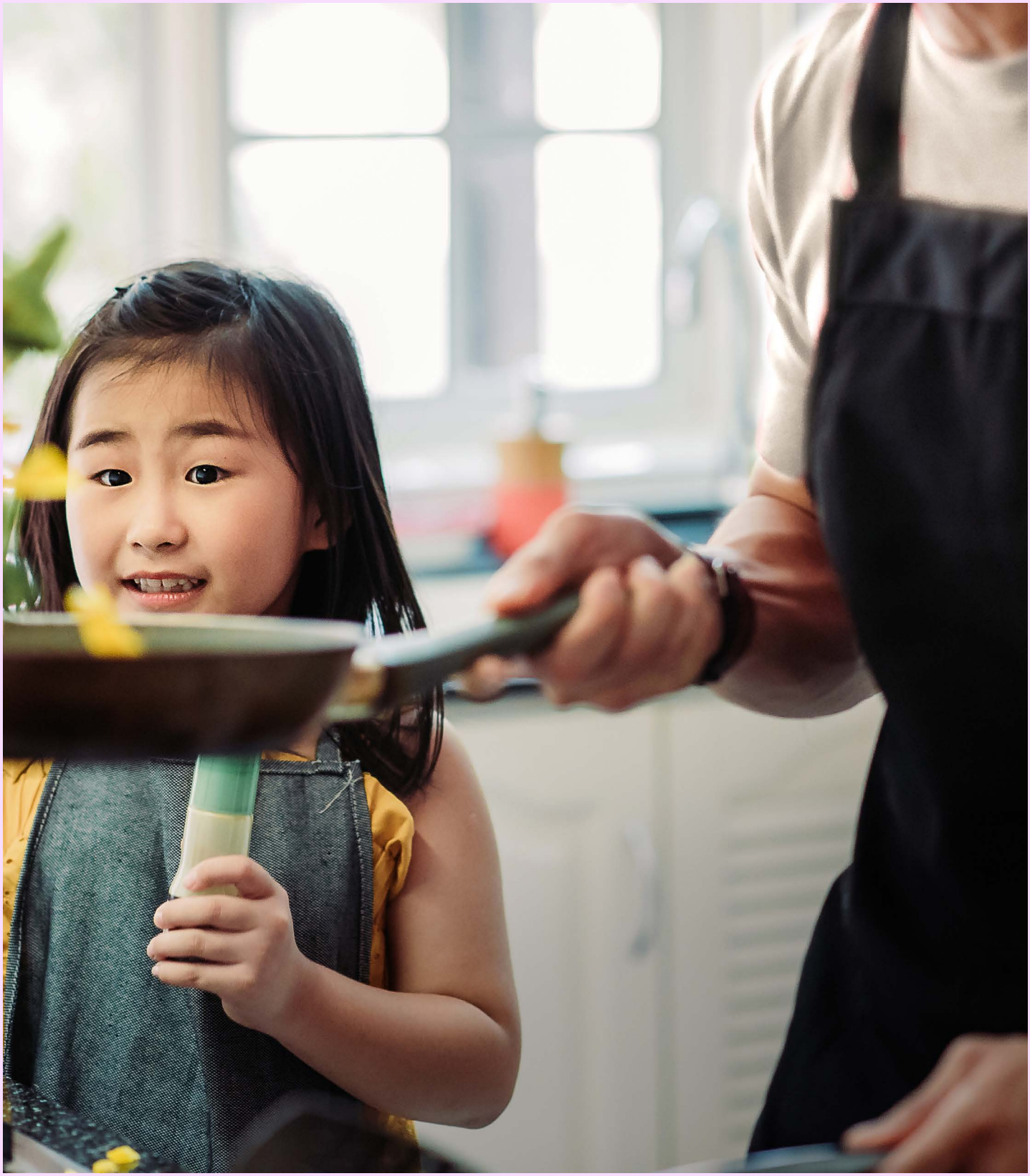
A larger proportion of men (42%) agreed that society tells them that 'a transgender man is not a "real man"'.

Personal beliefs

One in 5 (22%) men held the transphobic view that 'it's not okay for straight guys to be friends with trans or gender diverse people', and almost twice as many (39%) denied trans men's masculinity, holding the transphobic belief that 'a transgender man is not a "real man"'.

CHAPTER 4

NAVIGATING PRESSURES AND CONFLICTS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN



In this chapter, we explore the ways that focus group participants navigate pressures to conform with masculine norms in their interpersonal relationships, across different settings and in their interactions with institutional structures.

Men's norms, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours manifest differently in different contexts. However, all are tethered to dominant stereotypes about how men should act and the roles that they should play in relationships, peer groups, families and across society. These attitudes and beliefs are captured in the Man Box rules (13).

The dynamics that shape how men behave and the attitudes they express are captured in Our Watch's *Men in focus – Evidence review*.

> *Men's choices [about how to position themselves against masculine norms] are shaped by social and structural constraints, as well as other internalised processes … A range of displays of masculinity may be performed in different contexts, but performances are nevertheless constrained by what are deemed acceptable types of masculinity, and these different contexts allow for different types of performances* ***(10 p 31).***

Here, we start by recognising the importance of keeping this complexity visible when thinking about 'engaging' men in primary prevention of violence against women and gender-based violence. In considering why men might act in ways that address or reinforce the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, we foreground that:

- men make choices about and have agency over their behaviour
- these choices are often influenced by their perception of pressures to conform to or resist masculine norms, as well as their own personal beliefs in those norms
- normative scripts about more and less acceptable ways of being a man can be different across different settings and social contexts
- men's assessment of potential consequences for resisting pressures to perform masculinity in prescribed ways can shape their behaviours and encourage reflection on their own attitudes and beliefs.

Throughout this chapter, we focus particularly on this last point: men's assessment of potential consequences of how they align with or challenge different gendered norms or behaviours. This provides a frame from which to consider why men might make decisions about the attitudes and behaviours they express, challenge, avoid, agree with or ignore in different aspects of their lives.

We use the term 'social safety' to refer to the ways men modulate their behaviours to protect their social position with different audiences and in different contexts. Participants across all focus groups described the ways that social dynamics influence their decisions about what forms of masculinity they want to align with in different contexts. They described the often-deliberate ways that they altered the attitudes they express and the ways they behave in response to different social settings or relational dynamics. For example, one participant expressed feeling like he was 'wearing two masks' when he navigated interactions with groups of men who had varying levels of gender-equitable beliefs.

I think we're also very good, our generation is – not playing both sides, but sort of wearing two sort of masks, like knowing when and who to sort of challenge it with.
Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement

Other participants also shared that they would choose not to challenge harmful or less equitable expressions of masculinity in some social groups or family relationships, whereas they actively sought to challenge rigid or harmful masculinities in other contexts. They described how they navigate their position in relation to masculine norms and how they present themselves – choose which 'mask' to wear' – across two broad categories:

- through expressing resistance to gender equality and violence prevention, which generally resulted in aligning with some rigid masculine norms
- by deliberately challenging and disrupting rigid and inequitable gender norms in their words, interactions and behaviours.

In this chapter, we consider focus group participants' reflections on their or their peers' resistance to some actions to address gendered drivers of violence, and what makes it easier or more difficult to take action in different contexts. It is important to note that these categories do not represent a fixed binary and they often overlapped as study participants discussed making sense of their experiences navigating masculine norms. Their perspectives show the ways in which men might grapple with their resistance to some issues but still profess their alignment with efforts to progress gender equality and end gender-based violence.

They might be willing, capable and confident to actively challenge sexist or homophobic commentary in some settings or social dynamics but need more support and strategies to take action in others.

Here, we explore the ways that focus group participants described how they express, police or challenge rigid or inequitable gender norms in different contexts and why. We do so to consider what this can tell us about engaging men more effectively in actions to prevent violence against women and gender-based violence.

4.1 NAVIGATING RESISTANCE TO ADDRESSING THE GENDERED DRIVERS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HOMOPHOBIA

Resistance encompasses a range of behaviours, discourses, practices and structures that deliberately undermine actions to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women and broader gender equality efforts (33, 97). VicHealth describes eight types of resistance to gender equality, ranging from passive to active: denial, disavowal, inaction, appeasement, appropriation, co-option, repression and backlash. This framework can be used to understand resistance to other social change efforts, including actions necessary to prevent violence against women (34).

The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) found that many Australian men disagree that gender inequality still exists in Australia (17). This aligns with findings from *The Man Box 2024*, which shows that many men deny the existence of gender inequality and also hold attitudes that support violence against women (see Box 13).

Focus group participants described using or observing two main forms of resistance when navigating pressures or conflicts to do with masculine norms: denial of the problem and disavowal of responsibility.[7]
We discuss each of these in turn.

DENIAL AS MINIMISING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HOMOPHOBIA

Denial of the harms resulting from the drivers of gender-based violence can include minimising their significance, impact or severity (34, 97). In the focus group discussions, some participants minimised the nature and impact of some forms of violence and harassment, as well as the existence and problematic nature of the underpinning beliefs and norms that drive it. For example, some street harassment or homophobic commentary was framed as harmless 'joking' rather than discrimination or expressions of violence. Participants were asked how they or their peers might respond if they saw their peers yelling suggestive comments to women on the street.

> *I'll be dead honest with you. I think being younger … and being pretty immature, I reckon everyone would think it's funny or whatever [if a friend yells a suggestive comment to a woman on the street]. But I think a certain few and I feel like myself, obviously depending on what it is but you might think, 'Fuck, that was funny'. But then you'd go, 'Come on, mate. You're not gaining. You're just putting someone down'. You'd tell them to pull their head in. You know what I mean?* ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Similarly, participants were asked how they or their peers would respond if they observed homophobic commentary from someone in their peer group.

7 Several other forms of resistance were discussed in less in-depth ways across all groups. Appeasement and co-option were described on only a few occasions. Backlash was discussed only as a hypothetical, for example, with a few participants mentioning the potential for loss of work opportunities or exclusion from peer groups if they were to speak up against other men's perpetration of street harassment or homophobia.The minimal discussion of these more active forms of resistance in the focus groups may reflect the exclusion of men with high Man Box endorsement from the qualitative study, explained in Chapter 2.

If it was a very disrespectful and in-their-face [homophobic] comment, publicly being violent [to someone], then yeah, I'd step in respectfully to say, 'That's not cool, step back'. If it was a joking banter thing, then you'd just be like, okay, that's touch and go. ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

These quotes suggest that some forms of harassment or discrimination are viewed as acceptable because they are perceived as harmless humour, whereas other forms might be seen as going too far. However, the suggestion that there might be an acceptable threshold for street harassment and homophobia minimises their inherent harm and neglects the fact that these behaviours also drive, reinforce and enable other forms of violence and abuse (6).

These examples highlight the ways that men may seek to use sexist or homophobic humour to maintain their masculine status (82). When cisgender heterosexual men are willing to step in to challenge this humour, it can help reduce the social acceptability of sexist and homophobic jokes in peer groups, or the perception that such jokes are benign. On the other hand, affirming responses, such as laughing at a derogatory joke, can demonstrate acceptance of harmful attitudes and behaviours, and make them more difficult to shift (98). If the person being mocked or harassed hears it, laughter might also compound their sense of unsafety, humiliation or other negative effects, as it signals that they may be being targeted by the group who are encouraging the behaviour rather than one person (99). Positive reactions from a group of male peers can also encourage escalation in behaviours informed by harmful gender norms, if men perceive that they will gain approval and acceptance from their peer group as a result (98).

Some participants spoke about the ongoing effort and self-reflection required to become aware of the harms of comments they might

BOX 13: YOUNG MEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The Man Box 2024 (13) found that many men aged 18 to 30 hold attitudes that deny gender inequality exists in Australia, and attitudes that are supportive of violence against women. Four in 10 men (39%) agreed that 'many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia'. More than 1 in 3 (35%) agreed that 'many women mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist' and 'many women don't fully appreciate all that men do for them'.

One in 4 men held attitudes that minimise violence against women or blame women for the violence perpetrated against them, believing that 'sometimes a woman can make a man so angry that he hits her when he didn't mean to' (25% agreed) and 'many allegations of sexual assault made by women are false' (24% agreed).

One in 5 men (20%) agreed that 'domestic violence is a private matter that should be handled in the family'. This attitude denies the right of victim survivors to seek help and denies that people who use violence should face consequences.

previously have viewed as humorous, and to actively challenge these comments. One participant described how, despite having changed his own attitudes and beliefs, he sometimes found himself reverting to the culture of his peer group. He provided an example of joining in with racist jokes.

