

be a  
**GENTLE**  
man

**CHANGE**  
Campaign for  
sexual Health &  
Gender Equality



  
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# CHanGE in action

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CHanGE (Campaign for sexual Health & Gender Equality) is a student project on gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Its yearly campaigns aim to increase support for the global struggle for gender equality and equitable access to SRHR, and to contribute to change in the Belgian context. CHanGE is a project of the University Centre for Development Cooperation (UCOS).

In July and August of 2023, the CHanGE participants traveled to Cameroon, Jordan and the Philippines. During these research trips, we met with various activists and organizations working on gender equality and sexual rights and tried to find out in what ways masculinity plays a role in their work.

The stories and experiences that emerged in these conversations form the core of the campaign and are our biggest sources of inspiration.

# Be A GENTLEman: An introduction

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Dominant views and images of masculinity have a huge impact on people and society. Our visual culture is full of traditional images of masculinity, with characters perpetuating harmful stereotypes of emotional stoicism, aggression, intimidation and misogyny. Many of our favorite and most acclaimed films and series are unfortunate examples of this.

Take, for example, the misogynistic behavior of the male lead characters in *The Big Bang Theory*, which is invariably portrayed as innocent. Or consider *Back To The Future*, where sexually transgressive behavior such as peeping, stalking and even sexual assault are deployed for comic effect. The characters are often presented as the sympathetic "heroes," so their harmful behavior is routinely normalized and even approved in the context of the story.

Even our favorite pop songs are not always innocent. Sexual objectification of women is disguised as love and domestic violence often gets glorified. Curse words that devalue (proximity to) femininity and queerness are also used frequently. The media we consume doesn't just spread harmful forms of masculinity, but cements them in our collective consciousness.

These examples are not innocent nor limited to the small or big screen. They also translate to society and everyday life, where notions around gender norms are perpetuated and harmful behavior is normalized.

This is where the concept of toxic (or harmful) masculinity enters the conversation. It has become a popular notion in mainstream discourse, but is often met with resistance. Yet the urgency to critically examine popular perceptions of masculinity has never been more acute than now. The rise of the "manosphere" and related popularity of people such as the controversial influencer Andrew Tate makes it clear that many boys and men are looking for male role models and wondering how to interpret masculinity. The increasing mainstreaming of feminist ideas, which denounce the patriarchal structures that underlie gender inequality, has put traditional masculinity under pressure, according to opponents.

This is far from the truth: Men and masculinity are - and have always been - included in a feminist vision of society. Still, to many people it's not entirely clear what masculinity could look like when removed from its current toxic framework.

That is precisely why this CHanGE campaign, Be A GENTLEman, aims to unravel the mainstream portrayal of masculinity in imagery and explores possible positive alternatives. We will investigate the effects of toxic masculinity in images on men and the rest of society, but also seek to answer the question of what a positive and healthy interpretation of masculinity can look like.

Around the world, there are many organizations and activists who try to deconstruct the effects of harmful stereotypes and imagery on masculinity. In the summer of 2023, CHanGE met with several of these inspiring actors during their research stays in Jordan, Cameroon and The Philippines. They are our biggest inspiration for this campaign.

So what do positive portrayals of masculinity look like? And what does healthy masculinity even entail? Healthy masculinity allows men to be feminists without being called wimps. Healthy masculinity involves men taking responsibility in the fight for gender equality. Healthy masculinity allows men to be softer - gentle.

# Toxic masculinity: What's in a name?

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The idea that gender equality is exclusively an issue that concerns women and people under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella is outdated. History shows that men have always been involved in the struggle for women's rights, and their support remains essential today. The need to widen our focus to include men and masculinity in the fight for gender equality is a notion that keeps gaining support within feminist movements. Men, too, experience the influence of gender-based stereotypes and discrimination daily.

But when exactly does masculinity become toxic? Toxic masculinity refers to a culturally formed idea of masculinity that is harmful to both men and to society as a whole. Traditional masculine stereotypes determine which behaviors and characteristics are acceptable for men and which ideals should be pursued: being strong, showing no emotion, taking charge, being the breadwinner... These are just a few examples of the rigid stereotypes that come with traditional masculinity and have toxic consequences. These characteristics do not occur naturally in men, but are taught through socialization.



Our societal norms reflect these traditional gender stereotypes and ensure that men are rewarded when they meet all stereotypical expectations around masculinity to the best of their ability.

