Manhood Impossible
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Part III

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Making Manhood Possible

I don’t know that I can separate out being a man from being a good person.
—Gentlemen’s Fighting Club member Jason

I wouldn’t put up with somebody thinking I was less of a man because I’m a stay-at-home dad.
—stay-at-home dad Rob

If men benefit from gender inequality, how can they be persuaded to help oppose it, especially if it requires them to change their behavior? I take it as a given that virtually all women and transgender people support changes to current manhood ideals and gender arrangements, which are all too often sources of their discrimination, violence, and oppression. Speaking with and listening to the men in this book, it is clear that they, too, would largely welcome change. Most men don’t feel particularly privileged or powerful in their daily lives. The tensions, conflicts, and insecurities that accompany capitalism, postindustrialization, and declining patriarchal relations invite fundamental changes. Many men would prefer a more egalitarian society.

Contemporary American culture assigns boys and men an impossible mission: to ceaselessly maintain control of themselves and not be controlled by others or the circumstances they face. They are expected to stifle the full range of basic human emotions and to physically dominate and not be dominated
by others. Later, they are expected to sexually attract and masterfully perform for women and establish themselves as reliable breadwinners. These body and breadwinner ideals are beyond even the reach of Tom Cruise and a 100-million-dollar budget. No man can possibly complete this mission.

Marginalized and subordinated men face structural and cultural obstacles that make achieving manhood even less possible for them. The privileges of patriarchal arrangements are enjoyed by all men but are not equally distributed. Queer men, men of color, resource-poor men, men with disabilities, undocumented men, and others enjoy fewer of these benefits.

I find that when men fail to fulfill hegemonic manhood ideals, they internalize their failures and endlessly try to repair them or compensate for them. These responses to failure pose dangers to the men themselves, others in their lives—especially women—and society at large. And many men know it. Most of the men in this book view these ideals as unattainable, onerous, sometimes undesirable, and often costly. They have felt and often continue to feel the burdens of fitting into a tiny box, of endlessly having to prove their manhood while avoiding all things feminine. They express feeling trapped and constrained by our narrow definition of masculinity. They see and suffer the consequences of pursuing body and breadwinner ideals, the costs of privilege that accompany successful and unsuccessful attempts to fulfill these ideals.¹ A lifetime of suppressing emotions, competing with others, and not taking proper care of one’s body, both inside and out, takes its toll. The physical, interpersonal, and psychological consequences are considerable.

Men live shorter, more dangerous, and less healthy lives because the expectation for them to be dominant and in control produces greater levels of violence, risk-taking, economic stress, substance abuse, and social isolation and leads them more often toward the avoidance of health care and suicide. Just as marginalized and subordinated men enjoy fewer of the privileges of manhood, they disproportionately endure the costs of its pursuit. Many men would embrace being unburdened of this impossible mission.

Most important, a growing number of men are open to change for more selfless reasons: because they empathize with girls and women. The culmination of decades upon decades of feminist activism coupled with dramatic economic changes have opened up a window of opportunity whereby a growing number of men view the pursuit of orthodox manhood ideals as anachronistic and unrealistic—a fool’s errand. We now live in a more gender equality-minded society. Most men agree that women should not be excluded from any areas of life—whether social, economic, or political—or subject to discrimination, harassment, or violence.² Industrialization led to a dominant model of fatherhood: good fathers were good breadwinners. Maybe deindustrialization, greater workplace gender parity, and the introduction of
progressive work-family policies will lead to a new dominant model: responsible and engaged fatherhood.

Today more than ever, there is the possibility of redefining manhood in such a way as to make it attainable and feminist, as a subset of the men in this book attempt to do. Establishing and maintaining power and control come into conflict with the growing expectation of engaged fatherhood. The provider and protector ethic, many men report, is outdated. Men’s long-standing expectation to be responsible is the thread that connects yesterday’s emotionally distant provider-protectors to today’s responsible fathers. This emerging ideal expects dads to be far more involved and engaged parents than in generations past. Our roller coaster economy of bubbles and busts, made excruciatingly clear by the Great Recession, highlights how fragile are men’s breadwinner identities and how little control over them men wield. A more realistic, obtainable set of manhood ideals should attract more and more men and would be beneficial to all.