> *If I get around certain crowds, certain people, you know, I can slip into some of that bit of old school type of thinking and be a little bit, you know, racial in some aspects, the jokes and that. But then when you think about it and stop in the time, you're like, 'Hang on, no, no. The new lens, we're looking through things now, you shouldn't be like that'. So, it's a bit of a mix.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

The participant acknowledges that it can be easy to reflexively join in discussions reflecting a prevailing culture of racism – 'old school type of thinking' – as a way to participate in a social group. However, he described his own discomfort and the increasing unacceptability of racist humour, and his process of reflection about looking at racist 'jokes' through a new way of thinking – a 'new lens'.

These examples illustrate some of the ways that men balance their personal progress towards addressing resistance and recognition of harms related to discriminatory views with efforts to protect their social safety within a group where such views might be expressed. Some participants indicated that they might be willing to intervene and speak to a peer who made a discriminatory joke or comment, but most suggested that they might catch themselves laughing and then recognise the implications of affirming their friend's discriminatory views. That is, they may not yet feel capable or confident to take more deliberate, prosocial action to intervene.

Some cisgender heterosexual focus group participants demonstrated minimisation as a form of resistance when discussing LGBTIQA+ identities and relationships. These participants expressed the heteronormative and homophobic view that only heterosexual relationships are 'normal' and 'natural' (6, 100). This sentiment was particularly common in moderate Man Box endorsement groups. Rather than positioning intimate relationships between men as normal expressions of care, love and desire, some participants described these relationships in terms that minimised their value, or inferred that public displays of homosexuality are a disagreeable but inevitable fact of life.

> *If I was with my kids and saw two men kissing, [I would] take [my kids] away and just say, 'Look, it is what it is', you know, like, each, each to their own, basically.* ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *All of my group of friends, for example, they sort of agree that it's supposed to be men and women only [in a romantic relationship with each other]. But at the same time, they just don't care. Each to their own.* ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

'Each to their own' or 'it is what it is' were used by these participants to attempt to communicate a pose of neutrality with regard to homosexuality: they acknowledge the

existence of gay men and relationships and express that they tolerate their existence. However, rather than helping to address homophobia, positioning gay men as people whose relationships and personhood need to be 'tolerated' enables their continued marginalisation. These attitudes and resulting behaviours perpetuate social conditions where LGBTIQA+ people and communities face hostility and exclusion (6). This highlights the need for ongoing efforts to shift masculine norms in ways that encourage widespread public acceptance and celebration of LGBTIQA+ relationships and challenge homophobic views (6, 15). Such efforts align with the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic) and with federal legislation such as the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), which protect gay men and gay relationships (and more broadly LGBTIQA+ people and relationships) and legislate against discrimination and marginalisation of LGBTIQA+ people (101–103).

Resistance framed as tolerance can mask more discriminatory attitudes, which may be expressed in overtly harmful ways in other settings. Some participants in moderate Man Box endorsement groups shared the ways that they perform 'tolerance' and self-censor inequitable views when they know those around them would not respond well to them.

> *It's a [homophobic] comment maybe between the boys or our mates walking, I feel it'd be pretty unlikely for someone to say something to an oncoming person or someone walking past. I think for us, it'd be like, whether you think it or not, you can't say it. As bad as that sounds. I think there'd definitely be more of a chance that it would be said within the group to each other. As opposed to another person.*
> ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *I feel like the expectation is for me to say that [certain comments are] wrong, even if your personal opinion might be different.*
> ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These quotes illustrate how men may respond to perceived risk of judgement from others by hiding their views when they recognise that these views may diverge from prevailing social norms. Attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Australia are shifting towards increasing acceptance and representation of LGBTIQA+ relationships and communities (20, 104). As these quotes show, men's peer to peer relationships can still foster homophobia (1, 105). In Australia and globally, homophobia and sexism are promoted through virtual communities such as the 'manosphere', where men connect through sharing harmful and discriminatory views (72, 73). These examples demonstrate the possibilities for inequitable attitudes to be reinforced in men's peer relationships, even when they are openly rejected by a growing proportion of Australian society.

ENOUGH ABOUT WOMEN, WHAT ABOUT MEN? DENIAL AS RENAMING AND REDEFINING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Some study participants denied the severity and impact of violence against women by focusing on men's own experiences of violence or their vilification as perpetrators. Others suggested that men's experiences of harassment perpetrated by women is an equally or even more compelling social problem.

> *On the flip side of the argument, have you ever seen girls making comments to guys? This is where the perception of men gets looked down upon because it also happens the other way around, and that'd be perfectly acceptable or laughed at … It can be taken a lot more displeased if a man does it to a female. But I've seen it happen the other way around, and nobody thought anything bad when the woman said it.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

> *When a girl does it [sexual harassment] to a guy, is he going to accept it? Most likely yes. If a guy calls out to a female, will she accept it? No. If it's becoming forceful or if it's not being received, then it shouldn't be done. But if a female does it to a guy, if it's being received, then it's deemed acceptable.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

These quotes imply that men and women experience sexual harassment in uniformly similar ways, and as such do not recognise power differentials in these forms of harassment based on gender. However, population-level surveys and workplace studies demonstrate that while both men and women experience harassment and other forms of gendered violence, women are overrepresented as victims of harassment (106). This is compounded for women whose harassment is informed by other forms of structural discrimination including colonialism and racism; homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, transmisogyny and intersexphobia; ableism; ageism; and classism (20, 106). Women are also more likely than men to report feeling fearful for their safety as a result of harassment (107). Nonetheless, to help understand the logic that informs resistance narratives that seem to deny the gendered nature of sexual harassment, it is worth examining the concerns the participant raises in the first quote.

In the quote, this participant suggests that men's experiences of sexual harassment are not taken seriously in public discourse. There are two ways of understanding this concern. First, by examining the suggestion that complaints of sexual harassment made by men may not be heard with sufficient gravity by peers, loved ones or even service providers. In terms of institutional responses, research by the Australian Human Rights Commission found that workplace complaints of harassment made by men are in fact more likely to result in disciplinary action than complaints made by women (106). This suggests that men's experiences are likely to be attended to when men seek help. Nonetheless, the participant's perception that bystanders may not intervene to help a man being harassed by a woman relates to the Man Box rules associated with hypersexuality. These describe the ways that men may feel pressure to always welcome

sexualised attention and 'never say no to sex' (13). Pressure to conform to these norms, and experiences of peers policing or enacting behaviours aligned with these norms may inform this participant's perception that men are not taken seriously as victims of harassment. This highlights again that addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, as well as the overlapping drivers of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, are likely to result in improvements in preventing harm to men as well as women and gender diverse people.

Second, responding to a discussion about the widespread issue of women's experiences of sexual harassment across various settings by asking 'What about men?' is consistent with well-documented narratives of resistance to acknowledging the relationship between gender inequality and violence against women (34). That is, resistance in this example is demonstrated through the participant's implication that men's experiences of harassment by women are necessarily equivalent to women's experiences of harassment perpetrated by men. This framing both refocuses attention away from women's experiences of violence and contributes to denial of the gendered nature of violence (1).

These two interpretations of the focus group participant's views should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory. Everyone has the right to reject unwelcome sexual attention regardless of their gender, and men's reports of sexual harassment and resulting harms ought to be taken seriously. This coexists with the fact that the social determinants of sexual harassment are clearly gendered, which is evidenced in studies about patterns of perpetration and the higher risk of greater harm and prevalence that women face when compared to men (106). Reframing a discussion to focus on proving equivalency between the overall experience of harassment by women victimised by men and the relatively small number of men harassed by women creates a straw man argument that diverts attention away from what men can do to address the gendered drivers and prevent street harassment and other forms of gender-based violence.

This example highlights ways that resistance might reveal commonality between men who are unengaged with primary prevention efforts and primary prevention policy and practice. This common ground can be leveraged to help challenge misconceptions about the gendered nature of violence and men's role in primary prevention. The study participant has identified that harmful masculine norms across different levels of society can make it difficult for men to seek and receive help from services or friends. An opportunity for better engagement with primary prevention in this example might therefore be affirming the ways that harmful gender norms have negative consequences for men but emphasising that this fact does not equate to a need to deny the ways that they also – and disproportionately – harm women.

NOT ALL MEN

In addition to attempts to reframe discussion about violence against women to focus on men's experiences of violence, other participants denied the culpability of 'most men' in the perpetration of violence or in facilitating social dynamics that allow gender-based violence to occur. These participants did not deny the gendered nature of

violence perpetration outright, but they refocused discussion of harm on what they viewed as men's vilification in the media.

> *I've [felt] so belittled as a male, feeling that I'm a monster … The way it is presented on the media, you know, these [men are bad] people that do commit domestic violence … There's way too much of it [family violence], don't get me wrong … [But] it's the minority [of men] … being represented in news coverage … We need to … not slam down your children's throat that, 'Hey, men are these horrible blokes that commit murder and, you know, rape and domestic violence'.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *[All] men in the media are the villains, the murderers, the domestic violence perpetrators, all this kind of stuff.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Many focus group participants' awareness of the gendered patterns of family violence highlight ways that better quality media reporting can contribute to community understandings of how and why violence occurs (108). However, better understanding of the nature of the problem does not immediately lead to understanding one's own role in taking action to address the gendered drivers of violence (17). Throughout this study, participants demonstrated that they were not always aware of the variety of ways they could help to prevent violence against women. Similarly, even if they were aware of what they might do, the perspectives they shared indicated that they were not always confident in how to take action. This was true even when participants described recognising the harmful effects of gender norms playing out in families, workplaces, social settings and in institutions.

As the quotes above illustrate, some individuals were predominantly concerned with showing that they were not like men in media reports about family violence. Reflecting widespread patterns in public discourse over recent years, this preoccupation could eclipse discussions about the different ways they could contribute to collective efforts, through actions to address the gendered drivers, to make sure violence is less likely to happen (109).

This indicates participants' desire to ensure their social safety. Several were eager to create distance between who they were as people, and as men, and the perpetrators accused or convicted of violent crimes that attract significant media coverage – egregious, usually physically or sexually violent crimes against women, intimate partners of other genders, or children. This theme of men distancing themselves from other men who they see as less progressive or more violent is explored more in the discussion of 'disavowal' below.

DISAVOWAL OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Disavowal of responsibility for violence against women refers to someone's unwillingness to take responsibility for, or see their own role in, addressing violence against women or the gendered drivers of violence (34). Across multiple focus groups, several participants made statements of disavowal by distancing themselves from men whose behaviour and adherence to harmful gender norms they characterised as worse than their own.

Distancing is defined as 'discursive separation or dissociation' from a behaviour or belief system, 'based on perceptions and interpretations of the appropriateness of a given practice or personal perspectives within a particular … context' (110 p 701). As well as efforts to show distance from perpetrators of violence reported on in the media, focus group participants drew comparisons between their own attitudes and behaviours and those of older men.

Many participants expressed their disapproval of what they described as outdated and gender inequitable beliefs held by men from previous generations. They did so as a means of demonstrating the progressiveness of their own attitudes and behaviours. These participants described their own generation as less aligned with harmful masculine norms in terms of attending to their mental health, being less emotionally repressed, contributing to healthier workplace cultures, being less homophobic, and seeking more gender-equitable dynamics in their households and families. For example, one participant compared the dynamics in his intimate partnership to those of relationships in the past.

> *We share the workload, but it's not … you hear of these things from bygone eras of, your wife's getting allowances and stuff. Like, it's messed up. It's archaic. I don't see it anymore, but you do hear of it … from bygone eras.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

In this quote, the participant positions the idea of men controlling finances as a problem of the past. While this may reflect the participant's anecdotal knowledge and personal experience, men's control of finances remains a problem both in private and public life (75). In addition, 1 in 5 Australians still believe that men should take control in intimate relationships (17).

The idea that unhealthy gender norms are a problem of the past can encourage complacency about the need for ongoing efforts to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women and gender inequality more broadly. This form of distancing enables men to absolve themselves of responsibility for taking action (32). As discussed throughout this report and in national prevention frameworks, shifting norms that drive gender-based violence requires ongoing, cumulative efforts by individuals, organisations, communities and systemic change (1). Encouraging men to be curious and proactive about the ongoing harms resulting from gender inequality and about the ways they can keep contributing to collective, reparative action is therefore critical to prevention of violence against women and gender-based violence.

Focus group participants described the ways that they employed distancing logic to excuse choices not to address examples of sexist, homophobic or violence-supporting attitudes encountered across various social, familial and work settings. Several men shared how they sometimes find it difficult to challenge other men's discriminatory views or harmful behaviours. This may be due to a combination of wanting to protect their relationship with the person causing offence, or justifying their decision to not enter an uncomfortable encounter because they do not believe they will change that person's point of view.