The effects of toxic masculinity on society are reflected in multiple areas. The unrealistic box of traditional masculinity lies at the root of widespread structural problems such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and gender inequality in the workplace. Because values such as dominance, power and aggressiveness in men are praised in our culture, a certain normalization of violence toward others occurs. On a structural level, toxic masculinity indirectly contributes to maintaining a culture of violence, sexism and discrimination.

Unsurprisingly, there are major drawbacks to toxic masculinity for men themselves. According to sociologist and gender expert Katrien Van der Heyden, the traditional masculine norm is labeled toxic because the men who fit inside this narrow box both create victims in their own environment, and are themselves victims of their own behavior. Unrealistic and destructive expectations of what it means to be a man hinder men from being fully themselves, causing a great deal of emotional distress and mental health problems. The male pressure to be tough,

confident, strong and independent, makes it difficult for men to show vulnerability. These oppressive stereotypes can have far-reaching consequences: for example, male victims of abuse and violence suffer from a greater taboo to talk about their experiences, which can cause increased feelings of loneliness and alienation.

A 2022 Plan International Belgium survey among 736 young people, conducted in the context of International Men's Day, shows that half of Belgian youngsters consider toxic masculinity a problem. About 60% of them personally feel the pressure to meet stereotypical expectations of masculinity or femininity. Six in ten young people experience social pressure to conform to the stereotypical image of being male or female. For more than 73.5% of affected youths, toxic behavior even results in an increase in violence. These research findings prove that it's high time to promote positive, healthy images of masculinity.

# On the road to positive masculinity

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The dominant image of masculinity, its associated stereotypes and the consequences of toxic masculinity are widespread mechanisms. Nevertheless, there are many examples of organizations that want to counter these issues and actively engage men to work toward healthy interpretations of masculinity. In the summer of 2023 we, the CHanGE'ers, went on research trips to three different countries - Jordan, Cameroon and the Philippines - where we engaged with local actors and organizations to discuss their work on gender equality. These conversations helped us gain interesting insights into the construction of positive masculinity.

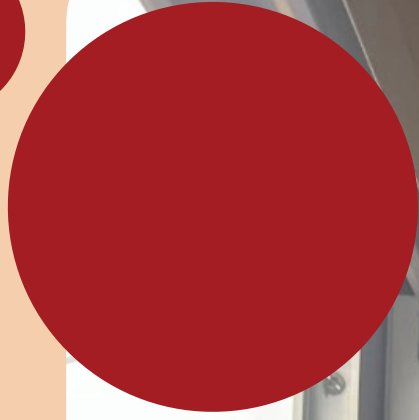


**"Although we are all one community, we have diverse experiences and diverse needs as well."**

In the Philippines, we had the opportunity to meet with Matt, one of the co-founders of the community-oriented organization **Transmasculine Philippines**. They actively advocate for trans rights, with a specific focus on the interests of trans men and trans masculine non-binary individuals. Because these individuals are not already socialized into a masculine gender role from birth, their relationship to masculinity develops in a different way than is the case for cisgender men. Yet Transmasculine Philippines still sees the serious effects of toxic masculinity and misogyny within their own community. They are resisting these effects by creating safe spaces for trans men and trans masculine people, where they can increase awareness around intersectional feminism and gender sensitivity through education and communication. A society

that is inclusive toward trans men and trans masculine individuals is a society that succeeds in opening up the dominant norms around masculinity. The work of Transmasculine Philippines demonstrates that positive masculinity means creating space for the diverse and multilayered experiences and needs of all men and masculine people.





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# "Men are not excluded from our program."

During our trip to Cameroon, we had the chance to speak with several organizations working on gender equality and justice. In their experience, negative masculinity is a structural issue that leads to individual problems for girls and women in Cameroon. Through education and open dialogues, these organizations try to transform these harmful conceptions into positive masculinities and, more importantly, they transform these men into allies who join the fight for gender equality. The **Bridgers Association** is a strong example of this. We spoke with Victor, Bridgers' co-founder, about their work. He explained that Bridgers works to empower vulnerable girls and women by supporting them to become financially independent. This objective is directly related to reducing women and girls' vulnerability to child marriage and other forms of gendered violence in Cameroon. Engaging men in their mission is crucial for Bridgers. By taking an inclusive approach to their work and engaging men, they break the prejudice that gender equality is solely a women's issue. As Victor

emphasized during our conversation: "We bring them together, side to side, without discrimination." Bridgers uses a variety of methods to transform negative masculinity into a force for good, to counter the fact that Cameroon is culturally, economically and religiously dominated by men. At Bridgers, boys and men are seen as equal partners. A prime example of this is the involvement of men in a farming initiative where they prepare farmland so that women can later grow crops. This respectful partnership not only reflects equality between genders, but also shows the power of mutual cooperation toward a more just society.

