Young men, masculinity and wellbeing
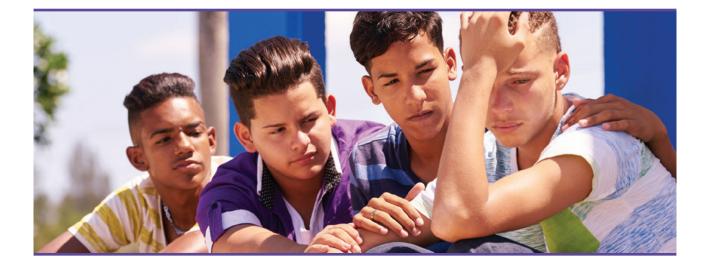
An Open University research project in association with Promundo

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REPORT

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About the research

This report summarises the findings of a qualitative research study exploring young men's experience of masculinity and wellbeing, undertaken in Autumn 2016. The Open University (UK) was contracted by Promundo, a global organisation that promotes gender justice by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls, to explore the attitudes and experiences of young men in the United Kingdom, using focus group discussions. The research, funded by Axe/Unilever, was part of a three-country study in the United States, Mexico and the UK (Promundo, 2017).

Summary of key findings

The findings set out below are based on an analysis of focus group discussions with young men in four English locations. Although the composition of the groups was diverse, this was a small-scale project and further research would be needed to explore the extent to which these findings are representative of young men across the United Kingdom. However, many of these findings are borne out by the results of the wider study, in the United Kingdom, United States and Mexico, of which this forms a part.

- Young men experience pressure to conform to a dominant masculine stereotype, but many perceive that the images of masculinity promoted in the media and elsewhere are so remote from their own lives as to be irrelevant to them.

- Young men tend to accept that increasing gender equality is a good thing and believe in the importance of treating women as equals. However, they are aware that stereotypes and assumptions about men's and women's roles are still powerful, and to some extent many young men still share those assumptions.

- Many young men articulate a sense of disadvantage associated with being male and contrast this with the high expectations placed upon them as men. A minority of young men feel anger and resentment at what they see as their experiences of discrimination and disadvantage based on being young and male.

- Young men are aware of a pressure to 'look good' and many have gone through a phase of 'working out', though most have concluded that this is unhealthy and unfulfilling. Young men perceive that the pressures on young women to conform to a particular body image are more intense than they are for young men.

- A powerful association persists between work and masculine identity, and young men are aware of, and to some extent share, conventional expectations about what kinds of jobs are suitable for men and women.

- Many young men regard their families as important sources of support, though some have had poor relationships with their fathers and have experienced more positive influences from female relatives.

- Young men recognise the importance and responsibility of fatherhood and want to be different from their own fathers, though some maintain quite traditional beliefs about fathers' and mothers' roles, emphasising the importance of male role models for sons and the traditional breadwinner and protector roles.

- Some young men are angry at what they perceive to be the more favourable treatment given to young mothers than young fathers, though others recognise the particular challenges faced by young women with children.

- Male friendships are important, particularly for younger men, while older young men regret the loss of close friendships as they move towards adulthood.

- Young men tend to agree with the notion that men find it more difficult than women to express their feelings and to seek help for their problems. Some young men associate emotional problems they have experienced with pressures on them as men, while others believe that young men are often unfairly labelled with mental health conditions.

- Violence is a feature of many young men's lives, with some regarding actual or threatened violence as part of the process of developing a masculine identity, and necessary for defending friends and maintaining status with male peers. Violence against women is disapproved of, with some young men also believing that women should not use violence.

- Most young men claim not to be prejudiced against homosexuality, but they recognise that prejudice still exists in the wider society and at the same time clearly find this a difficult issue to discuss.

- Young men in some localities experience a stronger and more positive sense of community than others. In some areas there is a real feeling of a loss of a sense of community over time, leading to a decline in the quality of young men's lives. Many young men have experienced a sense of stigma in public spaces based on their age and gender.

Background to the research

Young men are expected to be strong, sexually experienced, brave and aggressive, as well as successful. They are expected to know how to deal with tough situations, avoid asking for help, and to keep their emotions inside. These are stereotypes, but they are not far off the messages that many young men take in every day at school and at home, or from video games, television and social media.

Young men often find themselves caught between such messages and the desire to be themselves, and there is growing evidence that young men pay a high price in the effort to conform to these expectations. In addition to physical and mental health problems emerging from simply trying to 'be a man', these stereotypes keep young (and adult) men from fully realising their humanity and full potential.

So what does it mean to be a young man today? With the changes in women's roles and status that have taken place in recent decades, and with greater acceptance of sexual diversity, old-fashioned ideas of manhood would seem to be losing their appeal. But to what extent is this true?

In 2016, Promundo, working in partnership with Axe/Unilever, set out to ask where young men are on these issues in the United States, United Kingdom, and Mexico. Email and telephone surveys were used to reach a representative, random sample of young men, reflecting the ethnic and social diversity of each country. Combined with those surveys, qualitative studies were organised in each of the three countries, in which group discussions were used to hear young men's own views on what it means to be a man (Promundo, 2017).

This report presents the findings of the qualitative study undertaken in the UK by The Open University, in partnership with Promundo, together with some reflections on the process of carrying out the research.

The research team

The project was led by two researchers, Martin Robb and Sandy Ruxton, with support from consultant researcher David Bartlett.

Dr Martin Robb is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at The Open University, where his research has focused mainly on issues of gender and care. From 2013–2015 Martin was Principal Investigator of the ESRC-funded Open University/Action for Children research project, 'Beyond Male Role Models: gender identities and work with young men'. He is a member of the Men as Change Agents Working Group established by the UK Government Equalities Office. Before joining The Open University Martin worked in a variety of community education projects with adults and young people.

Sandy Ruxton is an independent researcher, specialising in men and masculinities issues. He was consultant to the Open University/Action for Children 'Beyond Male Role Models' project and has been working recently in Egypt and Turkey on engaging men in tackling violence against women. He is an Honorary Research Fellow with the European Children's Rights Unit at the University of Liverpool; an Ambassador for the White Ribbon Campaign UK; and a member of the Steering Group of the NGO alliance MenEngage Europe. A trained teacher, he has worked with boys and young men in schools, in the community and in prisons.

