



Addressing men's violence against women

A practical guide on
shaping men's perspectives



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About this guide

This guide sets out an approach based on cognitive science on how to talk to men about men's violence against women and girls and gender equality, which:

- improves men's understanding of the link between gender inequality and men's violence against women and girls, and men's role in ending it
- shows that gender equality benefits everyone and gains support for it
- makes ending men's violence against women and girls feel personally relevant to men

Content warning:
As with all our work, this guide covers sensitive and challenging topics. Please consider your wellbeing and read at your own pace.



Who should use this guide?

This guide is for anyone communicating with men and boys about masculinity, equality, sex and relationships, or any subject related to men's violence against women and girls.

That includes outreach workers, youth workers, community engagement workers, equality and human rights organisations, the women's sector, communications professionals, and campaigners.

The recommendations included here are about communicating with the 'conflicted middle' or persuadable men. That is, men who could support gender equality and ending men's violence against women and girls but instead are surrounded by messaging, for example in the media, that prevents them from engaging.

These men hold conflicting ideas and beliefs at the same time. We can use their positive and progressive beliefs to persuade them to engage in preventing men's violence against women and girls.

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Why we need to tell a new story

Shifting communication to shift attitudes

To end men's violence against women and girls, we need to involve men in solutions. But too often, the way we talk about this violence elicits resistance, backlash, and even abuse. This is usually because we're trying to appeal to heads, not hearts. Our messages are often untested and can backfire – not just failing to convince or persuade people, but switching them off the issue completely, or reinforcing the very beliefs we want to change.

To effectively engage men in Scotland, we need to understand what shapes their current attitudes about masculinity, gender equality, and men's violence against women and girls. Then we can tap into the positive beliefs they hold to inspire support for change.

Attitudes towards men's violence against women and girls – and legislation to tackle it – have changed for the better in Scotland. For example, domestic abuse is now regarded as a crime, recognised as a key equality issue, and is openly discussed in mainstream media and parliament.

In recent decades, understandings of womanhood have expanded and flourished and we are more aware that rigid 'traditional' and increasingly obsolete notions of masculinity are harmful. But in the absence of positive role models of masculinity to replace obsolete and outdated ones, there has been a resurgence in propaganda that idolises violent and abusive men and promotes misogynistic views. We have seen a worrying step backwards in attitudes towards gender equality and men's violence against women and girls, especially among some young men.



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How strategic communications and framing works

One tool in the toolbox

Remember, framing is about how we communicate with a particular audience in a way that shifts attitudes, builds support for solutions, and changes narratives. It guides us on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave out, depending on our audience.

Strategic communications is not about changing who we are or what we stand for. The women's movement will continue to campaign, call for change, and hold the government to account for ending men's violence against women and girls. Strategic communications is one of the primary prevention tools we can use, but it's not the only one.

We should also recognise that persuadable men are a diverse audience with different ages, relationships, and jobs (more insight to this is available in our [research report](#)). They may also be part of other audiences we wish to communicate with, such as decision makers.

Strategic communications is a powerful approach to long-term social change that's rooted in evidence from cognitive science about how humans really think, process information, and form opinion.

When we talk about any issue, we never communicate in a vacuum. Everyone makes sense of the world through their own beliefs, knowledge, and experiences, and every word we say triggers conscious and unconscious associations, values, and biases.

Strategic communications work with these understandings, intentionally framing social issues to give people a new perspective. Frames are familiar stories and concepts that help us understand the world. How we frame an issue influences what we think about it, how we feel, and what we do.

The more we repeat frames, the more likely people will believe and adopt them. By reinforcing our frames over time and at scale, strategic communications leads to narrative change – a shift in how large sections of the public perceive an issue.



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Framing recommendations at a glance

Our research highlights tools we can use to engage with conflicted, persuadable men on issues of gender inequality and men's violence against women and girls. Here's a quick overview:

Connect through shared values

Connecting to people's values is a powerful way to help them see equality issues from a different perspective. By appealing to men's existing, compassionate values and sense of what's morally right (for example, respect), we can increase support for our campaigning issues.