We might be on the cusp of a significant redefining of manhood, but changes to it are not inevitable. Researchers have documented how progress toward gender inequality has slowed or even stalled. And as joblessness recedes along with the most devastating impacts of the Great Recession, we face a return to the status quo, including involuntary stay-at-home fathers high-tailing it back to paid work. It will take significant grassroots efforts, systemic changes to work-family laws and policies, and perhaps American families’ mounting struggles and dissatisfaction to spur these changes. Womanhood has been transformed. Now manhood must be as well. The new dominant version of manhood must be equitable and attainable. We can create manhood ideals that are neither unachievable nor destructive. It can be just a mission, not an impossible one.

### Signs of Progress

Progress toward gender equality is evident in all areas of American life. The last century of activism and social change has resulted in widespread legal, political, and social advancements for women. Highlights include women’s suffrage; greater access to and participation in the paid labor force; access to birth control and abortion rights; the prohibition of discrimination in education (Title IX); less gender segregation in fields of study; higher rates of college graduation (which now exceed those of men); greater access to political power; an antiviolence movement that has transformed laws, policies, and attitudes regarding sexual harassment and intimate violence; a culture that increasingly celebrates women athletes and artists; more gender-egalitarian attitudes regarding work-family arrangements; and the
nomination of the first woman to lead a major party’s presidential ticket, as well as her near victory.

These changes were hard fought, and as I discuss in the following section, they are uneven and far from complete. The breaks from the past are revealing, though, in that they expose gender as an arbitrary cultural artifact that is malleable, not a biological inevitability to which we are condemned. What it means to be a woman today looks quite different than it did a century ago in the United States. Men and manhood have been slower to change.

Yet progress can be seen in men’s changing attitudes and practices on many of the issues identified here. Survey research since the 1950s reveals that public attitudes have become much more supportive of women’s rights and opposed to confining women to lower status roles. For example, nearly all Americans say they would vote for a woman president today, but that figure didn’t even reach 50% until after World War II. Americans, especially younger ones, now support and desire a greater balance between work and family. Single young adults envision egalitarian relationships as the ideal, if workplaces and work laws and policies allowed for this arrangement. Recent survey research also suggests that Americans largely support women working. This includes mothers of young children if the family depends on her income. There remains a gap, with respondents more likely to endorse men working to support families. But the gap is smaller between gender groups than it is within when analyzing questions about women and men in an array of work-family scenarios. In short, attitudes about women’s and men’s work-family balance is influenced more by family situations than gender. To address these work-family challenges, more Americans now support federal and state policies that would and do provide paid family leave and higher wages and continued expansion of more affordable health care.

Of course, attitudes are one thing; actions are another. Men have already chosen or been forced to change their work-family practices. Recall that fathers in 2015 were doing 16 hours per week of childcare and housework, up from only 7 hours in 1965. And long-term, voluntary stay-at-home fathers are a growing demographic. Further, public attitudes about sexuality have undergone rapid and seismic shifts. Only conservative Republicans remain strongly opposed to same-sex marriage and “acceptance” of homosexuality. Recent cohorts of younger men are those most likely to embrace gender and sexuality equality and to reject homophobia. Millennials find it difficult to believe that we only recently established marriage equality or stopped using sexuality to gatekeep military service. Might evidence of antihomophobic and equality-minded young men in homosocial, historically hypermasculine contexts such as sports teams and fraternities suggest a new “inclusive masculinity” that challenges hegemonic masculinity? Out athletes and fraternity members who receive strong support from teammates and friends certainly indicate social
progress. Younger men view gender and sexuality as much more fluid, and their actions reflect their beliefs. They are more emotionally and physically intimate with other men, platonically and sexually. They are more likely to become familiar with the experiences of women, which leads them to becoming less sexist.