David Bartlett is the Chief Executive of the White Ribbon Campaign, a national charity that engages with men and boys to challenge male violence against women and girls. He is also an independent consultant on gender equality, masculinities and fatherhood, with a strong UK and international track record of strategic advice and senior leadership coaching for statutory and third sector service providers. In 1999, he co-founded the Fatherhood Institute, the UK's fatherhood think tank. Since then, he has been influential in national policy and practice development concerning fatherhood and, until he left in 2015, contributed greatly to the Institute's strong reputation for evidence-based policy influence and service development.

The focus groups

Four focus groups were organised, two in London and two in the North of England. We worked closely with local agencies, using a variety of existing contacts and networks, to identify and organise the groups. The four groups represented a substantial degree of diversity in terms of location, ethnicity, age and social background:

Bermondsey, South London

This group consisted of four young men, aged between 20 and 24. All were from Black or minority ethnic groups, describing themselves as Black African, Black Caribbean or of mixed heritage. Two said they were Christian, one Muslim and one Jewish.

Elephant and Castle, South London

Seven men participated in this group, with ages ranging from 18-28. Two of the group described themselves as white British, one as black British, one black African, one black African/Caribbean, one Latin American, and one mixed race (white, and black African). Three said they had no religion, two said they were Christian, and one Buddhist.

Beeston Hill, Leeds

The group was composed of nine young men, eight from Pakistani 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'). All were Muslim.

Batley, Yorkshire

There were five young men in this group, all members of the same rugby team. All were white, with two defining themselves as English; one English and Irish; one English and gypsy/Irish traveller; and one half English, quarter Irish, quarter Greek. All were students, and all were age 17. Four said they had no religion, and one didn't respond to the question.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from The Open University's Human Research and Ethics Committee following a detailed submission. Partner agencies were given a briefing sheet explaining the background and aims of the study, and potential participants were provided with an information sheet. Participants were asked to sign a consent form and to provide basic demographic information. All focus group members were given a shopping voucher as a nominal 'thank you' for their participation.

Research methods

Using the questionnaire from the Promundo telephone and email survey as a starting-point, the researchers developed a written focus group guide, consisting of a list of key topics and possible questions (see Appendix). This guide was used with all four groups, though as a broad framework rather than as a rigid schedule.

The Bermondsey focus group was facilitated by one of the researchers, with the other three groups co-facilitated by the other researcher and the consultant researcher. Each session began with the facilitator(s) explaining the aims of the study and the format and ground rules for the session. They then introduced key topics, posing broad generative questions, and taking their cue from the interests of the group and the direction of the conversation. The sessions ended with groups being offered the opportunity to suggest topics that they felt had not been covered. Sessions lasted for between 60 and 90 minutes each.

The group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional agency. An initial analysis and coding of the transcripts took place, using a process of thematic analysis to identify key emergent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Each key theme was then analysed in greater depth, looking for comparisons and contrasts between groups. Members of the research team analysed the data individually, before comparing initial findings and agreeing conclusions.

Reflections on the focus groups

Bermondsey

Bermondsey is a district in south London and forms part of the inner urban borough of Southwark. Some of the group members were from this area, while others lived in neighbouring boroughs. This part of London has suffered from industrial decline and there is visible evidence of poor housing and social disadvantage, though this contrasts with a degree of gentrification resulting from the arrival of fashionable businesses and middle-class housing.

The focus group took place at the premises of a charity working with marginalised and excluded boys and young men. To begin with only two young men were present with their support worker, who later left, while two others arrived with another support worker after the session had begun. All of the young men seemed keen to talk and it was not difficult to get them to engage with the questions, many of which seemed to arouse strong passions. Some group members were particularly vocal, with one participant contributing much more than the others. This young man was clearly carrying a lot of anger and resentment, some of it directed towards women, and some at the world in general. However, even though other group members expressed their feelings less passionately, all of them had obviously been through tough experiences, which emerged in their responses to the questions. Generally, these young men felt marginalised from mainstream society and left behind by social change, at the same time as holding on to aspirations for meaningful employment and stable relationships.

Elephant and Castle

Elephant and Castle is an ethnically diverse neighbourhood just south of the River Thames in central London. During the Second World War, bombing destroyed much of the area, which was subsequently redeveloped with high-density slab-block estates and a large gyratory road system. Today it is an area in transition, with a major regeneration programme underway. As part of this programme, the iconic, but rather dilapidated, 1960s shopping centre at the heart of the area is being redeveloped; the focus group took place in a charity based in the tower that forms part of the shopping centre.

The group was composed of five members who were part of a young fathers' organisation, and two who volunteered with a charity working with boys and young men in schools. Although some of the group already knew each other, this was not true for all of them. All of the young men spoke at some point, with the older ones perhaps playing slightly more of a leading role. Contributions early in the session tended to be rather abstract – perhaps reflecting the fact that the participants were 'sussing each other out' – but as the discussion developed, they were often more to the point. Notably, various members of the group told quite personal anecdotes from their lives, reflecting a generally positive group dynamic. As with the Bermondsey group, there was one member who expressed considerable hostility towards a range of targets – women, gay people, the government – but this was not true of the majority.

Beeston Hill

Beeston Hill is an inner–city suburb of Leeds, Yorkshire, located about two miles south-west of the city centre. The area suffers from a high level of deprivation, with indicators for health, economic activity and community safety substantially worse than for Leeds as a whole. Around 40% of the population are from Black and minority ethnic communities, and there are three mosques and a Sikh Gurdwara in the area. In recent years it has received negative publicity, since it was home to two of the 7/7 bombers.

The focus group took place in an upstairs room in an Asian community centre. The researchers were introduced by a worker at the centre, who then withdrew. From the start, nine young men were present. At first, the group were not particularly forthcoming, but after ten minutes or so, some of the older ones took the initiative and spoke quite a bit. Most of the talking came from four or five of the young men, with a small number saying very little, although they remained in the room and seemed interested to follow the discussion. The session lasted over an hour and group members seemed engaged with it. The researchers were able to ask almost all the questions in the interview schedule, and to follow up and probe in a way that was quite natural. Overall, there was a sense from this group that their lives were changing and that navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood was not easy. They were sad, for example, that the connections between group members were less close than they used to be, largely as a result of emerging family and work responsibilities.