The need to involve men in the struggle for gender equality is also high on the Belgian feminist agenda. A good example of this is MoveMen, a joint initiative of vzw Zijn - an organization that works against violence - and RoSa vzw - a knowledge center in the domains of gender and feminism. Through MoveMen, these organizations carry out projects that engage boys and men in taking action for gender equality and violence prevention efforts. In addition, MoveMen serves as the coordinator of the MoveMen Platform - Platform for Masculinity and Gender Equality - which brings together organizations and professionals who delve into the concept of masculinity from an intersectional perspective.

# "If we learn and think about something, that makes us take action"

A huge source of inspiration who we had the pleasure of meeting in Jordan was the organization **Takatoat**. This group of devoted feminist activists actively resist the dominant patriarchal culture, policy and practices by spreading feminist knowledge and thereby expanding the collective consciousness on gender equality. They work towards this mission by creating safe spaces for women and girls where they can share knowledge and strengthen their connection to themselves and each other without the presence of a male gaze. This initiative fosters mutual solidarity and stems from the belief that knowledge generates action. Takatoat's work shows that, in a culture where negative masculinity is the norm, it can be crucial to claim your own spaces where personal experiences and knowledge can be explored in a safe context.

The importance of safe spaces in the conceptualization of positive masculinity holds up in the Belgian context: Liminal vzw is an organization that deconstructs patriarchal

thinking patterns and promotes gender equality by organizing safe space activities such as conversation circles for men. These men's circles were created as safe spaces that allow men to open up to each other about what is going on in their lives. The purpose of this is to offer a context where men can feel safe enough to be vulnerable, express their emotions and feel seen and heard while doing so. Liminal connects these transformative, vulnerable exchanges to a broader framework of feminist theory in order to widen social awareness about gender inequality and gender roles. By connecting ideas around patriarchy, gender roles and responsibility to personal experiences, they work on the imagination of positive masculinity in a sustainable way.



**Banan Abu ZainEddin is the executive director and co-founder of Takatoat**

**Be A GENTLEman takes these stories as starting points for a further examination of how we can construct a positive interpretation of masculinity. Our slogan emphasizes the importance of softness, empathy and emotional intelligence as essential characteristics of masculinity. The campaign activities each work toward a broader, more inclusive definition of masculinity in visual representation. We will deconstruct stereotypes, celebrate diversity in masculine expression and stimulate open communication. By underscoring that there's power in vulnerability and showing each other respect, we deconstruct the traditional image of masculinity to make space for a multitude of equal masculinities.**

# Campaign initiatives

Be A GENTLEman aims to provide tools on how we can consciously shape positive masculinity. Throughout our events and workshops, we will pause and reflect on the effects of visual representations of masculinity, offer tools for positive masculinity and promote different interpretations of masculinity - with the ultimate goal of breaking out of the box toxic masculinity has created.

# Workshops

Our research trips demonstrated the importance of education and information sharing to combat gender stereotypes and develop critical thinking. During the campaign, we are therefore focusing our energy on creating awareness around the effects of toxic masculinity among young people.

We will organize various workshops in higher education and youth work in which we will explore masculinity together with young people. What does it mean to be a gentle man? Together we will unravel harmful patterns in perceptions and work on creating a more positive image of masculinity. During these workshops we give young people tools to reflect on their own relationship with masculinity and activate them to help build a world without oppressive gender norms.

# Events

## Moonlight Shining a Light on Masculinity

Tuesday 21 November  
19:00-22:00

FOMU  
(Waalsekaai 47, Antwerp)

Free event.  
Dutch  
(movie with Dutch subtitles)

Screening of the film  
Moonlight with an aftertalk  
on identity, masculinity and  
queerness.

