

MDN Views on Masculinity

At a time when there is a growing number of men who are feeling lost, angry, or just unsure of where they fit, The Men's Development Network want to present a different way of talking and thinking about masculinity.

It is evident that there is a sense of urgency when it comes to conversations about masculinity today. Across the globe, we are facing wide-scale upheaval which has created uncertainty in many areas of life including around gender. In this current transition between outdated stereotypes, ingrained ideals and a rapidly changing societal context, promoting alternative forms of masculinity is vital.

Masculinity has traditionally been constructed around the idea that men demonstrate social power through the accumulation of masculine capital which includes traits such as: strength, stoicism, rationality, control, and self-sufficiency (Connell 2020).

Masculinity is not a single, fixed identity; rather, it can vary among countries and be influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors. Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge that there are multiple masculinities rather than just one overarching ideal. However, while this may be the case, there is a prevailing notion of what it means to be a man/male in society more generally.

Even though ideas about masculinity vary across societies, certain themes tend to recur which reinforce the general depiction of what masculinity is on a broader scale. These themes are generally understood through male dominance over women, the expectation of men as breadwinners, and the image of men as competitive and being risk-takers.

In Ireland, masculinity has been shaped by historical, cultural, and religious influences which have traditionally reinforced gendered divisions in both public and private life. The masculine ideal in Ireland was historically tied to physical labour and endurance, particularly within an agrarian economy where men's primary role was to provide for their families. This is also evident in the image of the 'hard man' which was (and still is to some extent) central to working-class masculinity where greater value is placed on demonstrating resilience, toughness, and emotional restraint within the family unit rather than on emotional openness or relational engagement.

This depiction of masculinity was further reinforced by the Catholic Church who, through different forms of indoctrination and social teaching, essentially cemented men's role as

providers which arguably limited their ability and opportunities to be emotionally expressive. This ideology was woven into the very fabric of Irish society through sermons, education, and state policies reinforcing a patriarchal structure that not only confined men to the role of breadwinners but also deprived them of the space to engage in emotional and relational roles without fear of undermining their masculinity.

In this way, the Church's influence did not just shape individual identities, but it constructed an entire national narrative which constrained men from exploring alternative identities rooted in empathy, connection, and emotional openness. Drinking culture has also played a role in shaping Irish masculinity, with alcohol historically used as a social and emotional coping mechanism for men who were discouraged from openly expressing emotions. Heavy drinking has often been framed as a marker of masculine strength by reinforcing the expectation that men should suppress emotional needs rather than seek support.

However, contemporary research suggests that gender roles in Ireland are becoming more fluid. In this regard, there is evidence to suggest that there are ongoing tensions between traditional expectations and modern shifts, as men navigate identities that range from the stoic provider to a more engaged and emotionally expressive individual in today's evolving landscape of masculinity.

Engaging with these evolving concepts of masculinity is not just an academic exercise; it is an opportunity to reveal the lived experiences behind them. Beyond the theories and labels are real people navigating complex, often contradictory expectations of gender.

Feminist movements have long challenged rigid roles and opened space for a more equal and inclusive society. As more women gain economic and political independence through participation in the workforce, traditional gender roles are being redefined. This has shifted expectations of men and boys, prompting many to reconsider what masculinity looks like in a world where dominance and control are no longer the only currencies associated with manhood. Assumptions around gender roles are changing and there is a need to redefine the expectations that society has of men and boys in a way that centres their capabilities.

This uncertainty is also mirrored in the broader society, where there is significant social, economic, environmental, and political turbulence, both locally and globally.

More to this point, while some studies suggest that young men in Ireland struggle to define what masculinity means to them, others have found that it is often constructed through

markers such as heterosexuality, physical appearance, sport, drinking, emotional restraint, and breadwinning. These ideas reflect dominant norms, but there are also signs of change. This is reflected in the number of men who are embracing more individualised and fluid understandings of masculinity, especially as they grow older. This suggests that masculine identities are not fixed but can shift across a lifetime which points to the possibility of more open, authentic ways of being for men today.

This shift in conversations around masculinity is becoming increasingly relevant. At The Men's Development Network, we recognise that true progress in this area depends on including, and actively inviting, men into these conversations. From our perspective, this ensures that we are not just dismantling and reframing old concepts, but we are working towards co-creating more inclusive understandings of how men can be their most authentic selves and move away from what society expects from them.

In our work, we support men in reframing traditional understandings and expectations that come from the ways they were raised to allow a more creative interpretation. Being strong can be related to physical strength, sure, but it can also show in how much compassion we have for others, how we stand up against injustice, how we rely on community or simply acknowledging that it is ok to ask for help. At the core of our work is the belief that our role is not to tell men who they should or should not be, but to create a space where they feel safe enough to explore their own understanding of what being a good person means to them.

These deep-rooted influences on masculine identity have too often boxed men into rigid roles.

This stems from the way masculinity is often built on unrealistic ideals of what it means to be a 'real man'. As a result, a hierarchy emerges in which certain forms of masculinity—such as those associated with gay men, working-class men, men who appear more feminine, or men of colour—are pushed to the margins and seen as less valid. This is because masculinity is built on highly implausible ideas of what true "manhood" is.

The idea of expanding the way we understand masculinity and moving from a strict definition to a variety of possibilities can have a liberating effect on individuals. Many of us grew up with very rigid understandings of what it means to be a man and often this has a negative effect on us, as well as on the people around us. Such a strict definition gives us little space to explore who we truly are and allow ourselves to be.

Conversations where men reflect on how masculinity impacts and restricts them can be powerful in helping to show how the pressure to ‘be a man’ can take a toll on their wellbeing. We need more of these open, honest discussions to challenge the ways gendered expectations shape power and can lead to harmful outcomes for others in less privileged positions. Through this exploration, the groups of men we work with at The Men’s Development Network can have very open-hearted conversations and have a more empathetic understanding of other’s struggles.

In this alternative form we as an organisation are strongly advocating for, allyship becomes a natural extension of being a decent person. It is not about men stepping in to speak for others but about standing beside them to use whatever power or privilege they hold to amplify marginalised voices. True allyship is rooted in speaking, seeking and enacting truth in line with your connection with others. So, in expressing forms of alternative masculinity, we must challenge men and boys to step up and act as participants in a collective movement toward dignity, equity, and justice for all. This includes standing in solidarity with women, queer and trans communities, and anyone whose identity or expression challenges dominant norms.

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