Batley

Batley is a town in West Yorkshire, lying 7 miles south-east of Bradford and 7 miles south-west of Leeds. The town's economy was built on the textile industry, which drew significant numbers of migrant labourers from Pakistan and India from the 1950s onwards. Renovated former textile mills form a significant part of the area's employment and economy. During the recent referendum on EU membership the area was under the spotlight as a result of the killing of Jo Cox MP. The town is home to the professional rugby league club Batley RLFC.

The focus group was organised by a coach at the rugby club; he had contacted players in various age groups and asked them to come in, though he didn't have a clear view of how many would actually appear. He spent some time looking for an appropriate room, but one was locked (a result of recent break-ins), and another was busy, so in the end the researchers used a changing room and sat opposite the young men on wooden benches. Five young men arrived together; they all knew each other well, were in the same friendship group, and trained and played rugby together three times a week. At 17, they were younger than the participants in the other three groups, and this occasionally showed in the good-humoured horseplay between them. Often, they were putting each other down, but in a way that was good-natured rather than cruel. Initially they were a little shy, but soon warmed up, with all but one of the young men speaking frequently. Most of the issues in the interview schedule were covered. Generally comments and opinions were brief on any given topic, but there was a high degree of interaction with other members of the group.

Some general reflections

This was a small-scale research project, taking place over a short period of time, in two locations in England. The study did not include young men from Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland, so it makes no claims to be representative of all young men in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the composition of the groups reflected a considerable degree of diversity, in terms of age, ethnicity and social and economic circumstances.

At the same time, it was a matter of regret that, in the time available, we were unable to include the voices and experiences of certain groups of young men. For example, none of the young men in these groups identified openly as gay or bisexual, and the dynamics of the groups to some extent worked against open discussion of sexuality.

Those group dynamics obviously shaped the content and direction of the group, making some views and experiences easier to express than others. The transcripts of the discussions show young men 'doing' or performing masculinity in a particular group context. At the same time, it would be a mistake to fall back on easy generalisations. The Batley group, being the youngest, conformed most closely to the stereotype of 'joshing' young masculinity, but as researchers we felt that a variety of masculinities – ways of 'doing' young manhood – was on display in these groups.

The dynamics of the groups depended to some extent on the existing relationships between group members. These ranged from the Batley group, where all the participants were members of the same sports team and some were close friends, through the Beeston and Bermondsey groups, where the young men knew each other to a greater or lesser degree, to the Elephant and Castle group, some of whom knew each other but others had never met before. These differing degrees of familiarity created different group dynamics, and made different kinds of discussion possible.

Having said that, all of the focus groups opened up a space for discussion that is not commonly available for young men, one in which they were invited to reflect on their lives and in particular on their gender identities. This was a different kind of social space to those they normally encountered, and this impacted on what was (or was not) said. Perhaps as a result, participants were both keen to talk, but also initially hesitant or wary, whether of other group members or of us as researchers.

The rather artificial nature of these encounters should not be overlooked. It is not every day that young men are put in a room with strangers and asked to share information about their personal experiences and intimate relationships. In addition to this, the agenda was pre-set by the research team, though there was also space for group members to raise additional issues that they thought were important. In some instances, the young men decided to ask us, the researchers, questions about our beliefs and experiences as men. This was refreshing and seemed to reflect the respectful and inclusive ethos that we were trying to achieve.

Almost all of the young men involved demonstrate a desire to share and explore their experiences, and for the most part did so respectfully, though (as already mentioned) there was a certain amount of good-natured joshing and put-down, especially among the young participants, when more sensitive subjects were aired. Some subjects, such as homosexuality and violence, for example, seemed more difficult than others to talk about, or to do so more than briefly. In some of the groups there were some members who were much more vocal than others, and in all cases there were participants who chose not to share a great deal.

Finally, as researchers we obviously heard what the young men wanted to tell us, and it is worth remembering that what is unspoken can be just as powerful in defining masculine (or any other) identity as what is spoken.

Key themes

In analysing the data from the four focus groups, we identified a number of key themes, which we have used as a way of organising the findings from the study. These were: images of masculinity; gender equality; relationships; sexuality; violence; emotional wellbeing and seeking help; family; fatherhood; friendship; work; community and locality.

Images of masculinity

On the one hand, participants in the **Bermondsey** group agreed that there was a pressure on them to conform to a traditional masculine stereotype: *'There is a pressure everywhere to tell you what man you should be.' 'Conforming innit, which is basically work nine to five'*. On the other hand, they felt that the images conveyed by the media and fashion industry were not really aimed at people like them (*'I don't think they have me in mind or have my community in mind'*). 'There was a sense of these ideals of masculinity, including ideals of body image, being so distant from their everyday experience that there was no point in trying to aspire to them. (*'But we don't care, that's the honest, because our life is so rough, like it's so different from their life'*).

Quite a lot of the talk in the **Elephant and Castle** group was about the pressures on young men to live up to (unrealistic) images of what a man should be, and about the drive for success (*'we see more rich and famous people, we have more access to their life. And then we have to compare their lifestyle to ours, which is kind of unfair because they have loads of money and loads of things'*). Most images of masculinity were of older powerful white men, and material wealth was held up as important to male identity: *'it's a pressure that your identity of a man is tied to what you have in the bank'*.

Most of the young men had been members of gyms and had gone through a phase of working out regularly in order to look good. But most had ultimately found a preoccupation with self-image 'boring'; for those who still exercised, the main aim had become maintaining good health. One cautioned that working out could become an obsession for men, citing one of his friends whose identity, he believed, was totally linked to body-building – and involved unhealthy practices such as using steroids.

