

# THE MAN BOX



A STUDY  
ON  
BEING  
A YOUNG  
MAN

IN THE  
US, UK,  
AND  
MEXICO



Unilever

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PROMUNDO



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A Study on Being a Young Man  
in the US, UK, and Mexico

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Brian Heilman - Gary Barker - Alexander Harrison

2017



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US, UK, and Mexico

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## About:

Axe commissioned this research to determine the state of manhood in the US, UK, and Mexico – and to figure out the areas in which guys need help the most. Axe is taking the lead in liberating guys from harmful labels and pressures through global and local initiatives. After all, a world of liberated men, free from judgement, is a better place for everyone – both men and women. Axe is doing this because breaking out of the Man Box isn't something that guys can do alone. It's something that involves everyone working together to change society's narrow views about masculinity.

With support from Axe, Promundo led this research in collaboration with partners in the US, UK, and Mexico. Founded in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. Promundo's offices in the United States, Brazil, and Portugal, and its affiliate in Democratic Republic of the Congo, collaborate to achieve this mission by conducting applied research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling-up gender-transformative interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international advocacy to achieve gender equality and social justice.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## What Does It Mean to “Be a Man” in 2017?

**What does it mean to be a young man? How is a man supposed to act? Do these expectations matter for young men’s lives?** In a moment of tremendous social change for members of all genders, these questions may seem outdated. While good progress has been made in freeing people from gender-based judgements around what are acceptable roles and behaviors for men and women, there remains much to do to reach a situation of true equality. A diversity of sexualities and gender identities has entered the mainstream. Women have made inspiring progress toward overcoming centuries of discrimination based on their gender, although much remains to be done. In this new reality, has the investigation of “masculinity,” or what it means to be a man, become irrelevant? We say no. Rather, these social transformations and tensions make this study essential. In order to better understand these dynamics, we – Promundo, Axe, and research partners – gathered a representative, random sample of young men aged 18 to 30 in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Mexico, representing the ethnic and social diversity of each country. Combined with that survey, we convened group discussions of young men in each of the three countries to hear, in these men’s own words, what it means to be a man.

**In order to investigate and answer these and other questions, we constructed a tool that we call the “Man Box.”** The Man Box refers to a set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society, that place pressure on men to be a certain way. These pressures tell men to be self-sufficient, to act tough, to be physically attractive, to stick to rigid gender roles, to be heterosexual, to have sexual prowess, and to use aggression to resolve conflicts. For the purposes of the study, men “in the Man Box” are those who most internalize these messages and pressures. They tell us that “a guy



who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak," or that "a gay guy is not a 'real man'," among other messages. Young men "outside the Man Box" are those who have broken out of the box, who reject these ideas and instead embrace more positive, original ideas and attitudes about what men should believe and how they should behave.

## Life in the Man Box

**Study results show that the Man Box is alive and well in the US, the UK, and Mexico, with severe, real, and troubling effects on young men's and young women's lives.** The study demonstrates these negative effects across the following six arenas of young men's lives:

### Life Satisfaction and Self-Confidence:

**Are men who are in the Man Box happier or sadder? Are they more or less satisfied with their lives? The answer is uncertain.** In Mexico, we see no links between Man Box attitudes and life satisfaction or well-being. In the US and UK, however, young men who agree with society's most rigid rules about how to "be a man" also say that they are "the man." Young men in the Man Box, it seems, experience some reward for meeting these societal expectations, even as later analyses show that this is not the full story of life inside the Man Box.

### Mental Health:

**Young men's mental health is in a worrisome state. Their bravado masks deep insecurities, depression, and frequent thoughts of suicide.** Men in the Man Box in the US and UK are statistically significantly more likely to meet a screening standard for depression than men outside the Man Box. Furthermore, all young men's rates of suicidal ideation are troubling, with particularly high rates among men in the Man Box.

### Friendship and Support-Seeking:

**Young men are more likely to report providing emotional support to others than they are to report being emotionally vulnerable or seeking help themselves.** In line with the Man Box rule that young men be self-sufficient, study participants tend to grapple with emotions with little or no support from others. When they do seek support, it is from women in their lives – almost never from their fathers. We also see that fear of appearing vulnerable or gay still has a powerful influence over young men's behaviors, particularly for men in the Man Box.

### Risky Behaviors:

**The Man Box is also a place of extremely risky behaviors, particularly binge drinking and reckless driving.** Too many young men associate being a "real man" with alcohol abuse and dangerous driving, putting themselves and others at risk when they try to meet this harmful standard.

### Attractiveness:

**Young men's notions of physical attractiveness still link primarily with muscle bulk and body shape, as opposed to a more inward, individual sense of confidence and attractiveness.** Approximately two-thirds of young men in the study told us that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their physical attractiveness. Far fewer men, however, are satisfied with the size of their muscles, and nearly half of all respondents' top choice for what they would change about their appearance is their weight or body shape.

### Bullying and Violence:

**The Man Box is an enormously violent place, with negative repercussions for young men themselves, for young women, and for others in their lives.** Men in the Man Box in the US and UK are as much as six or seven times more likely to report having perpetrated acts of online or physical bullying against male peers than men outside the Man Box. Men in the Man Box in Mexico are also three times more likely than their peers outside the Man Box to report having perpetrated sexual harassment. In the US and UK, men in the Man Box are six times more likely to report perpetrating sexual harassment.

**As these results show, the harms of living in the Man Box certainly outweigh the sense of comfort that some young men derive from aligning with social pressures to be a "real man."** Men who adhere to the rules of the Man Box are more likely to put their health and well-being at risk, to cut themselves off from intimate friendships, to resist seeking help when they need it, to experience depression, and to think frequently about ending their own life. Young men inside the Man Box are more likely to have used violence against other young men – verbally, physically, and online – and to sexually harass women. They are more likely to have experienced violence themselves. They are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as binge drinking, they are two to three times more likely to have been in traffic accidents, and they are less likely to have close relationships and friendships.

## Breaking Out of the Box

**The process of breaking out of the Man Box is neither perfectly linear nor straightforward.** The study reveals some contradictory trends. Young men in the Man Box are more satisfied with their lives, even as they display more symptoms of depression, for instance. Men in the Man Box adhere to the most rigid gender norms, yet some also feel freer to transgress certain norms, such as by crying in front of male friends or spending time on indulgent grooming.

**Does this make sense? We say yes.** These are accurate and logical representations of the dilemmas that young men face in navigating society's contradictory ideals of manhood. Young men reap certain benefits from staying inside the Man Box: it provides them with a sense of belonging, of living up to what is expected of them. Friends and parents may praise

them. However, when those same norms tell men to be aggressive all the time, to repress emotions, and to fight every time someone threatens them, the Man Box demands that they pretend to be someone they are not, and study results show how violent and lonely the resulting life can be.

**Young men need support to break out of the box; they cannot do it on their own.** If conforming to the pressures of the Man Box were obviously disadvantageous to men, few men would do so. As the study shows, however, the picture is more complicated. Navigating the rewards and punishments of manhood is a real dilemma for young men. In this reality, all of us – young men and young women, parents, educators, the media, teachers, romantic partners, and all members of society – have a role to play in reinforcing positive, equitable, unrestrictive ideas of manhood. In other words, it is time for all of us to work to break out of – and break – the Man Box.



# WHY THIS STUDY?

**What does it mean to be a young man? How is a man supposed to act? Do these expectations matter for young men's lives?** In a moment of tremendous social change for members of all genders, these questions may seem outdated. While good progress has been made in freeing people from gender-based judgements around what are acceptable roles and behaviors for men and women, there remains much to do to reach a situation of true equality. A diversity of sexualities and gender identities has entered the mainstream. Women have made inspiring progress toward overcoming centuries of discrimination based on their gender, although much remains to be done. In this new reality, has the investigation of “masculinity,” or what it means to be a man, become irrelevant? We say no.

Rather, these social transformations and tensions make this study essential. It is imperative that we ask: Are these social changes driving young men to radically reimagine what “being a man” should entail, in private and public life? Are they reinvigorating traditional attitudes? Do young men feel they've been dealt a winning or a losing hand by a transforming society? Or, perhaps, are young men experiencing some combination of all of these?

To better understand these dynamics, we – Promundo, Axe, and research partners – set out at the end of 2016 to investigate young men's lives in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Mexico. The central analytical tool of the study is what we and many others call the “Man Box”: a set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society, that place pressure on men to be a certain way. Through this study, we seek to give research rigor to the concept of the Man Box, measuring how young men encounter these messages socially and internalize them personally. We also demonstrate the broad influence of these beliefs on several areas of young men's lives.

**Using an email and telephone survey, we gathered a representative, random sample of young men aged 18 to 30, reflecting the ethnic and social diversity of each of the three countries.** Combined with that survey, we convened focus group discussions of young men in each of the three countries to hear, in these men's own words, what it means to be a man. Specifically, we sought to understand:



To what extent do young men report that their romantic partners, friends, family members, and/or society as a whole communicate rigid ideas and norms about what “real men” should believe and how they should behave?



To what extent do young men themselves internalize and agree with these rigid ideas and norms about what “real men” should believe and how they should behave?



Do young men personally subscribe to these ideas at higher or lower rates than they report encountering or hearing about these ideas in broader society?



Does any of this matter? How do young men’s ideas about manhood affect how they live and behave?

This report begins with a description of the research methodology used, and introduces the idea of the Man Box. Then, we discuss how the Man Box affects young men’s lives. The report also includes a short section exploring the Man Box in more detail, demonstrating the dynamic connections between Man Box status and eight key aspects of men’s lives. **What we affirm in the study is that the Man Box is alive and well. It has immediate, sometimes contradictory, and often harmful effects on young men and on those around them.**

## Studying what it means to be a man

This study builds on existing social science methodology and research on masculinities, which refers to the plural and dynamic ways that masculine norms, attitudes, identities, power dynamics, and practices are lived. Numerous studies from around the world have confirmed linkages between social norms and attitudes about what it means to be a

man and a number of key behaviors. For example, men who subscribe to traditional views about manhood often demonstrate limited health-seeking behavior (meaning they are less likely to seek health care when they need it), are more prone to taking risks, and may be more emotionally repressed. Numerous authors from all three of the countries

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studied here, including Michael Kimmel and Niobe Way in the US, Sandy Ruxton and Martin Robb in the UK, and Juan Guillermo Figueroa and Benno de Keijzer in Mexico, among many others, have long examined these issues.

Their research, along with our own, and many other studies, affirm the multiple complex and changing ways that the rigid norms surrounding manhood negatively affect men's lives. These norms inhibit men by keeping them from expressing their true selves and from having the kind of deep connections and relationships they want. Rigid norms also affect society at large, driving inequalities, homophobia, and various forms of violence.\*

Since 2008, Promundo and research partners have asked questions, similar to those applied in

this study, of more than 45,000 men and women in more than 30 countries, as part of the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES). IMAGES includes representative household samples of men and women ages 18-59 and has allowed us to refine a set of questions to assess the extent to which men are aware of social norms about manhood (how family, media, peers, and others express these ideas to them); how much they themselves subscribe to these ideas; and the relationship between those attitudes and key practices and behaviors (sexual, health-related, caregiving, use of violence, etc.). By testing these questions in numerous cultural settings, we have refined ways of encouraging men to provide more honest answers about their opinions on gender norms, as well as about their sex and family lives, their mental health, their use and experiences of violence, and other sensitive topics.