I think, at least as far as the United States is concerned, we would be going too far to argue that there are now dueling dominant masculinities, one orthodox and the other inclusive. Locating and studying inclusive masculinities is essential; indeed, I hope that my own research on stay-at-home fathers contributes to this literature. However, my data suggest that men who adopt antisexist and antihomophobic attitudes and practices still view orthodox masculinity (i.e., hegemonic masculine ideals) as the standard to which they and other men are held. They know that they are swimming against the tide. It doesn’t force them to change course, but they are well aware theirs is not the dominant mode of thinking or acting. Inclusive masculinities may be becoming more prevalent; there may even be pockets where they are the locally prevailing standard. Culturally speaking, though, orthodox masculinity is still dominant. Men continue to believe that there are natural, immutable gender differences, which are used to justify not only difference but inequality. Nevertheless, these cracks in the façade of manhood indicate that inclusive masculinities could one day replace the orthodox kind.

There is no reason to continue to assign men an impossible mission, one that is so destructive for all. These manhood ideals are as artificial as the movie sets that serve as the backdrop to Tom Cruise’s missions: The sets look real. The actors persuasively play the roles they are given. The audience, in turn, suspends its disbelief and accepts that world as real. Though our own reality isn’t quite as flimsy as an action movie set, it too is sustained by our willingness to buy into and play roles, and put on believable performances for audiences. Doing what is expected of us as men—pursuing manhood ideals—doesn’t necessarily lead to Hollywood-level wealth and fame, but it does offer rewards. Ultimately, though, it is an act that fewer and fewer men embrace. To mix movie hero metaphors, the impossible body and breadwinner mission assigned to men is to be Supermen in the streets, sheets, and suites. Some of the men I interview may occasionally fantasize about being heroes and superheroes, but most simply desire to set and meet more realistic expectations for ideal manhood. They are a captive audience; many are hungry for new models of manhood.

When I ask them what it means to be a man, many identify characteristics and behaviors that they associate generically with responsible adulthood. Stay-at-home dad Jamie says, “I don’t think there should be so much of this, you know, ‘Men do this, women don’t do this.’ I think that if I could change the definition, I would try to make them more synonymous.” Gentlemen’s
Fighting Club participant Stuart thinks expectations have shifted since his parents grew up, and today, “I really do find it difficult to consider the roles of a man as different than the roles of a woman.” Fellow fighter Barry says, “I guess there’s a part of me that wants to answer that question and knows where you’re coming from. But then there’s another part of me that’s like, you know, that’s just another bullshit label. I don’t have to aspire to anything because I have a penis, right? I mean, I’m not a man, I just am who I am.”

Many of my interviewees also reject orthodox masculinity; it never reflected their experiences or interests. Jonathan, one of the long-term unemployed, says he rejected his parents’ approach and determined early on in his relationship, “I will be affectionate to my wife and kids and that I [will] equally share all parts of my life and responsibilities in married life.” Stay-at-home father Tim says, “I’m not into the machismo kind of thing,” using language that reflects stereotypes of Latin American men as hypermasculine. “Men need to be role models for boys and girls, and raise them to be good people and to care about people in the world.”

GFC fighter Jackson’s rejection of orthodox masculinity sometimes elicited verbal or physical bullying. Today, he says, “I’m just more concerned about just doing me, whatever makes me happy. And I’ve heard it from people before, like, ‘You’re not masculine or manly enough.’ I’m like, ‘I . . . ’ it’s just not an interest of mine,’ you know? ‘Sorry, can’t do it.’ It has its consequences. You know, I’ve had people call me a faggot.” When Penis Health Club member Stephen was a kid, he faced bullying for not being like the other boys. He says he was the “loser kid in elementary school that everybody picked on,” which makes him particularly attuned and prone to interceding today when he sees similar behavior.

Just a few of the men I interview believe that physical strength or toughness are important features of manhood. Similarly, most do not emphasize the importance of heterosexual virility, although this is widespread on Club forum posts. Many men, especially the unwillingly unemployed, support the breadwinner ideal. Much more frequently, though, when men begin describing manhood, they talk about responsibility. And when doing so, they refer to being accountable for one’s actions, being a source of love and support for partners and children, standing up against bullies, being an asset to the community, and leaving the world a better place than how they found it. Men in each of the four groups, but especially stay-at-home dads, talk specifically about setting their egos aside for the benefit of others.