1

Highlight solutions and show how change is possible

We need to talk about the better world we're striving for and how we can create it, show that we've made progress, and explain men's roles in achieving long-term change.

2

Link individual stories to structural change

Use stories to connect issues to the structural inequalities that cause them. This can help us overcome a focus on individuals' behaviour and the myth that violence against women and girls is 'only due to a few bad individuals'.

3

Tell a new story about gender roles

Framed messages about flexible gender roles and masculinity can help to move people on from fixed views about how men and women should be, and their roles in relationships and society. It also helps if we can show how gender equality benefits everyone.

4

Make it relatable

Audiences have different understandings of what we mean when we talk about violence, masculinity, and gender inequality. We need to explain these in clear, relatable ways, and avoid leading conversations and communications with words and phrases that will reinforce their existing misbeliefs and misunderstandings. This means giving concrete examples and guidance and avoiding jargon and technical concepts.

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Connect through shared values

Values are powerful. They're often the entry point to more fruitful conversations about social justice issues – because they're positive things that people already think, feel, or aspire to.

Connecting with people's compassionate values can help increase support for our campaigning issues, particularly among people who might not be pre-disposed to agree with us (Common Cause Foundation, 2014). Appealing to people's values and morals of right and wrong can open up conversations and the possibility of seeing things from different perspectives.

So which values can we use for talking about men's violence against women and girls, and gender inequalities?



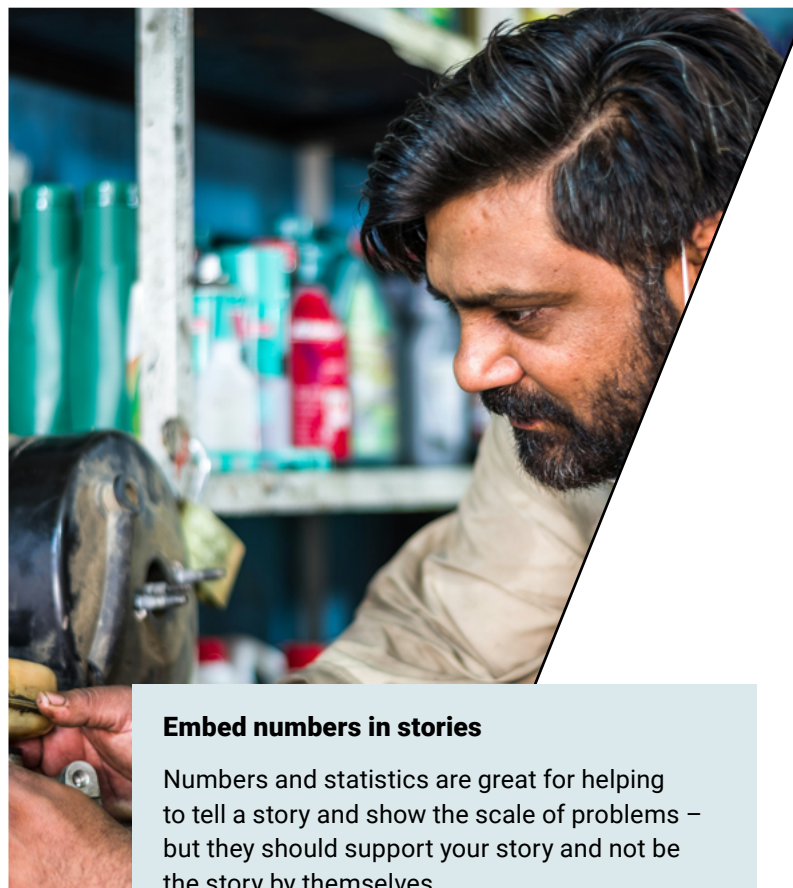
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Embed numbers in stories

Numbers and statistics are great for helping to tell a story and show the scale of problems – but they should support your story and not be the story by themselves.

On their own, they might make a good headline, but numbers don't change people's minds or connect with their values or emotions. People need help to understand the picture the numbers are painting, so figures and stats need to be framed with context, explanation, stories, and values. Otherwise, they'll interpret them through their own existing beliefs.



