The MASCULINITY *Paradox*

Toxic. Fragile. Healthy. In crisis. Everyone's talking about *masculinity*, but does the concept need a rebrand? Or rather, asks Kathryn Madden, a debrand?

An 11-year-old boy, a sensitive and endlessly curious soul, sees a newspaper lying open on the kitchen bench. A headline jumps off the page, rousing his interest, and he reads it aloud. "Are boys really toxic or are we in a moral panic?" He pauses thoughtfully, and repeats, "Are boys really toxic? What does that mean?"

The boy is my nephew and a few weeks ago, while eating his peanut butter toast, he was introduced to one of 2025's hot-button topics. His mum – my sister – immediately jumped in. "I wanted to address it then and there; there was already a lot of media around toxic masculinity and I didn't want him to misinterpret it. I wanted to protect him from the idea that boys are inherently bad, but still have a discussion about men's behaviour and how there's a real problem with male violence."

Masculinity is everywhere right now – not just in the literal sense of jacked-up gym bros and the lingering scent of Dior Sauvage in the air, but the word itself. *Adolescence*, the viral Netflix miniseries about a 13-year-old who's radicalised by the manosphere, ignited a global discussion about modern boyhood. In the lead-up to the federal election in May, Anthony Albanese and Peter Dutton were pitted against each other based on their styles of masculinity (the former, a caring and compassionate "state daddy"; the latter, a "strongman tough cop"). And amid the chaotic announcement of Trump's tariffs, conservative pundits declared that the trade levies would reverse "a crisis in masculinity" by bringing jobs that rely on physicality and brawn back to US shores. As MAGA provocateur Vish Burra spouted on X: "Men in America don't need therapy. Men in America need tariffs … The fake email jobs will disappear. Competing with women like this for REAL JOBS will be over. Kitchens will be filled and sandwiches will be made. Fertility rates will go to the moon."

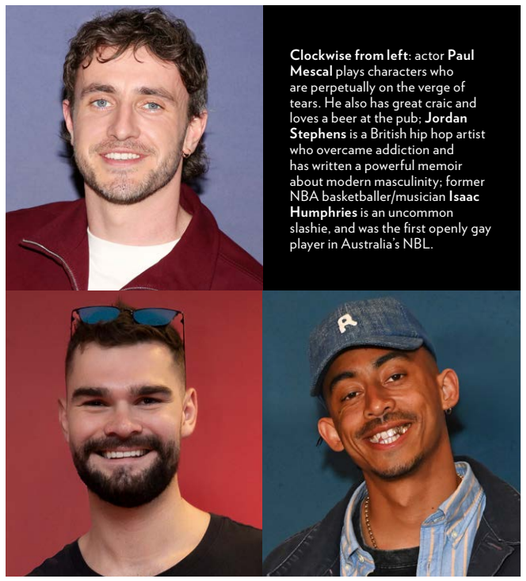
The current fixation on masculinity could be a symptom of the algorithm, a cultural moment that feeds itself with every new opinion piece and TikTok video, a crisis borne on column inches that's swelled beyond its origins. And it could be an equal and opposite reaction to the thriving women's movement of the past decade – the mobilisation of millions to march for #MeToo; an uprising for women's bodily autonomy; our ongoing economic empowerment; pop culture's glorious celebration of girlhood – engineered by men's rights activists who fear the scales of equality are tipping against them.

But behind every podcast bro whining, "What about me?", studies and statistics also paint a very real picture of men and boys in crisis. They're lagging behind in education, employment and mental health, and – based on figures from the 2024 US presidential election – becoming more conservative. Some are lured to the extremes by misogynist influencers like accused rapist Andrew Tate, who prey on male loneliness and promote the oppression of women, along with fast cars and bulging biceps, as their salvation. Meanwhile, incidents of male violence against women remain shamefully high (at the time of writing, 24 women have been killed in Australia in 2025*), all of which is sparking frank and urgent discussions. What's the matter with men? And how do we frame and talk about masculinity in a productive way?