PHC member Larry says, “There are guys who tie their feelings of being a man to their ability to inflict their will on others. And to me that’s being a bully; that’s not being a man.” GFC fighter Darren is surprised “at how many guys are still pumped up about, ‘Yeah, my wife works at home and that’s the way it should be,’ and ‘I make all the financial decisions in the family.’” As far
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as Club member Ed is concerned, “the whole virility, macho, beer-slogging image” needs to go: “It has so many negative connotations. It’s abusive, and rude . . . obnoxious and disrespectful. It disrespects men and women. It’s a bullying attitude.”

My question about the meaning of manhood elicits a methodical, thoughtful response from PHC member Travis. He says,

A man is fully accountable for all of his actions. And he cares for his spouse and loved ones. He does everything he can to support them, not only by working to the best of his capability to provide for their temporal needs, but also by providing the love, the care, the tenderness, and the emotional support that each family member requires of him.

Travis also emphasizes that actions have consequences and men must take responsibility for these as well. A man “who wantonly nails anything with two legs, with complete disregard for consequences afterwards—is that a man, or is that just a guy who’s getting his rocks off on someone?” he asks rhetorically. It’s not about being or even trying to be perfect, he says, but rather “when you screw up, you also own up.”

Notably, when describing manhood, men in the three groups that are not stay-at-home dads consistently talk about the importance of being a committed and engaged father. GFC fighter Freddy says he would be “a kick-ass stay-at-home dad” if he was in that position. He is insulted by the “dopey father” stereotype so widely depicted in popular culture. Although he and his wife agree that she is the primary caretaker, when she travels, he says he meets his kids’ basic needs; he doesn’t need to be told which folder his kids’ homework goes in or what day it’s due. Ed uses the example of presidential masculinities to illustrate what he believes has changed over the last half century: “Lyndon Johnson was a bullying SOB, and he was a ‘real man,’ you know, a Texan man. And Barack Obama is a caring family man who does not exhibit any of those characteristics, as far as I can tell.” (Our interview precedes the 2016 election.)

According to voluntary stay-at-home dad Zach, “To be a man is to be a good dad, to be a good husband, to be a good person, and try to take good care of my family and giving back to my community.” His peer, Justin, gets “frustrated with crappy dads [who] spend a lot of time watching football” instead of enjoying family time: “It’s like, man, you’re really missing out.” Justin believes the standard is “so low” that men are considered good dads if they play ball with their kid every couple of weeks:

[Actually] being a good dad is a daily thing; [it’s] being a good parent. I guess my pet peeve or whatever is even saying “mother” or “father.” I try to refer to myself
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as a parent. That’s a non-gender-specific kind of term. It’s like, parent, that means you do it all. My brother-in-law, he never changed a diaper. Can you believe that—never changed a diaper?

Justin thinks only a small minority of men, regardless of whether they are at-home parents, do the kind of intensive parenting expected of and done mostly by mothers. His preference for gender-neutral terms reveals his belief that men can and should do this work just as well. He implicitly seeks to redefine manhood.

Ryan says he used language he’s not proud of when he was younger. His feminist wife and his feelings of responsibility for his two young kids have led him to interrogate his earlier use of “that’s so gay” and has prevented him from telling his boys to “man up, or sack up”: “I think a lot of times, it means don’t cry, don’t whine, do what needs to be done. It is like, stop being a sissy, something like that—like stop being in any way feminine, stop being weak. And it is another one of those things where this phrase that I’ve always used—[am I now going to be] saying it in front of my kids? Like, what does this mean? What do I think it means? What does society mean by it? And is this what I want to teach my kids?” When his prekindergarten son falls and scrapes his knee and, at the sight of his own blood, “loses it like he has just been shot,” Ryan resists the cultural temptation to tell him to man up. He says he might tell his son to toughen up if he’s reacting only to the blood rather than pain and believes he would do the same if he had a daughter. His parenting is gendered, but (by his own account) not sexist. Previously, he admits, he was casually homophobic and sexist. As a husband and a father, he finally began examining the meanings of his words. He found that he couldn’t reconcile saying “that’s so gay” with his earlier belief that it had nothing to do with sexuality, especially after putting himself in the shoes of his gay friends. Now he says he recognizes “the power of language and words and the way words are used to put people down.”

