
November 2023



Roundtable into

Men & Masculinities

Summary Report

Background

On 14 November 2023, the Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence Commission (the Commission) and No To Violence (NTV) convened a roundtable on the topic of Men and Masculinities.

The roundtable was attended by 45 people from six states and territories, including representatives from government, service sector organisations, not-for-profit agencies and lived experience advocates.

This summary report is an overview of the conversation at the roundtable, intended to provide insights for general use. Many issues were discussed, the following themes are a distillation of topics on which most participants shared a view that further action is required, at both a macro- and micro-level.

Key Themes

A number of key themes emerged across the day:

- Many men are alienated by the idea of toxic masculinity in the absence of a positive model for healthy or positive ways of being.
- The systems themselves are traumatising for many who experience them, regardless of their entry point.
- There is a lack of clarity relating to men's experience as both perpetrators and victims of violence, not only by the community but also by the service and justice systems.
- There must be more sustained and sustainable funding and better evaluation of early intervention programs and initiatives.
- There is growing concern about misogyny online, including misogynist influencers and violence pornography.

Many men are alienated by the idea of toxic masculinity in the absence of a positive model for healthy or positive ways of being

Participants highlighted the ways in which men's role in society has been evolving, which has left some men confused about their role and identity, and the demands made on them by society.

There is growing concern that the conversation about gender-based violence is not engaging men in a meaningful way, and that this lack of engagement may create greater risks of perpetration of violence and back lash. Participants noted that we need to work with men differently, encouraging frank conversations including spaces which allow men to be vulnerable.

The Roundtable also considered the positive role to be played by communities in both establishing positive role models and providing ongoing mentoring to boys and young men.

The systems are traumatising for many who experience them, regardless of their entry point

Systems change was a strong focus of discussion. Many participants – particularly those with lived experience – noted that the systems as they currently exist are sometimes contributing to trauma and are not meeting the needs of many who are participating in them.

Attendees shared significant feedback on the notion of healing and recovery, and the limitations of traditional forms of justice for both people who have experienced violence and those who use violence. Participants were concerned about what could be done to overcome the highly individualised focus of the justice system and involve communities in a more meaningful way in restorative justice approaches.

There is a lack of clarity relating to men's experience as both perpetrators and victims of violence, not only by the community but also by the service and justice systems

Participants noted that many who perpetrate violence had themselves experienced violence in their past or in their families, and that multiple points existed for intervention prior to a crisis response. A more nuanced or complex conversation should not perpetuate power imbalances between people who use violence and those who they perpetrate violence against, but it must find ways to engage with people who are a risk of using violence at the earliest possible stage. Many participants reflected on the diverse pathways to perpetration for men, noting that many men had at one point been adamant they would never be perpetrators, having experienced violence themselves at a younger age.

Several participants noted that shame is not an effective motivator for behavioural change. Sometimes a perpetrator's first act of disrespect is towards themselves, with some men using violence against others to feel empowered. We need to take a more nuanced approach to the factors which might contribute to this lack of empowerment, including analysing the ways in which some men may experience society in different ways.

Participants identified systemic racism, the impact of colonisation and discrimination as key elements in men's experience which – while not informing men's use of violence – impact on their experience of the world and relationships with others.

There must be more sustained and sustainable funding and better evaluation of early intervention programs and initiatives

The short and limited funding available for early intervention and programs which specifically target men have left some who work with men feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. One participant asked, *“If we can't increase the resources so desperately needed, are we complicit in this failure [to reduce men's violence against women]?”*

Participants noted the dearth of evidence relating to early intervention, and the limited way in which data is currently collected and analysed. Several noted that not enough emphasis has been placed on learning. Some participants argued that evidence and evaluation could be improved through more inclusive practice, which prioritises not only data and research, but also ways of knowing and cultural knowledge.

Several participants noted the need to ensure that there is stronger recognition of the ways in which national conversations and universal interventions are failing to reach specific communities. As one attendee stated, *“Some of these things are very white, very Western. We need to learn from more than just western experiences. We need an inclusive conversation that recognises diversity of experience.”*

There is growing concern about misogyny in the online environment

Some participants identified a need for the service sector from all four domains of the National Plan to be better acquainted with online communities and platforms, and the ways in which they might

be used for perpetration or perpetuation of misinformation and violence. There was concern about the influence of online communities exercised in the absence of positive models of masculinity.

Several participants noted the move in communities of interest to online spaces, away from the traditional connections of place and shared interest. There was acknowledgement that communities of shared passion were beneficial in some ways, but that some sub-cultures were perpetuating harmful stereotypes online, with limited opportunities for intervention. While this phenomenon is not new, the speed with which online communities are developing and becoming normalised is beyond the capacity of the sector to respond in an organised way. Many agencies do not allow workers to participate in forums in which harmful messages are proliferating, leading to a lack of knowledge on behalf of staff.

While there are risks of the negative influence on gender role models and relationships developed in online environments, there are also opportunities to engage using online mechanisms, which can connect all genders in both specialist and community spaces with each other to communicate positive messages, model safe and positive behaviours and share learning.

What's next?

The key themes explored in the Roundtable will inform the substantive work of the Commission in the next 12 months. Themes emerging from the Roundtable contributed to the development of the Commission's Interim Statement to Parliament.

Participants were keen for the Commission to provide an opportunity for a national conversation on the issue of technology and the ways in which the DFV and SV sectors might engage with it. In particular, there was an eagerness to ensure that the sector was provided with ways to upskill frontline workers on the use of technology, and the ways in which alternative models of masculinity might be promoted using technology. The Commission is engaging with the E Safety Commissioner and others in the work.

We are grateful to all those who took time to consider these issues thoughtfully and constructively, bringing their considerable wisdom and lived experience to the conversation.

Further Reading

The following papers were provided to roundtable participants for further reading:

- Chung, D., Upton-Davis, K., Cordier, R., Campbell, E., Wong, T., Salter, M., Bissett, T. (2020). Improved accountability: The role of perpetrator intervention systems (Research report, 20/2020). Sydney: ANROWS, available at: www.anrows.org.au
- Day, A., Vlasis, R., Chung, D., & Green, D. J. (2019). Evaluation readiness, program quality and outcomes in men's behaviour change programs (Research report, 01/2019). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS, available at: www.anrows.org.au
- Sarah McCook (2022) 'So, What is a Good Masculinity?': Navigating Normativity in Violence Prevention with Men and Boys, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 37:111,37-53, DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2022.2095612, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2022.2095612>

- Andrea Waling (2019) Problematizing ‘Toxic’ and ‘Healthy’ Masculinity for Addressing Gender Inequalities, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 34:101, 362-375, DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2019.1679021, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1679021>