

A timely title in the Big Idea series that reveals the exceptional power and intrinsic vulnerability of manhood

# Is Masculinity Toxic?

*A Primer for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Andrew Smiler

150 illustrations

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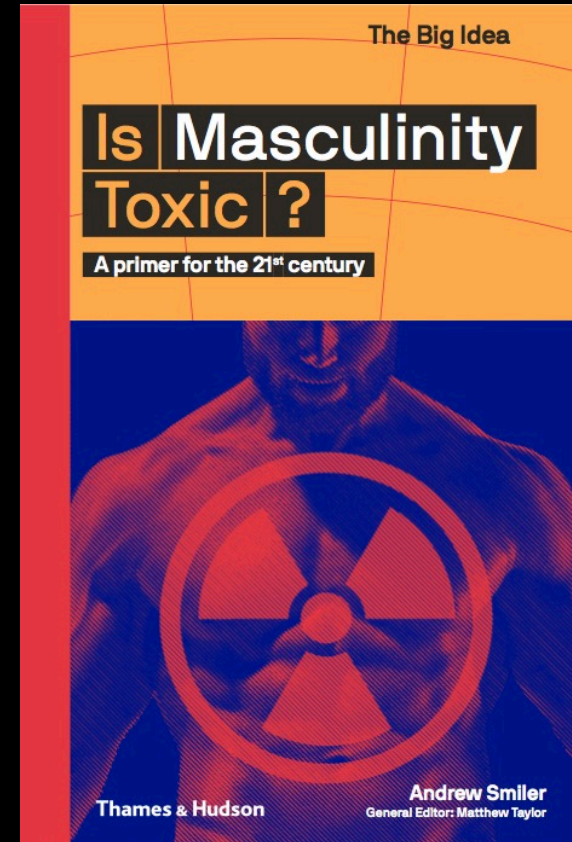
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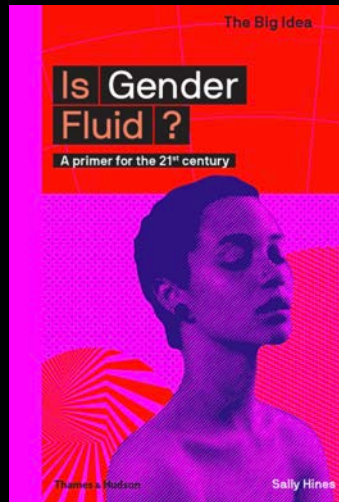
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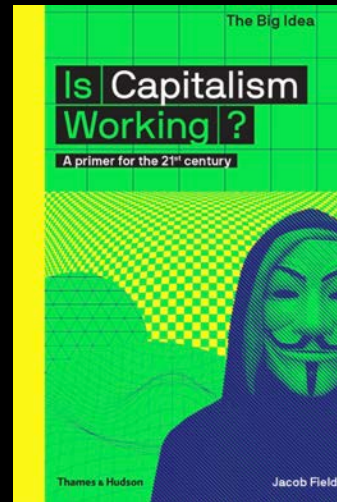
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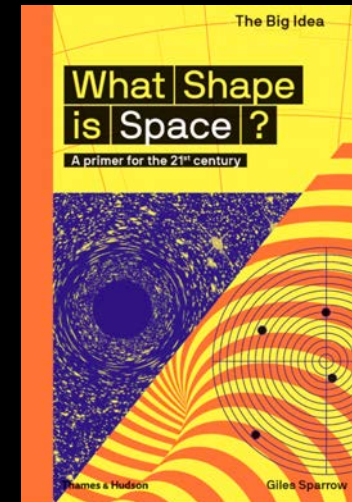
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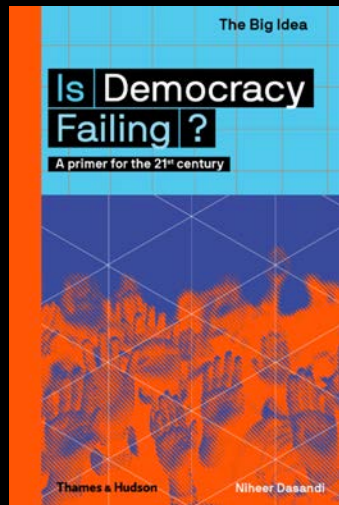
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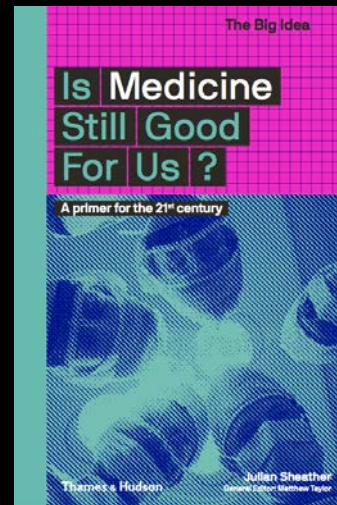
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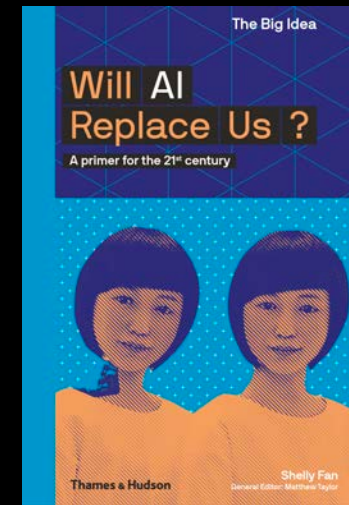
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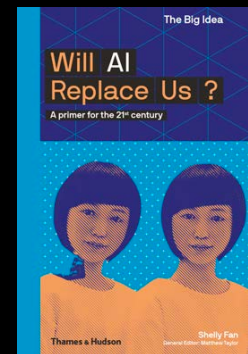
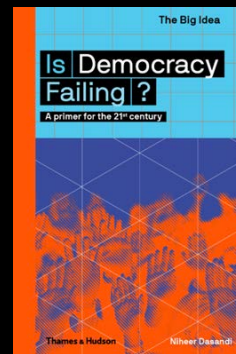
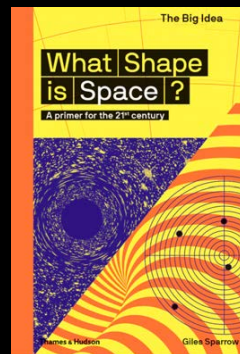
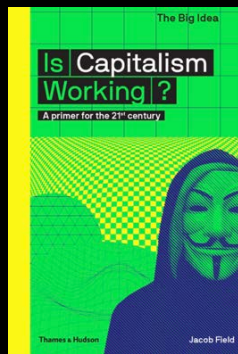
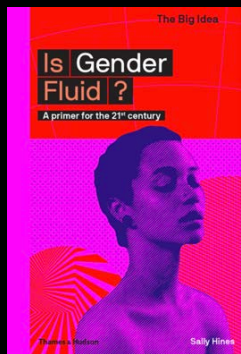