Respect and fairness

These universal human values are rooted in Scottish culture and underpin gender equality and ending men's violence against women and girls.

There's a long-standing belief that being a man means being a '**protector**', and this desire to show strength is hard to shift. This notion is deeply embedded in hyper-masculinity, stereotypical gender roles, and unequal gendered power dynamics – all thinking that leads to structural gender inequality.

But among Scottish men who are resisting rigid gender roles, there is a key opportunity to use a different frame that will strengthen support for a progressive and structural approach to the issues.

Instead of 'protection', talk about **mutual care** and **respect**. Embrace the idea that men and women can offer each other care and respect in partnership. We can take action together to make life better and more equal.

Self-direction (choice, autonomy, freedom)

Show that it's empowering to choose not to be restricted by rigid gender norms or roles. Talk about equality and choice together. Gender equality = greater freedom to be who you want to be – unconfined by rigid gender roles.

Equality, respect, and non-violence

Talk about these as core values in healthy relationships; equality enriches rather than threatens relationships.

Community responsibilities

It's helpful to frame issues as something that affects all of us, or certainly a larger group of people. Men's violence against women and girls and gender equality are important for men and everyone in society –

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Things to avoid

Othering: Don't use framing that 'others' men who commit violence against women and girls. In other words, don't describe them as 'monsters', 'bad apples' and other similar labels.

Why? Because this focuses attention on individual behaviour and character, and on individual solutions. We need men to see that this is a societal, structural issue that needs a societal, structural response (including themselves).

'Them and us': Move away from narratives that unnecessarily divide people. However understandable and rational it might be to think in terms of 'them and us' when talking about men's violence against women and girls, this won't shift entrenched beliefs or expand men's understanding and support for our cause.

they're not issues for only women to be concerned with. We can emphasise our audience's compassion by expanding who they think of as their community, instead of thinking about 'us and them'.

But be mindful that we're not all the same and don't all have equal chances to thrive – some of us are much more held back by structural inequality.

It helps to **be clear that our solutions are common sense**. Take employment and disability as an example. We know that employers can and do have an important role in making society more inclusive. For instance, remote working used to be rare, but in some jobs it's now a fact of life. Real inclusivity means disabled people having the same choices about whether to work at home or not as non-disabled people. And that needs things like accessible public transport to get to work, and employers providing flexible start and finish times, the right equipment, and inclusive training opportunities (Inclusion London, 2024).

Care, love, honesty and friendship

Appeal to men's identities and aspirations as good partners and parents through these values. Connect values of caring relationships, responsible fatherhood, and social justice to the goal of ending gender-based violence to make this feel personally relevant and motivating.

A safer, more just world for all: Emphasise men's stake in building a world based on these values, and consider appealing to 'humanity' more broadly. It's motivating rather than isolating.



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Highlight solutions and show how change is possible

Focusing on solutions is a powerful way of reframing fatalistic stories about things that are rigged, broken, or in permanent crisis.

Talking about the better world we're striving for, showing that change is possible, and explaining how we can achieve this change gives people something to get behind.

If we can help men to recognise where we have already made progress on gender equality and how that happened, it shows the difference they can make when they support action and change.



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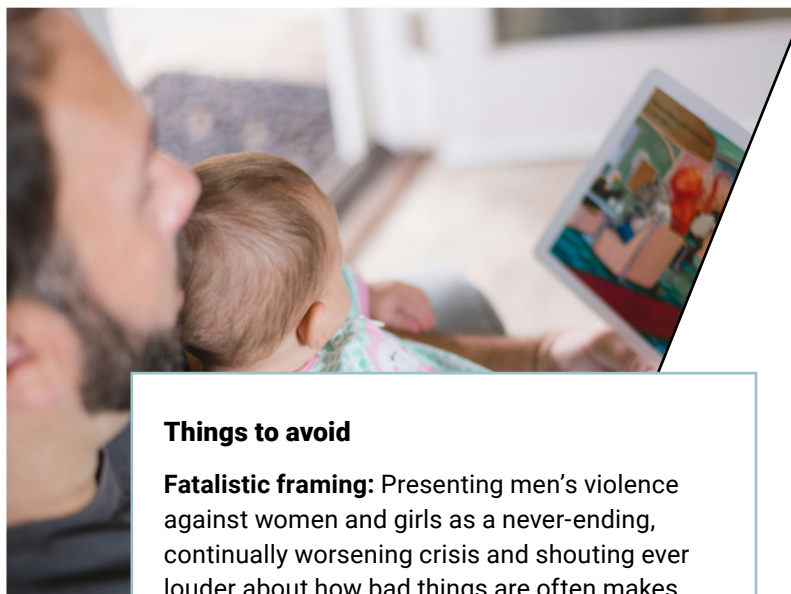
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Things to avoid