In the **Beeston** group, it was also felt that there was pressure on young men to be successful (*'you have to be a young man who's got a nice house, who's got a nice car, who's got a family with kids, who's got a good job'*). Part of that pressure came from looking at 'role models': *'being like him, want to achieve big like them…big cars, big money, you know, life's rolling, that's how they all think'*. This extended to body image too. Young men in the area often talked about looking good, and building up their bodies. Going to the gym and taking part in sport was partly seen as a release, a way of getting rid of frustration, but it was also regarded as a necessity to be tough in a tough area: *'Someone might get battered, they might get jumped, and think that's it, I'm going to start kick boxing, I'm going to start hitting the gym'*.

Whilst members of the **Batley** group were certainly into their sport, training three times a week, they said they weren't so bothered about looking good or 'bulking up' – although perhaps this reflected the fact that they already were involved in a quite strict health and fitness regime. They felt there was more pressure on young women in relation to body image: *'They will talk about it all the time; whereas we don't care anyway. Well we do care, just like not as much'*.

They felt that young women were heavily influenced by media and celebrity culture, and therefore wanted to be like the 'perfect' women they saw represented. They highlighted how this damaged the self-confidence of some young women, and could lead to depression (*'some lasses go too far into it and then they just, I don't know, they're just not happy with themselves'*). They agreed that some of the pressure also came from young men, but denied that they themselves were part of this: *'We wouldn't put no pressure on them, like say to them oh you're ugly. We don't see them all as objects really; we're mates with them so we don't really care'*.

Gender equality

Opinions on this issue were finely balanced in the **Bermondsey** group between an acknowledgement that the world had changed and men needed to accept women as equals (*'Men and women should have equality…Work together. And once you teach people to work together it creates longer relationships'*), and a very real sense of hurt and resentment and what were perceived to be the disadvantages experienced by young men like themselves (*'It's gone from men being sexist to men having all the power to now really and truly women have got all the power'*). There was a feeling that female empowerment meant that men had to 'step up' and work harder in order to achieve (*'You've got to be different, yeah.' 'I don't think some guys are ready for that though.'*) At the same time, some participants felt that they had been treated less fairly than young women, by employers, social services and the police, because they were male (*'I've dated two girls that's been in and out of prison, but they don't have no problems getting jobs though.'*)

In the **Elephant and Castle** group, there was a recognition that times had changed, but that stereotypes were nevertheless enduring. It was argued that fathers are still more likely to go to work and do what are perceived to be 'manly' jobs, and 'providing' remains predominantly a male responsibility. Moreover, most bosses are more likely to be men, and men still tend to occupy most positions of power in the workplace. As both cause and consequence, *'the jobs that society…has a higher regard for tend to fall to men'*.

Despite this male dominance at work, group members also suggested that men had to put in considerable effort to maintain the appearance of being strong, and this involved never admitting weaknesses. For example, one participant suggested that for a man to admit on social media that he had been sacked would be seen as *'embarrassing and pathetic'*, whereas a woman would be more likely to be supported by other women. And while the men said that it was commonly believed that women were in general 'weaker' than men, group members agreed that this was a false perception (*'we all know examples of women who are way stronger than the man they're with'*).

Members of the **Beeston** group argued that the world had moved towards greater equality, especially in the sphere of work (*'You see a lot of successful women in careers, education, it's just as important for them as it is for guys nowadays. So yeah, I think it's equal, it's definitely changed'*). But there was also a recognition that some women had little option but to go to work: *'they may be single mums or no one to support them, so they might be pushed into it'*. It was felt that certain (low paid) jobs – cleaning, working in a canteen – were more appropriate for women than men. However, although it was initially suggested that 'nurse' sounded like a feminine word, group members did accept that nurses – and indeed doctors – could be male or female.

The **Batley** group argued that, compared to the 1960s, roles for men and women are less stereotypical today, and options wider, especially for women. But still, there was a lot more opportunity for men than for women. In theory at least, men and women were relatively equal in the workplace, and they could both do the jobs they wanted. But in practice, *'it's just not everyone*

is wanting to do everything because they're scared of other people saying stuff about them' and that social pressures meant that *'you don't want to be the odd one out'*. For example, you wouldn't often see a man working in a beauty parlour. Conversely, you wouldn't expect a woman to join the army (as several of the young men in this group were going to do). In both cases, group members nevertheless accepted that one or two individuals might buck the trend and go into a job which was more often thought to be largely, or exclusively, appropriate for the other sex.

Relationships

Discussion of relationships in the **Bermondsey** group was clearly influenced by some of the participants' negative experiences of broken relationships with women, including in some cases the mothers of their children (*'I'm not with my baby mother', 'We had a massive argument when I found out she was pregnant'*). There was a definite sense of hurt and injustice (*'Men want commitment as well, but…the society is so mad, yeah. It's like when you get in a relationship like you would think you'd trust that person, but secretly you don't … I would never trust a woman because of the law, do you understand?'*) and also of the difficulty of forming worthwhile and lasting intimate relationships, even though that was what most of them aspired to (*'Of course. Everyone wants that'*).

Within the **Elephant and Castle** group, various members praised the support that they had received from their partners (*'My girlfriend's been really important over the last few years, because I was just really angry for like most of my life really. I don't really know why. And she just really helps calm me down'*). For some, support in a couple was mutual: *'whenever I've got problems I go to her, whenever she's got problems she comes to me'*. Perhaps reflecting common gender stereotypes, more than one participant was of the opinion that women were especially good at providing emotional support, whereas men were more rational: *'if it's more emotional support I'd probably go to my girl because she's just like, she's really cool. And then with the boys as well, they tend to be…just more level-headed thinking'*.

Various members of the group stated that their attitudes and behaviour towards commitment in relationships had changed, and that now they were older they were more keen to be in stable relationships (*'I'm really happy with the girl that I have now, so everything else is just irrelevant… I'm now able to commit which I wasn't able to before'; 'for me the biggest commitment is that she cares about me and invests her time in me, and I care about her and invest my time in her'*). One member of the group argued, in contrast, that, although he had a regular girlfriend, behind her back he still had casual sex with numerous women (*'I just can't help it. I think it's just old habits'*). This led to a discussion of the different standards that were often applied to women and men who have sex with multiple partners (*'if a guy has a lot of sex with a lot of women he's a player. And if a woman does that she's a slut'*).