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## Praise for *The Big Idea* series

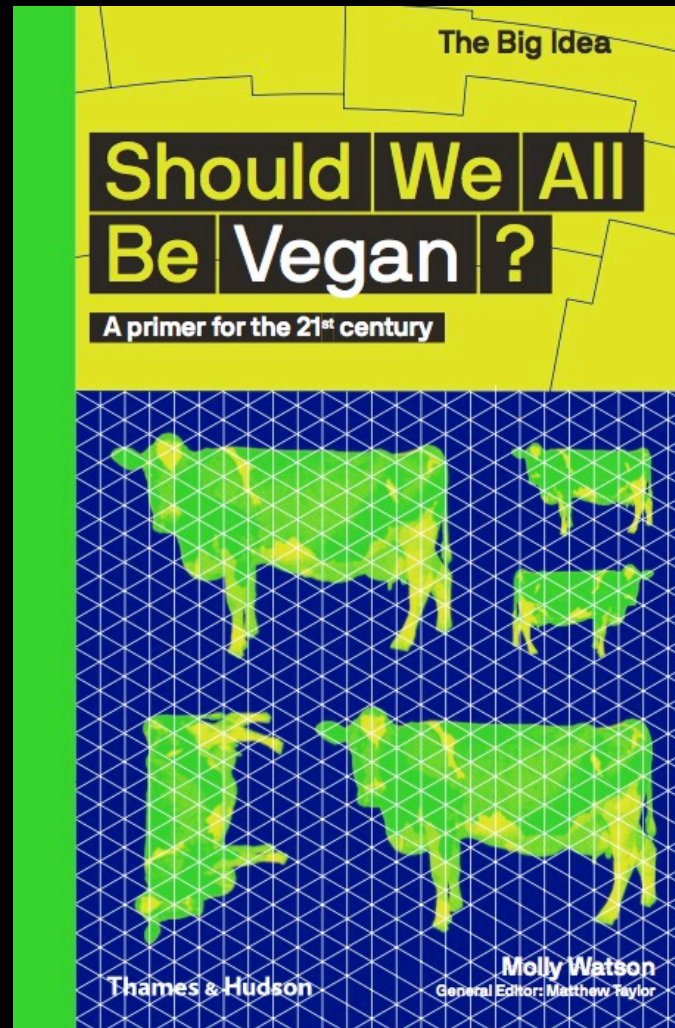
‘A kind of choose-your-own-adventure using fonts: paragraphs are set in type of differing sizes depending on their importance’