*\* Interested readers are encouraged to pursue the following landmark texts, drawing primarily from our study countries:*



## International

**R.W. Connell,**  
*Masculinities*

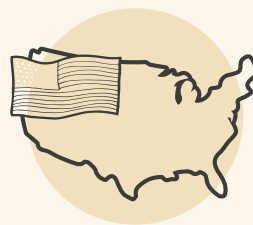


## UK

**Sandy Ruxton,**  
*Men, Masculinities, and  
Poverty in the UK*

**Martin Robb,**  
*Youth in Context:  
Frameworks, Settings and  
Encounters*

**Martin Robb, Brid  
Featherstone, Sandy  
Ruxton, and Michael  
Ward,** *Beyond Male Role  
Models: Gender Identities  
and Work with Young Men*



## US

**Michael Kimmel,**  
*Guyland: The Perilous World  
Where Boys Become Men*

**Niobe Way,**  
*Deep Secrets: Boys'  
Friendships and the Crisis of  
Connection*

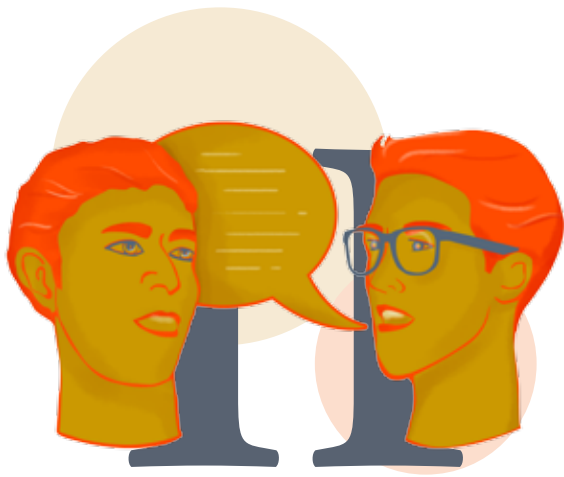


## Mexico

**Juan Guillermo Figueroa,**  
*Ser padres, esposos e hijos:  
prácticas y valoraciones de  
varones mexicanos*

**Benno De Keijzer,**  
*Hasta donde el cuerpo  
aguante: género, cuerpo y  
salud masculina*





# WHO WE TALKED TO

## About the Study

This study included a representative survey of young men and focus group discussions with young men in all three countries. In each country, the sample was selected to be representative of young men of all income and educational levels and ethnic groups, as well as from urban and rural settings. The details of the survey are presented in the following box, with sampling and respondent characteristics presented in Table 2.1 and Table 2.2. Table 2.3 shows the distribution of survey respondents across geographic regions within the three countries of study. In addition to the surveys, we wanted to hear, in the young men's own words, how the Man Box plays out in their lives. To that end, we worked with research partners to conduct focus groups with young men in all three countries. Quotes from these focus groups are included throughout the report.

### The survey at a glance

- **Age range:** Young men in the three countries were considered eligible for our study if they fell between the ages of 18 and 30 on the date of completing the survey.
- **Sample:** The initial sample in each country was approximately 1,000 respondents. After a socio-demographic analysis of this initial sample, each country's data set was adjusted

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- given a “boost” to underrepresented ethnic and income groups – to ensure accurate representation; in this process, members of underrepresented groups were specifically identified to participate in the study. In the UK, the “boost” sample included 154 respondents identifying as Asian and 80 identifying as Black. In the US, the boost sample included 200 respondents identifying as Asian and 128 identifying as Black. The Mexico boost sample included 120 respondents from the highest two socioeconomic categories. Final sample sizes are presented below.
- **Online survey and panel details:** The online survey was coordinated with Lightspeed GMI, a Kantar company, using local panel partners where required, and carried out in one wave of survey field work.
- **Translation:** The questionnaire was translated into Spanish for data collection in Mexico.
- **Pre-test:** In all three countries, the questionnaire was pre-tested with 100 respondents. After the pre-test, minimal adjustments were made to ensure accessibility for respondents, to adjust for cultural variations and translation errors, and to assess length feasibility.
- **Weighting:** For analysis, the data sets have been weighted to available representative census data proportions in three categories: age, ethnicity, and income/wealth status.

**TABLE 2.1 SAMPLE SIZE**

	US	UK	Mexico
Main sample	1,000	991	1,000
Boost	328	234	120
Total sample including boosts	1,328	1,225	1,120

Based on comparison to national-level census data, the sample is broadly representative of young men in each country, in terms of education, income, marital status, and employment. For our analysis, the data set was weighted to approximate available census data proportions for age, ethnicity, income, and socioeconomic status.

**TABLE 2.2 SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS**

	US	UK	Mexico
<b>Overall sample size</b>	1,328	1,225	1,120
<b>Age group</b>			
18-24	53%	54%	57%
25-30	47%	46%	43%
<b>Marital status</b>			
Ever married	26%	19%	25%
Never married	74%	81%	75%
<b>Educational attainment</b>			
Has completed any/some formal, non-vocational tertiary education	65%	41%	23%
Has completed anything less, including vocational training, up to finished secondary	35%	59%	77%
<b>Employment status</b>			
Employed full time	52%	53%	44%
Employed part time	13%	11%	14%
Unemployed	14%	13%	7%
Student	19%	19%	27%
Freelance/Consultant/Contractor	1%	2%	7%
Other	1%	1%	1%
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
White	56%	81%	-
Black	13%	4%	-
Latino	22%	-	-
Asian	6%	11%	-
Other	3%	4%	-
<b>Annual household income</b>			
Over \$40,000	28%	-	-
Under \$40,000	72%	-	-

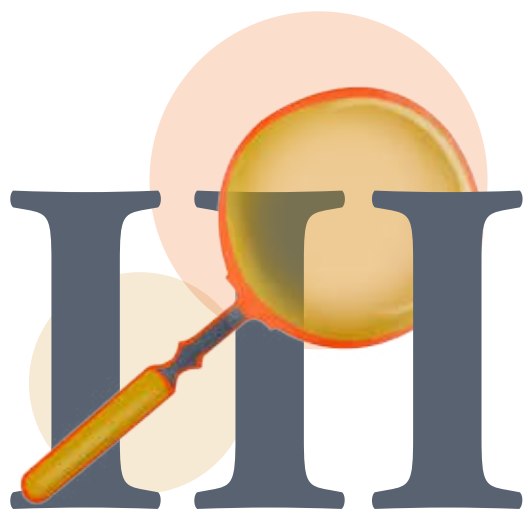
**TABLE 2.2 SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS, CONTINUED**

	US	UK	Mexico
<b>Socioeconomic status (SES)</b>			
Bottom SES categories	-	56%	60%
Top SES categories	-	44%	41%
<b>Sexual orientation</b>			
Heterosexual	87%	87%	88%
Homosexual	7%	7%	6%
Bisexual	4%	5%	5%
Other	1%	2%	1%

**TABLE 2.3 REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES**

Weighted to available representative census data proportions

US		UK		Mexico	
Northeast	18%	North	35%	Northeast	9%
Midwest	21%	Midlands	29%	Northwest	13%
South	37%	London	16%	West	11%
West	24%	South	20%	East	15%
				Central North	11%
				Southwest	11%
				Southeast	6%
				Central South	24%



# THE MAN BOX

Exploring the Social Pressures  
and Individual Attitudes Related  
to What It Means to Be a Man

**“There is a pressure everywhere to tell you what man you should be.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Bermondsey, South London, UK

As the quote above and Figure 3.1 demonstrate, respondents in all three countries encounter clear and constant messages and pressures around how to be a “real man.”

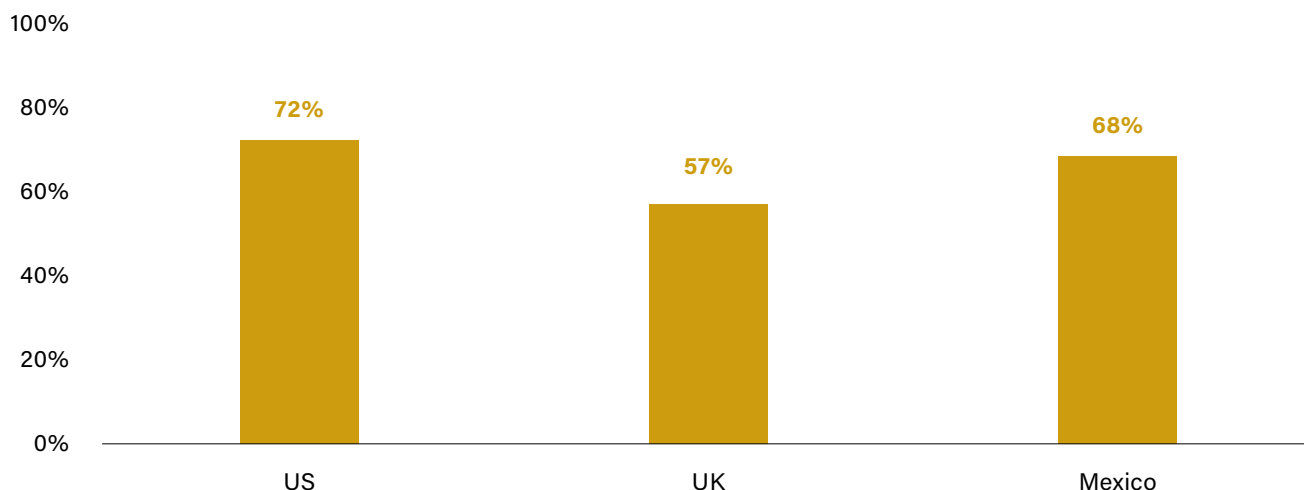
**What exactly is this “certain way” that a man needs to behave?** To answer this question, we developed a tool that we call the Man Box. The notion that the pressures of socially constructed masculinity would have the effect of putting men in a box draws from the research of Paul Kivel and other social scientists. Kivel’s oft-circulated “Act Like a Man Box” graphic<sup>1</sup> demonstrates how labels and pressures associated with mainstream masculinity have the effect of entrapping and isolating men who, inevitably, fall short of these idealized, rigid notions of manhood. In Kivel’s graphic, men in the Man Box are those who feel trapped by society’s messages about manhood, unable to fully express themselves lest they be scorned by peers or family for falling short as a “real man.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graphic publicly available at <http://paulkivel.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/actlikeamanbox.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The authors of this report believe that true gender equality would mean that women are able to do and be things that are considered to be masculine, while men are able to do and be things that are traditionally and historically considered to be feminine. Gender equality also requires acknowledging the fluidity of identity and that one’s identity does not always match with one’s biological sex. Because of this, there should be no such thing as a “real man” or “real woman.” To describe the Man Box and its function, we use these terms as they are often employed in everyday speech.

**FIGURE 3.1 “A REAL MAN...”**

Percentage of survey respondents who report being told that “a real man behaves a certain way”



## What we mean by “inside or outside the Man Box”

For the purposes of this study, men who are **“in the Man Box”** are those who most internalize and agree with society’s rigid messages about how men should behave. In this sense, “in the box” refers to falling in line with normative masculine expectations, or “boxing oneself in.”

Conversely, young men who are **“outside the Man Box”** are those who have broken out of the box, who embrace more positive, equitable ideas and attitudes about what “real men” should believe and how they should behave. They demonstrate a greater propensity to reject rigid societal ideas about manhood.

This distinction is imperfect, of course. All young men, like all people regardless of gender, struggle to establish their individual identity within and

against social pressures related to their gender and many other social forces. If we had the chance to conduct deep life-story interviews with each survey respondent, we would certainly be able to present a much more nuanced landscape than we can with a simple, binary “in” or “out.” To be sure, all respondents carry the Man Box with them to some degree, just as all respondents demonstrate a desire to be their truest selves, regardless of social pressure. As Section IV of this report shows, however, falling on one or the other side of this binary has effects – both statistically significant and undeniably significant in the real world – on many elements of young men’s lives. Section V will examine the Man Box scale in somewhat finer detail, as well, investigating some of the complexities of young men’s relationships with gender socialization and identity.



### III.a.

## The Contents of the Man Box: Seven Pillars of What “Real Men” Are Supposed to Be

**Our investigation of the Man Box focuses on 17 messages organized into seven thematic pillars.** All of these messages reflect what respondents may think a “real man” should believe and/or how a “real man” should behave. In choosing these messages, we have drawn on decades of social science research on masculine norms in the countries of study and around the world – primarily on the global applications of the widely used Gender Equitable Men Scale (GEM Scale), created by Promundo and the Population Council.<sup>3</sup>

This section presents each pillar’s messages, as shown in Figure 3.2.<sup>4</sup> In short, these survey items measure, with reasonable accuracy, the extent to which men either adhere to or reject traditional, restrictive ideas about what it means to be a man.



**SELF-SUFFICIENCY:** Respondents reported the extent to which “society as a whole” affirms these two messages related to men’s **self-sufficiency**, as well as the extent to which they personally agree with these messages. Messages related to independence are associated with the widespread expectation that men be **self-reliant**, particularly with regard to their physical and emotional health. Later in this report, we will link respondents’ adherence to these messages with their actual health-seeking and help-seeking behaviors.



**ACTING TOUGH:** The requirements of men’s **toughness** are two-fold. The first is a willingness to defend one’s reputation, by fighting or using physical force, if necessary. The second is emotional invulnerability, whereby men must maintain the outward appearance of toughness and strength even when experiencing more vulnerable emotions. Section IV of the report looks at acceptance of these messages via young men’s actual participation in fights, as well as their emotional help-seeking behaviors.

