

More than Toxic: Masculinity, Inequality and Social Change

Introduction: Slide Two

Good morning, all. The blurb for this talk said aggressive masculinity is on the rise. But is it on the rise? And if so, among whom is it claimed to be on the rise? And what even is aggressive masculinity?

Today I will explore some of these questions, drawing on my knowledge as a scholar of masculinities and research I conducted in the South Wales Valleys that explored the lives and identities of a group of marginalised young men.

I will begin with the crisis of masculinity, the manosphere and toxic masculinity before turning to findings from my research and concluding with some broader reflections.

The take-home message is that while harmful expressions of masculinity exist, they cannot be understood in isolation from wider social and economic contexts. Equally, we should not overlook the positive and progressive forms of masculinity that can emerge even among groups frequently portrayed as regressive.

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Recent media discourse has seen a renewed emphasis on the idea of a crisis of masculinity. This idea centres on the notion that men no longer know how to be men and are uncertain about their masculine identity. The argument is often linked to broader social and economic change, including the decline of manual employment, the growth of service-sector work commonly associated with feminine traits, and changes in the gender

division of labour. Although this argument is not new and has emerged repeatedly during periods of rapid social transformation, and has also drawn considerable critique, advocates suggest that a void has been created and many men have lost their sense of purpose in life. This argument has also been linked to gender equality and women's pursuit of parity, contributing to a backlash against feminism among some men.

Within this renewed discussion of a crisis of masculinity and backlash against feminism, we have seen the emergence of the manosphere, a network of online communities that often promote anti-feminist and misogynistic views. Perhaps the person who best embodies the manosphere is Andrew Tate, who promotes a form of masculinity centred on power, dominance, and wealth, while also expressing views that degrade women. The media has often labelled him the "King of Toxic Masculinity". But what is toxic masculinity? For some, toxic masculinity has become a catch-all term for masculinity itself. Others dislike the term, arguing that it alienates men and boys.

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Among gender scholars such as myself, rather than seeing masculinity as a product of biology, we understand it as something that is socially constructed through key institutional influences such as the media, family, schools, peers, and sporting environments. Within these settings, traditional ideas of manhood and masculinity have often promoted the view that men should be tough, stoic, unemotional, self-reliant, and independent. I would argue that these traits are not inherently toxic. Take a firefighter, for example. They may draw on stoicism to enter a dangerous building to preserve life. The problem arises when these traits are taken to an extreme and prevent

men from seeking help, expressing vulnerability, or caring for themselves and others. This, I would argue, is what toxic masculinity is.

Given that traditional ideas of masculinity are associated with independence and self-reliance, complications can arise when men are unable to attain these factors. This is particularly pertinent in the current economic climate, where the transition to independence has become increasingly prolonged. Many young people find it difficult to buy a home and spend longer living with their parents, while others are unemployed and therefore unable to attain key markers traditionally associated with masculinity, such as independence and economic provision. In this environment, figures like Tate and far-right movements thrive. They exploit these frustrations, offering simple answers to complex problems and blaming particular groups for men's perceived struggles and failures to achieve the wealth and independence that society has traditionally associated with masculinity.

Those who are most vulnerable to the current social and economic climate, where well-paid and secure employment is increasingly difficult to find, are often those who are socioeconomically marginalised. In the increasingly neoliberal, credentialised era, university-educated individuals can often find themselves in low-paid jobs. As a result, those with lower levels of educational attainment and fewer skills can find themselves at a particular disadvantage. It is these groups who have often become the focus of concerns about toxic masculinity, yet their experiences are frequently shaped by wider structural inequalities and limited opportunities.

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One way that gender scholars have sought to understand the experiences of marginalised young men and masculinity is through the concept of protest masculinity. Protest masculinity denotes a defiant response to social exclusion and limited access to the markers traditionally associated with masculinity. Much like toxic masculinity, this form of masculinity is often associated with homophobia, sexism, violence and crime.

However, while this concept has good intentions and highlights the role that inequality can play in shaping negative expressions of masculinity, it also has drawbacks. In particular, it can inadvertently portray marginalised young men as regressive and suggest that meaningful changes in masculinity are unlikely without wider socioeconomic transformation. In doing so, it risks implying that disadvantaged men have a limited capacity to reshape their gender identities or adopt softer and more progressive expressions of masculinity. This is particularly notable in a context where progressive forms of manhood are increasingly promoted, while more regressive forms of masculinity are often viewed as damaging both to individual life chances and to wider society.

It was within this context of social change, growing concerns about toxic masculinity, and an increased emphasis on promoting more positive forms of manhood that I sought to understand the masculine identities of contemporary marginalised young men, while also examining their attitudes towards education and employment. I conducted an ethnographic study, or basically systematic people-watching, with a group of nine young men based at a youth centre in the South Wales Valleys, observing their behaviours, asking them

questions, and considering their experiences through the lens of masculinities.