Fatalistic framing: Presenting men's violence against women and girls as a never-ending, continually worsening crisis and shouting ever louder about how bad things are often makes people bury their heads in the sand. People disengage when they feel there's nothing we can do about an issue and that problems are inevitable, not fixable.

Don't compare: The danger of comparing situations here and now with things that happen in other countries or have happened in the past can easily reinforce people's beliefs that 'our work here is done'. It's widely believed that gender equality has been achieved, or that it's better in Scotland than in other countries or cultures, therefore it's 'not that bad' and not a concern.

Instead, talk about what is happening here and now, explain the issues and causes, and say what can be done to change them.



Focus on what men can do right

Portray men as part of the solution, not part of the problem. **Show how men have the agency to choose** to support gender equality, prevent violence against women and girls, and act as a role model for other men on these issues. This taps into the value of self-direction described above.

Foster a sense of – and opportunities for – dialogue and conversation

Men who took part in our project found there was value and power in having the chance to explore and discuss gender equality, masculinity, and men's violence against women and girls without fear of judgement and saying the wrong thing. It allowed them to see different perspectives.

Talk about rebuilding, redesigning, and changing systems, structures, and problems

Inspiring people with a vision of the better world we could create is motivating and inspiring.



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Link individual stories to structural change

Individual stories, or case studies, are a well established and important way of communicating about social issues – but these stories can do more to build understanding and support.

When people read an individual's story, they'll think about individual problems and solutions, not wider structural changes.

We can change this and make our stories more powerful by linking them to structural causes and solutions. We need to be explicit about the wider social structures behind individual circumstances and actions, to avoid them being seen as isolated incidents, as [Crisis has done with homelessness](#) (Crisis, 2020). The public views individual decision-making as the main cause of homelessness, and that the response should be a bed for the night and a hot meal. But evidence shows that homelessness is mainly the result of structural problems, such as a lack of affordable housing, low wages, discrimination, and cuts to welfare programmes. One person's story can illustrate how these factors have pushed them into homelessness, then we can explain that there are other people in the same situation all over the country, and the structural and policy changes that could help them.

Use simple language

Using certain concepts, arguments, jargon or tones of voice can completely turn off our audiences or get in the way of improving their understanding. Choose language that's clear, non-judgmental, and doesn't sound political or complicated.



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Things to avoid

Don't ignore individual agency: The 'conflicted' segment of the public – those who agree with both positive and negative messages about equality – believe really strongly in individual agency.

They believe that problems are caused by the bad behaviour of individual people. They think that people shape their own circumstances, are responsible for their own choices and actions, and therefore are responsible for making change happen.

We do need to communicate the structural nature of inequality to them, but we also have to acknowledge individual agency at the same time – without this, messages don't ring true and are often rejected outright. By providing the context around individual agency, we can help to show its place in the bigger picture. For example, when people think about poverty in the UK, they often have an idea of 'self-makingness' – that getting out of poverty means trying harder and working more. They make judgements about who's deserving or undeserving of support, particularly when they hear stories about benefits.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and FrameWorks found [new ways to talk about benefits and poverty](#) that showed an individual in a broader context:

- Benefits are one of the public services any of us might need at some time in life
- Poverty restricts the options available to people, meaning they have to choose whether to put the heating on or pay their rent – the way to unlock people from poverty is to improve the benefits system or make sure jobs are secure and pay enough (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2019)

Circumstances like a relationship break-up can pull people into poverty. The social security system can be redesigned to keep people afloat when they're struggling.