<sup>3</sup> See Pulerwitz J, Barker G. 2008. “Measuring attitudes towards gender norms among young men in Brazil: development and psychometric evaluation of the GEM Scale.” *Men and Masculinities*.

<sup>4</sup> With one exception, all of these questions are worded in ways that affirm the “negative” or rigid view of manhood. Only the question about the acceptability of heterosexual men having gay male friends is affirmed using the positive, equitable norm. We word the questions to affirm the negative or rigid norm because multiple testing of these questions and accompanying qualitative research has found that men around the world are more likely to respond honestly when questions are worded this way.



**PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS:** Pillar 3 includes three items related to men's **physical appearance, physical attractiveness, and grooming behaviors**, drawing from common expectations that "real men" meet the paradoxical standard that they both (a) dress well and look good, and (b) achieve this without seeming to try too hard. Section IV of the report will link agreement with these and other messages about masculinity with men's opinions of their own physical attractiveness, as well as with their reported grooming behavior. Our emphasis is on pressures men face related to their appearance, as well as the negative professional, romantic, and personal consequences they may face if they fail to achieve a particular standard of physical attractiveness.



**RIGID MASCULINE GENDER ROLES:** Pillar 4 includes three items related to common gender-based **divisions of household and caregiving work**. These messages relate to the still-common expectation that men contribute to family well-being primarily as financial providers, while women contribute disproportionately in the daily care of children and the home. Section IV of the report presents results – particularly from the focus group data – that illuminate the complex ways in which respondents relate to changing family and fatherhood roles in each country.



**HETEROSEXUALITY AND HOMOPHOBIA:** The survey includes these two items that emphasize that a "real man" is supposed to be both **heterosexual and homophobic**. Section IV highlights the links between Man Box adherence and respondents' likelihood of spending time with openly gay friends.



**HYPERSEXUALITY:** Pillar 6 emphasizes that not only is a "real man" unambiguously straight or heterosexual, but he is supposedly also **always ready for sex**, and always eager to acquire another "sexual conquest." The hypersexuality implied in Pillar 6 also serves to undermine men's sexual agency and sexual health, in that it instructs young men that saying no to sex is something that only women do. While the survey did not investigate men's sexual behaviors, due to space constraints, we present links between adherence to the Man Box rules and men's likelihood of perpetrating sexual harassment, among other findings.



**AGGRESSION AND CONTROL:** Finally, the three messages of Pillar 7 emphasize the need for a "real man" to use physical violence when necessary, and to hold **control over household decisions and women's movements**. Section IV of the report will link adherence to the Man Box rules with men's likelihood of perpetrating various forms of bullying and sexual harassment, among other forms of aggression and control.

**FIGURE 3.2 THE MAN BOX IN SEVEN PILLARS**



**Self-Sufficiency**

A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect

Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help



**Acting Tough**

A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak

Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside



**Physical Attractiveness**

It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good

Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin

A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly



**Rigid Masculine Gender Roles**

It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, and take care of younger children

A husband shouldn't have to do household chores

Men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women



**Heterosexuality and Homophobia**

A gay guy is not a "real man"  
Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement)



**Hypersexuality**

A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can  
A "real man" would never say no to sex



**Aggression and Control**

Men should use violence to get respect, if necessary  
A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage

If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time

### III.b.

## Social Pressures

**“How does society let men act? Because of society, the pathologies and powers that exist, men can only act a certain way. If you do not fit into the box, you are not labeled as a male or one of the many labels that we have talked about.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US

Before we asked men where they are in terms of the Man Box, we asked them if they perceived that they had received clear messages about what was expected of them as men. We asked respondents to report on these messages in two ways. First, we asked one question each about masculine norms being imparted by respondents’ romantic partners, male friends, and parents. Table 3.1, below, presents the results.

**Most notably, the majority of respondents in the US and Mexico reported that their parents taught them to hide feelings of nervousness or fear – in other words, to “tough it out.”** In the UK, 47 percent of respondents encountered this message. This finding underscores the observation that young men are not creating their rigid, harmful identities on their own; they receive these restrictive messages from influential sources including their parents.

Young men also reported experiencing similar pressures from their romantic partners and male friends. Approximately three out of ten men in the US and UK reported that a romantic partner (mostly girlfriends) would expect them to use violence to defend their reputation, with a slightly lower rate of agreement in Mexico. A slightly higher percentage of respondents in all three countries agreed with the third statement in Table 3.1, indicating that homophobia is reinforced in their peer groups.

**In addition to the influence of romantic partners, male friends, and parents, young men reported social pressures to fit into the Man Box.** After asking the men if they received specific messages about manhood from family, peers, and intimate partners – which they did – we asked the participants whether they perceived that society as a whole affirms specific messages about manhood. Particularly in the US and UK, the majority of respondents reported encountering many of these Man Box rules in society. Survey participants were particularly likely to have encountered messages related to men’s self-sufficiency, toughness, and hypersexuality.

**TABLE 3.1 PRESSURES FROM PARTNERS, FRIENDS, AND FAMILY**

Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that...

	US	UK	Mexico
My parents taught me that a “real man” should act strong even if he feels nervous or scared	59%	47%	59%
My partner definitely expects me to use violence to defend my reputation if I have to	31%	30%	19%
My guy friends would give me a hard time if they saw me hanging out with someone who is gay or who they think looks gay	35%	31%	28%

**TABLE 3.2 REPORTED SOCIAL PRESSURE TO FIT INTO THE MAN BOX**

Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that "Society as a whole tells me that..."

	US	UK	Mexico
<b>Pillar 1: Self-Sufficiency</b>			
A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect	57%	50%	38%
Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help	66%	55%	49%
<b>Pillar 2: Acting Tough</b>			
A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak	68%	60%	55%
Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside	75%	64%	59%
<b>Pillar 3: Physical Attractiveness</b>			
It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good	64%	58%	56%
Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin	54%	46%	43%
A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly	55%	51%	49%
<b>Pillar 4: Rigid Masculine Gender Roles</b>			
It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, and take care of younger children	52%	46%	40%
A husband shouldn't have to do household chores	46%	45%	41%
Men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women	64%	56%	53%
<b>Pillar 5: Heterosexuality and Homophobia</b>			
A gay guy is not a "real man"	55%	49%	48%
Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement)	58%	66%	56%
<b>Pillar 6: Hypersexuality</b>			
A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can	60%	51%	42%
A "real man" would never say no to sex	63%	55%	53%
<b>Pillar 7: Aggression and Control</b>			
Men should use violence to get respect, if necessary	51%	40%	36%
A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage	55%	46%	44%
If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time	56%	46%	44%



Survey participants are unambiguous: the pressure to fit into the Man Box comes through loud and clear.

## **“We turned into what they made us out to be”**

Pressures and social forces at a neighborhood level in Batley, Yorkshire, UK

Young men in the Batley focus group discussed their neighborhood, and specifically, the ways in which the majority of their neighbors seemed to treat young men. Batley is a town in West Yorkshire, lying seven miles southeast of Bradford and seven miles southwest of Leeds, in the UK. The town's economy was built on the textile industry, which, from the 1950s onwards, drew in significant numbers of migrant laborers from Pakistan and India. Renovated former textile mills form a significant part of the area's employment and economy. The majority of participants seemed to like living in the area, and friendships extended across whole families, with one participant saying, *“I don't even need to knock on the door, I just walk in.”*

However, this group's most animated discussion was around how they were viewed in public spaces by other neighborhood residents and police; they resented being viewed as intimidating or as threats. One participant shared: *“Because we*

*wear joggers and hoodies and stuff, people think we're just, like, going to do trouble and stuff, but we actually don't.”* Participants said that they had occasionally been accused of things they hadn't done, or been banned from shops and takeaways for reasons they felt were unfair. Another shared: *“The police always interfered with us; ... we'd never be doing anything wrong, but because we're all in the big group at one place, it was always assumed to be like a gang.”*

The young men gave multiple examples of situations in which police or security guards had treated them or other people from their neighborhood roughly, and they reported that the authorities' actions alone had been an impetus for their own action. As one participant concluded: *“We turned into what they made us out to be.”* These young men were angry because they felt that they would not be believed if they complained to authorities about their treatment.

This text draws from a full report of the qualitative data collection in the UK, exploring these and other themes, to be published by the Open University in 2017.



### III.c.

## Internalizing the Man Box

### **To what extent do young men internalize the social pressures to fit into the Man Box?**

Are they able to shake off these sometimes repressive and restrictive social forces and let their more genuine and emotionally connected selves show? Or, do young men internalize and reproduce – in other words, subscribe to – the Man Box in their own beliefs and behaviors?

### **Overall, we found that young men distance themselves from the Man Box rules somewhat, but they don't reject them outright.**

We also asked participants if they agreed – in their own opinion – with each of the 17 Man Box rules, as shown in Table 3.3.<sup>5</sup> Across the board, young men were less likely to report personal agreement with the Man Box rules than they were to report encountering these rules in society. Nonetheless, young men's rates of personal agreement with the Man Box rules – often around 33 percent or higher – confirm that they are internalizing these messages. Some men may be able to reject restrictive and negative social pressures related to masculinity, but a great many embrace these pressures and the version of manhood that they promote.

### **In focus groups, participants expressed contradictory notions about whether they had been able to break out of the Man Box.**

As one participant in Mexico City reflected: “... *to be a man is no longer to be the typical macho, but rather [to be] the one who protects the woman, who protects the family, who protects himself – that's to be a man, to defend oneself and the loved ones.*” This young man seemed to feel that society had moved on from regressive, “macho” views of manhood. At the same time, however, his idea of men being the protectors suggests an adherence to the Man Box rules. Another respondent in Mexico City affirmed that men still have greater social status than women, but that women had changed more – that is, they had become more progressive than men: “*Socially [men] are looked at more positively than women, but we are also more closed-minded when compared to a woman.*”

<sup>5</sup> This set of questions appeared prior to the same set of questions (presented earlier) about social pressures related to the Man Box rules, in an effort to acquire the most honest, accurate responses possible. Percentages presented in Table 3.3 are those in each country of study who either agree or strongly agree with that particular survey item.

**TABLE 3.3 REPORTED PERSONAL AGREEMENT WITH THE MAN BOX RULES**

Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that "In my opinion..."

	US	UK	Mexico
<b>Pillar 1: Self-Sufficiency</b>			
A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect	30%	31%	18%
Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help	40%	36%	35%
<b>Pillar 2: Acting Tough</b>			
A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak	43%	41%	41%
Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside	59%	51%	48%
<b>Pillar 3: Physical Attractiveness</b>			
It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good	47%	46%	43%
Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin	48%	45%	43%
A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly	40%	42%	32%
<b>Pillar 4: Rigid Masculine Gender Roles</b>			
It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, and take care of younger children	28%	31%	17%
A husband shouldn't have to do household chores	22%	27%	11%
Men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women	44%	39%	26%
<b>Pillar 5: Heterosexuality and Homophobia</b>			
A gay guy is not a "real man"	29%	30%	23%
Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement)	84%	83%	86%
<b>Pillar 6: Hypersexuality</b>			
A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can	26%	26%	11%
A "real man" would never say no to sex	28%	31%	26%
<b>Pillar 7: Aggression and Control</b>			
Men should use violence to get respect, if necessary	23%	25%	10%
A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage	34%	33%	21%
If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time	46%	37%	26%

**Young men in the survey and focus groups were particularly likely to affirm notions of manhood associated with toughness and repression of emotions.** At least two out of five men in all three countries agreed with the notion that “a guy who doesn’t fight back when others push him around is weak,” and the majority in the US and UK personally agreed with the notion that “guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside.” One focus group participant in Washington, DC, reflected on these dynamics, adding an insight about the intersection of masculine gendering and race-related discrimination in the US:

**“Coming from a Black background, for Black men, I feel like they’re already labeled before they even come out into the world. For Black men, that’s all that they have. The fact that they are strong. It’s like, mother f---ers is killing people. ‘You are weak, so I’m a man, I’m going to prove it to you. I’m going to kill you because you’re not man enough to kill me!’ It’s like a dog-eat-dog world for Black men in society. It’s like you gotta be strong to survive, because if not, the next man might cut you down.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US

This affirmation of toughness and emotional repression was by no means universal, however. One focus group participant from Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK, made the distinction between “inside strength and outside strength,” reporting that the ability to walk away from violence was what made a man strong:

**“And it takes a stronger person to walk away, so you actually realize that. It starts from inside rather than outside, strength does. And if you can walk away from a situation, it shows you how strong you are as a person.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK

Other young men in the focus groups, generally a minority, said that changes in gender norms – that is, greater equality between men and women – serve to disadvantage men. In a statement contrary to what we know about women’s lower wages compared to men’s, and women’s limited participation in positions of power, one young man said:

**“It’s gone from men being sexist, to men having all the power, to now, really and truly, women have got all the power.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Bermondsey, South London, UK

## “You’re chasing the happiness of your family, and your child’s upbringing”

### Changing views on household roles for men and women

One of the areas where respondents were least likely to agree with the Man Box rules were those related to who does the housecleaning and care of children (Pillar 4). Survey respondents overwhelmingly rejected the notion that “a husband shouldn’t have to do household chores.” Focus group participants echoed these results. One young man in Bermondsey, South London, UK, reflecting on his father’s low level of involvement in childcare, said, “As long as I’m nothing like my dad, I’m happy.” Another participant in Bermondsey said: “It shouldn’t be all mothers get to be primary carer of your kid. Because I know mothers out there that can’t look after their kids better than the dad can.”