## (Re)Imagined Masculinities

Thursday 23 November  
18:00-21:00

RITCS Café  
(Antoine Dansaertstraat 70,  
Brussels)

Free event.  
Dutch  
(introduction in English)

Panel talk on masculinity in  
visual representation, from  
stubborn stereotypes to  
positive  
representation.

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## Can You See Us Rhythm of Words between Us

Tuesday 5 December  
19:00-22:00

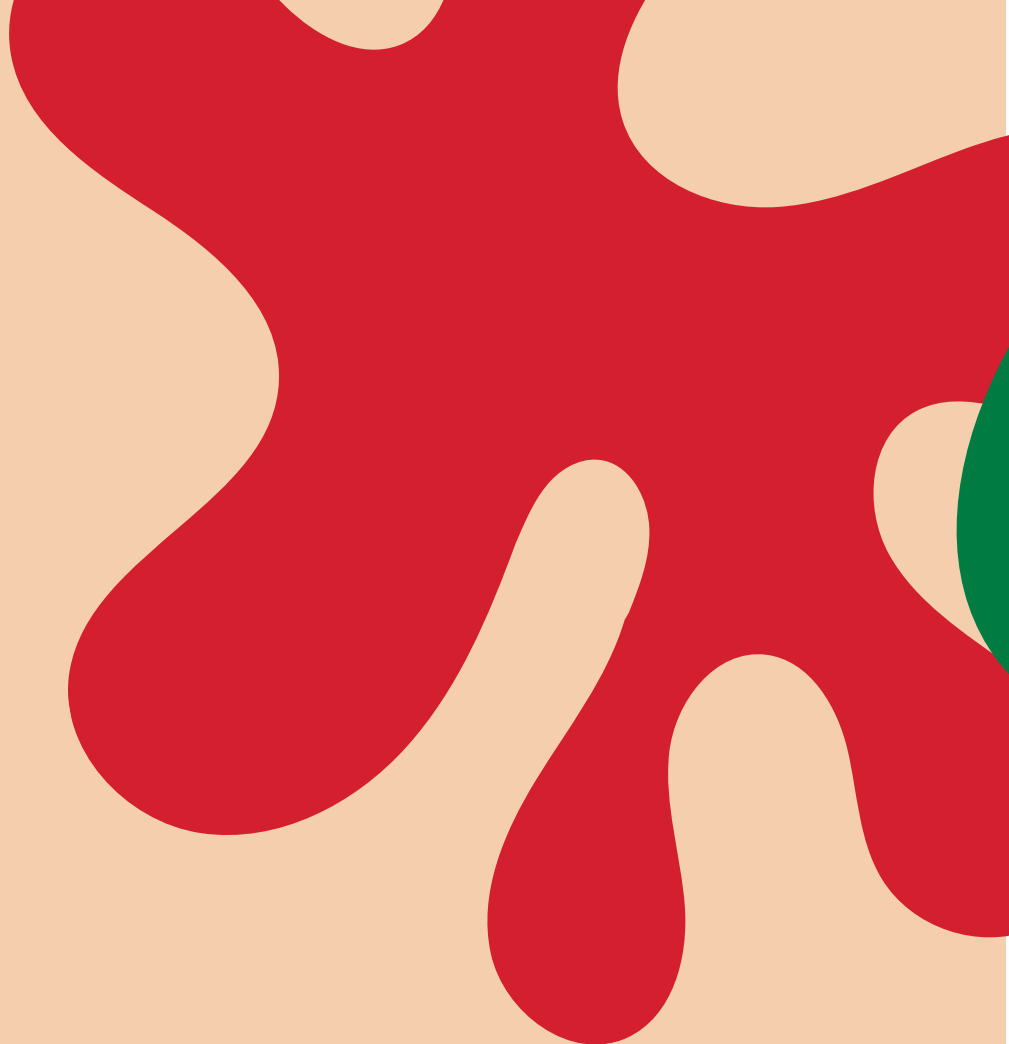
De Centrale  
(Kraankindersstraat 2, Ghent)

Free event.  
English.

Art collective Roesoesoe  
explores the effects of  
masculinity with a performance  
blending music, dance and  
poetry.



**more CHAnGE?  
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Graphic design: Finn Waters



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**UCOS – University Centre for Development Cooperation**  
Pleinlaan 5 | 1050 Brussels | [contact@ucos.be](mailto:contact@ucos.be)  
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V.U.: Medea Ghijssen, Pleinstraat 5, 1050 Brussels