Members of the **Beeston** group talked about the difficulties they faced in building relationships with young women: *'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'*. Love and being faithful were regarded as important to marriage, but so too, they joked, were 'breakfast' and 'having one's shirts ironed'! Whilst on the one hand, it was said that young men feared commitment, on the other it was suggested that by age 27 or 28 many young men wanted to be in a long-term relationship (*'I'd better start fixing up yeah'*). A harder challenge than convincing the wife-to-be was the fact that a young man needed to convince the in-laws – especially the father-in-law – that he was worthy of his daughter's hand: *'You've got to have some money, you've got to have a degree'* and *'if you want a nice wife, you've got to bring something*

to the table'. Caste issues also play a part here, with marriage between castes unacceptable to some people, particularly among the older generation. One of the group said he had never had a girlfriend; while to the researchers this seemed a brave thing to admit to in a group of this kind, maybe within the context described above it was not so unusual.

Being younger, the **Batley** group were more at the stage of exploring relationships rather than settling down, with mixed views on short- and long-term involvement. They criticised lads of their age who just wanted to sleep with 'slags', *'instead of like actually going for the good ones'* – meaning those with a good personality. Young women's expectations of young men apparently varied: *'There's some lasses that are like wants perfect from the boyfriend all the time; where there's like, my girlfriend and his girlfriend and that just like trust us'*. And some young women were already planning for the future, unlike the young men: *'some lasses, I don't know, they talk about oh what they'd like to do when they're older; whereas obviously I don't know'*.

Sexuality

While members of the **Bermondsey** group claimed that they, and their local community, were generally tolerant of gay people (*'You wouldn't discriminate against a gay person'*), they recognised there was still a lot of prejudice towards gay people (*'it's new to a lot of people, some people are still uncomfortable with it'*). One member said that although he didn't think being gay was wrong, he disliked homosexuality being 'promoted', as he saw it, by the media.

The question of sexuality aroused strong passions in the **Elephant and Castle** group. One or two group members cited examples of when they had acted in a homophobic manner in the past, and had now come to realise this (*'one of my friends, he was gay and I was kind of ribbing him about the fact 'how could you not want to be with a woman...and that can be a bit of banter but actually from his perspective it's actually quite horrible'*). Another participant expressed hostile – not to say homophobic – attitudes (*'I believe in a guy and a woman, not dick on dick'*). But when he suggested he wouldn't want to be in a swimming pool changing room with a gay man, another of the participants countered that he didn't think it was easy to be naked in front of other men, whether gay or straight. Furthermore, *'he's not going to rape you in the gym is he? He's not going to come and play with you or anything like that. That's sexual assault and that's ridiculous. No one's going to do that'*.

It was also noted that heterosexuality is habitually taken to be the 'norm' for men, whereas if a man is gay, there is much more pressure to be 'straight' (*'it's not like you have to come out if you're straight where you go mum, dad, I like women. That doesn't happen'*). It was highlighted too, however, that straight men had been influenced by gay culture, and that generally hostility to homosexuality had declined somewhat.

For the **Beeston** group, although they felt there was greater social acceptance of homosexuality, it was still an issue that was hard for them to talk about. Whilst more than one member of the group said they had no problem with someone being gay – and one, probably the most liberal, said he had some gay friends – the overriding view was that homosexuality was in contradiction with the Muslim faith. They acknowledged that a gay Pakistani who was Muslim would find life tough: *'they find it very hard to fit in any kind of social activity with their friends or family'*. Moreover, if it 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'*.

When the **Batley** group were asked about being gay, this seemed an issue that was also difficult for them to discuss, and it led to a certain amount of joshing within the group. They were generally tolerant (*'If one of these lot said I'm gay I wouldn't be too fussed really'*) and suggested that they wouldn't exclude someone from their group if they were gay (*'You wouldn't be not mates with them just because they're gay'*). One group member admitted that they used terms such as 'faggot', but argued that was a form of joking or banter rather than being intended as a real insult. Interestingly, it transpired that one of the key Batley adult players had come out as gay, leaving his wife and child, so homosexuality had obviously been a high profile issue within the club.

Violence

There was a lot of discussion of domestic violence in the **Bermondsey** group, with some members clearly having direct experience of violent disputes with their partners. Some participants believed that men were treated less fairly than women by police in such cases, and that violence by women against men was not taken seriously: *'The worst thing is I've seen, I've heard, I've actually seen a girl call the feds on a boy, yeah, that she's bashed up.' 'The feds are so bad, yeah. They will come to an incident, yeah, I've been arrested for domestics and they'll come to an incident and assume straightaway oh what you beating up girls, yeah.'*

The discussion on violence within the **Elephant and Castle** group highlighted how important this topic is in young men's lives. One member clearly stated how, in his view, all men have the possibility and threat of using violence in order to assert their authority: *'if you're a man and you don't have the money, you don't have the success, you don't have the physique, you don't have anything. You always can rely on violence'*. For another of the men, violence was a central aspect of learning to be a man (*'it shapes young boys into men'*), and wasn't necessarily a negative component (*'it's like a test of your own strength, your bravado, your macho'*). A third suggested that there is a pervasive attitude among young men that *'if you're violent and you win, it's all right'* – and if you don't join in, you may lose status with your peers.

By contrast, some of the men related examples of incidents where they had tried to defuse conflict (*'our instinct was to try and calm the situation down, find out what was wrong, and if they had a problem with us'*). It was also argued that as you get older, you come to realise that, even if you 'win' through violence in the short term, it can have serious negative consequences in the long term.

Members of the **Beeston** group felt that the threat of violence was *'very low'* in their locality, partly because young men in the area had *'a lot of respect to for the elders'*, which wasn't the case in a neighbouring district: *'up there it's just all the youths up there trashing houses, smashing windows, and the elders are saying they're scared to come out to confront them'*. At the same time they felt it was important for them to be physically strong: *'round here as well you've got to be tough'*. One young man believed that, now he was older, he could control himself and walk away from violence: *'And it takes a stronger person to walk away, so you actually realise 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.'*

Participants in the **Batley** group believed that their local area was less violent than Beeston, which had *'got rougher and rougher…it got violent'*. As for their own involvement in violence, one group member commented: *'We use our violence for a good thing, like we stick up for each other'* and all claimed to have been involved in fights. They admitted that, as a rugby team, *'We can all like stick up for each other in the games. We did have a reputation for fighting at one point.'* Conversely, they didn't think that young women should use violence: *'I don't like seeing lasses fight'*.