Taking a positive tone in describing shifting roles for fathers over time, a Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK,

participant said: “You’re not really chasing the money anymore, you’re not really chasing the American dream, or whatever it is. You’re chasing the happiness of your family, and your child’s upbringing.” However, another Beeston Hill participant countered this, saying that earning income was the marker of manhood: “It’s kind of a manhood, as well, as in bringing money home or putting it in your own pocket. It gives you that sense of pride in a way that you’re going out, you’re earning your own money, you get to spend it on what you want. With money you can open doors for yourself.” These quotes suggest what many other researchers have affirmed: that, when it comes to attitudes about gender roles, many men and women are in transition between the traditional ideas of the past and more egalitarian or equitable notions.

This text draws from a full report of the qualitative data collection in the UK, exploring these and other themes, to be published by the Open University in 2017.

**Respondents’ personal opinions were much more progressive than social pressures when it came to homophobia, hypersexuality, and household roles, showing strong rejection of the Man Box in these areas.** The five Man Box rules presented in Table 3.4 are those for which participants’ personal attitudes diverged farthest (in a positive, equitable direction) from the messages they reported receiving. This suggests that these rules may represent areas in which social change can be pushed even more quickly.

**TABLE 3.4 MAN BOX RULE DIVERGENCE**

Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that "Society as a whole tells me that..."

Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that "In my opinion..."

US	UK	Mexico	Man Box Rule	US	UK	Mexico
55%	49%	48%	A gay guy is not a "real man"	29%	30%	23%
60%	51%	42%	A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can	26%	26%	11%
46%	45%	41%	A husband shouldn't have to do household chores	22%	27%	11%
63%	55%	53%	A "real man" would never say no to sex	28%	31%	26%
58%	66%	56%	Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement)	84%	83%	86%



Some men are able to reject restrictive, negative social pressures related to masculinity, but many embrace these pressures and rules, as well as the version of manhood they represent. Young men in all three countries overwhelmingly reject notions of manhood that imply that men are superior to women or that men should not care for children. However, they show strong support for toughness and the repression of emotions. Indeed, while men in the three countries have come a long way toward accepting equality between women and men, they still have a long way to go to break free of norms that hold them in emotionally straightjacketed forms of manhood.



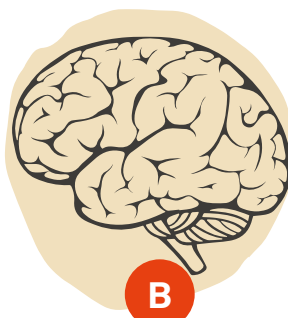
# WHAT THIS MEANS

## Life Inside the Man Box

Why does the Man Box matter? What are the consequences of men's adherence to restrictive ideas about manhood, both for themselves and for others around them? This section focuses on the broad effects of young men's adherence to the Man Box rules, with particular attention to six themes:



**LIFE SATISFACTION AND  
SELF-CONFIDENCE**



**MENTAL HEALTH**



**FRIENDSHIP AND  
SUPPORT-SEEKING**



**RISKY  
BEHAVIORS**



**ATTRACTIVENESS**



**BULLYING  
AND VIOLENCE**



# How we constructed the Man Box scale

To construct the Man Box scale, we calculated a composite score for each respondent's answers to 15 of the Man Box rules presented in Figure 3.2.\* Each response was awarded from one to four points, where the most gender-inequitable answer (usually "strongly agree") received one point and the most gender-equitable answer (usually "strongly disagree") received four points. "Agree" and "disagree" responses received two or three points, depending on the nature/direction of the item. We then divided this score by 15 to arrive at each individual's composite score on the same 1 to 4 scale (where higher scores reflect more gender-equitable views).

Country	Average Man Box score - 1 to 4 scale
US	2.87
UK	2.87
Mexico	3.03

For ease of analysis and presentation, we then coded all men with Man Box scores below the country average as "in the Man Box," and those with scores at or above the country average as "outside the Man Box." This allows us to have two easily comparable categories that reflect the particular landscape of masculine norms in each country.

*\* Two items from Pillar 3, Physical Attractiveness, were removed for the study-wide Man Box calculations: "It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good," and "Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin." While valuable for understanding men's opinions about physical attractiveness, these items differ from the remaining Man Box rules in that they are not strict reflections of mainstream masculine expectations and roles. Rather, these items ask men to reflect on the external implications of men's behavior and roles.*

## IV.a. Life Satisfaction and Self-Confidence

Are young men's ideas about masculinity related to how satisfied and happy they are with their lives?

**Young men's ideas about masculinity are strongly connected, in complex ways, with how they feel about themselves.** When asked, "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life, overall, these days?", young men who are in the Man Box in both the US and UK rated their satisfaction as statistically significantly higher than did their peers outside the Man Box (as shown in Table 4.1). In the US, young men who are in the Man Box rated their life satisfaction nearly a full point higher, on a 1-to-10 scale, than did young men outside the Man Box. The same held true for young men's scores on the Positive Affect scale, an internationally validated measure of subjective well-being, which asks several questions about

how respondents have been feeling in the last week. In both the US and the UK, scores among men who are in the Man Box were higher on this scale, at a statistically significant level, than scores among men who are outside the Man Box. Holding more rigid ideas about masculinity, then, is linked with greater self-reported life satisfaction and well-being in the US and the UK.

**However, being in the Man Box is also associated with exactly the opposite: high levels of dissatisfaction with life.** There is a statistically significant relationship – in the opposite direction – with the Negative Affect scale score, a counterpart to the Positive Affect scale score. Drawing upon young men’s reports of how they’ve been feeling over the past week, young men who are in the Man Box are significantly more likely, in the US and UK, to self-report lower well-being than their counterparts outside the Man Box.

**TABLE 4.1 LIFE SATISFACTION**

Positive and Negative Affect scale scores

	Man Box	Life Satisfaction (average, scale of 1 to 10)	Positive Affect scale score	Negative Affect scale score
US	In	<b>7.8</b>	<b>35.5</b>	<b>24.8</b>
	Out	<b>6.9</b>	<b>32.8</b>	<b>21</b>
UK	In	<b>7.0</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>26.3</b>
	Out	<b>6.5</b>	<b>30.5</b>	<b>21</b>
Mexico	In	<b>7.9</b>	<b>34.4</b>	<b>22.7</b>
	Out	<b>7.9</b>	<b>34.7</b>	<b>22.2</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$

**So are men who are in the Man Box happier or sadder? The answer is complex.** In Mexico, we see no links between Man Box attitudes and life satisfaction or well-being. In the US and UK, however, young men who agree with society’s most rigid rules about how to be a man also say that they are “the man”: they rate themselves highly when asked broad questions about their satisfaction with their lives. As Section V will explore in more detail, young men in the Man Box experience some reward for meeting these societal expectations. They are doing what their parents, partners, friends, and media sources are telling them to do, and they can therefore feel a certain confidence and comfort in who they are. In addition, focus group participants suggest that “being the man” according to society’s rules can bring a sense of certainty in confusing times. However, as will be discussed in the next section, the Man Box also exacts a high cost in terms of mental health. It tells men they should always be tough no matter the circumstances, which no one can do. It tells them to act strong even when they feel

uncertain. In other words, it tells them to be someone other than who they are. Some men do find comfort and confidence in adhering to these norms, but as will be seen, the rigidity of the Man Box brings far more costs than benefits.

**At the same time, some focus group participants emphasized that self-confidence can, in fact, emerge from “breaking out of the box” or “staying true to [oneself]” rather than conforming.** Two participants from conversations in Washington, DC, expressed these complementary insights:

**“I feel like, when I went through my transition from being a boy to a man, I became confident with making my own decisions. I didn’t have to go to someone to make sure what I was doing was good, or go to them after to make sure I didn’t mess anything up. It was like, ‘No, this is what I want to do, and I’m going to do it!’ And I’ll handle the responsibilities.”**

**Focus Group Participant, Washington, DC, US**

**“Just staying true to yourself, what makes you happy as an individual. I feel like you shouldn’t let the stereotypes of society put you down. You shouldn’t succumb to them. Because at the end of the day, you know, I’m me, and that’s who I am, that’s what I like. I’m a person, I’m goofy, I like to joke around and that’s my personality. And sometimes when I was going to school, I used to try to be more masculine, be more aggressive and stuff like that. But after [inaudible] I was like, ‘F--- that, that’s not me!’ So why am I going to act like something that I’m not? So, I think people start to learn to be confident in their own selves and be part of who they are as individuals. I think that’s when we as a society are able to shift the whole dynamic of what you consider as a male, what you consider, if a male, is supposed to be masculine [inaudible], but that’s not actually; it’s not actually true.”**

**Focus Group Participant, Washington, DC, US**



Some men derive a sense of happiness from staying “in the box,” but focus group participants shared a sense that they are cut off from their true selves if they do. As we will see in the next section, young men show consistent, significant negative mental health outcomes from staying “in the box.”

## IV.b.

# Mental Health

Are young men's ideas about masculinity related to their mental health?

**Young men's ideas about masculinity show strong links with mental health problems.** In all three countries, men inside the Man Box show higher incidence of at least one indicator of depression and suicidal ideation. Why would the Man Box have this effect on men? A quote from one of the focus groups provides an insight. Some members of the Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK, group said that if they were having a problem, they would simply *"bottle it up and get on with it,"* or *"work it out,"* perhaps by going to the gym, or *"just put the kettle on."* In other words, they don't talk about feeling sad or depressed. They keep their feelings bottled up and they don't reach out for help when they need it.

**TABLE 4.2 DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AND SUICIDAL IDEATION**

Percentage of respondents who report experience at some point in the last two weeks

	Man Box	Little interest or pleasure in doing things	Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	Having thoughts of suicide
US	In	<b>74%</b>	64%	<b>40%</b>
	Out	<b>63%</b>	61%	<b>17%</b>
UK	In	<b>82%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>55%</b>
	Out	<b>70%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>20%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>68%</b>	50%	<b>19%</b>
	Out	<b>67%</b>	50%	<b>13%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$

**Participants reported extremely high incidence of depressive symptoms, with clear links to adhering to the Man Box.** As Table 4.2 shows, large proportions of respondents reported experiencing one or both depressive symptoms ("Little interest or pleasure in doing things" or "Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless") in the last two weeks, with some significant associations with Man Box adherence. Statistically significant associations are marked by bold/italic figures. In the UK, men inside the Man Box are statistically significantly more likely than their peers outside the Man Box to report both of these symptoms.

These two survey items, taken together, comprise the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2), an internationally validated initial screening tool for depressive disorder. Any respondent who

meets a certain threshold on this scale<sup>6</sup> would be referred for additional screening in a clinical setting, prior to diagnosis with any depressive disorder. Using this threshold, we demonstrate definitively that men in the Man Box in the US and UK are statistically significantly more likely to meet this initial screening standard for depression than men outside the Man Box. Some 41 percent of men in the Man Box meet this screening standard in the US, compared with 26 percent of men outside the Man Box. In the UK, 46 percent of men in the Man Box meet this standard, compared with 28 percent of men outside the Man Box.

**Both the overall rates of suicidal ideation and their statistical links to being in the Man Box are extremely troubling.** Quite simply, young men are thinking frequently about taking their own lives. As the right-hand column of Table 4.2 shows, large proportions of young men in all three countries report having thoughts of suicide at least “some days” in the last two weeks. In all three countries, men in the Man Box show dramatically, statistically significantly higher levels of reported suicidal ideas than men outside the Man Box.