For example, several participants described contexts where they were interacting with older men.

> *I feel like [for] the majority of their life [older generations'] gender roles have been pretty fixed. And it's only been the last 20 years or so that a lot of this progress has been made. Then you are like, 'They are stuck in their own ways' and you will probably avoid the topic because they are not going to be understanding of what has changed since they were younger.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *I suppose I don't challenge them [older men] enough with that, either. I just sort of let it slide, because I think, you know, 'You grew up in a different time in a different era'. I would definitely challenge my mates about it, though, and I do. So, but yeah, I'll let the older father figures sort of slide with that sort of stuff, but yeah.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These quotes capture the idea that people's willingness to challenge rigid masculine norms and beliefs can be contextual, and as part of the decision-making about when to challenge harmful ideas, people might gauge the likelihood of success in changing someone's mind. They also suggest that some participants considered that openly resisting an idea that they know to be sexist, homophobic or that condones violence, and bearing the social discomfort or conflict that might result from such an exchange, is less worthwhile if they feel that they are unlikely to change someone's mind. However, bystander action can also be an important way to signal support to others in the group who might also take issue with the views in question – or be actively harmed as a result of them being aired (55).

Other focus group participants also constructed their reluctance to challenge the traditional gendered beliefs of older family members as a demonstration of respect, which was described as something that is owed to older men.

> *I've watched … a younger cousin … [who is a] very progressive sort of bloke, like, challenge his father on stereotypes … And it, like, it sort of didn't sit well with me. I know that he's doing the right thing, but I was like, that's your dad … Me personally, it's just sort of, you know, disagree inside and not speaking up about it … I just don't think that's respectful to the older generations.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

This quote illustrates how participants balanced acting on different values when interacting with older men, particularly in their families. It shows how 'respect' can be constructed in ways that reinforce the hierarchical status quo that perpetuates rigid masculine norms. This framing can allow men to disavow themselves of the responsibility for challenging the harmful norms they hear older men reinforce. Although not discussed in the focus groups, it is worth noting that women of the same age may not have access to the same unchallenged respect given the context of patriarchy and the ways it encourages devaluing of women in relation to men (111). Further, this quote again sets up a binary between challenging an older man in a way that feels disrespectful or not challenging harmful views at all.

However, there are many ways to consider approaches to modelling examples of and having conversations about healthier masculinities and gender dynamics that can be tailored to

different contexts. In the next section, we consider strategies shared by focus group participants that made them feel more capable and confident to take action against the gendered drivers of violence, while managing risks or feared consequences to their physical and social safety.

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4.2 UNDERSTANDING MEN'S ACTION TO CHALLENGE RIGID GENDER NORMS

The Man Box 2024 found that a majority of survey participants aged 18 to 30 said they would be bothered and take action in relation to witnessing both peer violence and intimate partner violence (see Box 14) (13). Similarly, in the focus groups, some men said they would seek to challenge harmful expressions of masculinity among their peers and workmates. For example, and in contrast to the participants quoted in the previous section, one man insisted that he would intervene to address homophobic commentary from peers, even if it was shared under the guise of a joke.

> *[In relation to homophobic commentary] I'd call them out. If that's something they've said out loud, even as a joke, I'd say that's uncool.* ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

Participants described making strategic decisions around the most appropriate and effective ways to intervene to challenge harmful behaviours by other men. These included thinking about their timing and tone of engagement, and the context in which the harmful behaviour took place and possible consequences of speaking up to address it. They also spoke about how their confidence in practising freer expressions of masculinity had changed across their different life stages, including their positioning against some masculine norms. Each of these are discussed in turn below.

TIMING AND TONE

When asked about challenging other men's harmful behaviours and attitudes, several focus group participants shared how they considered the best moment to intervene and the best way to deliver the message, as well as contextual factors such as the make-up of the group. Box 14 shows that a majority of survey participants in the Man Box 2024 study said they would intervene immediately as opposed to later. The focus group participants gave nuance to this finding, describing their considerations for acting in the moment or choosing a different time.

> *I think probably I would tell them in the moment, in the context of the situation, and I would prefer to act in that point. Because later the effect has probably gone down, and they may not understand the situation. I think if I tell them at that particular point, it can stick better.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *I think it would also be something to bring up at a different time, but I wouldn't bring it up in the situation. At another stage, where it's a different environment, where it's more calm and collected, you will be like, 'I noticed you said this, and I don't think you should be saying that'.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Some participants talked about how they would adapt their tone or delivery when seeking to address attitudes or behaviours of different men in their life.

> *I wouldn't sit down with him and say, you know, 'Mate, where does your root homophobia stem from?' Like, it's just constant, like, a little quick reminder of, 'Mate, you know, in this day and age, we don't sort of … that's not what we talk about'.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

BOX 14: YOUNG MEN'S WILLINGNESS TO BE A BYSTANDER WHEN WITNESSING VIOLENCE

The Man Box 2024 study (13) investigated men's willingness to be a bystander when witnessing violence between their male peers, and when witnessing a male friend verbally abusing his female partner.

Witnessing peer violence

When asked, 'Imagine you are out with some friends and two of them get involved in a physical fight with each other', 2 in 3 men (65%) aged 18 to 30 said they would be bothered and would take action, and 5% said they would be bothered but would not take action. Almost 1 in 3 men (30%) said they would not be bothered by witnessing their friends physically fighting.

Of those men who said they would be bothered, almost half (46%) said they would physically intervene to break up the fight, 25% would say something then and there, 12% would say something in private later, and 8% would call security or the police. A small proportion of men who said they would be bothered by their friends fighting said they would not say anything because they would not know what to say (5%) or they would not feel comfortable speaking out (2%).

Witnessing a male friend verbally abusing his female partner

When asked, 'Imagine you are out with some friends and a male friend is insulting or verbally abusing a woman he is in a relationship with', almost 7 in 10 men (68%) said they would be bothered and would take action and 8% said they would be bothered but would not take action. One in 4 men (24%) said they would not be bothered witnessing a male friend verbally abusing his female partner.

Of those men who said they would be bothered, 2 in 3 (63%) said they would say something then and there, and 27% said they would say something in private later. One in 10 men said they either would not say anything because they would not know what to say (7%) or because they would not feel comfortable speaking out (4%).

> *It's the way we sort of deal with it in a group of jesters. 'I didn't know we were living in the 1960s, mate'. I was like, it's just a little jab back, 'Oh, you're a homophobe? Like, literally, it's frowned upon now'.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

In these quotes, men describe moderating their approach to minimising social discomfort for a group and defensiveness from the man being corrected. They also emphasise that their objective in speaking up is to add to cumulative reinforcing signals that sexist and homophobic behaviour are not acceptable. This indicates there is public awareness among some men that normative change is a long-term project that requires consistent reinforcement. Using humour for bystander action, as the second quote above describes, created social dynamics that minimised risk of confrontation or tension. In these instances, men maintained the balance between protecting group social dynamics – and potentially therefore their place and ability to maintain status in that group – and intervening against harmful behaviours. This approach to bystander action is illustrative of a larger conversation about how to communicate prevention messaging to men in ways that balance being resonant and effective,

without colluding with men who hold harmful views or seeking to appease the discomfort that might result from reflection on one's own behaviours (10, 29, 50).

CONTEXT AND ANTICIPATED PEER RESPONSES

Men described the ways that peer supports helped them to take action against rigid gender norms and feel more confident to resist pressure to conform to rigid masculine norms. This was demonstrated in accounts from focus group participants about social consequences for peers whose sexist or homophobic views sat in opposition to the majority of their social group. For instance, some participants said that they or their peer group would collectively signal their distance from men who perpetrated sexual harassment or were homophobic in a public setting.

> *They [the peer group] wouldn't be happy at all, mate [if their friend catcalled a woman]. I think a big part of that is because one friend [does] something, now that girl or that group of girls is going to have an assumption about the whole group of mates. Even though he's the only fucking dickhead in there. So, yeah, that's a no go. That's disrespectful.* ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

> *If [homophobic commentary is] affecting the people around you, I don't want to be associated with that person or that same person's ideologies. Because you don't know who is out in public or who is going to see, and I don't want that connection with that person's thoughts or values … In those situations, I would definitely either bring it up on the spot or distance myself from the group to disassociate myself from them.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These responses show that the participants see the harms of sexual harassment and homophobic commentary and do not want to participate in these behaviours. Moreover, these men sound assured and confident in taking action to show that such behaviour is unacceptable.

The quotes also suggest that the study participants' desire to differentiate themselves from the poor behaviour of peers is influenced by their awareness of their audience and a desire to protect their public image as well as their personal values. This includes avoiding likely rejection from women by virtue of being associated with a friend's disrespectful and harassing behaviour towards women. This highlights that men's interest in distancing themselves from the harmful attitudes and behaviours of other men can originate from more than individual ethics or altruism.

Participants identified settings and peer relationships where they felt safer and more confident to act in ways that helped them to explore healthier expressions of masculinity with greater freedom. For example, some participants articulated a deliberate approach to choosing who they talked to about their vulnerabilities. One participant described how they read social cues to decide whether a group is safe to be open with.

> *There are certain topics you can only talk to some groups of people [about]. As you approach certain people, get the vibe that they're understanding, their acceptance*

and knowledge, then you can share more. I also feel restricted with some people, you can't share that much. They may make you feel like a failure for sharing that. ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

Several participants described a sense of freedom within those peer groups where they felt a greater ability to talk through challenges that they were experiencing or to express emotional vulnerability.

Only a year or two ago, I found the perfect group of people to hang around with, who allowed me to be vulnerable and expose my inner self. I couldn't do that around my family. I couldn't go to them with relationship troubles, or if I was going through a hard time in life. None of them were really on the same level of mindset … It's all about having the right people around you. ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

In this quote, finding the 'right people' reflects genuine social safety: having friends that allowed the participant to be open about who they are, in all their complexity and fallibility, without fear of judgement or being stigmatised as weak or unmasculine. Several participants described the ways in which finding some degree of this kind of support and common values helped them to feel more capable and confident to address sexist or homophobic commentary in different settings.

Some men recounted times when they were less confident in their ability to address sexist or homophobic comments or behaviour without facing negative consequences. They described the factors that they might consider before deciding to act. These included potential risks related to physical and social safety or work security as a result of speaking out or intervening, and the likelihood that their intervention would successfully change someone's beliefs or behaviour.

Maintaining group cohesion and men's acceptance within a peer group were often highly prioritised in participants' considerations about whether to act to address another man's sexist or homophobic behaviour. Several participants suggested that they may not intervene if it was likely to risk their status in and membership of a peer group.

There's sometimes also fear that if you do step in, are the rest of the group going to back you on it or are you going to be the one person that is sticking up or telling the other person to stop and alienating yourself? ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

The majority of the times I've heard it [catcalling], it's been said within a group, and most of the guys join in … You're a team, in a sense. If you don't have the same goals, or thoughts, as a team, you're most likely going to get booted out. Whether that's guys not talking to you anymore, not giving you as many tasks to do, or you lose your job altogether. It's a reverse punishment for doing the right thing. ***Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement***

I FOUND THE PERFECT GROUP OF PEOPLE TO HANG AROUND WITH, WHO ALLOWED ME TO BE VULNERABLE AND EXPOSE MY INNER SELF...

IT'S ALL ABOUT HAVING THE RIGHT PEOPLE AROUND YOU.

Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement

Similarly, some men said that the fear of losing social connections and relationships with their friends might limit their willingness to intervene in homophobic commentary or street harassment in their peer groups.

> *The pub test is that we should be standing up for the right thing, but it's the confrontation and the friendship and the relationship. I don't want to ruin the relationship.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These quotes show the critical role that men's relationships play in successful prevention efforts. Focus group participants placed great value on belonging and acceptance, group membership, group cohesion, and loyalty to their friends (112, 113). In the first quote, the participant describes pressure to demonstrate loyalty and earn acceptance through upholding the status quo of the group, even if it does not align with an individual's own ethics or morals.

In peer or group settings where hypermasculine traits are highly valued, men's efforts to assert belonging or even power can mean that they assert harmful attitudes and behaviours, including condoning or enacting violence against women or LGBTIQA+ people (114). This is apparent in the ways that belonging and loyalty are conceived of in the context of men's sporting culture (115) as well as within highly masculinised professions such as police, the military and the security industry (116). The masculinities that are represented in these contexts often overemphasise in-group cohesion and the desirability of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, dominance, risk-taking, aggression and other dominant masculine norms (115).