As a youth advocate and father of two young boys, Tom Harkin has a unique perspective. Eight years ago he co-founded Tomorrow Man, a social enterprise that aims to challenge hyper-macho stereotypes and encourage men to exercise their emotional muscle. "The concept of masculinity is a tightrope right now," he says, adding that influences from the manosphere (a loosely connected network of men's online content ranging from self-help to violent misogyny) are evident in workshops with teen boys. "We hear this new vocabulary overlaid on the traditional stereotypes of a man: 'alphas', 'sigmas', 'betas' and 'cucks' … Language is powerful, but when you use a word too much, you kind of forget its origins. You have to ask, what does it actually mean? So if you take 'toxic masculinity' at surface value, what does it say? It says that masculinity is toxic." ▸

A FEW GOOD MEN

There's no singular archetype of masculinity, but these role models have range.



Clockwise from left: actor **Paul Mescal** plays characters who are perpetually on the verge of tears. He also has great craic and loves a beer at the pub; **Jordan Stephens** is a British hip hop artist who overcame addiction and has written a powerful memoir about modern masculinity; former NBA basketballer/musician **Isaac Humphries** is an uncommon slashie, and was the first openly gay player in Australia's NBL.

Originally used to describe how rigid gender norms can cause destructive behaviour in men, the term "toxic masculinity" originated in the 1980s in the mythopoetic men's movement. It entered the mainstream in the mid-2010s alongside a renewed interest in feminism, peaking during the #MeToo reckoning. Soon, the two words morphed into one, a catchcry in both the media and common parlance. It also became a political hot potato, condemned as anti-male by the right and thrown around too liberally by the left. Toxic masculinity was never meant to shame boys nor claim all men are toxic, but with widespread misrepresentation and potentially damaging interpretations, many believe it no longer serves its purpose.

"I've worked with thousands and thousands of men over the years, and I've met very few purely toxic men," says Harkin. "I've met a lot of men who have some toxic masculine traits, and they've also got healthy, positive masculine traits ... I think 'toxic masculinity' is overused and is creating division, entrenchment and defence amongst boys and men. Sure, you can label [the behaviour], but you've got to ask, should it be our mainstream terminology for trying to deal with the societal issue we're facing?"

"I grew up feeling that [masculinity] was a bad thing and I should suppress all those qualities."

– Tomorrow Man co-founder Tom Harkin

Then again, you only need to watch an episode of *Married at First Sight* or delve into the manosphere – where even a shallow-dive will see you stumble upon Reddit discussions like "Women want to be raped by a high-value man" – to see how notions of masculinity and toxicity became so entwined. Disentangling the two and finding a way to speak about masculinity that encompasses the good, the bad and all the grey in between is what has thought-leaders, commentators, parents and politicians searching for the right words.

There's a bright corner of the internet, far away from the dark and ragey manosphere, where young men post videos about respecting women, periods, sober consent and female pleasure. The TikTok account @SexEdForGuys was initially part of a research project unpicking privilege at elite all-male institutions and is run by students at a liberal arts school in Maine, US.

The result – playful and unproblematic skits that have racked up seven million likes – is being hailed as a healthy counter to the "alpha" males and incels filling boys' feeds, and a shining example of "positive masculinity". Could it be the antidote to toxic masculinity we need?

For Harkin, while the work itself is constructive, labels and buzzwords are not. "One-line solutions like toxic masculinity and positive masculinity might make it easy to get a beat in media, but they lack nuance," he explains. "Also, I think there are a lot of well-meaning adults who are buried in the research telling teenage guys what a 'positive man' looks like and how he should behave. But at times it's one-dimensional and doesn't take into consideration [the full gamut of] traits they might be feeling."

He's wary that this kind of framing could alienate boys from their own identity. "I grew up in a house where my mum, for various reasons I've since discovered, didn't trust masculinity," Harkin shares. "So I grew up feeling that it was a bad thing and I should suppress my power and all of those qualities... It took me until my twenties and a lot of self-development work to realise I'd disowned my masculinity. And you do need to own it because there's value in it, and it doesn't need to be practised in unhealthy ways. It's about being sure of yourself and taking initiative and having your full voice and your full roar. And if I had daughters, I'd be saying the same thing: to have a big voice. Don't hold that back. You don't need to be stuck on 'gentle in life' in order to be a healthy man."