**Participants in the focus groups had frank conversations about how mental health and depression link with manhood.** There was a discussion in the Bermondsey, South London, UK group, for instance, where one young man believed depression and anxiety to be signs of weakness, saying, *“If anyone who says they have depression, for me, I think there’s weakness in them.”* Others in the group disagreed and shared personal experiences of being diagnosed with mental health problems. One young man said that many members of his family, including him, had experienced mental health problems, saying, *“My family has a history of mental illness ranging from my nan to her mum, and everybody in the family has something wrong with them, put it like that.”*

One participant in Washington, DC, observed a specific intersection between being a young Black man and restrictive ideas about manhood:

**“Mental illness is such a big issue in the Black male community, and people don’t realize that. It wasn’t until Kid Cudi [a hip-hop artist who recently opened up about his depression] was like, ‘Yo, I suffer from depression, I checked myself into rehab’ that Black men started to open up a little bit on social media like, ‘I also have these same issues.’ We are taught to not express ourselves, you know, depression is really big. Depression and anxiety is actually the number one killers of Black males in this country, not homicide or anything like that: ... surprising, because we aren’t told to express ourselves, we aren’t told that it’s okay to talk about your problems. So, it’s literally killing Black people, and Black men in this country.”**

**Focus Group Participant, Washington, DC, US**

<sup>6</sup> These two survey items have four possible answers, which receive points as follows: Not at All (0 points), Some Days (1 point), More Than Half the Days (2 points), and Nearly Every Day (3 points). Taken together, the possible score ranges from 0 to 6. A respondent scoring 3 points or higher is recommended for further screening.

Another Washington, DC, participant shared that it was these very issues – both in his community and around the world – that led to his depressive symptoms:

**“I start to feel down and depressed whenever I start thinking about the world’s problems, like racial discrimination, things like that. It just makes me so sad and depressed to think about people are killing other people, all of this for money and stuff like that. That’s when I start to feel down and depressed.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US



We must be worried about the mental health of young men. Their bravado and outward posture that “all is fine” mask deep insecurities, depression, and frequent thoughts of suicide. These issues are all the more troubling because, as we see in the next section, those in the Man Box are even less likely to turn to peers and friends for help when they need it.

#### **IV.c.**

### **Friendship and Support-Seeking**

What is the relationship between young men’s ideas about masculinity and the closeness of their friendships and other supportive relationships?

**Young men reported deriving emotional connection from their friendships, even as the focus groups found that showing emotional vulnerability to their friends is seen as being against the Man Box rules.** Upwards of three-quarters of young men in all three countries reported having a friend with whom they feel comfortable talking about a personal, emotional issue, as seen in Table 4.3. In both the US and Mexico, men who had broken out of the Man Box reported these friendships at significantly higher rates, suggesting that rigid masculine norms impede more emotionally connected friendships for some young men.

**TABLE 4.3 SUPPORTIVE FRIENDSHIPS**

	Man Box	Percentage who report having a friend with whom they feel comfortable talking about a personal, emotional issue
US	In	<b>73%</b>
	Out	<b>82%</b>
UK	In	<b>72%</b>
	Out	<b>74%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>84%</b>
	Out	<b>91%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$

One focus group participant from Washington, DC articulated the strategy by which he seeks out these kinds of friendships or mentorships:

**"I usually do a lot of community programs and stuff like that. And eventually when I'm done with the program, I make sure at least one of the persons that I have done the program with – maybe it's a mentor or something – I keep them around and I know that whenever I walk in the room there's at least someone. I make sure when I'm feeling down and I need support, I hit them up, you know. I'm feeling this type of way. I'm struggling with this perspective – can you help me figure things out? Initially what happens, a lot of people I talk to about my issues, they are older and they have experienced things that I have gone through. So that helps me out a lot. And it helps me put back into the perspective where I was before. Whenever I feel troubled, especially when it's about how to be strong and things like that, you can't [tell] whether you fit the standard or reconstruct another one. It's confusing, some things don't become clear, but once you start talking to people, it kind of becomes better."**

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US

**When asked about specific displays of vulnerability, however, participants showed complex emotional behaviors. In some cases, men in the Man Box demonstrated more emotionally vulnerable behaviors.** The survey asked young men to report on how often they had engaged in various emotionally vulnerable acts during the last month, including the three presented in Table 4.4. The figures presented in the table are the proportions of respondents who reported engaging in this act either "often" or "very often" in the past month.

**TABLE 4.4 EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE ACTS**

Often or very often in the past month

	Man Box	You willingly provided emotional support to someone going through a difficult time	You felt comfortable crying in front of a male friend	You talked with a friend about something deeply emotional that you were going through
US	In	67%	44%	52%
	Out	63%	25%	40%
UK	In	56%	46%	52%
	Out	55%	18%	33%
Mexico	In	62%	25%	40%
	Out	69%	24%	50%

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$ 

**Overall, men are more likely to report providing emotional support to others (first column of Table 4.4) than they are to report being emotionally vulnerable or seeking help themselves (second and third columns of Table 4.4).** Perhaps, surprisingly, men in the Man Box in both the US and UK are significantly more likely to report crying in front of male friends and talking about something deeply emotional than are men outside the Man Box.

**Again, we see that life inside the Man Box can be confusing and contradictory.** Some young men in the US and UK who adhere to more rigid gender norms also demonstrate transgressive emotional behaviors such as crying in front of friends or talking about emotional topics. This could be an extension of the aforementioned self-confidence boost associated with adhering to the Man Box rules. Or, it could tell us that male friendships inside the Man Box are actually richer than men usually let on.

In Mexico, we observe the opposite relationship, however. There, it is men outside the Man Box who are more likely to report talking with friends about something deeply emotional. These findings warrant additional qualitative research. Within this study, our focus group discussions reinforce these contradictions: some young men are proud of being able to cry, while other young men find themselves unable to cry, even when they want to. Our key finding from these contradictions are that ideas about manhood are changing and leaving some young men confused.



**“Sometimes I just cry, and like, it’s okay. And I tell myself it’s okay because I’m confident in myself, because sometimes all you need is a good cry to get that, whatever you need to do, to get that outlet out.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US

**“The problem with that for me is ... because I was raised that way, I cannot break that, like even when I come on the verge of crying, nothing happens. I just sit there and get more mad at what is going on because I can’t break. It just forces to go more internal and I can’t have that outlet.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US

## I get by with a little (very little) help from my friends

Even as some young men express willingness to open up emotionally with their male friends, the survey found that they continue to rely primarily on women in their lives for emotional support. The

majority of men in all three countries said that their first source of help is their mother or their romantic partner. (Their romantic partners are predominantly women.)

**TABLE 4.5 WHEN YOU FEEL VERY SAD OR DEPRESSED, WHO WOULD YOU SEEK HELP FROM FIRST?**

	US	UK	Mexico
Mother	25%	27%	27%
Romantic Partner	25%	25%	26%
Male Friend	11%	10%	17%
Father	7%	5%	4%
Online Sources	4%	5%	1%

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Box continues from previous page.

Only 18 percent of respondents in the US, 15 percent of respondents in the UK, and 21 percent of respondents in Mexico reported that they would seek help first from their male friends or fathers when feeling very sad or depressed – less than half the rates of reported help-seeking from mothers and (mostly female) romantic partners. Most alarmingly, perhaps, only 4 to 7 percent of respondents seek help from their fathers first. Very few men – as few as 1 percent in Mexico – reported seeking help first from online sources.

What are some of the ways that men seek to support and heal themselves in emotionally trying times? Across countries, focus group participants suggested individual creativity, but mostly emphasized feelings of loneliness:

“What I like a lot is to write and there, everything flows naturally and at the end of it [writing], like at the end of it more than anything, it is trust, no? [...] There are some [people] that are really close to their parents, more than their friends, and they share with their parents or their girlfriend or boyfriend, whoever, and equally, it depends on the situation of each person, depends on who they trust because it varies a lot.”

**Focus Group Participant**, Mexico City, Mexico

“With guys, I don’t know if it’s as they grow older, as their responsibilities change, all drift

off. And through friends that I know, people that I’ve met, they kind of feel alone.”

**Focus Group Participant**, Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK

“So, sometimes it’s easy to say, ‘I don’t give a f---’ and just walk away, but sometimes [...] we may deal with it by crying or writing in our journals, or Facebooking or tweeting and getting our feelings out. But we deal with it in different ways, because we’re human beings and we have emotions and we have to express ourselves, somehow. And we deal with the pressures, sometimes we just deal with it in silence, in a dark, dark closet.”

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US

Members of the South Asian immigrant community in the Beeston Hill discussion in Leeds, UK, expressed some envy at the emotional closeness both of the older generation and of their female peers. These participants contrasted their lives with those of their parents’ generation, whom they felt had maintained stronger links with each other. One young man said, “*The elders have got that bond from years ago, because they came to this country together. They’ve got that relationship or friendship that they’ve kept.*” With regard to their female peers, one young man shared, “*I think the female community are a lot tighter to each other... They’ll keep their family ties ... friends-for-life kind of thing.*”

The survey also found that, while young men often turn to girlfriends for support, they also spend more time alone than they want to. Table 4.6 presents two related questions in the survey, side by side. On the left-hand side of the table, we present participants' responses when asked, "On average, how would you *like* to spend your free time?" Table 4.6 contrasts these rates of response with those on the right-hand side, reflecting young men's responses when asked, "On average, how *do* you spend your free time?"

**TABLE 4.6 FREE TIME, IDEAL AND REAL**

**IDEAL**

On average, how would you *like* to spend your free time?

**REAL**

On average, how *do* you spend your free time?

US	UK	Mexico	Free Time	US	UK	Mexico
25%	26%	12%	Mostly by myself	40%	39%	26%
20%	24%	19%	Mostly with friends	16%	18%	18%
25%	26%	30%	Mostly with a romantic partner	19%	22%	22%
10%	9%	21%	Mostly with family	11%	10%	22%
19%	16%	18%	Equally by myself and with others	14%	11%	13%

**Men in Mexico reported spending – and wishing to spend – more time with family than men in the US and UK reported.** Focus groups in the UK affirmed tremendous variation in how much family matters. There was a definite sense, in the Bermondsey, South London group, of families as close-knit systems of support for these young men, with one young man sharing, "*They always just had my back.*" There was a range of views in the Batley group on closeness to mothers and fathers. The immediate response tended towards valuing the role of the father, with one representative young man sharing, "*My dad's like my mate, I could tell him all sorts.*" But, echoing survey data, more than one participant reported closer relations with his mother. As one young man shared about his mother, "*She could be a good role model, she's always honest, never gets into trouble.*"

**Focus group participants in the UK also discussed the importance of romantic relationships, with insights generally reinforcing those of Table 4.6.** As one young man in Bermondsey, South London, put it, "*Of course – everyone wants that.*" Men identified (the lack of) income, educational attainment, and cultural restrictions as significant barriers to attracting intimate partners:

**"You've got to have some money, you've got to have a degree [...] If you want a nice wife, you've got to bring something to the table."**

**Focus Group Participant, Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK**

**“For a young Asian guy, especially a Muslim growing up, you’re not meant to be interacting with the opposite sex – because you’re not meant to be in a relationship before marriage. So everyone’s always chasing for this, finding this one girl and settling down and getting married.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK

**Finally, participants shared diverging responses about how homophobia influences their friendships and their actions.** As Table 4.7 shows, the Man Box rules are significantly linked with responses about homophobia and friendships with gay men. These links seem to move in opposite directions from one another, however, where being in the Man Box in the US and UK is linked with both (a) refraining from doing something so as not to appear “girly” or gay, and (b) enjoying hanging out socially with an openly gay friend. In other words, adhering to the Man Box means you don’t want to be seen as gay, but you may feel comfortable enough with your highly emphasized heterosexual identity to have and hang out with a gay friend.

**TABLE 4.7 HOMOPHOBIA, ACTIONS, AND FRIENDSHIPS**

Often or very often in the last month

	Man Box	You refrained from doing something because you thought it might appear “girly” or gay	You enjoyed hanging out socially with a gay person whom you consider your friend
US	In	<b>50%</b>	<b>48%</b>
	Out	<b>14%</b>	<b>38%</b>
UK	In	<b>48%</b>	<b>48%</b>
	Out	<b>14%</b>	<b>39%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>23%</b>	<b>28%</b>
	Out	<b>12%</b>	<b>42%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$

**However, this trend is reversed in Mexico, where young men in the Man Box are significantly less likely to report enjoying hanging out socially with a gay friend.** The Mexico findings present a clear, context-specific picture of how being in the Man Box can curtail straight-gay friendships and reinforce homophobia.