Political concepts or language: These can marginalise people instead of engaging them in solutions. We need to show how and why change is about all of us, so be careful with language that can sound political or radical.

Polarising language: Some men may feel alienated by language or ideas that right-wing commentators have portrayed as 'woke'. To engage them with your messages, emphasise core values of equality and societal benefits, while still clearly condemning extreme misogyny. This approach aligns with the attitudes of many Scottish men who support gender equity in principle but may be wary of divisive rhetoric.

Complex arguments and concepts: arguments based on these won't engage conflicted audiences and are another barrier to changing beliefs

Lecturing or patronising: whatever the issue, and however passionate we are about it, nobody likes being talked down to. Telling someone they're wrong doesn't make them think we're right. Adopting a patronising, aggressive, judgemental or inflexible tone is more likely to turn people against what we're saying, not improve their understanding or engagement.



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Tell a new story about gender roles

Our research shows that men have contradicting ideas about masculinity and gender roles, particularly when it comes to showing strength and vulnerability. They tend to think that the two exist separately – but we can redefine strength to include vulnerability.

We can portray a flexible vision of masculinity that includes individuality and freedom sitting at ease with one another, as well as strength and sensitivity. Framing communication in terms of flexible gender roles also helps to validate the progress that Scottish men have already made.



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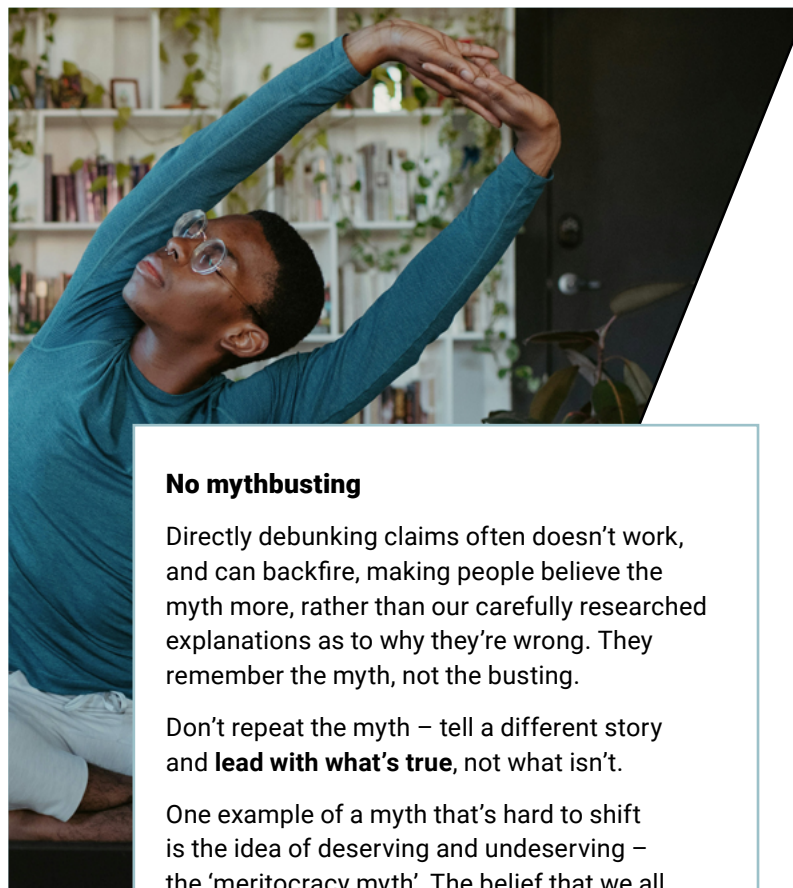
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No mythbusting

Directly debunking claims often doesn't work, and can backfire, making people believe the myth more, rather than our carefully researched explanations as to why they're wrong. They remember the myth, not the busting.

Don't repeat the myth – tell a different story and **lead with what's true**, not what isn't.