It is important to emphasise that the pressures to conform to harmful masculinities created in these contexts are at issue, rather than men's desire to maintain strong social relationships. Fostering supportive social connections is valuable in many ways, including to help mitigate risk of men's social isolation and loneliness. Isolation and feelings of rejection are correlated with some men's vulnerability to grooming by extremist groups, including misogynist online movements that actively condone and, in some cases, perpetrate violence against women and LGBTIQA+ people (73). They are also correlated with poorer mental health and wellbeing outcomes for men (117). However, these quotes show how prioritising group cohesion over personal values may perpetuate unhealthy male peer group cultures in which men are not confident to challenge views that are contrary to the perceived consensus of the peer group.

They also highlight how tensions between men's personal beliefs and values and their experiences of pressure to conform to unhealthy masculine norms can play out. As discussed early in this chapter, the decision to act is not limited to a binary choice between staying silent or confronting harmful attitudes in a way that 'ruin[s] the relationship'. Helping men to understand the variety of ways that they can take action is an ongoing aim for primary prevention efforts focused on encouraging bystander action (55).

Focus group participants talked about how considerations of their physical safety factored into their decisions to intervene in sexist or homophobic commentary. They identified this as particularly pertinent when study participants did not have a personal relationship with those

who were being offensive or harassing others. In these situations, men discussed how they would weigh up their desire to intervene against the likelihood of aggressive confrontation and possible risks to their physical safety.

> *[In relation to the homophobic scenario] say if it's someone that looks dangerous, then I'd be less likely to intervene, mainly because safety for myself and others out there. 'Cause, chances are they could lash out or make the situation worse than what it is already.* ***University-educated; low Man Box endorsement***

The findings of the 2021 NCAS similarly show that men limited their bystander actions with strangers because of considerations for their own safety (17) (17). These findings, along with the findings from the focus groups, point to the need to facilitate men's safety and confidence to take prosocial bystander intervention within their communities and peer groups. VicHealth's *'Stepping in': a bystander action toolkit to support equality and respect at work* provides additional insights on bystander safety, stressing the need to assess physical safety (55).

The focus group findings on bystander action presented in this section underscore the importance of understanding men's relationships with their friends and peers as a crucial site for action against violence against women and LGBTIQA+ people (1, 6). The research and the focus group findings in *The Man Box 2024* suggest a high level of willingness among many men to actively address sexist, homophobic and violence-supporting attitudes and behaviours. Focus group participants also described various barriers to acting on this intent that stem from wanting to protect their relationships and status in a peer group, family, team or workplace. This highlights the importance of engaging with men as friends, brothers, sons, cousins, teammates, partners, lovers and colleagues – and as people who value these relationships and the people in their lives – rather than engaging them solely as individuals whose attitudes and behaviours need to be changed as participants in primary prevention interventions. Strategies to affect and communicate broad-based normative change will help to reduce men's perceived pressure to conform to harmful masculine norms. This in turn is likely to strengthen men's confidence and capability to intervene in sexist and homophobic behaviour when it happens in different settings where they live, work, learn, socialise and play.

MEN'S CONFIDENCE IN THEIR GENDER IDENTITY

Some focus group participants described how their confidence in their own masculinity and strong sense of self helped them to navigate social pressure to adhere to rigid ideas of how they should behave as men.

> *If someone makes any weird comments about [my less 'masculine' hobbies], I just play into it and say, 'Yeah, I like to do this', and I will share a bit about motivations, and they might acknowledge that, and that's nice … I think it's much more about being yourself, being unique and standing up for yourself and being confident in whatever you believe in or who you are.* ***University-educated; moderate Man Box endorsement***

This quote shows how the participant intentionally and confidently shares the activities that he enjoys. He describes how his self-assuredness provides tools to address and neutralise judgement from peers and their efforts to police adherence to more stereotypical masculine norms. This contrasts with some examples discussed in Chapter 3 in which some men hid, or made excuses for, behaviours that their peers may code as feminine. In this example, the participant describes how he presents a counterpoint to pressure to conform to prescriptive gender norms through sharing with peers the pleasure he gains from his hobbies.

This example is an instance of bystander action that 'supports men and boys in developing healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships', one of the four essential actions to prevent violence against women as set out in *Change the story* (1 p 60). Further, in several focus groups, participants shared the ways that they might try and police the behaviours of peers like the man quoted above if they thought they were moving 'too far' outside of traditional male gender norms.

> *At least in my group of friends, we might crack a joke at the start or give them a bit of shit [for having non-stereotypical hobbies like knitting] but I think for the most part, we wouldn't really care. We might bring it up the first time and laugh at it or say, like, 'What was that about?' or 'Are you actually doing this?' But then we'd sort of just take it if they're into that, and that's sweet.*
> ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

This instinct to communicate disapproval and judgement to a friend because of his hobbies reflects the idea of precarious manhood shared in Chapter 3, which suggests that men need to constantly earn and prove their masculinity (10, 82). Through this lens, the group of friends described here are seeking to prove their masculinity to each other by signalling that they recognise that someone in their group has moved away from dominant masculine norms. The use of humour to do so shows some of the ways in which norms can be policed using a deliberate system of rewards and punishment. The peer group 'cracking a joke', allowing them to initially push back against transgression of masculine norms ('Are you actually doing this?') before choosing to tolerate this behaviour ('We'd sort of just take it').

This example contrasts with the action the man quoted above describes, in comfortably defending his chosen hobbies, taking a non-combative, confident approach to neutralising social pressure from peers and modelling the benefits of flexible and healthier masculine norms. This approach illustrates one way of inviting one's peers to re-evaluate their own attitudes and beliefs about the 'right' way of being a man. Alongside structural and systemic action, the cumulative effect of such invitations to explore different ways of enacting masculinities are an important contributor to progress to address the gendered drivers and prevent violence against women.

CHANGES IN PERSPECTIVE OVER MEN'S LIFE COURSE

Focus group participants described fatherhood as providing increased motivation for some men to challenge rigid masculine norms and related belief systems. Some fathers described intentionally moderating the social messages that their children heard, including limiting their exposure to homophobic or sexist views. They discussed how they would consider intervening with older men who expressed or tried to enforce their adherence to stereotypical gender norms on the participants' children.

> *There's certain people that you don't … you kind of wouldn't put up with it around anymore, but some of you just kind of let slide. Like dad, you're 77, you're not going to change him. It's too late, you know, in that aspect of what's acceptable. But I will call him up and go, 'Hey, mate, you can say that in your house, but don't say that out, you know, in public with everybody else or don't … I don't want you doing that with my kids'.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

This quote illustrates how having children introduced different incentives which prompted some men to address the behaviours of older men in their families, unlike some other participants, whose reluctance to cause offence or disrespect resulted in them deciding not to challenge their elders. This highlights the potential for primary prevention efforts to encourage men to think about the purpose of bystander behaviour and to use that to shape strategies for action. For example, the participant in the fathers' focus group above describes the purpose of his intervention as shielding his children from views that are increasingly unacceptable and contribute to social harm. This makes it a priority to address with his father, and he finds a way to do so that is more likely to result in a productive conversation. These same principles can be applied in a range of social settings as part of the calculations of risk and benefits related to bystander action discussed throughout this chapter.

Some participants reflected upon the progress towards gender equality and reduced pressure to conform to rigid masculine norms. They expressed empathy for older men in their lives who felt a higher degree of pressure, and talked with gratitude about the changes that have occurred.

> *It's changed a bit, I think, from looking at the boomer generation above me, and my father, and father-in-law and that sort of era … I think we are more open to talking, I think we are more open to being vulnerable. You don't have to be that tough, you know, tough person, I think. It might have been bred into them, because they're obviously children of people that have been to war and seen [economic] depression.* ***Fathers; moderate Man Box endorsement***

Others spoke about their own progress through adulthood in building their capability and confidence in resisting pressures to conform to harmful expectations for men to be invariably stoic or tough.

> *I can't say for the younger blokes, but … growing up through the early 2000s and that, [I learned that] you don't talk about [feelings]. You just bottle it up and move on with it … Whereas now, if you've got an issue,*

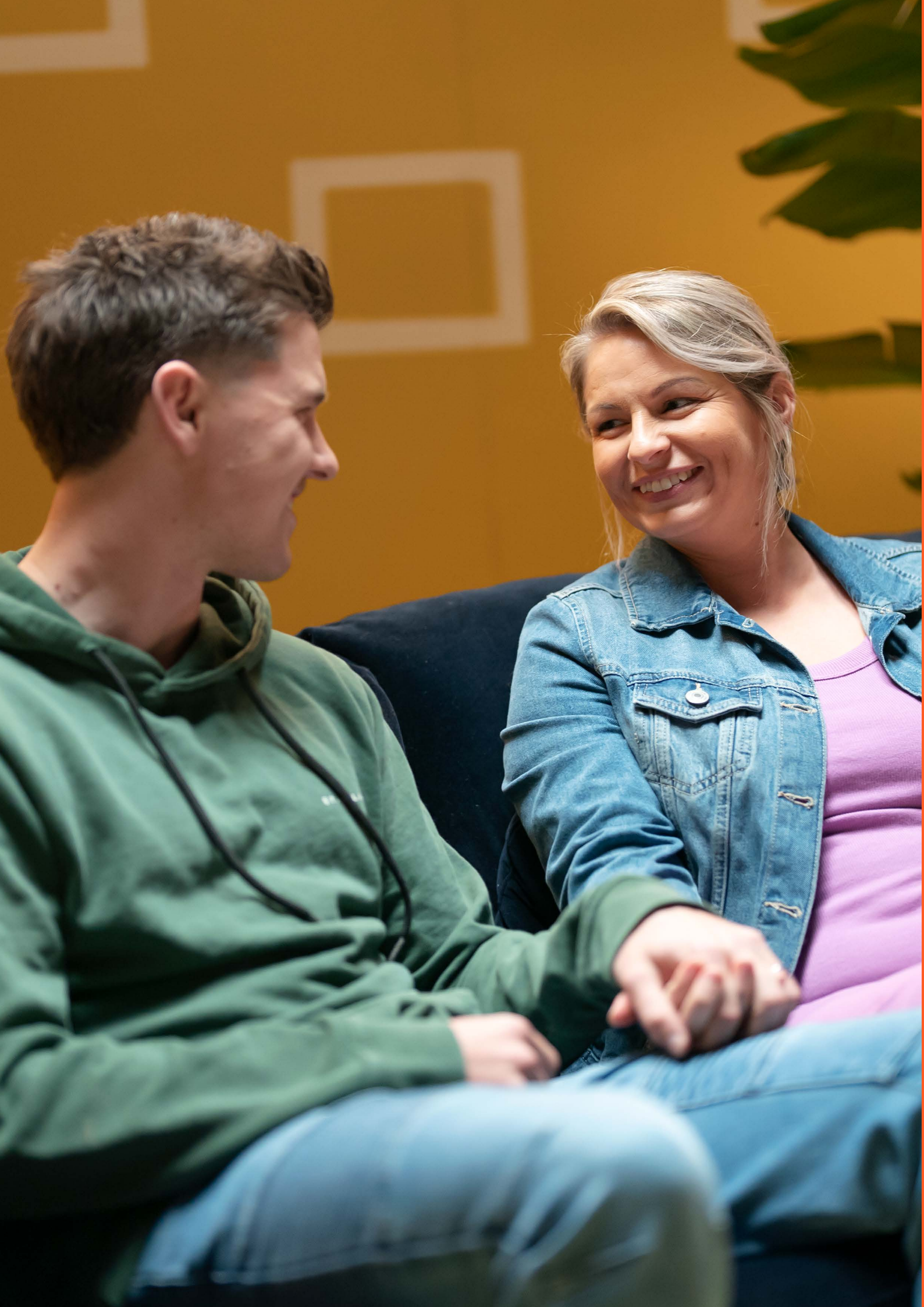
you can ask someone, you can talk to them. Which a lot of guys that are older than me struggle to understand. ***Male-dominated trade; moderate Man Box endorsement***

These examples describe promising social shifts, including in individual men's ability to recognise harmful masculine pressures and to align themselves with healthier expressions of masculinity. However, as shown throughout this chapter, these shifts are much more likely to result in sustained positive change when scaffolded by efforts to address the gendered drivers of violence, including rigid gender norms, at all levels of society.

CONCLUSION

The different ways that focus group participants resist, support or express ambivalence about rigid gender norms demonstrates the contextual push and pull factors that inform men's decisions about how to enact masculinities in different contexts. The ways that men respond to perceived social pressures about legitimate ways to be a man can vary according to circumstance, life stage and social context. All these factors can influence how willing, capable and confident men might be to actively participate in addressing the gendered drivers of violence against women, particularly shifting harmful masculine norms, heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Understanding such factors and the ways that they interrelate to cause or disrupt men's perceptions of social pressure to conform to Man Box rules present new opportunities for helping men to choose to take action to prevent violence against women and gender-based violence.