### *The Bookseller*





Also coming out Autumn 2019



978 0 500 295038

## Key Sales Points

- A topic of hot debate that comes in the wake of the #MeToo movement and the upsurge in both feminist and men's rights activism
- Lucid, articulate discussion sets out the societal and individual impact of our beliefs about how to be male, weighing modern masculinity's capacity for good against its potential for destruction
- Interrogates the myths surrounding modern manhood, asking whether – and how – we need to change our attitudes to masculinity in the 21st century
- One of two new books in the Big Idea series this autumn, the other being *Should We All Be Vegan?* (ISBN 978 0 500 295038)

Within this framework of separate spheres and morality-based concerns about honour, cross-gender friendships were allowed during childhood but were viewed suspiciously and generally discouraged after puberty. Among the upper and middle classes, girls and young women needed to be chaperoned to ensure proper behaviour in order to prevent any questions about their 'purity' and thus their suitability for marriage to a man of equal or higher status. Insults and other challenges to the purity of a man's daughters, sisters or wife represented a substantial challenge to his honour.

Passions were also an important component of masculinity during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Activities as diverse as animal husbandry, hunting and writing poetry were common examples. As the term suggests, men were allowed to feel greatly and deeply about these activities, and were expected to express their hopes and pleasures, as well as their challenges and disappointments. The depth and breadth of men's passions and emotional expression are illustrated by Romantic-era poets such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), John Keats (1795–1821) and Lord Byron (1788–1824).



Although men's pride and joy, or disappointment and regret, could be shared with a fair amount of freedom, compared to modern standards, such emotional displays were not tolerated when it came to the worlds of business or politics.

**Passions** Men's preferred or favoured activities, which they pursue wholeheartedly while openly speaking of the feelings generated by these activities.

Men's passionate displays extended to their friendships with other men. Sharing one's hopes and fears with a best male friend was common and expected, and men of this era did not hesitate to tell each other that they loved them. Similarly, they were conscious of and responsive to the quality of their friendships; if they thought the calibre of the relationship had diminished or there was a disagreement with their friend, they would attempt to repair the relationship.

- A XLaudi ullam namustis esequo cus quid ma nonetur, ute quiam re volupta cuptaepro omnis sust quamus, eles et veni cone nis expellias solo di valor.
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The focus on juvenile delinquents marked a change in the acceptance of male violence. Although many men had experienced and perpetrated violence in the context of two world wars, the everyday fighting and brawling by middle-class teen boys was something not previously experienced by the dominant culture. As the definition of masculinity shifted and the West absorbed the idea of adolescents experiencing an identity crisis, this type of low-level violence became an accepted part of masculinity.

The adoption of war metaphors in professional sport through the latter half of the 20th century also helped normalize violence as part of masculinity. Cricketers may 'shoulder arms', American football players might 'throw a bomb', any sports player might 'battle' through an injury and teams might survive a 'war of attrition'.