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So what did I find? Did I find evidence of toxic masculinity? Yes, I did. Some of the young men used homophobic and sexist slurs and were involved in drug use and violence. But that wasn't the whole story. I also found reasons for optimism and evidence of more positive expressions of masculinity.

One of the most notable things I observed was the young men's greeting practices. Rather than greeting each other with a nod of the head or a handshake, they often hugged one another, openly and in front of their peers. This stood in contrast to more traditional ideas of masculinity, which have often involved rejecting anything considered feminine.

Historically, displays of affection between young men have been viewed as feminine and, in some cases, associated with being gay. Yet these young men seemed entirely comfortable expressing affection towards one another. When I asked two of the young men why they engaged in this behaviour, this was the discussion that followed:

Tommy: Best friends.

Me: You hug each other because you're best friends?

Tommy: Yeah, besties for life! Nah, 'cos we're all gay together!

Me: You're all gay?

Stan: I'm a homosexual, you dull cunt!

Tommy: Nah, joking. To say hello, init. We don't do it the old-fashioned way, do we, Stan?

Here we can see that both young men recognise that male hugging and same-sex touch may be perceived as gay

behaviour, but this does not appear to concern them. More importantly, they identify what they see as a generational shift in masculine behaviour, suggesting that they no longer greet one another in the "old-fashioned way". Rather than rejecting physical affection, they appear comfortable expressing it openly in front of their peers, pointing towards changing norms of masculinity among some young men.

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As stated, my research focused on education and employment, so I asked the young men about their views on working alongside women and gay men. This allowed me to explore their attitudes towards gender, sexuality and masculinity, while also considering employment futures beyond traditionally male-dominated occupations.

In contrast to the sexism and homophobia often associated with marginalised young men, some of the participants expressed strikingly egalitarian views and responses that challenged these assumptions.

Dan: *"If girls do plumbing, it shows an example and makes others feel more comfortable doing it. There's nothing bad if you're a girl or a boy. A boy can be a ballerina or a dancer, there's nothing wrong with it. It's what you're into, init. I don't care or think anything of it. It's them, init. As long as it's not bothering anyone, let them do what they want. No difference between a man and a woman is there. If anyone thinks there is, it's just sexist, init."*

This response by Dan challenges the assumption that marginalised young men necessarily hold regressive views towards women and sexual minorities. Instead, they point towards a degree of acceptance, tolerance and gender egalitarianism that is often overlooked in discussions of toxic or protest masculinity. While these young men were not free of contradictions, their views show that positive and progressive

expressions of masculinity can exist alongside regressive expressions of manhood.

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The young men were also shown a picture of a nurse as a way of exploring their views on different forms of employment.

Ian:

"Nurse. Underpaid! Soooo underpaid. They're saving your life, and football players get paid a quarter of a million just for playing football on a football pitch. They're saving your life, and they get paid pennies. It's just horrible! If I had the brains, I would love to do the job. It is something... just helping people."

This response by Ian is notable because it differs from the unemotional and dispassionate characteristics often associated with toxic or more regressive forms of masculinity. Rather than focusing solely on himself, Ian expresses concern for others and recognises the value of care work. The response points towards forms of masculinity characterised by empathy, compassion and sensitivity, qualities often associated with more caring and emotionally expressive forms of masculinity.

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In conclusion, and returning to the broader discussion of the manosphere and toxic expressions of masculinity that can be damaging to both men and women, do we have a societal problem? Yes, I would argue that we do. There are clearly concerns about some men's behaviour. But is this new? Is it evidence of a crisis of masculinity? And can it be detached from the current socioeconomic climate? I would argue not.

This is not to say that men can be exonerated from their actions or that individual agency does not matter. However, we cannot separate behaviours and expressions of masculinity from the

wider socioeconomic conditions in which they emerge, because these conditions play a significant role in shaping them.

In this context, particularly where manfluencers exploit frustration and offer simple answers to complex problems by promoting regressive and toxic forms of masculinity, the most obvious intervention is through macro-level policies and anti-poverty strategies that address the root causes shaping these behaviours. However, while anti-poverty strategies may offer a robust solution, they are also the most politically and economically challenging to implement. Even if achieved, they may not fully disrupt the cultural forces that continue to shape gendered behaviours.

Therefore, we need to pay closer attention to where and why positive expressions of masculinity are emerging, to understand the conditions that enable them, and to place greater emphasis on encouraging and sustaining them. Because if we do not, the frustration and sense of exclusion produced by marginalisation risk creating a vacuum that can be filled by manfluencers and other actors promoting harmful narratives.

If we want to challenge harmful forms of masculinity, we must give as much attention to understanding and fostering positive masculinities as we do to identifying harmful ones.