In the next chapter, we explore some of those opportunities and considerations for how they might be applied in future primary prevention efforts.



CHAPTER 5

OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE MEN IN PRIMARY PREVENTION

CHAPTER 5

Willing, capable and confident: men, masculinities and the prevention of violence against women highlights that many men understand the harms caused by social pressure to adhere to the Man Box rules. However, there is uneven understanding across communities about the role that some expressions of masculinity play in perpetuating such harms. A variety of structural, social and cultural circumstances influence men's sense of their own capacity to act to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women. Still, many participants described wanting to prevent or repair negative impacts of harmful masculine norms for their loved ones, their communities and themselves.

This chapter summarises the key findings from the focus group data collected as part of the Man Box 2024 study. We discuss what these findings reveal about opportunities to further strengthen and better support strategies to help men actively participate in primary prevention efforts. In doing so, we highlight considerations for future work aimed at improving men's engagement in action to prevent violence against women and gender-based violence.

The analysis presented throughout this report shows that many study participants identified examples of how the gendered drivers of men's violence against women play out in the places where they live, work, learn and socialise. They also identified examples of homophobia, which drives violence against LGBTIQA+ people (11). They described the interplay of these drivers with factors that are known to increase the risk of violence against women occurring where the gendered drivers are present, such as alcohol use (1). Many participants expressed how these examples caused them discomfort and did not align with their personal values. These findings correspond with those presented in *The Man Box 2024*, which show that men's personal endorsement of almost all Man Box rules is lower than their perceived social pressure to conform to those masculine norms (13).

Participants described the barriers that impeded them from acting against or speaking up about these pressures, including fear of being excluded from social networks; other punitive consequences from peers, family members, partners, managers or employers; or causing disharmony or awkwardness within a group. Importantly, several men also described feeling encouraged to disrupt harmful norms in contexts where they were confident that healthier expressions of masculinity would be accepted or even embraced. This included knowing that a friend would support them if they challenged sexist or homophobic commentary in a peer group or knowing that organisational culture and policy in a workplace or sports club explicitly rejects gender-inequitable attitudes and behaviours.

These findings align with those from other research and practice evidence that show that the ways men express attitudes and behaviours related to gender norms are not fixed but are shaped by their social environment (9, 10, 13, 38, 118). They also support recent research that refines the idea of a 'moveable middle' in primary prevention (119) through illustrating that men respond to masculine norms differently according to context, stimuli and assessment of relative risks and benefits resulting from the views they express (120).

This combined evidence foregrounds the importance of efforts to support men to foster

'positive, supportive male peer relationships', an essential action for addressing violence against women (1 p 63). Primary prevention efforts must acknowledge the richness of men's lives and relationships, and provide further support for practice approaches that appeal to the value men place on their friendships, family relationships and intimate partnerships, and their connections with colleagues, teammates and community (38).

Where men feel greater pressure to conform to harmful gender norms, the value they place on maintaining their social safety can mean that they dismiss, ignore, reinforce or encourage violence-supporting attitudes or behaviours. Conversely, the findings presented here support the assertion made in primary prevention frameworks that shifts in individual attitudes and behaviours are more likely to be sustainable when structural, institutional and organisational change enable them and when there is a critical mass of support for practising healthier versions of masculinity – from family members, partners, employers, friends, workmates, the media and online networks (1, 2).

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss five key findings drawn from the discussions presented in this report:

- Men see and understand the benefits of emotionally supportive, safe and equitable **intimate partner relationships** for themselves and their partners.
- Fathers understand how gender norms can influence their **parenting** and impact their children.
- Men's **families and social networks** can support them to let go of harmful ideas about what it means to be a man and can encourage healthy forms of masculinity.
- Men's increased openness to discuss their **mental health and wellbeing** can be built upon with gender-transformative primary prevention efforts.
- **Workplace initiatives, cultures and reforms** provide opportunities to challenge harmful ideas about what it means to be a man.

We consider what each of these findings reveal about strengthening collective approaches to help men engage more actively in primary prevention efforts.

The findings are intentionally framed as strengths-based, to highlight their potential for helping men see themselves as capable of challenging the gendered drivers of men's violence against women. We do this with the aim of contributing to increased understanding of the ways that men's willingness, capability and confidence to engage in gender-transformative action for prevention can be supported through systemic, structural and settings-based efforts.[8]

8 The inverse of each of these five findings is likely to be true for some Australian men; however, this was not captured in the focus group data analysed in this report. As *The Man Box 2024* shows, a significant minority of Australian men condone and perpetrate violence against women, and are homophobic and/or transphobic. The Men's Project and Respect Victoria deliberately designed the qualitative phase of the Man Box 2024 study to consider the views of most men in our communities: those who sit on a spectrum of low to moderate endorsement of the Man Box rules. This design means that participants were less likely to personally endorse harmful gender norms or condone violence against women and other gender-based violence. Further research is required to understand more about how primary prevention can support early intervention and response initiatives that work with men who use or are at high risk of using violence.

KEY FINDING 1: MEN SEE AND UNDERSTAND THE BENEFITS OF EMOTIONALLY SUPPORTIVE, SAFE AND EQUITABLE INTIMATE PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR PARTNERS

This report finds that men seek to live in more gender-equitable and emotionally supportive households and relationships than those that they grew up in and around. They want to be in fulfilling intimate partnerships where they can emotionally support their partners and feel supported in return. Some men also value the ways in which relationship norms have become less restrictive over time. These findings demonstrate widespread willingness to move away from adherence to masculine norms that prohibit men's emotional vulnerability or constrain gender-equitable partnerships in households and intimate relationships.

However, many focus group participants shared that they still find it difficult at times to put into practice. Even where men expressed desire for genuinely equal relationships, they also described pressures to conform to harmful gender stereotypes around, for example, men as breadwinner and women as carer, or men needing to be an emotional 'rock' for their partners.

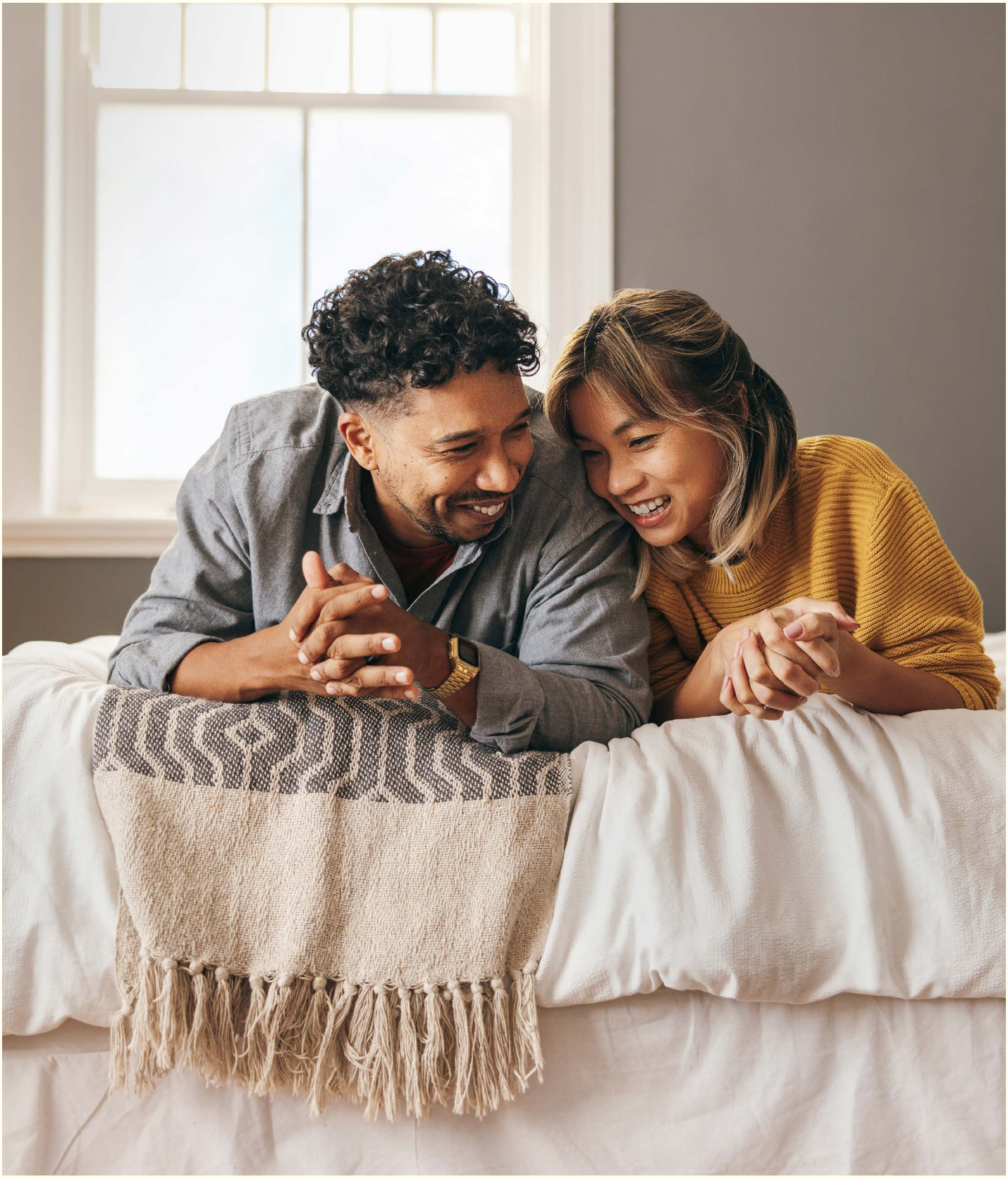
This suggests two avenues for prevention efforts to connect with men.

SUPPORT MEN TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND EXPRESS THEIR FULL RANGE OF EMOTIONS IN HEALTHIER WAYS, INCLUDING IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

The men who participated in focus groups spoke about valuing mutualised emotional connection and support in their intimate relationships. This suggests that helping men to consider what it is that they value and aspire to in their relationships, what they might do better and how social pressures might be holding them back is a promising entry point through which to connect with some men in the context of primary prevention efforts.

Efforts to shift persistent framing of healthy emotional expression or help-seeking as weak and/or feminised remain an important area of focus for primary prevention. Focus group participants stated that they are cautious about how and with whom they share personal challenges, largely because of their concerns about judgement from other people. For heterosexual men, this included women as intimate partners as well as other men.

This aligns with findings in *The Man Box 2024* showing that men aged 18 to 30 with low or moderate endorsement of Man Box rules were more likely to seek help from formal supports, such as a GP or helpline, than from informal supports such as a friend or partner (13 p 103–5). It is encouraging that a high proportion of survey participants reported that they would seek professional help for emotional or personal problems. However, when placing focus group discussions into context with these findings, this also suggests that many men continue to be uncomfortable with sharing such problems with those close to them. Social pressure for men to be tough and stoic can impact their ability to be emotionally vulnerable within their relationships and in other parts of their lives. For some, this tendency to process difficult emotions through



the lens of staying 'tough' and maintaining control can result in domineering behaviours which are, or can become, violent or abusive (121, 122).

Encouraging more men to self-reflect on what they value or hope for in their relationships and the ways pressures to adhere to unhealthy masculine norms are holding them back from achieving those aims will help to address these behaviours. It will also contribute to collective efforts to change norms and build men's capability and confidence to help take further action in prevention.

SUPPORT MEN TO LEARN ABOUT DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO RESISTING STEREOTYPICALLY GENDERED ROLES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Focus group participants shared their desire to co-create more equitable relationship and home dynamics and to be supportive partners. These discussions suggest that many men are eager to have more conversations about barriers and enablers to more equitable intimate partner relationships.

Men in this study reflected that many heterosexual couples no longer agree with attitudes that support distinct gendered roles for men as provider and women as homemaker. Despite this, they described the ways that they perceive and internalise persistent social pressure about the role of a 'good man' as the primary financial support for their families. Even in households with dual incomes, persistent beliefs that household labour is feminine can lead to women taking on the dual burden of unpaid household work in heterosexual relationships while also contributing financially to the household (10, 50). Indeed, data show that women in Australia still bear a disproportionate share of unpaid household labour (1, 10, 50, 123).

Broader social and family networks, as well as workplace policies, structures, cultures, and regulations can reinforce men's experience of pressure to conform to rigid gender roles. These create practical and affective constraints against men taking up more caring and household responsibilities and in doing so, reshaping roles in their households.

There is an ongoing need to address structural and institutional constraints through policy and workforce reforms (2). Alongside this, these findings suggest it is important to support men to learn from others' experiences of resisting gendered social pressures that do not align with their desire for more gender equal households and relationships. This work must attend to the ways that the different identities men hold, or communities that they belong to, might inform their pathways to change.