One example of a myth that's hard to shift is the idea of deserving and undeserving – the 'meritocracy myth'. The belief that we all 'get out what we put in' obscures how inequality really works, and stops us addressing structural barriers. To move away from the idea that individuals completely shape their own destiny, tell a story that sets a positive, values-based vision of what we all need – justice, freedom, caring for each other, a decent standard of living. From there, you can explain why that isn't happening now (with concrete examples – see below) and what can be done to change this.



Show how gender equality benefits us all

In our research, men struggled to find concrete examples of how gender equality harms them – but they often couldn't identify why it directly benefits them either. Even when men enthusiastically support gender equality at a political level, they rarely feel any tangible benefits at a personal, emotional level.

We can fill this void by framing gender equality as something that benefits everyone, with messaging that includes examples from family life, community life, and friendship – for example harmony within the home, strengthening romantic relationships, offering a feeling of personal wellbeing, and making the world a better and safer place for everyone.



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Make it relatable

Our research found plenty of ways we can make issues of gender inequality, masculinity, and violence against women and girls relatable to men.



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Use a relatable 'way in' to talking about violence

Research shows that people very often take 'violence' literally to mean physical violence – and only physical violence. It can be very difficult to persuade audiences to consider other abusive actions as violence.

Begin by talking about things that are **'abusive' or 'harmful'**, which are better understood, as an entry point for conversations aimed at expanding understanding of the causes and types of violence, and build up from there. The potential impact of leading with the word 'violence' is that we lose people before we've had chance to explain more – their understanding of what it means is narrow and the conversation could easily get bogged down in debate about definitions.

Give examples

Framing men's violence against women and girls as a product of gender inequality is challenging, but possible. We can encourage men to accept responsibility for helping to end this violence, but to do so effectively, we need to offer concrete examples of how different forms of violence are connected.

Talk about respect: As we saw in the section on values, respect is a fundamental concept to harness. Disrespect is both familiar and repellent, and visible in behaviours such as groping, aggressive flirting, and catcalling. By framing the 'bad' behaviour observed in friends and colleagues as 'disrespectful', audiences can more clearly see their role in calling it out and therefore contributing actively to gender equality. Give concrete examples of relatable men already taking a stand against violence in their own lives – these can help to counter the more commonly seen negative role models in men's lives.

Clarify the links between gender inequality and men's violence against women and girls by using examples of sexist behaviours – for example catcalling, groping,

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Use a tested metaphor

Metaphors help people understand how things work or happen, by prompting a mental image of something familiar to explain an issue they don't understand. Many metaphors have been tested in research on social justice and equality issues. Try one of these – but don't mix them, or you'll create a confusing picture in people's mind instead of a clearer one!

Talk about inequality as 'running up down escalators': In other research on inequality, this metaphor was most successful in moving people's understanding of inequality in a more structural direction. Describe an unequal society as one where some people have a mix of escalators in their path, while others have only down escalators, and constantly have to run up them to get where they want to go.

Talk about how men can be restricted or limited by the 'man box': Research explored in our literature report found that metaphors like "masculine stereotypes are like a box" helped to convey how men can be constrained by rigid gender expectations.

Talk about the 'pressure' of traditional masculinity: While many men believe in equality, they feel pressure to uphold outdated aspects of masculinity. But don't focus your communications on men's current pressures – this can sidetrack men to dwell on the things that are currently causing them stress.



aggressive flirting, and dominant or controlling behaviour. These behaviours sit between actions that might be condoned or excused by some (such as using pornography, making sexist jokes, buying sex) and ones that are deemed totally unacceptable (physical violence, sexual violence, controlling finances or freedoms). Focusing on 'intermediate' acts of men's violence against women and girls helps audiences conceptualise a spectrum of violent actions.

Talk about families, friend groups, workplaces and other relatable social spheres: By focusing on interpersonal relationships and mutual support, we can give concrete examples of how challenging traditional masculine norms leads to a happier, healthier life.

Offer encouragement and guidance on calling out unacceptable behaviour: Our research found that men especially valued examples of what this looks like and how to do it.



