

# The problem of masculinity



**Will van der Hart is an ordained Anglican priest and director of the mental health charity Mind and Soul Foundation. He discusses the problems of masculinity in today's society, particularly toxic masculinity and the Church's role in advocating for positive masculinity.**

## What's the issue?

Many months ago, my daughter raised concerns over the influence of a YouTuber, Andrew Tate, who has since been arrested by Romanian authorities over allegations of his involvement in sexual and trafficking offences. My daughter's young male friends were tuning in to his broadcasts and absorbing the most misogynistic and vile parodies of masculine identity.

In my view, traditional constructs of masculinity have been eroded in our culture, leaving young men confused and frustrated. They are unsure how to position themselves and demonstrate their strength in a society where traditional masculine roles are no longer accepted, leading some young men to seek out harmful online content that promotes misogynistic and violent views of masculinity.



Like many middle-aged men, I look back with some embarrassment (and discomfort) at the masculine stereotypes that were expressed in my early adulthood. But the value of men, and whether their behaviours were appropriate, was simply not on the agenda. Cycle forward 30 years, and the dominance and privilege of hegemonic masculinity (the idea that heterosexual men are inherently dominant, the stronger gender and should be in power) was being slowly eroded. For most, this was a welcome rebalancing of society against prejudiced and chauvinist attitudes. According to McKinsey's annual report 'Women in the workplace', women now make up 48 per cent of corporate employees and 28 per cent of board roles; a seismic shift since the 1990s. But herein lies the problem – while the stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity have been eroded for many mature men, they haven't been effectively replaced by something that offers aspiration and resonance for the next generations.

## The dangers of toxic masculinity

Worryingly, the belief that 'men should naturally be the dominant gender' still exists within our society and is gathering new momentum among younger men through online material. The lack of positive role models has contributed to the rise of toxic masculinity, a set of behaviours that rigidly define 'acceptable masculinity'. These behaviours often oppress or diminish women and girls and limit the value of sensitivity and nurturing in men.

The National Police Chiefs Council has declared violence against women a 'national emergency'. Their report, published in July 2024, revealed that violence against women had reached 'epidemic' levels. Between 2018 and 2023, there was a 37 per cent increase in violent crimes against women and girls, accounting for 20 per cent of all crimes recorded in England and Wales. Women are still most likely to be killed by a domestic partner, and sexual assaults average 798,000

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per year in the UK. Discriminatory behaviour based on gender bias continues to create barriers for women seeking promotion at work. Research from Liverpool University highlights the negative effects of harmful gender norms and behaviours, particularly the link between masculinity, sexual objectification, and the conquest of women, which is directly linked to sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment.

## The Church and masculinity

A positively defined masculinity that benefits everyone is sorely needed. Despite Jesus' radical empowerment of women in the New Testament, the Church has not been neutral in its approach to gender. While Jesus celebrated women's faith, welcomed them as disciples and appeared first to women after his resurrection, the apostle Paul's instructions on Church order in the first century have been used to reinforce masculine dominance in both the Church and society. The Church must acknowledge that these teachings have been used to justify the patriarchal oppression and abuse of women throughout history.

## Jesus and masculinity

I love Jesus' way of being a man, but I see little made of it as a model. Jesus' masculinity is deeply secure and rooted – he never seeks to establish dominance. Jesus is not saccharine sweet, but resilient, boundaried and sometimes gruff. He speaks truth plainly, but with humour and at times, tenderness. 'Ecce homo' – 'Behold the man' (John 19:5), said Pontius Pilate as he presented Jesus, whipped, bound, and crowned with thorns, to a hostile crowd before his crucifixion – *this* is our counter-cultural portrait of masculinity. Jesus' example, without the distortion of ego and insecurity, shows that the need is not to learn how to be a man, but how to be ourselves.

## Steps to challenge the 'toxic masculinity' narrative

- Directly challenge sexist, misogynistic, and discriminatory behaviour wherever you see it.
- Form a core group within your church who can work together to address unhealthy models of masculinity and offer healthy alternatives.
- In light of the epidemic of domestic violence, consider preaching on anger management, treating people with honour and emphasizing that violence against women is unacceptable. See [restored-uk.org](https://restored-uk.org) for church resources.

🎧 Listen to Will on the Roots for Churches podcast, <https://rootsforchurches.podbean.com>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cne4vw1x83po>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2023/03/27/men4change-toolkit-launched-to-support-young-men-in-talking-about-masculinity-gender-inequalities-and-sexual-violence/#:~:text=The%20research%20found%20that%20dominant,physical%2C%20emotional%20and%20mental%20health.>