To assist in these efforts, there is a need for reciprocal learning and coordinated sharing of practice knowledge generated from community-led approaches to working with men. These might include programs or initiatives from LGBTIQA+ community-led organisations, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, faith-based community organisations, diaspora community organisations, organisations for and led by people with disability, youth-led organisations, fathers' groups or parenting groups, and older men's groups across the state (124–126). This information will help to generate more multifaceted and intersectional understanding about helping men to be part of positive change for their families and translate to more effective, tailored supports.

KEY FINDING 2: FATHERS UNDERSTAND HOW GENDER NORMS CAN INFLUENCE THEIR PARENTING AND IMPACT THEIR CHILDREN

The focus group discussions with fathers demonstrated that many men take pride in actively engaging as equal parents and seek to be good fathers. Prevention interventions and strategies that engage men as fathers are well placed to transform men's attitudes towards and engagement in parenting. These efforts will help to reduce pressures to conform to rigid gender norms for younger generations, as men begin to model healthier ways of being a man to their children. The findings of this study highlight several opportunities for prevention work with fathers to achieve these outcomes.

ENSURE PARENTING INITIATIVES ARE INCLUSIVE OF AND RESONATE WITH MEN ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Some fathers in the focus groups described being congratulated for actively parenting, a reflection of the persistent stereotype that men are not natural or primary parents or caregivers. Institutions may reinforce these stereotypes. For example, some hospitals prevent men, as the partner of a birthing mother, from staying overnight following the birth of their children, limiting opportunities for fathers to experience crucial bonding with their baby and to build confidence around care (127). Similarly, programs and structures designed to support new parents often focus on, and sometimes solely communicate with, mothers (128), which may also discriminate against parents who are LGBTIQA+ (129). Together, these actions position the parent giving birth, usually the mother, as the natural and inevitable 'primary' parent from the outset (130, 131).

These findings point to the importance of systematically including fathers and other caregivers in parenting initiatives at different stages of the parenting journey and across the life course (132). Opportunities to engage fathers include the maternal and child health system, antenatal education, early childhood education, schools and parenting groups, as well as consumer advocates for health system reform. Some initiatives for new parents already explicitly set out to work with couples together (132). Despite this, fathers often feel – or are – excluded from these settings or are unable to commit to participating in these initiatives due to structural barriers such as limited access to parental leave or flexible work arrangements (40, 133). There remains a critical need to understand and address:

- service providers' potential bias or resourcing limitations that serve to inhibit fathers' ability to participate in infant care
- normative factors that might inhibit men's uptake of available services, including workplace cultures that tacitly or overtly penalise men taking on more caring duties.

SUPPORT FATHERS TO BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER FATHERS

Many men in our study shared that they grew up with models of fatherhood that reflected rigid and sometimes harmful beliefs about how men should behave. Some participants stated that they hope to parent without imposing rigid gendered expectations on their children, in deliberate contrast to how they were parented. However, they noted that it could be difficult to find opportunities to meet or gather with other fathers who parented in ways that reflect these values.

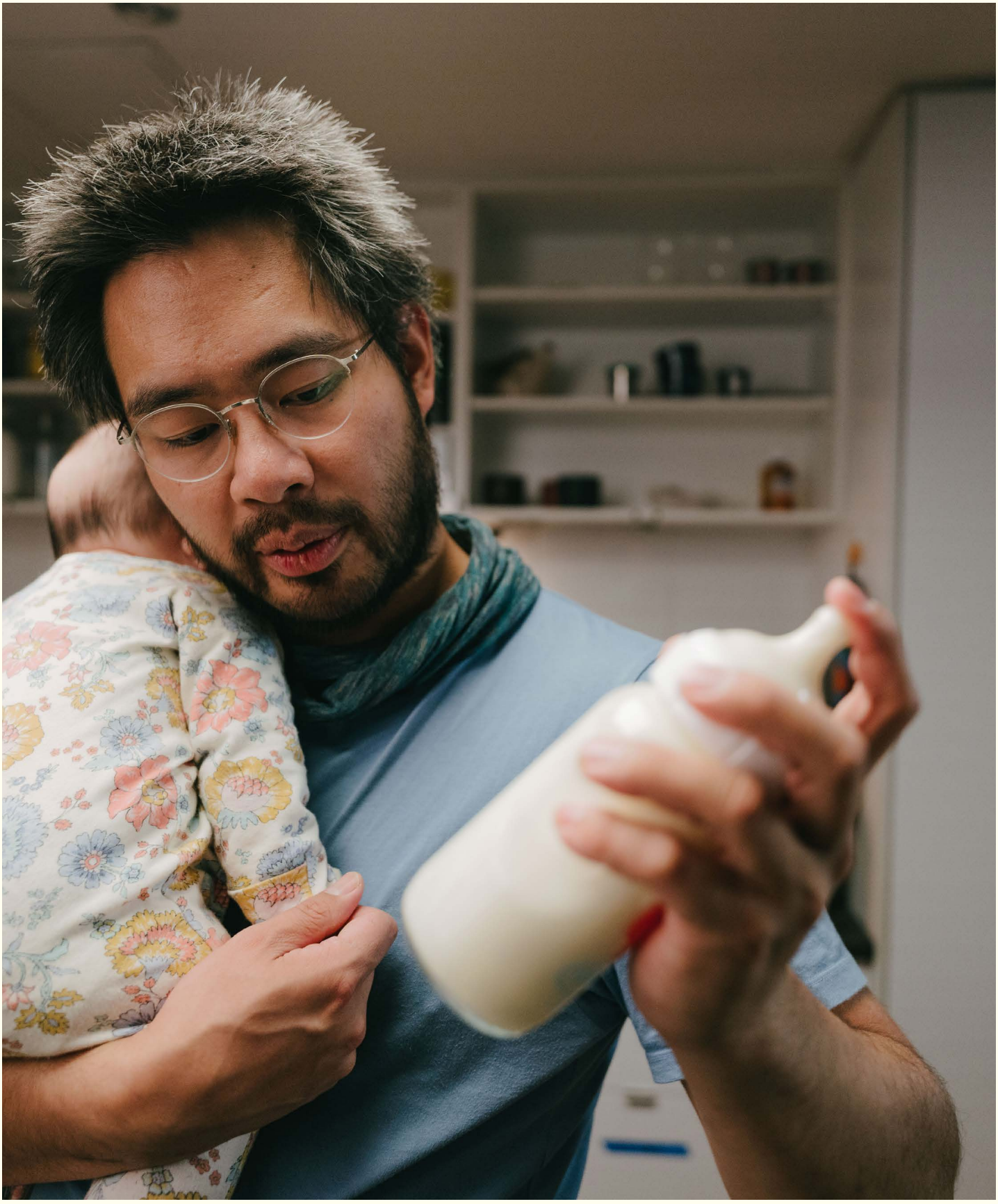
These findings suggest the importance of helping men to build supportive relationships with other fathers, and the potential for those relationships to be spaces that build men's capability and confidence to parent in ways that progress actions to prevent gender-based violence. Early childhood development and parenting programs, as well as fathers groups, online support groups for fathers (65) or other peer networks can facilitate engagement between fathers in ways that role model and build their comfort with enacting healthier masculinities. These programs can also encourage men to reflect on how to resist social pressures that are linked to unhealthy masculine norms and harmful individual beliefs and actions (1, 38). These efforts can help to foster more confidence among men to parent and contribute to household responsibilities. Importantly, efforts to support healthy engagement between fathers should not come at the expense of ensuring sufficient supports for mothers, nor detract from the importance of enabling supportive interactions between parents of all genders.

SUPPORT FATHERS TO REFLECT ON AND CHALLENGE INTERSECTING FORMS OF BIAS THAT INFLUENCE PARENTING

In Chapters 3 and 4, we illustrated ways that the transition to fatherhood can permit and even encourage men to reflect on harms resulting from pressure to conform to rigid gender norms. These include those pressures that limit men's emotional vulnerability, or that seek to enforce heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Fatherhood can provide opportunities and motivation for fathers to recognise and defy these pressures and to practise more flexible and equitable parenting than they experienced growing up.

As seen in the focus group discussions, fathers still experience pressure to align their parenting to rigid gender norms. For some this corresponds with their personal beliefs or biases, and this was particularly visible in discussions about the prospect of a child coming out as gay. Some fathers said that they would 'not encourage' a child's LGBTIQA+ identity. This is homophobia framed as tolerance, but several participants expressed their aim was to protect their child from anticipated harm if they were to identify as gay or otherwise LGBTIQA+. This fear, which may also be used to mask participant's own fear or shame around having a gay child, translated to men describing their intent to pressure their children to conform to heteronormative scripts. That is, fathers' recognition of the broader potential harms of heteronormativity and cisnormativity translated to a desire to discourage that child from accepting their sexual or gender identity, replicating those same harms within the family.

These findings highlight the importance



of using gender-transformative approaches to support parents/fathers to reflect on their prejudices and how these can negatively impact upon children. These approaches should include explicit efforts to disrupt heteronormative and cisnormative scripts in programs providing support to parents, and they should provide guidance for men as fathers to address homophobia or transphobia heard from other parents.

KEY FINDING 3: MEN'S FAMILIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS CAN SUPPORT THEM TO LET GO OF HARMFUL IDEAS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN AND CAN ENCOURAGE HEALTHY FORMS OF MASCULINITY

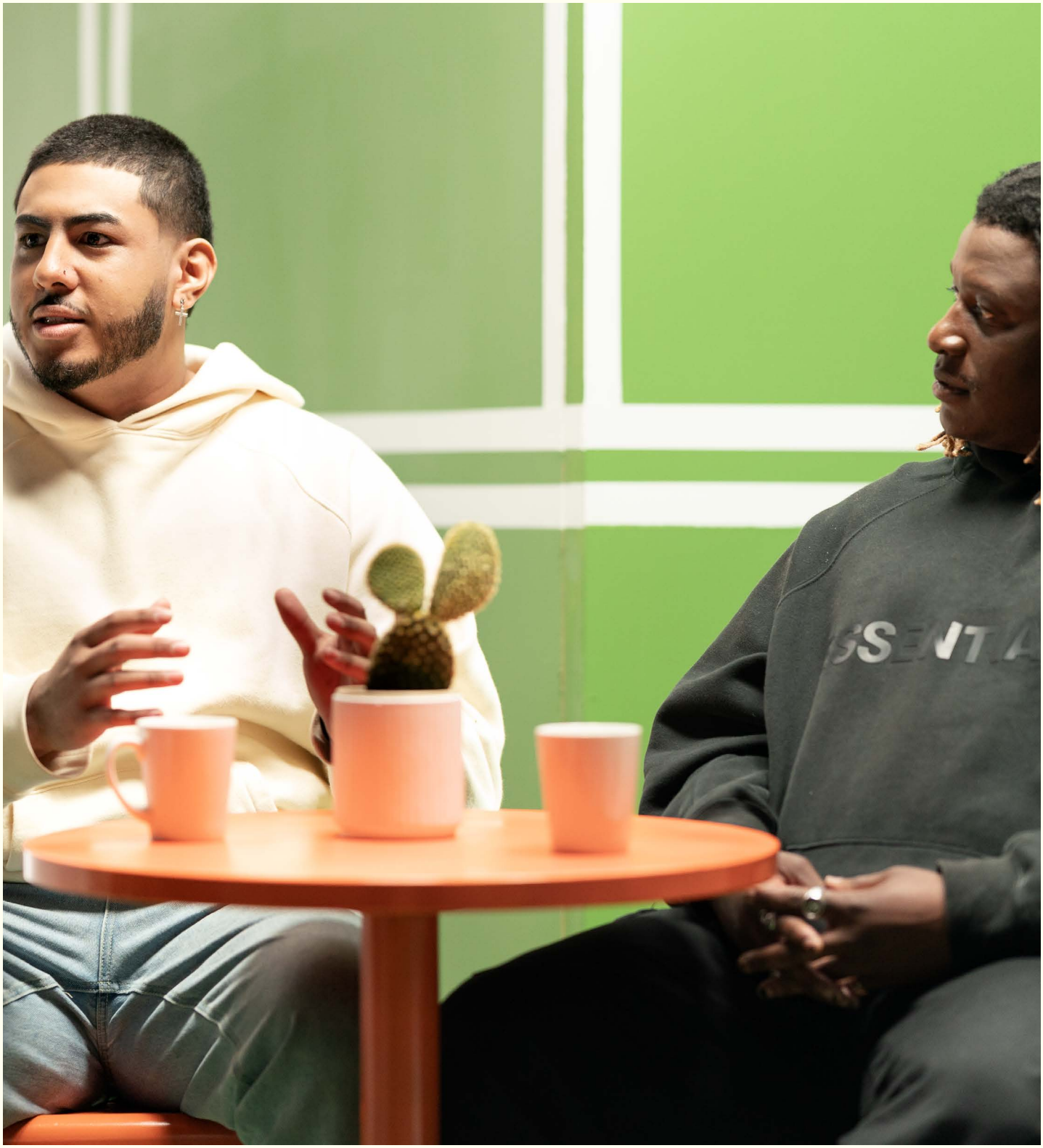
This report highlights the importance of changing social structures and cultures to support men to build their confidence in resisting pressure to conform to rigid gender norms in a range of interpersonal contexts. Here are three approaches effective prevention efforts can take.