Emotional wellbeing and seeking help

Members of the **Bermondsey** group tended to agree that men find it more difficult than women to express their feelings (*'Men, we just deal with it differently…we've got other channels of expressing our feelings'*), though one young man commented: *'It depends on what type of character you are. Remember you can come across feminine males, you know.'*

Several of the young men in the **Elephant and Castle** group talked about transition and change in their lives, and how they had come to move away from stereotypical notions of what being a man was about. One in particular described how he had struggled with mental health issues, *'disconnecting myself a lot from other people, because I thought that was the manly thing to do'*. In part, his illness was fuelled by a perception that his peers, many of whom were successful, thought he was *'some kind of loser'*.

Some members of the **Beeston** 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'*.

The **Batley** group said they would talk to their friends if they had problems (*'these are the ones that I'd trust the most'. 'You've got main people'*) but added that as a group they tended to deal with problems through humour (*'we can get a laugh out of serious things if it comes to it. Always turn it into a bit of a joke'*).

When it came to specific mental health issues, there was a lively discussion in the **Bermondsey** group, with a definite division between those, like one young man from an African background, who believed depression and anxiety to be a sign of weakness (*'No, if anyone who says they have depression, for me, I think there's weakness in them'*), and others who had personal experience of being diagnosed with mental health problems. One young man said that many of his family, including himself, had experienced mental health problems: *'My family has a history of mental illness ranging from my nan to her mum, and every boy in the family has something wrong with them, put it like that.'* Drug-taking (*'A lot of young men smoke a lot of weed, but they don't know what's going in weed'*), bullying (*'Bullying, for some people it's bullying. They don't know how to handle being, like everyone goes through bullying, I will say that straight'*), social media and the increasing pressures of being young and male, were seen as possible causes of the rising number of young men experiencing mental health difficulties. At the same time, group members were angry that boys were more likely to be diagnosed with conditions such as ADHD or autism and to be labelled as a 'problem' (*'But nowadays it's just like everyone's just getting slapped with it. Oh he's a bad you, ADHD, he's a bad you, ADHD'. Yeah, way more slapped on boys, way more slapped on boys'*) and there was a shared distrust of medical solutions.

Family

There was a definite sense in the **Bermondsey** group of families as close-knit systems of support for these young men (*'They always just had my back, innit'*), with mothers (or stepmothers) seen as particularly important figures, relationships with siblings also supportive, and fathers often in the shadows or absent (*'Yeah my step mum – that's my mum basically… She's just does everything for me like'*).

Several members of the **Elephant and Castle** group had not had positive male figures in their immediate families when they were growing up. One described his experience of *'two fatherly figures who've been very distant, in fact almost non-contactable'*. Another said of his father: *'I've*

learned growing up to not expect too much. Not to expect the ideal father-son relationship…I appreciate it for what it is'. In contrast, he said that two of his uncles had been healthy influences.

More commonly, group members cited the positive influence of female figures in their families – mothers, grandmothers, girlfriends – on their lives. One said that he had grown up in a female-dominated environment, and although he found being around girls *'irritating'* at the time, *'as I grew older and witnessed what they've done for me, and how they've been with me through life I was like oh that's pretty cool'*. Another stated that *'the woman that I am going to marry is going to have the qualities that my grandma had…because basically she's a good female, she's a positive female'*. He particularly valued how she had taken responsibility for him and his siblings when they came out of care.

In the **Beeston** group there was a sense of proximity to parents *'because they're the ones that bring you into this world, teach you'*, and to older brothers in particular. Fathers were regarded by some as the most important influence, but others highlighted mothers and other female figures (*'[my nan] even says education is the key and stuff like that'*). Several of the young men said they would talk to parents about any problems they might have, and in general the young men gave the impression of good relations between different age groups (*'They've got a lot of respect for the elders'*).

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 (*'my dad's like my mate, I could tell him all sorts'*), and one mentioned his grandfather as an important influence, especially as he had played rugby professionally. But more than one participant had closer relations with his mother (*'She could be a good role model, she's always honest, never gets into trouble'*). Beyond immediate family, the lads talked as if the club was also actually a form of family to them, and relations with coaches were important (*'we all go onto the field and we're family aren't we?'*).

Fatherhood

Two of the participants in the **Bermondsey** group were fathers of young children, though neither was currently living with their children's mother. There was a strong belief, particularly from one of these young men, that fathers were viewed negatively and treated less favourably than mothers by the authorities (*'For a young father, a single male, it is very hard to get a flat or house in London'*) together with a real sense of resentment towards former partners (*'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'*). These young fathers wanted to be different from their own fathers (*'As long as I'm nothing like my dad I'm happy'*), but were also keen to inculcate a sense of discipline in their children's lives and to help them avoid the kinds of mistakes that they themselves had made (*'I don't want them to be nothing like me'*).

There was a significant level of disappointment expressed by members of the **Elephant and Castle** group in their own fathers. One said he found that the negative experience of several of his peers of their fathers was similar to his own; when he was young he thought it was just *'because they had to go off and do their manly things'*. He believed he had learnt that *'that was an acceptable way to treat women and to treat your family'* – and that he had only come to question this perception in recent years.

The majority of participants were aware of the responsibilities of fatherhood, particularly for young fathers, and how it had affected their behaviour: *'Being a young father is just like a lot of responsibility, and something that you push yourself to hit the mark with'*. They emphasised the

importance of – as one put it – 'being there' for your child, and understood the pressures upon them, especially to be breadwinners (*'to be stable financially'*). There was also a strong view that some lone mothers are reluctant to allow lone fathers to play a significant role in caring for their children, as this would endorse a perspective of the mother as in some way negligent (*'if you do see a single dad, I believe the thought of some people is where's the mum or what did she do wrong?'*). It was noted that the stereotype is of the *'independent single mother striving to be the best for her kids',* but *'if you don't have your kids, oh no, you're a bad mother'*.