When I ask men what they might like to change about expectations placed on them as a group, they consistently identify the expectation to stifle many of their emotions and to put on a front of invulnerability. It turns out that big boys do cry—or at least they want and need to and wish they wouldn’t be ridiculed or considered weak for doing so. Many also want to stop being told to “man up” when displaying emotional vulnerability or doing anything else perceived as even the slightest bit feminine. And for most of the voluntary stay-at-home dads, manhood is inseparable from responsible, engaged fatherhood.
Signs of Stalled Progress

Despite all the progress made since what has been called the 1960s gender revolution, scholars have concluded it was always uneven, is unfinished, has stalled, and is unlikely to be completed. Much of the progress plateaued in the mid-1990s and hasn’t budged much since. The uneven nature of the progress is depressing, if unsurprising—many of the accrued rights and privileges have been enjoyed mostly by middle-class, white, and straight-identified women.

There remains a sizeable gendered gap in resources and power. Women, especially less formally educated women, continue to do less paid work and more unpaid carework than men. The gender pay gap remains stubbornly wide. Unpaid family leave laws and policies offer little support to all but the most economically secure families. At the top of the hierarchy, power is even more concentrated among men. Only 22 of the Fortune 500 CEOs are women, and only 3 are women of color. Persistent barriers and biases continue to undermine women’s access to leadership positions. Only one woman of color made the list of the 400 wealthiest Americans in 2016; among these billionaires, just over 10% are white women. Even in the not-for-profit sector, there is a large gap: women are the CEOs of a paltry 18% of these organizations. The numbers are only slightly better in higher education, where just over a quarter of colleges and universities have women leaders. Gender inequality within the realm of politics is just as dismal. Only 20 out of 100 U.S. senators are women, along with a slightly lower percentage of U.S. House members. Only 33 of 535 members of Congress are women of color. At the state level, there are only six women governors. The power gaps are repeated in other arenas, including unions and religious institutions.

As many have noted and I document in this book, changes in intimate relationships have been even slower. Gender inequality has been most persistent in interpersonal expressions of power, where various gendered double standards have progressed less than women’s material gains. Research confirms what we have observed for some time: men continue to take the initiator role in heterosexual dating, sex, and marriage proposals; women continue to be expected to play the gatekeeper role and are often judged and stigmatized for their sexual desires and behavior, especially outside of committed relationships; men are supposed to be taller and older in different-sex couples, indicating their greater social power; and large majorities of all groups of women still take their new husband’s surname, with children usually assigned the same name.

These subtle and sometimes less-than-subtle arrangements and practices reveal how little progress has been made on how we do gender in our intimate
relationships. Another example is the fervent pressure placed on women to practice “intensive mothering,” which emerged on the heels of women’s mass entrée into the paid labor force. This fueled, in part, the contentious debate about professional women opting out of their careers to raise children. No such pressures or debates revolve around fathers and fathering. Manhood continues to be narrowly defined, while motherhood has been expanded to accommodate the “supermoms” who do it all, only to then later get chastised for not being good enough moms. Boys and men’s pursuit of manhood ideals still all too often takes the form of violence against girls and women. Despite declining rates of sexual assault, rape, and all forms of intimate violence against women, the rates remain high. These continue to be social problems, not individual ones.

There are many explanations for why the revolution may have stalled. They include men’s lack of change, due largely to the continued devaluation of anything marked feminine; essentialist and individualistic attributions to gendered behaviors; lack of work-family policies that would provide institutional support; unconscious gender bias; and antifeminist backlash. Boys and men enjoy many gendered privileges. Our society more explicitly values and rewards masculine-marked characteristics and behaviors. Doing masculinity—being tough, strong, competitive, independent, successful, a leader—brings symbolic, psychological, social, and material rewards. Men often benefit simply from attempting to do and be these things or attaining them ever so briefly. Conversely, feminine-marked characteristics and behaviors are devalued. Boys and men must distance themselves from femininity if they are to avoid being ridiculed, ostracized, bullied, socially and economically marginalized, and more. This has produced a flood of women into fields and careers that men dominated but very little of the reverse. And when women choose careers or paths that allow them to be primary caretakers, observers often attribute this to their essential natures rather than the gender pay gap or the lack of work-family policies that would allow women to more fairly share carework. There has also been a robust antifeminist backlash movement, which turned feminism into “the other F-word.”