Efforts to get men to renounce the use of violence and minimize or eliminate their desire for power grew out of concerns about juvenile delinquents and was furthered by awareness of non-violent movements in India (Gandhi), South Africa (Mandela)

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and the US South (King). Concerns about civilian casualties of war became increasingly common in the second half of the century due to the Biafran War (1967–70) and its mass starvation and the Vietnam War (1955–75), particularly due to events such as the My Lai Massacre in 1968. Feminist critiques of men's power also contributed, and a new version of masculinity was born: the sensitive new age guy.

**Identity crisis** As developed and defined by Erik Erikson in the 1960s, an expected and naturally occurring aspect of human development during the teen years, in which the individual must create a coherent sense of self that includes a set of values. The creation of this sense of self often includes challenging parental and societal values.

Masculine dominance, men's treatment of women and the notion of separate spheres were challenged again by the 1970s era feminist movement.





Throughout the West, women gained greater access to higher education, and thus professional employment, as well as workplace protections against harassment. In a direct challenge to the separate spheres doctrine, some feminists suggested that masculinity and femininity be treated as separate collections of traits that any individual might possess.

**Promiscuous sexuality**  
 An approach to sexual activity that emphasizes having multiple short-term partners per year without establishing ongoing romantic relationships.

Mainstream definitions of masculinity began to include **promiscuous sexuality** in the 1970s, perhaps in reaction to women's gains and the rise of the sensitive new age guy. Prior to this decade, fear that men from undesirable groups might rape people had long been used as a rhetorical device to stoke fear and shape attitudes that allowed

the repression of these groups. For example, US slavers and their proponents often claimed that black men needed to be enslaved and have their freedoms curtailed because they would try to rape white women, a trope that persists even today. Similar fears have been fuelled about some Asian groups, gay men and Latinos.

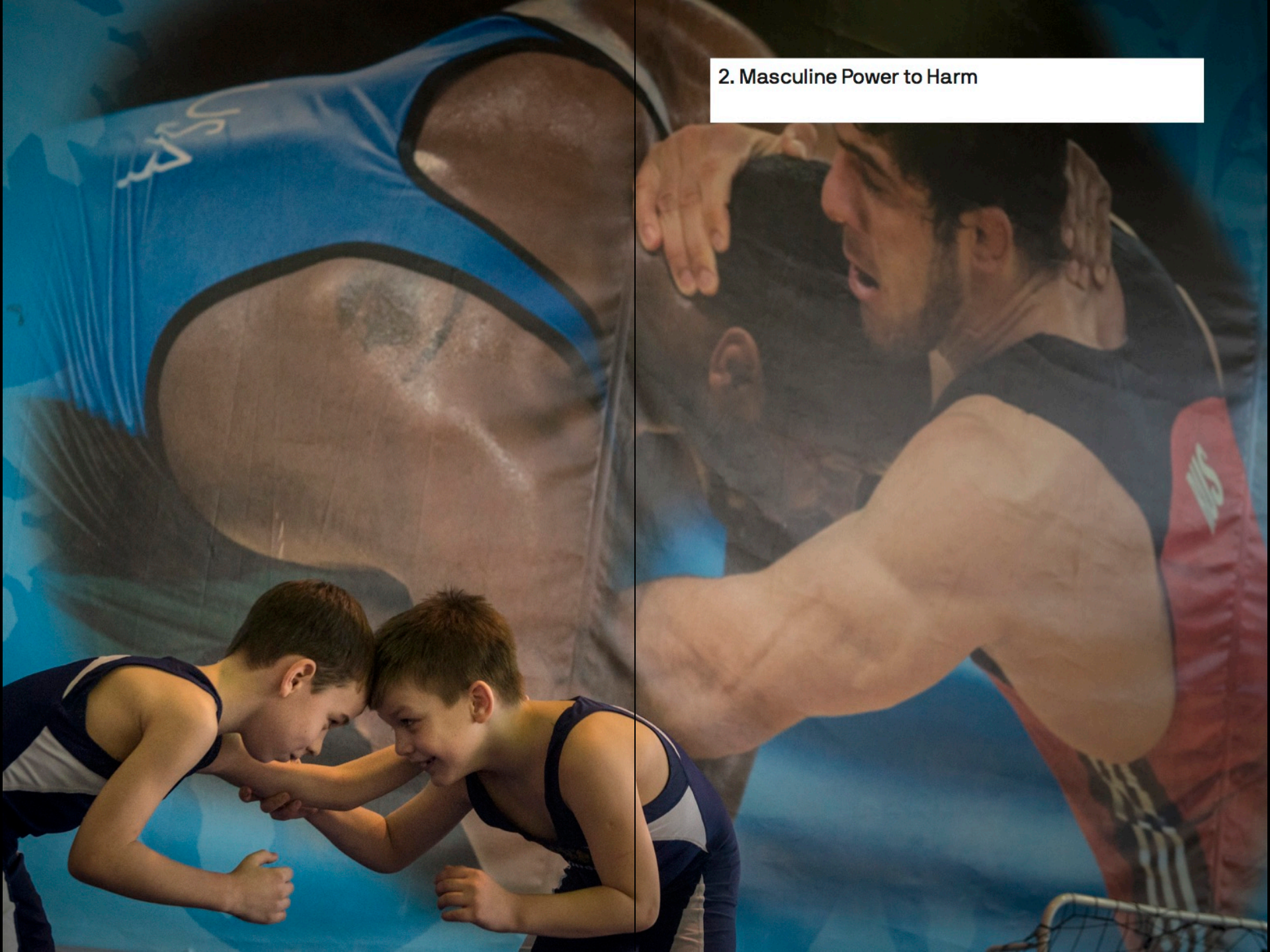
For middle- and upper-class white men, concerns about honour violations and maintaining one's own reputation – or at least one's partner's reputation – had previously cast male promiscuity as a distasteful aspect of some men's character. Prior to the 1970s, promiscuous male television and movie characters were often unsavoury and untrustworthy; Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind* (1939) may be the most iconic portrayal of this personality type. Gossip magazines were scandalized by the antics of 'womanizers' such as Rock Hudson and Frank Sinatra. However, promiscuous characters such as James Bond (1961–present), Fonzie (from *Happy Days*, 1974–84), and Hawkeye Pierce (from *M\*A\*S\*H*, 1972–83) were decent and well-intentioned, and helped usher in a new more acceptable version of male promiscuity.