Another school of thought argues that positive masculinity (or, really, slapping any adjective in front of masculinity) implies there's a *right* way to be a man. As Ruth Whippman, author of *BoyMom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity*, opined in *The New York Times*: "Positive masculinity still draws on all the old trappings and anxieties of traditional manliness, the same belief that there is such a thing as a 'real man' and the same fears of falling short ... Attempts to expand the definition of what can be considered masculine end up reinforcing the idea that masculinity itself is sacrosanct, so fundamental to male worth that boys must never abandon it altogether. But it is the pressures of masculinity – the constant insistence that there is such a thing as a 'real man' and the cold dread of falling short – that is at the root of many of boys' problems in the first place, making them more insecure and anxious, emotionally repressed and socially isolated."

A more progressive way to define masculinity would be as a spectrum of behaviours. Qualities that are typically deemed masculine in Western society include stoicism, assertiveness and risk-taking; feminine behaviours are more nurturing and empathetic. "Everyone has both masculine and feminine traits, and we need access to all of them for a well-rounded life," says Harkin. "At Tomorrow Man, we think of it as yin and yang."

Perhaps removing gender from the conversation is the way forward. A debranding and decentring of masculinity; a renewed focus on how to simply be a good human.

"For thousands of years, we've talked about virtues as essential for being a good human and living a good life, but we've kind of lost sight of that," says youth advocate and nominee for the 2025 NSW Australian of the Year Daniel Principe, who's spoken to more than 70,000 school students around the country. "In society today, we value wealth, status and power and being this kind of self-made man ... We need to come back to virtues of love, wisdom, courage, justice and respect ... I say to boys, it's not about what hobbies you like and what alcohol you want to drink, it's actually about your character. And do you use that for the service of others?"

Education is a pivotal piece of this puzzle and, thanks to the *Adolescence*-shaped uproar, the UK is reportedly introducing anti-misogyny classes to its school curriculum. Says Harkin, "I think at least a third of education [in Australia] should be spent on psychosocial skills, on how to access your emotional range, how to empathise, handle rejection and deal with loss without inflicting it on other people."

He has a mix of hope and trepidation for what comes next. The masculinity crisis "is similar to climate change – we've got all of the knowledge and technology, but we're not mobilising it fast enough. I've said for a long time that the non-profit sector, together with a lot of the people who really care about raising great men, are shit marketers and aren't great at utilising tech. Whereas the marketers who are marketing toxic masculinity? They're brilliant at it. So that's the thing that I fear."

Maybe it's on all of us to become the marketers, to reshape the narrative, to sketch a fuller picture of what it means to be a man – or just a better human.

There's a paradox in all of this. While women throughout history have fought for their safety and freedoms – and still today bear the brunt of inequality, burdened by gendered violence, the pay gap, underrepresentation in leadership, education barriers, health inequities and relentless beauty standards – men's groups (and men's interest publications equivalent to this one) have rarely gotten behind the cause in a bold and meaningful way. Yet now, as men face new and significant struggles, women are showing up and searching for solutions.

"In society today, we value wealth, status and power and being this kind of self-made man."

– youth advocate Daniel Principe

Harkin even shares that at Tomorrow Man's sister organisation Tomorrow Woman, "the women will always ask about what the guys are doing in their workshops. We live in a patriarchy, and the female experience is intricately entwined with the male experience. Whereas the guys never ask what's going on for the girls because one, they don't have the impulse, and two, they don't need to care because they don't need to be afraid of them." Tomorrow Man now runs workshops called In Her Shoes to cultivate male empathy.

None of this is to say that women shouldn't be committed to tackling the masculinity crisis. Progress calls for a collective, concerted effort, and a mutual understanding that this isn't a zero-sum game. Women's gains aren't a threat to men, and vice versa.

I ask my sister how she plans to talk to her boys about masculinity as they grow up (though I resolve that next time, I'll ask my brother-in-law – my nephew's dad – as well). "I think the way to deal with it is to keep talking, and to keep enforcing that you don't have to fit into societal expectations if they don't match who you are. It should be simple: if we just let everyone be who they are and understood that there are multiple ways to be a bloke, multiple ways to be a woman, and multiple ways to be everything in between, this wouldn't be an issue," she says. "But I also want my sons to know that boys and men have a huge amount of privilege. It's not their fault that they've got this privilege, but it's important they're aware of it." **mc**

Getty Images. *Figure from Australian Femicide Watch.