

Exploring the Masculinities of Young Men in Hong Kong



Gender equality is critical to building and sustaining a thriving society. Having gender equal rights and opportunities, cultivating healthy relationships, and promoting the health, education, safety and well-being of everyone, all contribute to building a solid foundation from which to pursue sustainable economic growth and social development. Thus, gender equality is beneficial for everyone of all backgrounds and genders.

Despite these benefits, to date, there is a paucity of research on men's attitudes towards women, gender equality and changing gender relations. To fill this gap, The Women's Foundation commissioned Dr Anita Chan from The Education University of Hong Kong and Dr Adam Cheung from Hong Kong Baptist University to conduct first of its kind research in Hong Kong to understand how young men perceive and understand gender roles, women's rising status, and changing gender and sexual relationships.

1,768 male university students from 11 universities participated in the study which included self-administered questionnaires and focus group interviews (9 groups, and 48 participants in total).

Research Findings

New Components of Masculinity

The top five attributes that male university students in Hong Kong self-identified with are:

- Being independent
- Being aware of other people's feelings
- Being helpful
- Showing Emotion
- Being understanding

'Being independent' is the only conventionally masculine attribute, suggesting that there have been some significant changes in the identification with gender attributes among young, educated men in Hong Kong, who are ready to embrace 'feminine' qualities in their gender identities.



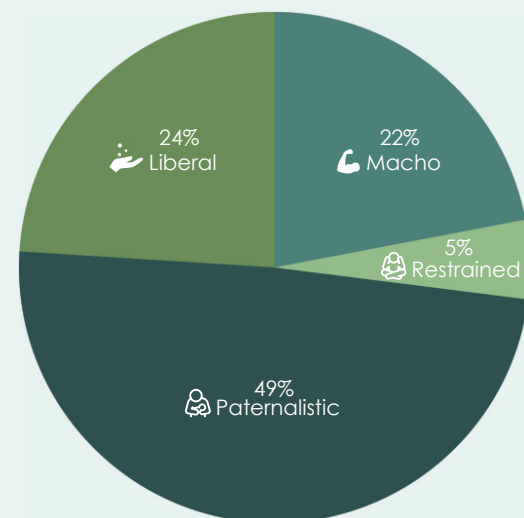
"In the past, men felt restrained (拘謹) from expressing their feelings. But now, our education is different, and society is more open-minded. Men are encouraged to express their emotions in front of others." Focus group participant

From the responses, the researchers identified four distinct types of masculine behaviours and beliefs¹:

Tendency to identify with the following traits:

| | Macho | Restrained | Paternalistic | Liberal |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------------|---------------|---------|
| Limited range of expressed emotions | 79% | 65% | 40% | 11% |
| Avoidance of femininity | 81% | 86% | 16% | 3% |
| Importance of sex | 75% | 58% | 40% | 15% |
| Negativity towards homosexuality | 48% | 38% | 13% | 8% |
| Dominance | 93% | 26% | 53% | 3% |
| Self-reliance | 80% | 45% | 64% | 22% |
| Desire to protect others | 97% | 46% | 91% | 39% |
| Toughness | 100% | 55% | 92% | 21% |

Breakdown of respondents by type



¹ ■ denotes the majority of respondents identify with the indicated trait; ■ indicates a minority of respondents within that group identify with the indicated trait.

Three-quarters of respondents (macho, paternalistic and restrained) agree with traditional male role norms to varying degrees, of which over 20% agree with nearly all traditional male role norms.



“How does a man find his manhood (男子氣概)? He shows his masculinity by protecting the weak, right? This is very natural. For example, I want to protect my family, my sisters, and my girlfriend.”
Focus group participant

These four types were then analysed for their level of conservatism towards gender roles and their negativity towards changing gender relations:

| | Macho | Restrained | Paternalistic | Liberal |
|--|-----------|----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Believe in rape myths ² | | | | |
| The #MeToo movement negatively affects men | | | | |
| Feminism and Women's Movements negatively affect men | | | | |
| Women should take on traditional roles ³ | | | | |
| Ideal girlfriend or partner embodies traditional feminine characteristics ⁴ | | | | |
| Agree with Kong Nui ⁵ stereotypes | | | | |

Agree Disagree

Significantly, across all four types, all believe their ideal girlfriend or partner should embody **traditional feminine characteristics** such as being conventionally beautiful, helpful and understanding. There is also a universal dislike of *Kong Nui* – viewing them as materialistic and selfish. The vast majority of respondents believe women should still **adopt traditional roles** such as doing most of the housework and prioritising motherhood over career aspirations.

