

International Men's Day - a time to talk

This article is intended to start a discussion on the International Men's Day UK themes.

19 November 2021

Friday 19 November is International Men's Day, and in the UK the themes are:

- Making a positive difference to the wellbeing and lives of men and boys
- Raising awareness and/or funds for charities supporting men and boys' wellbeing
- Promoting a positive conversation about men, manhood and masculinity

This article, co-written by Grace Woolford and [Alistair Taylor](#) is intended to start a discussion on these themes.

The first question many people ask, is why do we need an International Men's Day? Why does it matter?

A conversation about men and masculinity is long overdue, but opportunities for men to open up and talk about how they feel and what it means to be a man haven't always been easily accessible. With unhealthy masculinity and its victims in the headlines, discussing masculinity can feel even more difficult. This isn't new and it's not going away. International Men's Day creates and maintains a space where everyone can start and continue these conversations.

So where does a positive conversation about men, manhood and masculinity start?

Traits traditionally viewed as masculine in Western society include strength, courage, independence, leadership, and assertiveness. These are all valued traits, but they are not exclusively male, and represent just a subset of the traits that humans can show. Being automatically attributed with these traits as a man can create unrealistic expectations, or undeserved associations. International Men's Day is an opportunity to celebrate other male and masculine traits, such as creativity, empathy, ingenuity, vulnerability and emotional intelligence.

It is important to remember that masculinity in itself is not an exclusively male characteristic. Masculinity is a performance, and what is interesting is how society responds to it. 'In the 1990s, the late Stanford neuroscientist [Ben Barres transitioned from female to male](#). He was in his 40s, mid-career, and afterward, he marvelled at the stark changes in his professional life. Now that society saw him as male, his ideas were taken more seriously. He was able to complete a whole sentence without being interrupted by a man. A colleague who didn't know he was transgender even praised his work as "much better than his sister's."

Grace Woolford

Browne Jacobson

"I considered myself a 'tomboy' as a child, because I considered being feminine and 'girly' to be 'weak'. I wanted to be considered an equal by the boys in my class at school, to show I was just as 'good' as they were."

What action can we take?

A positive conversation about men should also consider the boundaries of 'being a man'? Where should a line be drawn, if at all, between 'man' and 'not man'? Traditional concepts of gender imply drawing a hard line, but this is inconsistent with growing recognition of the non-binary.

For those unfamiliar with the term, non-binary is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely. 'Boys' may not necessarily be boys.

Maybe International Men's Day is a good opportunity to acknowledge that being a man is a spectrum condition - in terms of biological and physiological characteristics - and the varying socially-constructed characteristics of 'men' and 'women' established by society around us. Manhood is about a diversity of characteristics, not a one-size fits all. Should being assigned male or female at birth destine a person to a rigid path?

This flies in the face of how being a man is portrayed by the media and society. Adverts featuring digitally enhanced models, movie action heroes, lifestyle advice featuring unrealistic bucket lists, all add up to a template for being a man that bears little relation to the diverse, messy, vulnerable reality of menkind.

It is then perhaps no wonder that being a 'man' can often feel like a square peg in a round hole.

With men being told to fulfil a role that is unrealistic and damaging, to them and others, it's little wonder they suffer high levels of stress and mental illness. Men aged 40-49 have the highest suicide rates in the UK, and men report lower levels of life satisfaction than women according to the Government's national wellbeing survey. Around $\frac{3}{4}$ of registered suicide deaths in 2020 were for men, which follows a consistent trend back to the mid-1990s. And yet men are discouraged from expressing emotion or fear the consequences of doing so. The phrase "be a man" implies not allowing your vulnerability to show and not seeking help, and statistics show men are less likely to access psychological therapies than women: only 36% of referrals to NHS talking therapies are for men. How long can you bury your feelings before they explode and cause harm, to yourself and others?

Toxic gender roles can also lead to destructive or damaging behaviour being tolerated because, "boys will be boys". This affects all of us. UK government stats tell us that men are nearly twice as likely as women to be a victim of violent crime and among children, boys are more likely than girls to be victims of violence. For the parents of young men this is a terrifying statistic. On the flip side, men are also staggeringly more likely to be the perpetrators of violent crime. This calls for urgent, crucial change for the benefit of everybody.

Beneath these evil killings [including those of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa] lies a culture of normalising sexual harassment, abuse and violence. This culture doesn't only target women, men are victims too. But 99% of the perpetrators are men. This needs to change, and it starts by changing our language. Not 'violence against women' as if there were no active perpetrators - let's call it violence by men.

Wera Hobhouse, 23rd March 2021.

This International Men's Day, we feel all people should be asking how we change this? How do we discard toxic gender roles, and adopt a new model of masculinity that accentuates the positive while eliminating the negative? Perhaps there is no "right" way to be a man.

A natural response is to look for role models and say "why can't you be more James Bond / David Beckham / David Brent?", but that excuses us from being the change we want to see. We're all role models, and men in privileged positions - which must include the legal profession - should be able to recognise that they can be agents for change, to benefit all. Conversations about men, manhood and masculinity are about a direction of travel and knowing that you're not alone on that journey, even if we start from different places and may have different destinations in mind.

Alistair Taylor

Browne Jacobson

“International Men’s Day is an opportunity to talk about the kind of men we want to be, and also the kind of men we want the boys and young men around us to become. Only by airing these issues in the open can we make a positive difference to the wellbeing and lives of men and boys.”

We must also recognise that it's not going to be a simple, short or comfortable journey. No one is prejudice-free, and acknowledging one's privilege is a profoundly uncomfortable experience. Also, no one is born knowing this stuff and looking back at things said and done in ignorance is painful – but we all do it, have done it and will do it again. To make progress we must sit with this discomfort and learn from it. Change may not come easily, and no one can change the way their mind works overnight; perhaps a trait we could all try to emulate is being kind and supporting others on the same journey.

Below are links to online resources about International Men’s day, masculinity and mental health to help with route planning.

At Browne Jacobson, we're hosting an internal Courageous Conversation on #InternationalMen'sDay (19 November) to tackle some of these issues and share resources.

International Men’s Day resources

[‘menkind’ – podcast by Mark Watson and Michael Chakraverty](#)

[‘The Transgender Issue: An Argument For Justice’ – book by Shon Faye](#)

[‘Why I’m Done Trying to be “Man Enough”’ – TEDTalk by Justin Baldoni](#)

[‘What is Female Masculinity?’ - Women, nonbinary, and gender-neutral folks discuss what it means for them to be masculine](#)

[‘Unpacking the link between football and violence’ – Metro article by Aidan Milan, 13th July 2021](#)

[Men after #MeToo: ‘There’s a narrative that masculinity is fundamentally toxic’ | #MeToo movement | The Guardian](#)

[Humen – The Men’s Mental Health Charity](#)

[Mind – Mental Health Charity](#)

[‘How to raise a boy: my mission to bring up a son fit for the 21st century’ – Article by Tom Lamont](#)

<https://metoomvmt.org/>- Beyond the Hashtag: #metoo 4th anniversary.

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