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2. Masculine Power to Harm







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**Heterosexism** A set of behaviours, values and attitudes that reflect a belief in the primacy of those whose romantic and sexual behaviours occur only in male-female pairings (ie heterosexual) over other types of pairings (eg homosexual, bisexual).

Power has been central to definitions of masculinity for centuries, and this has facilitated sexism, racism and heterosexism. Directives to obtain status and be ambitious make this focus on power explicit, while encouragement to be decisive, take risks and act – as opposed to think or feel – all support the acquisition of power.

The tolerance for violence that is included in the adventurousness and aggressiveness directive provides a particularly dangerous method for achieving status.



At the sociological level, male power in Western nations has been centralized in and dominated by men who are white, relatively well-educated, Christian, from the upper classes and heterosexual. In this chapter, we examine ways in which the currently dominant Western definition of masculinity contributes to men's harm of themselves, other men and women.

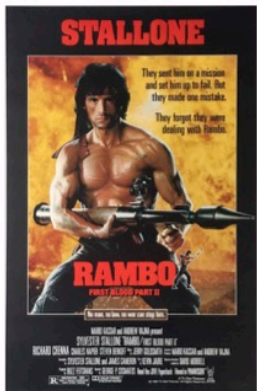
Globally, men die younger than women and the magnitude of this discrepancy varies from one country to the next. In Iceland, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the Republic of Macedonia, men live 'only' four years fewer than women, which places these countries among those with the smallest differentials. By contrast, men die approximately ten years younger than women in Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, thus positioning these countries among those with the largest discrepancies.



Being a soldier, especially during war, is a leading cause of male mortality. Being born male has typically been among the first determinants of whether or not an individual is eligible to serve in a nation's military, in combination with age and fitness. This reflects a decision made by political and military leaders. In the past few decades, some nations have opened military positions, including combat or front line service, to all citizens who are of age and sufficiently fit, without regard to gender.

There are several reasons related to power that mean men's lives are shorter than those of women. For example, men kill men at notably higher rates via homicide and war; what could be a clearer indication of power than killing? For both causes, the vast majority of victims – and killers – are younger men, age between 15 and 39. In the USA, for example, 75 to 80% of homicide victims each year are men.