BUILD BETTER EVIDENCE ABOUT EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO HELP MEN ENACT HEALTHIER MASCULINITIES WITH PEERS, COLLEAGUES AND FAMILY MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT AGES AND GENDERS

Our findings illustrate that men take a range of possible consequences into account when assessing whether to challenge harmful gender norms across different contexts. For example, focus group participants described how some peer group settings foster expressions of emotional vulnerability and other healthier expressions of masculinity, while other social dynamics uphold stereotypical masculine norms. Within their peer groups, men described how their desire to maintain relationships and group cohesion shaped their decision-making and behaviours. This finding aligns with evidence that shows how stereotypical masculine norms are often upheld in social and relational contexts including in male peer relationships (87).

It is essential to continue to support men to feel confident to reject pressure to conform to rigid masculine norms, and to accept more flexible relationships to those same norms from men around them. Some studies have found that boys with close friendships can better resist pressure to comply with masculine norms (134, 135). This suggests that more strategies are needed to normalise closeness and emotional support within men's social and family relationships at all ages (134, 135). For example, strategies may include targeted efforts to shift pressure to comply with gendered expectations that men should be stoic and self-reliant no matter what. Shifting these masculine norms may encourage men to seek help more proactively for challenges, and express vulnerability to peers, partners and family, and in doing so, signal to other men that these healthier and freer enactments of masculinity are possible.

The need to enable healthier expressions of masculinity among men is not limited to face-to-face interactions. Many people, in particular young men, seek to build community and connections online, including on social media platforms, online forums and interactive gaming forums (71, 118, 136, 137). This invites more consideration of how online spaces might present an opportunity to role model and encourage healthier expressions of masculinities within men's peer relationships (118). These efforts may help to serve as a counterpoint to the very real harms of the 'manosphere' – online spaces that have been shown to reinforce harmful gender norms, exacerbate resistance to action against the gendered drivers, and foster misogyny and the condoning of and perpetration of violence (10, 73, 138).



HELP MEN TO TRANSLATE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE INTO ACTIONS THAT SUPPORT PREVENTION

Some focus group participants demonstrated their awareness of different forms of violence against women and family violence, and their awareness of the ways these were linked to the drivers of violence against women (without using the 'driver' terminology). For example, some participants identified and discussed men's control of finances as problematic or

highlighted the problems that result from the ways that emotional vulnerability is gendered across society. Similarly, several participants identified the gendered nature of the different forms of harassment and abuse that women experience. However, this awareness did not necessarily translate into the men's willingness, sense of capability or confidence to take action to address the gendered drivers. This was particularly the case when they assessed the perceived personal risks as being too high, such as when there was feared potential for damage to a friendship or being penalised at work.

This finding is encouraging in that it shows that many men want or intend to do more to help to prevent gender-based violence. However, it also highlights that there is more to be done to help build capability and confidence across the population so that people of all genders, including but not limited to men, can more comprehensively see their role in addressing the gendered drivers of violence (21). Moreover, institutional, structural and systemic changes must be sufficient to support and sustain actions from individuals.

Primary prevention sector and government actors can continue to tailor strengths-based approaches to settings-based efforts. The aim of this work is to ensure that messages resonate with men, feel relevant to their lives, and centre their agency in taking steps to disrupt the gendered drivers of violence against women, and to disrupt the ways these combine with other forms of structural discrimination to shape the determinants of violence for different cohorts of the community (1, 8). This last point is critical. One of the limitations of this study noted in Chapter 2 is that it did not elicit sufficient insight into how men navigate rigid masculine norms through their intersections with ableism; racism; colonialism; homophobia, transphobia, transmisogyny, biphobia and intersexphobia; and classism. Ongoing and future work that considers barriers and enablers to men's active engagement in primary prevention and strategies to better support men's active participation should attend to how men's lived experience shapes their understanding of and engagement with efforts to prevent gender-based violence.

SUPPORT MEN TO EXAMINE THEIR RESISTANCE TO NORMATIVE CHANGE AND TO COUNTER RESISTANCE FROM OTHERS

The findings from this study invite broader consideration of what informs the defensiveness of some men at their perception of being categorised as perpetrators by virtue of their gender rather than their personal behaviour. This highlights the need for the prevention sector as a whole to consider more effective ways of translating the difference between addressing harmful masculinities as social norms that are upheld by people of all genders and working with men and boys as individuals and cohorts. The sector should also continue efforts to support men to self-reflect on the ways that they, as individuals and as members of communities, can actively help to address the social, relational and structural conditions that allow violence to occur.

As explored in Chapter 4, defensiveness can refocus discussions from how to prevent violence against women to whether a man is 'as bad as' a perpetrator in a media report. In doing so, this affective reaction from men can help to entrench misconceptions about primary

prevention, such as that it seeks to make teenage boys accept culpability for an adult man's choice to abuse a woman (139). This is not to suggest that prevention practitioners should seek to avoid causing discomfort for men. In any social change work, discomfort is inevitable as we consider ways that our position in society has meant we have been complicit in structural oppression or missed opportunities to create positive change and what we might do better in future (34).

Approaches to productively and effectively navigating this tension are already front of mind for many prevention practitioners; further strategies and resourcing are required to measure and translate impacts of promising approaches over time and across different settings. Importantly, as the focus groups highlight, some men are able and willing to engage in prosocial bystander action to counter different forms of resistance in their peer networks, such as speaking out against homophobic commentary. However, men's assessment of what they can do in a given situation can vary by context. To inform their decisions, men weigh up several factors, such as perceived social consequences or risks to physical safety they may face as a result of taking a particular action. These findings highlight the importance of mutually reinforcing prevention efforts and supports that help men to build the skills and confidence to intervene as active bystanders. This might include encouraging men to consider different perspectives when thinking about risks and mitigation strategies, and identifying subsequent opportunities to take action that minimises the likelihood of similar behaviours or problems occurring in the future, even after the immediate issue has passed (55, 140).

Men who hold positions where they can directly influence institutional, systemic and structural change are an important audience to keep in view for settings-based prevention efforts generally and initiatives that focus on addressing resistance to normative change more specifically (17, 55). More men in leadership positions are taking on these roles, achieved through decades of effort across settings from prevention practitioners and gender equality advocates. However, there is more to be done, including more comprehensive steps towards more diverse gender representation in political, organisational and community leadership (141, 142). Where leaders can communicate the necessary and achievable actions that can be made across organisations and systems, prevention practitioners and peers can also help individuals reflect on where they can do more to enact positive change.

KEY FINDING 4: MEN'S INCREASED OPENNESS TO DISCUSS THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING CAN BE BUILT UPON BY GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PRIMARY PREVENTION EFFORTS

The findings in this report illustrate synergies across efforts to address the gendered drivers of violence against women and promotion of men's mental health and wellbeing. *The Man Box 2024* found that rigid masculinities are associated with poor mental health outcomes, with men who more strongly endorse the Man Box rules more likely to report frequent symptoms of poor mental health (13).

In Chapter 3, we discussed the ways that mental health promotion efforts that target men can help to normalise men's ability to resist some harmful masculine norms and feel more equipped and capable to express vulnerable emotions or seek help for problems they may face. There is potential to consider ways that primary prevention of violence against women and gender-based violence efforts might intentionally build upon these disruptions to men's adherence to some Man Box rules.

HARNESS MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION EFFORTS THAT RESONATE WITH MEN TO INVITE REFLECTION ABOUT THE PRESSURES THEY FEEL TO CONFORM TO RIGID GENDER NORMS

Focus group participants described the ways that widespread normalisation of discussions about men's mental health and wellbeing has helped to increase some men's confidence in disrupting or rejecting some of the Man Box rules. Public discussions of mental health in workplaces, social media and podcasts seem to have contributed to shifting social pressures for men to be tough or stoic and encourage them to begin to share a fuller range of emotions in their peer groups and in other settings.

Men's mental health initiatives may not prioritise gender-transformative approaches in discussions of attitudinal or behaviour change in the same way primary prevention programs do. Mental health and wellbeing initiatives can provide an avenue to foster greater engagement with some actions to address gendered drivers but not all. They are therefore not a proxy for primary prevention efforts, but it is possible to strengthen co-benefits of mental health promotion for addressing the gendered drivers. These include potential positive outcomes from men developing healthier ways of expressing and regulating their emotions, and fostering supportive male peer relationships (1). There may be potential to translate the skills and confidence that men gain from engagement with these initiatives into more comprehensive reflection on their relationship to rigid masculine norms and ways that they might take other action to progress prevention of violence against women and gender-based violence.

Men in this study named the positive influence that different forms of media such as podcasts and social media had in terms of modelling and normalising expressions of healthier masculinities, including in the context of discussions of men's mental health. This finding adds texture to necessary discussions in prevention policy and practice about how to address the ways that online content, social media and traditional media can amplify and reinforce the drivers of violence against women (73, 143–145).

HEARING OTHER MEN'S STORIES ABOUT STRUGGLING AND MENTAL HEALTH, STUFF LIKE THAT. IT ENABLED ME TO OPEN UP A LOT MORE. YOU'RE ABLE TO THINK, IT'S NOT JUST ME...

Male-dominated trade; low Man Box endorsement

KEY FINDING 5: WORKPLACE INITIATIVES, CULTURES AND REFORMS PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO CHALLENGE HARMFUL IDEAS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN

Men across all focus groups illustrated ways in which workplace legislation and regulation, organisational policies and cultures can create environments where men feel more willing and safe to resist pressure to conform to harmful masculine norms, as well as being more capable of doing so. These dynamics can be fostered through the following efforts.

CONTINUE STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC WORKPLACE REFORMS THAT CHALLENGE HARMFUL GENDER NORMS

There are several areas where continued structural and systemic reforms will help to address harmful gender norms, including with regard to preventing sexual harassment and gendered wage discrimination, which is likely to disproportionately impact women with disability and women who experience discrimination because of their race or ethnicity (43, 146–151). Contributions from men in the fathers' focus group discussions, presented in Chapter 4 of this report, focused on the need for further action to address the structural and normative disincentives for men to take up greater caring duties. Participants suggested that they wanted to play a more active role in their child's life, with one man describing caring for his son as 'a joy beyond limit'. However, taking up opportunities to increase household responsibilities is balanced against the projected financial, social and career penalties that they may anticipate. This aligns with other studies which document the structural factors that reinforce rigid gender roles in the home, such as the gender pay gap (1, 10, 123) and limited access to parental leave and flexible work arrangements for fathers and other non-birthing parents (50, 130). In other focus groups, men discussed the differences in organisational culture that they encountered in male-dominated workplaces and more mixed-gender workplaces. Several men noted that where they had more women colleagues, they felt less judged for behaving in ways counter to rigid masculine norms. This was common across men in trades and men in (or aspiring to) white-collar work.

To engage in unpaid care work for their children or another family member, men need to be supported structurally and socially to work flexibly or take meaningful and equitable periods of parental leave. This support must include efforts to increase the perceived value of care work, particularly in comparison to paid work. It is just as important for women to be provided more equal opportunities for promotion and wage parity, including through policies that account for time away from the workforce due to full-time care work. This is necessary for several reasons related to equity and minimising risk of economic insecurity for older women and the toll that this creates for individual women, families and communities (152–154). For some households, it may also help to address questions of financial viability related to men's flexible work if both parents have similar incomes, and both parents face the same wage, superannuation and career development considerations. Where the material differences are less clearly gendered, it may be easier to identify other normative and cultural barriers that limit men's uptake of flexible work options within organisations and across communities.

This demonstrates the importance of concurrent and mutually reinforcing efforts to shift gender norms across different levels of society. Changes to legislation and government policy are important levers as:

- they set clear standards for employers and set out worker entitlements
- organisational uptake and promotion of equal access to flexible work and parental leave helps to change the culture of workplaces and model better practices for others in the community (131, 155)
- whole-of-population efforts to destigmatise and normalise men taking on more unpaid household labour make it more likely that men will take advantage of workplace entitlements.