Among the men I interview, a sizeable minority attribute social differences to girls’/women’s and boys’/men’s essential natures, as they’ve done historically. It was men, after all—scientists, politicians, preachers, employers, and judges—who created and enforced (and still do) ideologies that deemed women and men so essentially different and, inevitably and essentially, women so inferior. Some of my interviewees simply support the social separation of these groups on some tasks and roles. Overall, these men think that to be a man means being a protector and provider. They also think that the man should be in charge, the head and leader of the household, the family’s rock,
and generally, able to “handle their business.” As might be expected, men in the fighting club and the online penis enlargement club are more invested in an essentialist, orthodox masculinity that views women and men as binary beings. Whether this is due to self-selection into these groups, the influence of the respective clubs, or some combination, a higher proportion of these men use language that refers to an essential physicality and a need to control their own and others’ bodies.

The overall progressive politics of the stay-at-home dads precludes most from slipping into essentialist explanations for their kids’ behavior, but some do. Nick says, “Boys are different creatures than girls, you know. We’re the hunters, and they’re the gatherers. They’re delicate creatures. My mom told me a long time ago, when I was 17, ‘Don’t try to figure them out.’” As flawed as they are, these 100,000-year-old explanations for subtle differences in contemporary gendered behavior are seductive. They are simple, categorical: caveman versus cavewoman, Mars versus Venus, X versus Y, testosterone versus estrogen. They provide easy-to-digest understandings of (what amount to fairly small) group average differences in behavior. What Nick and most of us are liable to do is fall victim to confirmation bias, whereby we take note of and highlight kids’ gender-appropriate behavior and ignore or dismiss the rest.

According to a handful of GFC members, men are or should be programmed differently. “When you ask, ‘What does it mean to be a man?’” Freddy says, “I almost want to say, to fight. And maybe metaphorically and literally. I just think we’re built for it. I really think we’re built to fight.” His occasional fighting partner, George, says, “My dad always said, ‘Boys don’t cry, you get up,’ all this sort of stuff. And I do a little of that to [my son], but he beat me to the punch. He beat me to that. He does it himself.” Darren says he was raised to believe in gender equality and that there aren’t important gender differences. However, he says, “As I get older and reality sets in, [I’ve learned] I actually really do enjoy the role of being the caretaker or the role of being [physically] dominant.” Thanks to GFC, he says, “You’re cognizant more of your power and your ability to, you know, how you can pin people and hold people and, you know, things like that. I think there’s a difference between fighting a guy and winning versus maybe expressing your physical dominance over a woman.” He embraces the former—it meets one of his midlife desires—but rejects the latter as misogynist. When his girlfriend “kicked my butt” on a mountain hike, set up camp, started a fire, dug a snow cave, and took care of him while he was freezing and barely functioning, he found it “a pretty powerless, humiliating experience.” Yet when I ask him if it negatively impacted his relationship or if he resented her, he responds, “No, no, it’s all positive, and it just makes me want to be better. Makes me want to hang around her.” He desires strength and also finds it attractive in women.
A minority of men across the four groups continue to embrace orthodox masculinity. PHC lurker Isaiah provides an exhaustive answer when I ask him what it means to be a man. He says,

I think it means that you are someone who’s supposed to be a protector and a provider for other people. You’re supposed to be a leader. You’re supposed to embody positive qualities, kind of a positive attitude. You’re not supposed to display your emotions unnecessarily. You can display your emotions for certain things, but not all things. Having a firm handshake I think is one of the [bases of] being a man—not too strong, not too soft. Know how to control your temper. And being well-rounded in a lot of stuff but having one thing in particular that you’re good at.

This young man has internalized a long list of expected behaviors that even with constant effort and self-monitoring, no man can possibly achieve. He is set up for failure and all of the harsh consequences that follow.