Results show that young men are learning how to embrace emotional vulnerability, but that they most often grapple with emotions on their own or with the support of women in their lives. Young men, by and large, do not seek emotional support from their fathers. Fear of appearing vulnerable or gay still has a powerful influence over young men's behaviors, particularly for men in the Man Box. Additionally, heterosexual young men display varying levels of comfort with having openly gay friends.

## **“[He'd have] all his ties cut off, and he'd be on his own”**

### Exploring sexuality and homophobia in the UK focus groups

While members of the Bermondsey, South London, UK group claimed that they, and their local community, were generally tolerant of gay people, they recognized that there was still a lot of homophobia. One young man shared, *“It's new to a lot of people; some people are still uncomfortable with it.”* Another said that, although he didn't think being gay was wrong, he disliked homosexuality being “promoted,” as he saw it, by the media.

Although the Beeston Hill, Leeds, UK group felt there was increasing social acceptance of homosexuality, it was still a difficult issue for participants to talk about. More than one member of the group said they had no problem with someone being gay, and one participant said he had some gay friends, but the overriding view was that homosexuality was in contradiction with the

Muslim faith. The group acknowledged that a gay Pakistani who was Muslim would find life tough, with one man sharing, *“They find it very hard to fit in any kind of social activity with their friends or family.”* Moreover, he shared, if [his sexuality] became known outside close family, it is likely that a gay person would *“get all his ties cut off, and he'd be on his own.”*

The Batley, UK group also had difficulty discussing this subject, with the topic leading to teasing within the room. One group member admitted that he used terms such as “faggot,” but argued that this was a form of joking or banter rather than a real insult. At least one participant shared open tolerance, however, saying, *“If one of these lot said ‘I'm gay’ I wouldn't be too fussed really [...] You wouldn't be not mates with them just because they're gay.”*

This text draws from a full report of the qualitative data collection in the UK, exploring these and other themes, to be published by the Open University in 2017.

#### IV.d.

### Risky Behaviors

Do young men's ideas about masculinity relate in meaningful ways to their risky behaviors, namely binge drinking and reckless driving?

**In all three countries, men in the Man Box are more likely than those outside the Man Box to report regular binge drinking and recent traffic accidents.** While results in Mexico showed weaker links with several of the aforementioned tests, the links between adhering to the Man Box and these two risky behaviors were statistically significant in the Mexico sample, as presented in Table 4.8.

TABLE 4.8 RISKY DRINKING AND DRIVING

	Man Box	Drinks to the point of getting drunk once per month or more	Has been in one or more traffic accidents this year
US	In	25%	23%
	Out	20%	9%
UK	In	27%	28%
	Out	23%	7%
Mexico	In	24%	21%
	Out	17%	14%

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$

Focus group participants, particularly in Mexico City, offered insights on manhood and drinking:

**"But with friends there's also the fear of being alone, and you end up doing things you don't want, and doing it again, I think because the fear of being left alone or labeled as weird. That's scary, and that's when you end up drinking, going along with the group, and drinking again and again, to avoid being labeled as the one who doesn't drink, and what it means, and you want your friends to think you're like them."**

**Focus Group Participant**, Mexico City, Mexico

**“What I learned since I was a boy, and that’s a stereotype that has bothered me and has impacted me, is that you have to drink alcohol, and when you go to parties and clubs, because you’re a man, you have to finish the bottle of tequila, or vodka, and you have to endure it, and you have to get a woman drunk and take her.”**

**Focus Group Participant, Mexico City, Mexico**

**In all three countries, men inside the Man Box are significantly more likely to report having been in recent traffic accidents – two to three times more likely.** While our survey did not ask about the exact nature of these accidents, the results are consistent and unsurprising in a world that too often teaches young men to be reckless with their health and safety.



**Too many young men associate being a “real man” with binge drinking and dangerous driving, putting themselves and others at risk when they try to measure up to this harmful standard.**

#### **IV.e.**

### **Attractiveness**

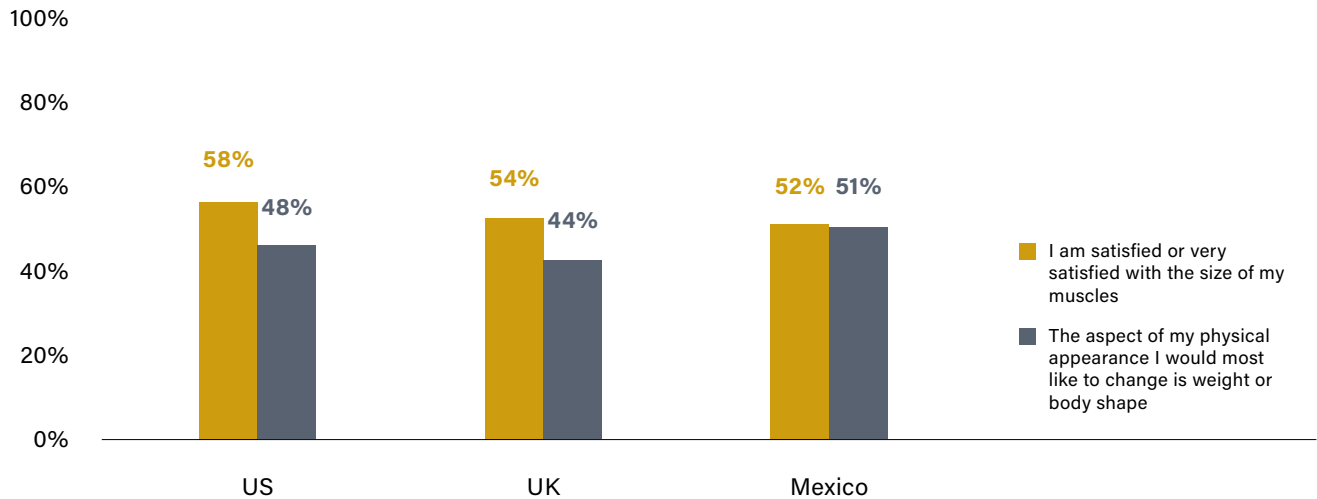
Do young men’s ideas about masculinity relate in meaningful ways to their body image?

**Overall, young men reported a positive body image: 64 percent of respondents in the UK, 70 percent of respondents in the US, and 74 percent of respondents in Mexico reported that they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their physical attractiveness.** Far fewer men, however, are satisfied with the size of their muscles, and nearly half of all respondents’ top choice for what they would change about their appearance is their weight or body shape (see Figure 4.1).

This focus on muscularity was referenced in the focus group discussion in Beeston, UK, where young men in the area often talked about looking good by building up their bodies. While going to the gym and taking part in sports were partly seen as means of releasing tension and coping with stress, working out and athletics were mostly regarded as necessities in order to be tough in a tough area. As one respondent shared, “*Someone*

FIGURE 4.1 MUSCLES, WEIGHT, AND BODY SHAPE

Survey responses about men's physical appearance



*might get battered, they might get jumped, and think that's it, I'm going to start kickboxing. I'm going to start hitting the gym."*

The survey also shows that, in the US and UK, men in the Man Box are significantly more likely to report being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their overall physical appearance, as shown in Table 4.9. This finding resonates with the finding that being in the Man Box is associated with greater life satisfaction.

TABLE 4.9 PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

	Man Box	Percentage of respondents who report being satisfied or very satisfied with overall physical attractiveness
US	In	80%
	Out	61%
UK	In	73%
	Out	56%
Mexico	In	75%
	Out	72%

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$



The survey also finds that men in the Man Box in the US and UK are significantly more likely to report having “often” or “very often” spent an hour or more bathing, grooming, and clothing themselves in the last month, as shown in Table 4.10. This survey item relates to the Man Box rule, “Women don’t go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin,” with which upwards of 40 percent of men in all three countries agreed. To be sure, the confidence required to be truly comfortable with one’s own physical attractiveness, as well as to transgress social norms in the amount of time one spends grooming (even if only in the privacy of one’s bathroom), is admirable.

**TABLE 4.10 BATHING, GROOMING, CLOTHING**

In the last month

	Man Box	You spent an hour or more bathing, grooming, and clothing yourself before going out
US	In	<b>51%</b>
	Out	<b>26%</b>
UK	In	<b>50%</b>
	Out	<b>26%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>31%</b>
	Out	<b>30%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$



Young men’s sense of physical attractiveness, while relatively high, is still primarily associated with muscle bulk and body shape, as opposed to a more inward, individual sense of confidence and attractiveness.

#### IV.f.

### Bullying and Violence

Do young men’s ideas about masculinity relate to their likelihood of experiencing, perpetrating, or intervening to prevent various forms of bullying and violence?

Young men were asked about both experiencing and perpetrating three forms of bullying – verbal, online, and physical – and were also asked about perpetrating sexual harassment against women.

# Bullying and violence definitions

## Experienced

### Bullying - Verbal

Someone, or a group of people, made jokes about you, teased you, or called you names that you did not like, for any reason

### Bullying - Physical

Someone, or a group of people, physically hurt you on purpose by pushing you down, kicking you, or hitting you with a hand, clenched fist, object, or weapon

### Bullying - Online

Someone, or a group of people, insulted you, posted photos meant to embarrass you, or made threats to you on SMS, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, or another app or website

### Sexual Harassment

[not included in survey]

## Perpetrated

### Bullying - Verbal

You made jokes about someone, teased someone, or called someone names that they did not like, for any reason

### Bullying - Physical

You physically hurt someone on purpose by pushing them down, kicking them, or hitting them with a hand, clenched fist, object, or weapon

### Bullying - Online

You insulted someone, posted photos meant to embarrass someone, or made threats to someone on SMS, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, or another app or website

### Sexual Harassment

You made sexual comments to a woman or girl you didn't know, in a public place, like the street, your workplace, your school/university, or in an internet or social media space

**Young men inside the Man Box are dramatically more likely to both experience and perpetrate all three forms of bullying.** As seen in Table 4.11, in all three countries, for all three forms of bullying, men in the Man Box are dramatically – and statistically significantly – more likely to report having been bullied at some point in the last month.

**TABLE 4.11 EXPERIENCES OF BULLYING**

In the last month

	Man Box	Experienced Bullying - Verbal	Experienced Bullying - Online	Experienced Bullying - Physical
US	In	<b>70%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>59%</b>
	Out	<b>43%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>15%</b>
UK	In	<b>76%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>65%</b>
	Out	<b>43%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>19%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>61%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>35%</b>
	Out	<b>52%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>15%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$

Some focus group participants spoke about the daily threat of violence, as did this young man from Washington, DC:

**“Cause it’s like every time you walk around the streets, always a dude looking at you, like [inaudible]. For me, I’ve gotten jumped by a lot of men before, for, being, they thought I was a boy, you know what I am saying? There’s always competition among dudes, like – dudes don’t like us, and I know that. So I really don’t care. I’ll still fight you.”**

**Focus Group Participant**, Washington, DC, US

**Men inside the Man Box are also much more likely to perpetrate bullying than are their peers outside the Man Box.** Where online and physical bullying are concerned (see Table 4.12), men in the Man Box in the US and UK are as much as six or seven times more likely to report having perpetrated this violence than are men outside the Man Box. In both the US and UK, more than half of men in the Man Box reported perpetrating all three forms of bullying within the last month.

**TABLE 4.12 PERPETRATION OF BULLYING**

In the last month

	Man Box	Perpetrated Bullying - Verbal	Perpetrated Bullying - Online	Perpetrated Bullying - Physical
US	In	<b>63%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>52%</b>
	Out	<b>26%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>7%</b>
UK	In	<b>63%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>59%</b>
	Out	<b>23%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>10%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>55%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>28%</b>
	Out	<b>40%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>9%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$ 

**The harms of the Man Box reach beyond bullying; men inside the Man Box are also far more likely to report having perpetrated sexual harassment against a woman or girl in the last month.** Men in the Man Box in Mexico are three times more likely than their peers outside the Man Box to report having perpetrated sexual harassment. In the US and UK, men in the Man Box are six times more likely, as shown in Table 4.13. This finding adds further evidence that restrictive notions about manhood are among the root causes of men's too-frequent use of various forms of violence against women.

**TABLE 4.13 PERPETRATION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

In the last month

	Man Box	Perpetrated Sexual Harassment
US	In	<b>54%</b>
	Out	<b>9%</b>
UK	In	<b>60%</b>
	Out	<b>9%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>32%</b>
	Out	<b>10%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$ 

**Violence pervades the lives of young men inside the Man Box. If there is one positive finding, it is that the young men in the Man Box are also more likely to attempt to intervene to stop violence.** As Table 4.14 shows, men in the Man Box in all three countries are significantly more likely to report having intervened to stop a physical fight among friends or others in the last month. This again shows the contradictions of the Man Box; the men inside it are more likely to use violence, to experience violence, and, at the same time, to intervene to stop violence.