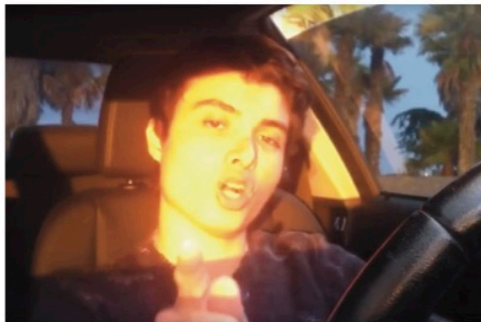
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Men who commit assault, rape and murder typically report high levels of adherence to the power aspects of masculinity and often do so in a rigid fashion that disallows or disavows other versions of masculinity and resists changes to the definition of masculinity. Their willingness to be violent may be a way to avoid being dominated by another man (as women are), also signified by sexist comments and behaviours. In addition, violence provides a method of gaining status or respect, by literally beating one's opponents and thus moving up the dominance hierarchy and potentially proving oneself to be the alpha male. Overpowering a partner to convince, or intimidate, them to have sex can also provide status because the man can then claim another sexual conquest and burnish his credential as promiscuous.



Some men say we should stop trying to change men because men are naturally oriented towards power, and the outcomes described in this chapter are inevitable consequences of that inclination. Many of these men identify themselves as **men's rights activists (MRAs)**. Their version of masculinity emphasizes men's dominance over women, disparages gay men and prizes power. They are easy to find online but do not have a meaningful presence among academics or organized activists. Online, they often threaten real-world violence and swarm individuals they object to. Their actions have caused journalist Jessica Valenti (for her writing) and actor Leslie Jones (for starring in the *Ghostbusters* remake) to leave social media platforms. As MRA author Christa Hodapp explained in 2017, their decision to engage in online trolling is an unusual political strategy but the only available option because they cannot engage with the dominant gynocentric culture.



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**Men's rights advocates (MRAs)** Individuals who advocate for a version of masculinity characterized by misogyny, heterosexism and the use of violence in support of those principles.

**Gynocentric culture** The idea that a culture is dominated by a focus on women and women's issues.

**Incels** Short for 'involuntary celibate'. The term is adopted by men who have been repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to have sex with women despite their own belief that they are sufficiently attractive and doing all the right things.



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Within the MRA universe, some men self-identify as 'involuntary celibates' or 'incels'. They emphasize male dominance over women and downplay notions of equality, with some arguing that women should be excluded from the workplace to ensure their financial dependence on men. These men buy into the stereotype of men as promiscuous, hold sexist beliefs and often believe that it is women's duty to fulfil men's sexual desires. Online, chat rooms and messages boards frequented by incels often demonstrate extreme disrespect for and degradation of women, including encouragement for men to be violent towards women who refuse men's sexual advances. US mass shooter Elliot Rodger (2014) and Canadian van attack killer Alek Minassian (2018) both posted in incel chat rooms.

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Masculinity can also adversely affect men's relationships with their children. Indeed, there is a 'new' generation of fathers, born after approximately 1980, who explicitly talk about being emotionally present for their children in ways their fathers never were. Perhaps the most striking change is their desire to be involved in their children's emotional lives, which is a step beyond simply attending sporting, artistic and educational events. The shift away from female-only baby showers is one part of this change.

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Many men report that they lack – or feel as though they lack – the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to be more deeply emotionally connected to a child, even though they want to be more emotionally involved. The media is again an important influence; soon-to-be fathers who watch programmes that feature ineffective fathers, such as Homer Simpson, Ray Barone (*Everybody Loves Raymond*) and Frank Gallagher (*Shameless*), tend to describe fathers as relatively unimportant in their child's development. But the research also tells us that not all is lost; parenting provides extensive opportunities for on-the-job training and most parents raise children who are relatively well-adjusted.

So which men tend to be more involved? Men who remember their own fathers as highly involved, men who describe their own fathers as not particularly involved and want to do better, and those who report good experience providing child care for siblings when they were boys all tend to provide more emotionally attentive parenting.



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