Jonathan, a long-term unwillingly unemployed father, says he “reluctantly still follow[s] the old adage” that men should be stoic. He feels compelled to be the rock for his family. He says he has cried only once in nearly 20 years, after the death of his brother. Even then, he held it in until he was home alone, the only place he will allow himself to express emotions. It is no secret that suppressing human emotions is physically unhealthy and may herald an explosive and dangerous release of those emotions when they can no longer be contained.

Tyler’s view of a man, which he hasn’t been able to fulfill since he was incarcerated, is fairly orthodox: “Somebody that definitely supports the family financially—if not the breadwinner, definitely works. I definitely don’t agree with being a ‘stay-at-home dad.’ Definitely work, definitely take care of the house in terms of fixing stuff and taking out the trash and stuff like that. You know, being in equal partnership with your significant other, whether you’re married or not. Take care of the kids, make sure the kids are at school, or doing their thing. Disciplinary actions toward your kids if needed. You know, taking care of the bills, making sure everything’s paid.” His and the preceding men’s views reflect the hegemonic masculine ideals that continue to serve as the dominant American model. As these men can personally attest, this model is unattainable. It leaves them feeling unfulfilled and often rather powerless. And it relegates women to secondary status.

Among all the interview participants, GFC regular George was the only one to vociferously reject feminist views on gender equality. He says his beliefs, which he labels “equalist or humanist,” support gender equality more than feminists’ because “feminism is essentially female supremacy.” He initially deflects my question about what it means to be a man but, after thinking about it some more, decides to respond:
What do men do better? What does it mean to be a man? Better inventors, better at building hierarchies, better at industrialization, better at building societies. Absolutely necessary to have a family. A woman and children is not a family. That’s just a woman and her children. For a family structure, you need to have a man and woman with their children . . . Some [characteristics] overlap with women but certainly a sense of selflessness. A sense of overcoming the odds, risk, aggression—both social and some physical aggression. I kind of see those as intertwined more so than [for] women. Mercy, kindness, and compassion but from a masculine expression.

George views feminism as an ideology that deems women superior, but his own views align with men’s rights and antifeminist groups that deem men superior. He is an outlier among the men I interview but representative of a minority of American men who feel that men are the victims of gender inequality thanks to feminist activism.

**Signs of Manhood in Flux**

Decades of cultural and structural change have upset, if not upended, gender ideologies and arrangements. Change generates competing responses: conflict, pushback and backlash, and growth. Gendered work-family conflicts and tensions highlight the instabilities. Further change, one way or another, seems inevitable. The men in this study—collectively and, in some cases, individually—reflect these contradictions, offering a range of views on gender and manhood. This is perhaps illustrated best in their responses to my asking them the meaning of the expression “man up.”

The participant most resistant to redefining manhood and embracing feminist-led gender equality, George, hates the expression because he thinks it’s sexist against men: “When it comes from a woman, [it means] ‘Do stuff for me. Do the stuff that I don’t want to do. Sacrifice your life on the first date or you’re a coward’ kind of a thing. ‘Give me money, buy me stuff, make me comfortable, provide for me for life, man up.’” George asks why we don’t ever hear “woman up” and suggests it should be used for “traditional woman stuff” like “man up” is used for things associated with men. For example, he says, “Don’t take any drugs when you’re delivering the baby. That’s your job, all right.” Or unemployed wives should always cook meals that satisfy the breadwinning husband.

No other men respond similarly to my prompt, but nearly half say “man up” is used by others, mostly men, to challenge men to stop acting feminine. They say it means “Suck it up,” “Stop whining,” “Don’t be a pussy,” “Stop being a girl,” “Stop acting like a little bitch,” “Put your big-boy pants on,” and “Get your balls back.” Most do not see this as a problem, reflecting the casual sexism
that remains so prevalent. Some men are put off by this, but they recognize that these expressions are widely used. This suggests that the dominant cultural standard remains something far from an inclusive masculinity. Most interpret the expression as “be a man, don’t be a woman,” but some suggest it means “don’t be a boy.” Whereas manhood was a term used to demarcate adult men from boys and boyhood in preindustrial America, after the forces of industrialization, capitalism, and feminism left many men economically insecure and feeling threatened, the term masculinity largely supplanted manhood and was contrasted with femininity.\textsuperscript{20}