**TABLE 4.14 INTERVENTION IN FIGHTS**

In the last month

	Man Box	You intervened to stop a physical fight among friends or other guys you knew
US	In	<b>48%</b>
	Out	<b>16%</b>
UK	In	<b>48%</b>
	Out	<b>16%</b>
Mexico	In	<b>25%</b>
	Out	<b>19%</b>

Bold and italic numbers represent statistically significant relationships at  $p < .05$



The Man Box is an enormously violent place, with negative repercussions for young men themselves, for young women, and for others around them.



# ANALYSIS

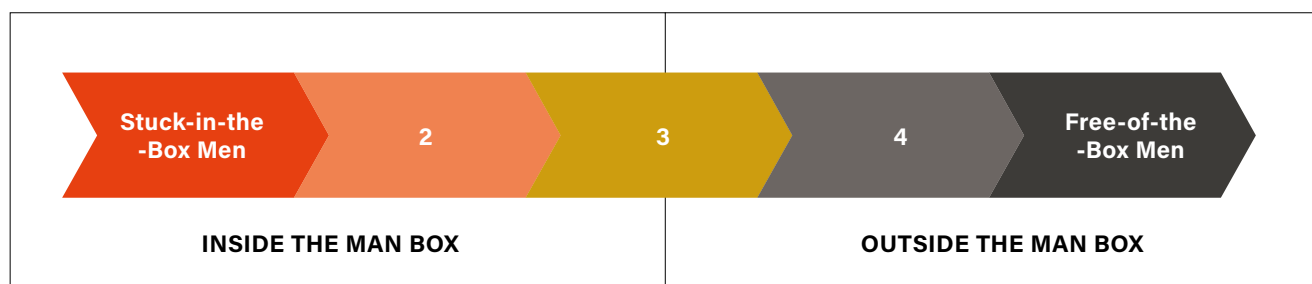
## The Bumpy Path From “Stuck-in-the-Box Men” to “Free-of-the-Box Men”

**At first glance, some findings appear contradictory.** For instance, young men in the Man Box are more satisfied with their lives, even as they display more symptoms of depression. Men in the Man Box adhere to the most rigid gender norms, yet also feel freer to transgress certain norms, such as by crying in front of male friends or spending time on indulgent grooming.

**These are real contradictions. We believe, however, that they are accurate and logical representations of young men’s conflicted inner lives and the dilemmas they face in navigating society’s contradictory ideals of manhood.** Young men’s relationships with the ideals of manhood are complex and confusing, and the process of breaking out of the Man Box, for some men, is neither perfectly linear nor straightforward. Young men reap certain benefits from staying inside the Man Box – not the least of which is receiving approval for being “real men.” At the same time, as we have seen in the prior section, living in the Man Box exacts tremendous costs. Breaking out of the box is not as simple as one decision or one life step. Indeed, if it were obviously and unambiguously disadvantageous to conform to the rigid norms of the Man Box, few, if any, men would do so. That is the dilemma of manhood in many settings.

**This section analyzes these contradictions in further detail.** For this analysis, we break the study samples into five categories (quintiles) using the same Man Box scale items. Men in quintile 1 are the approximately 20 percent of respondents with the most inequitable responses to Man Box scale items; we call them “Stuck-in-the-Box Men.” Men in quintile 5 are the approximately 20 percent with the most equitable responses; we call them “Free-of-the-Box Men.” Men in quintiles 2, 3, and 4 don’t have a special label, but represent the second, third, and fourth quintiles in the same analysis. Men in quintile 3 are those hovering closest to the country average Man Box score – some just a little higher, some just a little lower.

**FIGURE 5.1 QUINTILES FROM “STUCK-IN-THE-BOX MEN” TO “FREE-OF-THE-BOX MEN”**



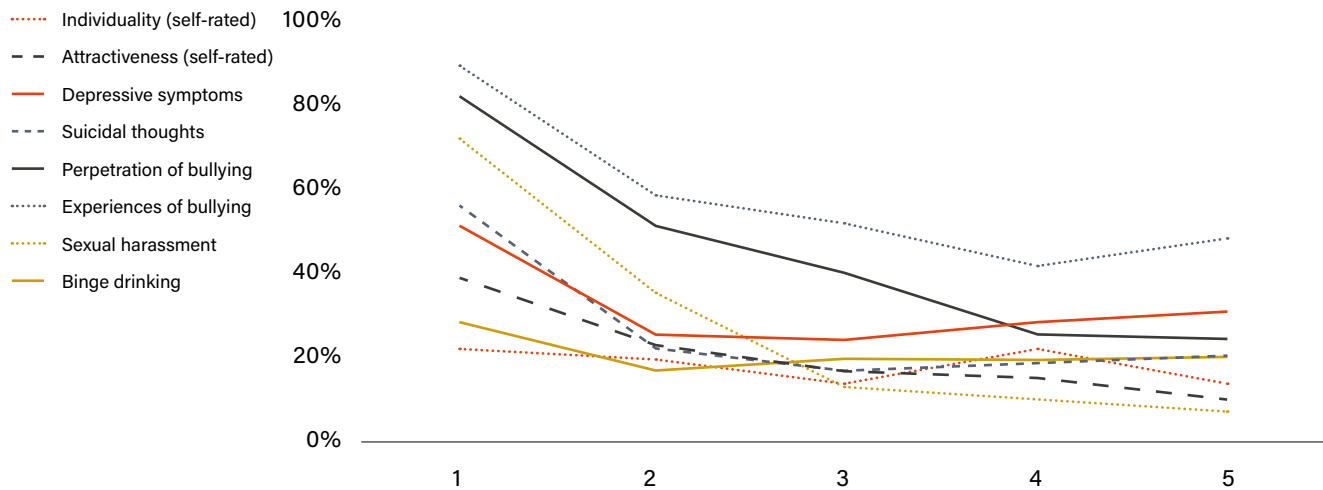
As the following country-specific sections will show, in nearly all cases, “Stuck-in-the-Box Men” reported much higher levels of self-rated attractiveness (i.e. they say they think they are attractive), for instance, than men in the middle category do, or even than “Free-of-the-Box Men” do. Yet, at the same time, “Stuck-in-the-Box Men” also show disturbing levels of depression, suicidal thoughts, and bullying. We see similar, though less stark, trends related to men’s “ability to be myself on a daily basis” – that is, “Stuck-in-the-Box Men” reported higher levels of this sense of individuality. What these findings suggest is that, in a society that still conveys rigid messages about what is required to be a “real man,” there is a benefit, however short-sighted, in obeying these rules. When you obey the rules, you may feel some security in your identity. You may superficially think you look like those “real men” on television or in the media. When you obey the rules, you have less fear of being ostracized. As a result, “Free-of-the-Box Men” have taken on an extra risk of social isolation, exclusion, and self-doubt, even as they reap many benefits from breaking out of the Man Box, as seen elsewhere in this report.

**V.a.**

## A Closer Look at the United States

“Stuck-in-the-Box Men” in the United States reported the highest ratings of individuality and attractiveness of any quintile of young men. This may seem counterintuitive and obvious at the same time: young men in the US who most conform are also those who most believe that they are expressing their individuality. This is compelling evidence of the comforts of conforming to social norms related to gender identity. At the same time, the “Stuck-in-the-Box Men” pay a price for living in the deepest interior of the Man Box, showing very high levels of bullying (both experiences and perpetration), depression, suicidal thoughts, and other negative factors.

**FIGURE 5.2 BUMPY PATH, UNITED STATES**



	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Individuality (self-rated)</b>	21%	19%	13%	21%	13%
<b>Attractiveness (self-rated)</b>	39%	22%	16%	14%	9%
<b>Depressive symptoms</b>	51%	25%	23%	28%	29%
<b>Suicidal thoughts</b>	56%	21%	16%	18%	19%
<b>Perpetration of bullying</b>	81%	50%	39%	24%	23%
<b>Experiences of bullying</b>	87%	58%	52%	41%	47%
<b>Sexual harassment</b>	71%	34%	13%	10%	7%
<b>Binge drinking</b>	27%	17%	19%	19%	18%

**“Free-of-the-Box Men” in the US show the second highest rates of meeting the screening standard for depression, behind the “Stuck-in-the-Box Men.”** Stuck-in-the-Box Men’s rates of meeting this standard are drastically higher than those for all other men; nonetheless, this finding shows that breaking out of the Man Box can be associated with experiences of depression. This is not surprising in a society that still punishes young men for breaking out of the Man Box.

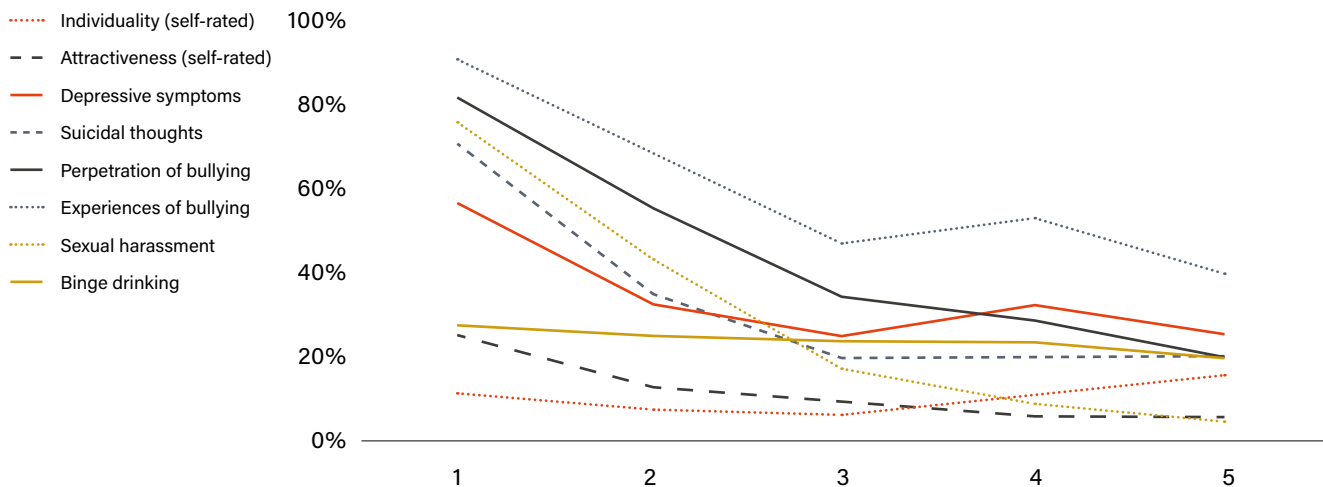


## V.b.

# A Closer Look at the United Kingdom

Encouragingly, young men's reports of individuality improve in the higher quintiles in the UK, reaching the highest rates with the "Free-of-the-Box Men." This finding suggests that, within our UK sample, breaking out of the Man Box produces a boost in young men's sense of their ability to be themselves. (The reverse of this trend is found in the US.) Unfortunately, young men's sense of their attractiveness does not move in the same direction. In the UK, as in the US, men most in the Man Box are also those most likely to hold the highest opinions of their own attractiveness.