Similar to the Bermondsey group, there was one member of the group who was angry that, as he saw it, young fathers are regarded very negatively, and that mothers have more power than they do: *'As a young father, in the eyes of social media, social services and the law, the girl's always right when it comes to the child. If you miss a day of that child's life, bad man gets cussed 24/7'*. Moreover, he believed he was justified in hitting his 'baby mother's' male partner for, in his view, usurping his position in relation to his child (*'What other guy wouldn't do that in my situation? Someone trying to move in on your son, who's put down as the father, but yet he came out of my testicles'*).

Four of the **Beeston** group, mainly the older members, were now fathers. There was a sense among them that when you become a father, responsibilities change (*'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'*). Group members suggested that in Asian families, roles for fathers and mothers tended to be seen in fairly traditional terms; fathers were role models for their sons, and primarily the breadwinners, whereas women were the carers. However, the young men accepted that this model did not fully represent today's reality, and that emotional connection with their children was important (*'It's changed a lot now, you have a lot of stay at home dads and women that work'*). One group member described his role as that of a *'friend, but also you're always tutoring them and watching them'*. It was suggested that fathers had a greater influence on sons, and mothers on daughters, especially as the children came to puberty, but that the roles weren't exclusive. The father's role as protector was also highlighted, especially in relation to girls: *'they always want to protect their daughter from evil people, evil stuff'*. There was an associated fear that *'if he's not there emotionally or physically you turn to outside sources'*.

Although none of the young men in the **Batley** group were fathers, there was general agreement that they needed to be in the 'right' position – i.e. have a reasonable job, good accommodation – if they were to be fathers (*'I just want to have kids when I settle down really. Get a decent house, decent care and that and then'*). One said that he *'could have a kid accidentally, but if I did I wouldn't treat it any different'*. They tended to express quite traditional views about the roles of mothers and fathers (e.g. mothers should change nappies) but nevertheless didn't see their role as just 'providing' (*'I wouldn't put it down towards me just providing obviously'*). Opinions varied as to whether they would talk to their father or their mother, if they had a problem.

An interesting discussion took place in this group around social fatherhood or step-fathering. Whilst one member took the view that the relationship with a step-child would inevitably be different, another revealed that *'my dad's not my real dad but he's been there since day one'*. And although one suggested you couldn't have a close bond and relationship as *'they're not yours'*, another argued *'you go on to love people whether they're family or not really'*.

Friendship

To some extent friends seemed less important than family members to the young men in the **Bermondsey** group. However, participants also said that they had female as well as male friends. (*'I've got a couple of friends that, I mean I'm classing them more as brothers'. 'Best friend's female innit'*).

Young men in the **Elephant and Castle** group described how their friendships in adolescence were often rooted in surface bravado and banter, and avoided any deeper emotional engagement: *'I just hung out with very laddy mates, and we'd just talk about sex and drink and stuff. Always boasting and never talking about our vulnerabilities. It would always be about how amazing we are, but never about how we're really sad and lonely or about how we're upset or worried about our futures or anything like that'*. But with age and greater maturity, several of them believed that they had moved beyond these stereotypical male behaviours, and that their friends had played an important part in their transitions. As one said: *'I always look to my friends, the friends that I have who are comfortable in being in the skin they're in'*. He noted that his networks had changed, and his friendships had become more meaningful. An important part of this was being more honest about himself and his feelings: *'You don't feel like you need to put up a front, like a façade, which I'd been doing for a really long time'*.

It felt as though this was a time of change for some of the **Beeston** group, as they moved from school or college into the world of work. They didn't see each other nearly as regularly as they used to (*'I see him every morning walking up when I finish work. Beep, beep, that's it'*), and some were happy that the focus group had provided them with an opportunity to get together. For some, there was a sense of loss that their lives weren't as entwined as perhaps they had been, and a degree of isolation was evident (*'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…'*). They contrasted their lives with those of their parents' generation, who had maintained stronger links with each other: *'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'*. There was also some envy that young women seemed to maintain greater closeness and intimacy with each other (*'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 **Batley** participants presented themselves as a group, and teased each other repeatedly (*'there's never anything serious between us. We all can take a laugh'*). They clearly enjoyed the camaraderie of the club and their team, and there was a strong sense of looking out for each other – of group solidarity – even when other teams tried to rile or scrap with them (*'That's when you find out who your true mates are as well, ones that run away or ones that run after you'*). They expressed close allegiance to their group – even above parents – and said that if they had a problem they would talk to each other first. Clearly membership of the team and the club provided the glue that kept their group together, even though they were now beginning to go their separate ways in terms of work and higher education paths. Their wider friendship group contained both 'lads' and 'lasses', and generally speaking, everyone got on well – though they suggested that the young women tended to form smaller (and closer) friendship groups, whereas the young men tended to socialise more easily within the larger group (*'when we're out, all the lads speak but not all the lasses do'*).

Work

All of the participants in the **Bermondsey** group were unemployed, though one was involved in voluntary work. The participants disagreed about how easy or difficult it was to find work in their locality: *'It's not hard to, trust me, it's not hard to get jobs.' 'It depends who you know and how you apply yourself.'* Their aspirations were mostly modest, a key factor being the ability not just to survive, but in the future to be able to provide for a family, which still seemed to be an important issue for some: *'Fifteen hundred pounds when you're a single man is not fifteen hundred pounds when you're a married man'*.

Among the **Elephant and Castle** participants, four were employed, one was a student, one was looking for work, and one was unemployed. However there was little discussion of this theme, other than the views set out above (e.g. in the section on gender equality).

In the **Beeston** group, the older participants were all working; one was training as a primary teacher, others were looking to get into sports coaching or youth and community work. The younger ones were doing college courses. There was a general feeling that they valued good jobs and wanted to get on. Higher education was important to them, and great opportunities were available, if you chose to take them: *'it's down to the individual how hungry they are and what they're willing to do to go and find it. There's universities, there's colleges that are opening foundation degrees, mature students. There's no excuses'*.