Each of these actions are critical for achieving meaningful and sustainable change.

BUILD WORKPLACE CULTURES THAT FOSTER HEALTHIER MASCULINITIES

Findings from focus group discussions suggest that in male-dominated workplaces, stoic or aggressive interactions between colleagues remain normative, and sometimes these are based on excessive consumption of alcohol or involve the denigration of women through street harassment. In these workplaces, sexual harassment or other harmful behaviours are more likely to be challenging to address or may even be condoned (156—158). Importantly, the focus group findings highlight that individual men often view these workplace cultures as unhealthy and undesirable. Participants discussed how they feel more capable to challenge these cultures when they perceive that they have the capability and confidence to do so, for example, if they feel they will be backed by other men or their employer, and will not suffer career or financial consequences. Inversely, they described how they might participate in hypermasculine cultures or became passive bystanders when the risk of not being seen to belong or of speaking out was perceived as too high. The intentional cultures fostered by organisational leadership and workforces are therefore influential in shaping the nature and extent of the permissions that men have to challenge the behaviour of men that they work with.

This was illustrated by focus group participants who spoke about how observing equitable behaviours from their bosses helped men to feel confident that they had permission to enact similar behaviours. Management can, for instance, encourage men to take up the opportunities offered by gender equality policies; increase the acceptability of healthier norms such as norms that encourage expressions of vulnerability and emotional support in the workplace; and ensure congruence between workplace policies and programs and day-to-day actions and experiences. These deliberate changes in workplace culture can shift the way men perceive they are expected to behave at work and beyond.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: STRENGTHENING HOW PRIMARY PREVENTION EFFORTS ENGAGE WITH MEN

These findings illustrate opportunities to help men who are already questioning or disconnected from some harmful masculine norms to take more action to help prevent violence against women and gender-based violence. They are avenues for primary prevention efforts to help increase men's willingness, capability and confidence to resist and ultimately help to reduce social pressures to conform to Man Box rules.

For many people working in primary prevention policy, program design and practice, the findings of this report are likely to affirm decades of experience and practice evidence that speak to the barriers and opportunities related to engaging men and boys in gender-transformative work. They also show the importance of consistent, mutually reinforcing and values-based messages that meet men where they are – where they live, work, learn, socialise and play. To conclude this report, we set out three domains for expanded effort to improve collective application of these findings.

CONSISTENCY AND COORDINATION

The findings presented in this report demonstrate that men's social environments play a significant role in determining their sense of capability and confidence to challenge or resist pressure to conform to harmful masculine stereotypes. This highlights the importance of amplifying and extending the reach of prevention efforts that help to address rigid gender norms and build men's capability and confidence to move away from the Man Box rules.

Coordinated implementation, expansion and regular review of existing policy and legislative reform is key to ensuring that harmful forms of masculinity are rejected across settings and social contexts. This might include:

- monitoring whether, how and why men use initiatives such as paid parental leave or flexible work options
- developing national guidelines for early childhood and parenting programs, with a focus on healthier masculinities, gender equality and transforming gender norms
- leveraging the existing reach of respectful relationships education across schools to expand focus in curriculums on healthier and harmful gender norms and consent education, with a view to fostering critical reflection on healthier masculinities for young people.

Successful primary prevention ensures the sustainability of efforts to support men who have perpetrated violence or who are at risk of perpetrating violence, so that they can change their behaviours. These efforts are scaffolded by mutually reinforcing primary prevention interventions. That is, where peers, colleagues and families do not tolerate unhealthy expressions of masculinity, there is higher likelihood of men being able to sustain positive outcomes from men's behaviour change programs. The importance of coordinated effort across prevention, early intervention, response and recovery is captured in national and state policy frameworks (2, 3, 7). However, there are still challenges across many areas of the country in facilitating reciprocal learning across different practice areas that work with men or that are focused on encouraging healthier masculinities. Further work is required to build information-

sharing opportunities that are coordinated and embedded into policy and practice development.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKS

It is critical to continue to build evidence about what works to shift harmful social norms and cultures of masculinity across whole populations and in different settings and places with different cohorts. This includes practice evidence about what helps to build men's willingness, capability and confidence to take action to address the gendered drivers of violence against women (159). It also includes research into the collective impact of work focused on men and masculinities across the family violence continuum, such as investigating what might help to build the willingness, capability and confidence of men who highly endorse the Man Box rules to engage more in actions to address the gendered drivers, which was out of scope for this study.

Building such a rich body of evidence requires adequate and sustained funding for monitoring and evaluation of different programmatic interventions, impact evaluations that consider the cumulative effect of different prevention efforts across communities and over time, and academic and community-led research. These efforts must foreground an intersectional understanding of where challenges and opportunities for improving prevention outcomes exist for different cohorts.

Equally important, the findings from knowledge building efforts need to be tested in policy and practice discussions. This helps to validate and apply lessons (or knowledge) and will ensure that emerging understandings of barriers and solutions to engaging with men in prevention can be applied in policy reviews and practice design (44).

SUPPORTING MEDIA TO BUILD MEN'S WILLINGNESS, CAPABILITY AND CONFIDENCE TO BE PART OF PREVENTION

Focus group participants named the positive influence of some media content on their capability and confidence to resist pressure to conform to rigid masculine norms, particularly in relation to emotional expression and stoicism or toughness. This finding demonstrates that there are more opportunities for different media actors to improve public literacy about necessary actions to address the gendered drivers, and about the actions available to men to help them contribute to prevention of violence against women and other gender-based violence.

This is a related but separate aim to that of ensuring that news reporting about violence against women and family violence is accurate and does not cause harm. There are extensive resources to support those working in media – including journalists, editors and producers – to report on violence against women in ways that challenge the gendered drivers of violence, address misconceptions about the gendered nature of violence, and reinforce the message that violence against women is not tolerated (160–162).

There is a broader imperative for media and social media to contribute to addressing harmful gender norms. Content that men

consume can help them to see where they are part of solutions to end gender-based violence, provide tools and language to actively address the gendered drivers in different settings and contexts, may help to increase confidence to express emotional vulnerability, and foster reflection about how they can change behaviours that align with rigid masculine norms that harm those around them or themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the importance of refining what is meant by 'engaging' with men in primary prevention to consider the different tiers of supporting men's active participation in actions to address the gendered drivers of violence. In Chapter 1, we introduced categories of how gender-transformative social justice movements might approach engaging with men, as set out by Casey and co-authors:

- outreach to and recruitment of previously unengaged men
- changing men's attitudes and behaviours
- social action to end violence as part of broader gender justice work (21).

We identified the outcomes of each of these categories of effort as:

1. building men's willingness to do more to address the gendered drivers of violence against women and intersecting drivers of other forms of gender-based violence
2. supporting men to build their knowledge, skills and capability so that they know how to help prevent violence against women and other gender-based violence across different settings and relationships
3. ensuring that men feel confident to put their willingness and capability into action and to support others in their lives, particularly other men, to do the same.

The accounts from participants in this study indicate that among men who are already questioning some or all of the unhealthy masculine norms described in the Man Box rules, there is considerable willingness to do more to address rigid gender norms and to interrupt cultures of masculinity that valorise dominance and control in peer groups, families and workplaces. However, we need to do more to ensure men are capable of and confident in putting that willingness into action. We also need to do more to understand the programmatic, policy and campaign efforts that are most effective for different cohorts across our communities in promoting men's active engagement.

This study also highlights the critical role that men's social and familial relationships play in determining how and when they act to address the gendered drivers. This is an important contribution to ongoing improvements to primary prevention approaches, as it recentres the significance of understanding men in the context of their social connections and the ways that seeking to protect those connections can shape behaviours. This is well evidenced – and captured as a key area of focus in *Change the story* (1, 10) – but can be easy to lose sight of in the context of equally important discourse about changing the attitudes and behaviours of individual men across the community, particularly those who are already perpetrating violence. Both approaches are needed; these findings reinforce that continued work to support individual men to change their behaviour through early intervention and response interventions will be more likely to yield sustainable, positive outcomes where the gendered drivers are rejected across peer groups, workplaces and families.

Overall, these findings reflect positive shifts in men's attitudes towards harmful masculine norms across Australian communities, and they demonstrate the potential to expand this progress through ongoing efforts to build men's willingness, capability and confidence to take action against the gendered drivers of violence against women and gender-based violence.

KEY TERMS

CISGENDER

Used to describe a person 'whose gender identity aligns with the sex that was assigned to them at birth' (1 p 133).

CISNORMATIVITY

An ideology that implies that cisgender experiences are the norm, and privileges these over the experiences of people with other gender identities. This includes the assumption of the 'gender binary': 'that all people are one of two distinct and complementary genders (man and woman), and that this corresponds to their sex assigned at birth' (1 p 133).

GENDER EQUALITY

Means equality for people of all genders, including women, men, people with intersex variations, and trans and gender diverse people, and that a person's rights, responsibilities, opportunities and outcomes should not depend on their gender (1, 163). Gender equality 'requires the redistribution of power, resources and responsibilities between men and women in particular, and the transformation of the underlying causes and structures that create and sustain gender inequality' (1 p 134).

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Violence that is directed at someone because of their gender. 'It describes violence rooted in gender-based power inequalities and gender-based discrimination. While people of all genders can experience gender-based violence, the term is most often used to describe violence against women and girls, because the majority of cases of gender-based violence are perpetrated by men against women' (164 p 3).

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE

Approaches that aim to achieve gender equality by critically examining and explicitly challenging harmful gender roles, practices, norms, structures, and systems (1). Using a gender-transformative approach helps to centre the importance of engaging with men in efforts to prevent violence against women and gender-based violence in ways which do not collude with or reinforce the gendered power dynamics that drive men's violence in the first place.

GENDERED DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Four specific expressions of gender inequality that the evidence base shows drive or cause men's violence against women:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control (1).

The gendered drivers derive from a broader context of gender inequality that manifests in individual attitudes and behaviours, in intimate, peer and family relationships, and across communities, organisations, societal norms and legal, governmental, political, institutional and other structures. These drivers must be challenged and changed at each of these levels in order to prevent violence against women.

HETERONORMATIVITY

An ideology that implies that heterosexuality is the only 'normal' sexual orientation, privileges these experiences over the experiences of people with other sexualities, and 'assumes a linear relationship between sex, gender and sexuality (for example, that all men are heterosexual and cisgendered)' (164 p 4). Heteronormativity assumes that all people are either a man or a woman, and 'includes a suite of cultural, legal and institutional practices that work to explicitly privilege relationships between 'men' and 'women' as the only 'normal' and 'natural' form of relationship' (6 p 10).

MASCULINITIES

'The socially learnt roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that any given society considers appropriate for men', that vary between cultures and can change over time (10). Masculinities are not confined to the attitudes and behaviours of individual men – they can be reinforced by people of all genders, and they extend to broader societal structures and systems that uphold expectations of how men should behave (10).

PRIMARY PREVENTION

Applies whole-of-population approaches to change the conditions that allow violence against women to thrive. These conditions include individual attitudes and behaviours, social norms, organisational cultures and practices, policies, laws and institutions. Primary prevention addresses these conditions in mutually-reinforcing ways across the life course, in all the different places where people live, learn, work, socialise and play.

REINFORCING FACTORS

Things that on their own do not predict violence against women, but may influence the likelihood, prevalence or dynamics in different settings and contexts in which the gendered drivers are present. These reinforcing factors are:

- condoning of violence in general
- experience of, and exposure to, violence
- factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (such as alcohol use)
- resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts (1).

RESISTANCE

Used to refer to resistance, opposition or hostility to progressive social change (33). Resistance to gender equality and prevention of violence against women is most often expressed by those who most benefit from the status quo (i.e. men), but can be expressed by people of all genders. Resistance encapsulates a broad range of behaviours, 'from passive blocking techniques which seek to maintain the status quo, to strategies which aim to minimise or co-opt change efforts, to active, aggressive opposition in order to restore the old order' (33 p 3).

WHOLE-OF-POPULATION APPROACH

A population level or whole-of-population approach goes beyond addressing individual behaviours to consider the broader social, political and economic factors that drive violence (1). While focusing on strategies necessary to address the common drivers of violence against women, whole-of-population approaches recognise the diversity of experiences and needs across communities. Such strategies acknowledge that particular manifestations of violence, and violence against particular groups of women, gender diverse people, and men can have a range of other drivers and contributing factors (1). A universal, or whole-of-population, framework for prevention, while not designed to focus in depth on any one specific form of violence or on violence perpetrated against particular population subgroups, must nevertheless embed an intersectional approach (1).

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