FIGURE 5.3 BUMPY PATH, UNITED KINGDOM



	1	2	3	4	5
Individuality (self-rated)	12%	8%	7%	11%	16%
Attractiveness (self-rated)	25%	12%	10%	6%	6%
Depressive symptoms	57%	33%	24%	31%	26%
Suicidal thoughts	69%	35%	19%	19%	20%
Perpetration of bullying	81%	56%	34%	28%	20%
Experiences of bullying	90%	69%	47%	52%	40%
Sexual harassment	75%	43%	17%	9%	5%
Binge drinking	27%	25%	23%	24%	19%

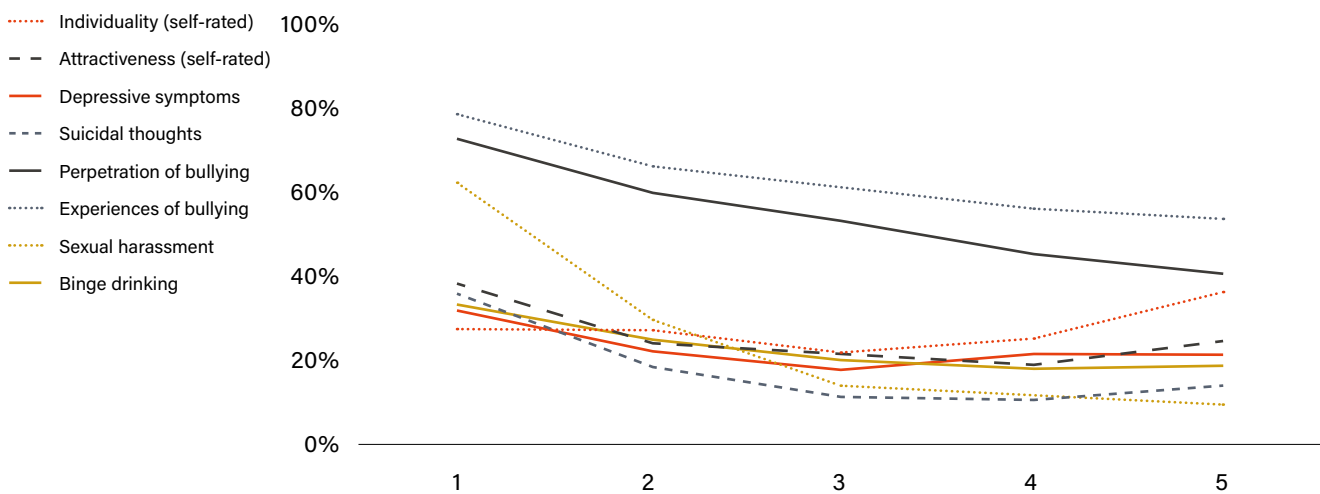
There is a dramatic relationship between inhabiting the most extreme corners of the Man Box and bullying (both experience and perpetration), sexual harassment perpetration, suicidal thoughts, and depression in the UK. This finding reflects the major themes presented earlier in the report.

## V.c.

# A Closer Look at Mexico

As in the UK, Mexican respondents' reports of individuality improve in the higher quintiles, reaching the highest rates with the "Free-of-the-Box Men." Unlike either of the other two countries, we also see a slight uptick whereby "Free-of-the-Box Men" in Mexico are more likely to hold higher self-ratings of their attractiveness than are men in quintiles 3 or 4. Ideally, in a society that had completely done away with the Man Box, we would expect to see these kinds of associations to a much more pronounced degree: breaking free of regressive, limiting social pressures should, in theory, boost young men's feelings of individuality and attractiveness.

FIGURE 5.4 BUMPY PATH, MEXICO



**FIGURE 5.4 BUMPY PATH, MEXICO, CONTINUED**

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Individuality (self-rated)</b>	27%	27%	22%	25%	36%
<b>Attractiveness (self-rated)</b>	37%	24%	22%	19%	24%
<b>Depressive symptoms</b>	32%	22%	17%	21%	21%
<b>Suicidal thoughts</b>	36%	18%	11%	10%	14%
<b>Perpetration of bullying</b>	73%	60%	53%	45%	40%
<b>Experiences of bullying</b>	79%	66%	60%	56%	54%
<b>Sexual harassment</b>	63%	30%	14%	11%	9%
<b>Binge drinking</b>	33%	25%	19%	17%	19%

**In other outcome areas – with the notable exceptions of all three forms of violence – the Man Box influence in the Mexico sample is not quite as pronounced as it is in the US and UK.** However, we do see a dramatic relationship between Man Box quintile and Mexican men’s experiences and perpetration of bullying, with “Stuck-in-the-Box Men” experiencing and perpetrating the most bullying and “Free-of-the-Box Men,” the least. The difference in perpetration of sexual harassment across the quintiles is staggering; the rate plummets from 63 percent perpetration among “Stuck-in-the-Box Men” to 9 percent perpetration among “Free-of-the-Box Men.”

**So what does all this mean? This deeper analysis confirms two things:**



**First, social norms and ideals about manhood are complex, and many men hold contradictory views about them.** There are benefits to staying inside the Man Box: it provides young men with a sense of belonging, of living up to what is expected of them. Friends, parents, and romantic partners may praise them. However, when those same norms tell men to be aggressive all the time, to repress emotions, and to fight every time someone threatens them, the Man Box demands that they pretend to be someone they are not. The resulting life can be violent and lonely.



**Second, breaking out of the Man Box is not easy. It is not something that young men can do on their own.** All of us, as young men and young women, parents, educators, the media, teachers, romantic partners, and members of society, need to be part of the process of reinforcing positive, equitable, unrestrictive ideas of manhood – in other words, of breaking the Man Box. Conforming to the norms of the Man Box often provides a superficial sense of security and self-satisfaction, while at the same time compelling men to mask the insecurity, sense of isolation, and desire for deeper personal connection that “real men” are not supposed to show. It is time for all of us to work to break this destructive cycle and to break the Man Box.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There are many tools and media resources that support the process of breaking the Man Box. The authors recommend the 2015 film, *The Mask You Live In*, in particular, as well as the aforementioned research of Niobe Way, particularly *Deep Secrets*.



# CONCLUSION

**The overall conclusion is that the Man Box – a set of socially reinforced rules about what “real men” should do – is alive and well in the US, the UK, and Mexico.** At the same time, a majority of the men interviewed support ideas of gender equality, and they affirm that men should be encouraged to engage in what were once considered to be traditional female activities, such as childcare.

**Some young men find a sense of security and safety inside the Man Box, even as it causes them – and others around them – harm.** For some young men, the Man Box seems to be a source of security, perhaps a mechanism by which to pretend that all is okay. For some young men, being inside the Man Box enables them to feel okay having gay friends, or reaching out to help others. These positive aspects of the Man Box, however, are more the exception than the rule.

**The harmful effects of the Man Box are severe, real, and troubling.** The majority of men who adhere to the rules of the Man Box are more likely to put their health and well-being at risk, to cut themselves off from intimate friendships, to resist seeking help when they need it, to experience depression, and to think frequently about ending their own life. Young men inside the Man Box are more likely to have used violence against other young men – verbally, physically, and online – and to have sexually harassed women. They are more likely to have experienced violence themselves. They are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as binge drinking, they are two to three times more likely to have been in traffic accidents, and they are less likely to have close relationships and friendships.

**Young men's relationships with the ideals of manhood are complex and confusing, and the process of breaking out of the Man Box is neither perfectly linear nor straightforward. The study reveals some contradictory trends.** Young men in the Man Box are more satisfied with their lives, even as they display more symptoms of depression, for instance. Men in the Man Box adhere to the most rigid gender norms, yet also feel freer to transgress certain norms, such as crying in front of male friends or spending time on indulgent grooming. These are real contradictions. We believe, however, that they are accurate and logical representations of the dilemmas young men face in navigating society's contradictory ideals of manhood. Young men reap certain benefits from staying inside the Man Box: it provides them with a sense of belonging, of living up to what is expected of them. Friends and parents may praise them. However, when those same norms tell men to be aggressive all the time, to repress emotions, and to fight every time someone threatens them, the Man Box demands that they pretend to be someone they are not, and the resulting life can be violent and lonely.

**Breaking out of the box is not something that young men can do on their own.** Indeed, if conforming to the rigid norms of the Man Box were obviously disadvantageous to men, few men would do so. The picture is more complicated, and navigating the rewards and punishments of manhood is a real dilemma in many settings. In this reality, all of us – young men and young women, parents, educators, the media, teachers, romantic partners, and all members of society – have a role to play in reinforcing positive, equitable, unrestrictive ideas of manhood. In other words, it is time for all of us to work to break out of – and break – the Man Box.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix I

### Investigating Gender Norms and Masculinity in Household Survey Research

Since 2008, Promundo and research partners have asked questions, similar to those applied in this study, of more than 45,000 men and women in more than 30 countries, as part of the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) and related studies. IMAGES includes representative household samples of men and women aged 18 to 59 and has provided the basis to refine a set of questions to assess the extent to which men are aware of social norms about manhood (how family, media, peers, and others express these ideas to them); how much they themselves subscribe to these ideas; and the relationship between those attitudes and key practices and behaviors. By testing questions and associations in numerous cultural settings, Promundo and its research partners have learned and refined ways of encouraging men to provide honest answers about their opinions on gender norms, as well as about their sex and family lives, their mental health, their use and experiences of violence, and other sensitive topics.

#### **Recommended examples of such research include:**

**Barker, G., Contreras, J.M., Heilman, B., Singh, A.K., Verma, R.K., & Nascimento, M. (2011).** *Evolving Men: Initial Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)*. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Promundo.

**Fleming, P.J., McCleary-Sills, J., Morton, M., Levto, R., Heilman, B., & Barker, G. (2015).** Risk Factors for Men's Lifetime Perpetration of Physical Violence against Intimate Partners: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) in Eight Countries. Dalal, K., ed. PLOS ONE. 10(3): e0118639.

**Fulu, E., Warner, X., Miedema, S., Jewkes, R., Roselli, T. & Lang, J. (2013).** *Why Do Some Men Use Violence against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific*. Bangkok: UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV.

**Heilman, B., Hebert, L., & Paul-Gera, N. (2014).** The Making of Sexual Violence: How Does a Boy Grow Up to Commit Rape? Evidence from Five IMAGES Countries. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Promundo.

**Kato-Wallace, J., Barker, G., Sharafi, L., Mora, L., & Lauro, G. (2016).** Adolescent Boys and Young Men: Engaging Them as Supporters of Gender Equality and Health and Understanding Their Vulnerabilities. Washington, DC: Promundo-US. New York City: UNFPA.

**Levtov, R., Barker, G., Contreras-Urbina, M., Heilman, B., & Verma, R. (2014).** Pathways to Gender-equitable Men: Findings from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey in Eight Countries. *Men and Masculinities*, 17(5).

## Appendix II

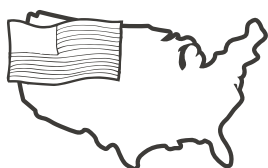
# Qualitative Research Details

Focus group discussions were led by Promundo staff in Washington, DC and in Mexico City, and by researchers from Open University in London and the North of England. All focus groups comprised fewer than ten participants, broadly within the age range of 17 to 30, and took place in September and October 2016. A stand-alone report on the qualitative research in the UK is forthcoming from Open University. Conversations focused on five main themes, with additional directions of conversation dictated by the participants' preferences and lives. The five main themes were:

1. **A “real man”** – How would you define a “real man”?
2. **Pressures** – What kinds of pressures do you feel to prove that you are a “real man”?
3. **Individuality in the face of pressures** – How do these pressures reflect the life you, individually, want to live?
4. **Putting ideas into action** – What are some of the actions you take in your daily life that reflect your values about how young men should live?
5. **Hopes for the future** – If you think about any sons and grandsons you may have, the next generations, how would you like them to define a “real man”?

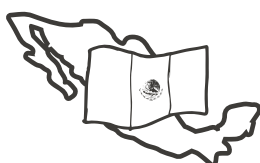
In addition to these five main framing questions, group facilitators were prepared with several in-depth follow-up questions and probes for these and other themes. Additional details on the groups follow.

Washington, DC,  
**US**



The two focus groups in Washington, DC were conducted in September 2016. The first focus group included eight participants, seven of whom identified as African-American. Two men identified as transgender, and another two identified as queer. The second focus group included ten participants, most of whom identified as Latino, with two African-American participants. All Washington, DC, participants were between the ages of 18 and 30.

Mexico City,  
**Mexico**



The three focus groups in Mexico City were conducted in October 2016. The first focus group included ten participants, all identifying as heterosexual, aged 18 to 24. This group included one young father. The second focus group included seven participants, all identifying as heterosexual, aged 25 to 30. The third and final focus group included nine participants, all of whom identified as homosexual, aged 18 to 30.

**United  
Kingdom**



The Open University team conducted four focus group discussions in four different locations in London and the North of England. The Bermondsey, South London, group consisted of four young men, aged 20 to 24. All were from Black or minority ethnic groups, describing themselves as Black African, Black Caribbean, or of mixed heritage. The Elephant and Castle, South London, group included seven men aged 18 to 28. Two members of the group described themselves as White British, one as Black British, one as Black African, one as Black African/Caribbean, one as Latin American, and one as mixed race (White and Black African). The Beeston Hill, Leeds, group was composed of nine young Muslim men, eight from Pakistani backgrounds and one from a Bangladeshi background. Ages ranged from 18 to 29. Five of the participants were employed and five were students (one ticked both “employed” and “student”). The Batley, Yorkshire, group included five young men, all members of the same rugby team. All were white, all were students, and all were 17 years old. Four said they had no religion, and one did not respond to the question.











The Man Box:  
A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico



AXE