Some of the discussion was about the relationship between work and male identity: *'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'*. They believed that school didn't put very much pressure on boys to get a good education, and that many young men went straight into (low-paid?) jobs and got stuck in them: *'where you turn 18 and work, that's all it is for the rest of your life kind of thing – which is a shame because there's more to life than just work, definitely'*.

Most members of the **Batley** group were doing college courses, but at least two wanted to join the army and one (the quietest in the group) wanted to be a professional rugby player (like his grandfather). Participants expressed some fairly traditional ideas about work roles for young men and young women, but acknowledged that it was possible to go against the grain. However for them, this was unlikely: *'You'd want to go like the same path as your mates wouldn't you? So you'd fit in with everyone and stuff'*. Those members of the group who intended to join the army had been influenced by friends and family to do so; they regarded it as an attractive career: *'It's like wanting to help people really isn't it? Just wanting to help people'*. Notably, almost all their parents – both mothers and fathers – appeared to have been working from when the lads were relatively young. Whilst one or two had therefore been looked after often by other family members (e.g. siblings, aunts), they had at the same time seen how hard their parents had worked, and it appeared that some of this ethic had rubbed off on them.

Community and locality

While a strong sense of community was mostly absent from the **Bermondsey** group's conversation, there was a shared feeling that the locality in which these young men lived was disadvantaged and stigmatised compared to other parts of London and the country generally, together with a sense of being isolated from and forgotten by government and decision-makers. As two of the young men said: *'I mean if you're a big businessman in the centre, you work in the city, the chances are –' 'You're not going to care man' – 'The government they don't think like us'*.

Whilst the majority of the **Elephant and Castle** group came from South London, the two volunteers were not local (one lived in Kent, the other in a different part of London). Although there was no talk in this group about Elephant and Castle itself, there was a shared sense that the moneyed lifestyles they were presented with through the media were very distant from the reality of living in a marginalised community in inner London. Affordable housing was a particular concern, with several group members saying either that they were moving house, or that they were still living at home (*'You're in London, who can afford a house?'*). One said that he felt that others viewed him as less of a man because he still lived at home (*'if you still live at home or you don't own a house or drive this car or have this amount of wealth, you are not a man'*).

There was a sense from the start of the **Beeston** focus group of an area that had declined in recent years. In particular, cuts to services and facilities, and a lack of youth workers had had a significant impact (*'Before there used to be a lot of stuff going on in the community, as in for youths to do'*). It was also noted that young people spend more time today on social media, and that this has led to the streets being quieter (*'You don't see kids playing out this and that, they're always inside'*). In terms of activities, many of the young men in the group visited the gym or played sport (e.g. football, cricket) on a regular basis, or went out for meals (pubs not being an option for them). The mosque was mentioned, but more in terms of religious observance than as a social meeting place.

One member argued that the terrorist attacks on 7th July 2015 had had a big impact on way the area is viewed: *'Since then it's kind of gone downhill and it's quietened down a lot on the streets, as in not many people interact with each other as they used to, and it's not the same place.'* There was also a concern that the people youngsters looked up to in the area now were often the drug dealers: *'they look cool and they drive nice cars. And when you're young you don't know what's going on'*. Nevertheless there was a general sense of a 'close-knit community': many of the young men had known each other a long time, and some were related. At the same time, there was a common view that they wanted to leave the area and live elsewhere in the longer-term. As one said: *'You just want to get out of this place man. The things you've seen here you don't want your kids to see. You just want them to have a better life…'*

Most of the young men in the **Batley** group seemed to like living in the area; they felt comfortable there and described it as 'friendly'. There were plenty of connections between them and their families (*'the parents know us kids'*). Much of the time they spent in each other's houses (*'I don't even need to knock on door me, I just walk in'*), or just met up in the park for a kick-around and *'…if anything pops up we do it'*. There wasn't a feeling that they would want to move away in the long-term; indeed they seemed set on staying.

However, this group's most animated discussion was around how they were viewed in public spaces. They said they resented how they were often seen as intimidating or a threat when they were out together, even if they weren't doing anything to annoy anybody (*'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'*). Sometimes they had been accused of things they hadn't done. And sometimes they had been moved on in the park, or banned from shops and takeaways, for reasons they felt were unfair: *'The police always interfered with us…we'd never to 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'*. They gave various examples of situations where the police or security guards had treated them or other people roughly – and this in itself had sometimes caused them to react (*'we turned into what they made us out to be'*). They also resented the fact that they had no means of complaining as they felt they would not be believed.

Further information

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Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Focus group guide

What's it like being young and male – in this community / area/ group?

-    what are the good things/ bad things about it?

What kind of man do you feel you're expected to be? / what expectations are there around today about being a man?

-    where do these expectations come from – family? friends? media?

-    is it different, depending on whether you're black/white/Asian/Muslim/gay/straight, young/old?

-    is it different for girls/young women – do they face similar expectations?

What about you – what do you think is important – what does you think it takes to be a (real) man? (or a 'good' man?)?

Family and future

-    are any of you fathers?

-    do you want to be a dad?

-    what kind of dad do you want to be?

-    what kind of man would you like your sons/grandsons to be?

Family and friends

-    who was the most important person to you growing up – and why?

-    who are the most important people in your life now – and why?

-    how important are friends – male? female? – and why?

-    who do you talk to if you're having problems of any kind?

Emotions

-    are men more/less emotional than women?

-    what emotions is it OK for a man to show / not show?

-    what are men like at expressing their feelings?

Health and body image

- how important is a healthy lifestyle / what does it mean to be 'healthy'?

- do you feel any pressure to live up to a certain 'look' or body image?

- how important are muscular body / good looks / nice clothes to you?

- is it the same / different for girls?

Sex and relationships

- are you looking for a committed / lifelong relationship?

- are young men just interested in sex – or is that a stereotype?

- how important is it to be faithful to your partner?

- how should men treat women?

- is it ever OK for a man to hit a woman?

- what about men hitting men – is it ever OK? Ever happened to you?

- how are gay men thought of / treated in your group / young men you mix with?

Work

- what kind of work would you like to do – and why?

- what do you think of the work you do / work opportunities for young men around here?

- how important is it for a man to have a paid job – and why?

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important? Anything else you want to say or ask?