The study identified factors that may influence young men's conservatism to gender roles and negativity towards changing gender relations. Specifically:

Without sisters

Co-ed secondary school

Active in sports⁶

Engages in online forum discussions

Does not have a Social Sciences or Humanities background

Least satisfied with life

Non-locally born⁷

²Rape myths include: sexual assault isn't a problem in Hong Kong, beautiful women are more likely to be raped, and rape is committed by impulsive, often inebriated men that act aggressively even under normal circumstances.
³Traditional roles for women include prioritising motherhood over a career, knowing how to do housework and behaving in a cute and gentle manner, and the perception that women in the workplace are seen as masculine and that some jobs are not suitable for women.
⁴Traditional feminine characteristics include conforming to traditional women's roles such as being helpful and understanding as well as having a feminine appearance like being beautiful and having a good body shape.
⁵'Kong Nui' (Hong Kong Girls) – 'troublesome and nasty Hong Kong women' (Chu 2014: 134)
⁶Factors in ■ indicate a significant association with conservatism to gender roles and negative attitudes towards changing gender relations.
⁷Non-locally born refers to students who are Hong Kong residents but not born here. Of the 15.5% who identified as non-locally born, the majority come from Mainland China.

Key Focus Group Findings

- Participants believe in the basic tenets of gender equality, but are not supportive of feminism and the women's movement. They believe feminism manipulates the concept of gender equality to confer special privileges to women.



"Very often feminists are very extreme. They package themselves as 'feminists' but in fact they are seeking special privileges. They make radical arguments which justify women's domination over men." Focus group participant

- Participants feel pressured to live up to society's expectations of what it means to be an 'ideal' man. Most consider the model of a successful man to be wealthy, morally upstanding, with a flourishing career and a happy family. Being a responsible economic provider and a protector is even more important as it is regarded as the 'natural' duty of men, but they are aware that current economic conditions make fulfilling that role challenging.



"It will definitely be very hard to find a job.... Because of the COVID-19 epidemic, I have more worries. I have got a driving license, so I may be working in transportation if there are no other choices. I may acquire a security license as well. How to say, if you have more skills, you will have some way to secure an income." Focus group participant

- Participants don't feel threatened or disadvantaged by women's equal education and employment opportunities, but are uncomfortable with the idea of having a girlfriend or partner with higher education qualifications or career achievements than them.



"If my partner earns more money than I do, I will question my ability; my pride will be hurt." Focus group participant

- While some participants are comfortable equally sharing household and caregiving responsibilities, the majority of participants prefer a traditional family model where women shoulder most of these responsibilities.



"If the children do not have their mother around them, or if we depend on a domestic helper or a relative to take up this role, it will have a disastrous impact on the children." Focus group participant

- Participants held ambivalent, sometimes contradictory views about female sexual autonomy. Many have a preference for a partner who is a virgin and while they acknowledge the importance of sex in a relationship, there is a reluctance to accept their girlfriend's or partner's past sexual history.



"In principle it is okay [if my girlfriend is not a virgin] but in reality I would feel bad." Focus group participant

Key Focus Group Findings

- Participants believe violence against women is wrong and do not place blame on victims of sexual assault. However, most respondents believe in common rape myths including sexual assault isn't a problem in Hong Kong and isn't committed by 'normal' men.





"I think right now this [sexual assault] is not a serious problem, because women's status has improved. If something of this kind happens, even one single incident, the whole society would react and speak up for the girl. Social opinions always stand with the girl." Focus group participant

- While the majority of participants believe the #MeToo movement has had a positive impact on sexual assault victims and society, some think men have not been sufficiently included in the movement and that it can lead to innocent men being wrongly accused of sexual assault or harassment. Others believe the movement overlooks male victims who rarely speak out about being sexually assaulted.



"The worst problem about #MeToo is that once a girl posts an accusation on the internet, all netizens make the judgements against the accused. There is no fair mechanism to assess the truthfulness of the claim, and a judgement is already made before a trial (未審先判)." Focus group participant

What Comes Next?

| Education  | Research  |
|--|--|
| Gender education programmes designed by educators and social service providers that target factors that influence conservative gender attitudes | Systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of gender education programmes in changing gender attitudes, particularly among boys and men |
| A whole-school approach to gender education established, which ensures relevant, concrete, and localised content, incorporating diverse voices and an inclusive approach | The causal relationship between men's gender ideology and their awareness of the influence of social media in shaping their opinions and behaviours explored |
| Gender awareness incorporated into parenting education to counteract adverse impact of gender stereotyping | |

Full Report



Questions?  Contact TWF at info@twfhk.org