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The messages developed and tested in our research show what it looks like when we bring all of these tools and techniques together to tell a different, more compelling story. Below are examples of new stories for gender, equality, and men's violence against women and girls. They are suggestions rather than scripts or exact wording. The important thing is to understand how these frames work and use the ideas that inform them.

Gender

We all want to be free to be ourselves. To be healthy, and the partner, friend, or parent we really want to be.

But what we learn about being a man, how we're expected to be and how we think we should be restricts us. And it can pressure us to behave in harmful ways, to ourselves and those we care about. Things like drinking too much, bottling up stress, and not asking for help when we need it. And we're sometimes told we should be vulnerable and strong at the same time, which can be confusing.

But as many of us now know, there are so many different ways of being a man, of loving the people in our lives and of being strong. Being free to talk about what's on our mind and how we feel, being true to who we are and having each other's backs. Building equal relationships and standing up for what's fair and right. This is freedom and growth, and it's a good way for us all to live.

A positive vision that applies to everyone, followed by a nod to values of love, care, and friendship.

We started with a vision of being free, now we show what the opposite looks like through the 'box' metaphor of being restricted.

Acknowledging structural factors behind ideas of masculinity and how it can feel to navigate the pressures and expectations.

Going back to our positive vision of how things could be and giving clear examples of what that might look like.

End by prompting positive values again ('standing up for what's fair and right') and bringing this back to a vision of a better world for all.

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Broadening out who men might think of as 'us'.

A statement that's hard for anyone to disagree with is a good way to introduce the conversation about gender equality.

Appealing to values and aspirations through clear examples, set in familiar and relatable social settings.

Acknowledging progress so far helps to show that change is possible.

Concrete examples of inequality – for both women and men.

More examples, but widened out to show what equality looks like in society, making the link between individual and structural.

Respect is a key value. Here we're showing that equality is based on respect and making this personally motivating and relevant to men.

Equality

Most of us agree that equality between men and women is a good thing. It's freeing for everyone and means we can be who we want to be. For men that could mean a role model for boys to look up to, a good friend when your mate's down, or a parent who tucks their kids in at night. At home, it means being a team and sharing the load – the good and the bad.

We've taken strides towards equality in Scotland, but we could go further still. For example, women often get paid less than men for the same work, and men are only given two weeks' paternity leave.

That equality is good for us is backed up by evidence, too – people in equal relationships are happier at home and work, and equality improves men's mental health and makes for healthier and safer communities for us all.

Equality goes hand in hand with respect, and we all have a part to play in achieving it. It lifts us all up and helps us to be our best selves.

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Rather than leading with 'violence', open with a values-based vision of a future that's better for everyone.

Although there might be disagreement over what the word 'violence' means, men are strongly against 'disrespect' and 'harm'.

Make the link between acts that men might justify and those they wouldn't, then show how they all connect to inequality.

Again, linking equality to respect is a powerful way of making this personally important to men.

This closing paragraph brings together values and morals, with aspirations for a more positive model of masculinity, and examples of what this looks like.

Men's violence against women and girls

We all want to live freely, to be equal and to feel safe. And most of us want that for each other, too.

But the way we often think about men and women and the relationship between them can lead men to disrespect and harm women. Seemingly harmless things like telling a sexist joke and catcalling. And things like restricting who a partner sees, pressuring a woman to have sex, and hitting a woman. All these actions spring from the same place: a lack of equality between men and women.

None of us want women to be harmed. And what harms women harms us all and pulls us down. That's why equality is so important. It goes hand in hand with respect and frees us to be the best version of ourselves.

By doing the right thing, like respecting women and refusing to go along with or calling it out when a pal is disrespectful, men can be a positive role model to the men and boys in their lives, and help to build healthier, more equal communities.

Repeat, repeat, repeat!

The more people hear a message, the more it's likely to stick. You might get bored of saying it or hearing it, but keep going – that's what other influential voices will be doing.

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For more information about the research that shaped this guide, and more detailed insights into men's beliefs and attitudes, read our [summary report](#).



**EQUALLY
OURS**

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