Isaiah says “man up” means “don’t be a woman,” rather than a boy “because women are supposed to be full of emotion. They’re allowed to cry [or] be angry. But [for men,] there’s no need for that, for something as simple as getting hurt on the field; just man up and leave that stuff at home.” GFC fighter Sammy says, “I think my interpretation is more encouragement. It’s to toughen up. I mean, be a man. Don’t cry, right? Don’t be a sissy.” Dwayne, who has long been struggling with unemployment and underemployment, says, “‘Man up’ means for a man to be brave and stand up for himself. It’s usually used when a male is acting soft, weak, or is afraid to do something.” He says men say it to other men “when a guy is acting whiny about approaching a girl or hesitant to do something they know they want to do.” He sees it as “a positive expression meant to encourage men to stand up, take charge of their lives, and go for what they want.” Sammy, Isaiah, and Dwayne view the expression positively, as one that helps men learn to be better men—rather than, more generically, better people. Stay-at-home dad Zach thinks it means “grow a set of balls.” He adds, “You know, don’t be a puss, don’t be a wuss.” He says a man might say this to another if he’s “whining about it being cold outside.”

Several men say “man up” is used to get men to reclaim their independence and identity from women. For Darren, “man up” is about overcoming challenges, but he thinks most other men use it to mean “don’t let your wife run the house. You know—get some balls, wear the pants.” Involuntary stay-at-home dad, Liam, says, “When I’ve heard it, it means get your balls back from your wife. Sometimes I’ve heard it [as], ‘Go to the freezer, get your balls out, put ‘em back on, and let’s go out and get a drink. Man up.’ I think it just means like ‘have some balls.’ ‘Have some conviction.’” Conviction, apparently, resides within men’s reproductive genitalia. Liam says he used the expression once to help his friend get over a relationship that ended: “After a while, this whining and complaining that he would do—I was just like, ‘Dude, you need to shut the fuck up and man up.’ I think it kind of shocked him because I was a very supportive friend up to that point. But how much are you going to wallow in your grief? Wallow for a while, get it out, and then move on, because there are plenty of other chicks out there. Yeah, take your panties off and put your big boy pants on.”
GFC fighter Jackson, who says he is “just not into” being masculine and has been called a fag for his gender nonconformity, seems to embrace the expression as a tool to get men to stop acting effeminate. He says, “Well, dude, ‘man up’ is real. Everybody, no matter what flavor of man you are, everybody needs to man up. That is, grow a pair. I would say it means [to] get back to your core, be a man. Suck it up, don’t be effeminate, don’t cry. Don’t bitch, don’t whine about it. Just . . . put on your stone face, and push through. I hear it, and the direct translation I get is like, ‘Stop being a bitch.’ Yeah. ‘Stop being a bitch. Man up.’” These interpretations are the most explicitly sexist among the subset of men whom, in other ways (such as their physical appearance or their parenting styles and practices), challenge gender binaries.

Several men believe the expression’s power is intensified if it’s uttered by a woman. Club member Colin says he would interpret it as being told he was inadequately masculine compared to other men; his long-standing concerns about his penis size helps explain this interpretation. Fellow Club member Travis agrees that it would be “a poke in the eye” if it comes from a woman, whereas it’s more likely to be used jokingly between men. Given how fragile men’s egos are, he is not surprised to see the sad and desperate posts on the Club forum:

Men don’t know how to handle [threats to their ego]. There’s guys on there that, after they asked [their girlfriends if they’d ever had sex with a man with a bigger penis] and got an answer that they didn’t like, you know, they developed a drug habit, they became alcoholic. They lost everything. They went into a catatonic depressed state for a week. That’s why I say the male ego is really fragile, because something as trivial as that can make a male do all kinds of silly things. But like anyone else, my ego drives me to do stuff that a sensible person would probably think twice before doing.

I ask for an example, and he says when running laps on a track, he tries to beat the person next to him: “My ego says, ‘I need to outrun him.’ Now if that person happens to be a ‘her,’ I have to outrun her.” He can accept being beat by a man, but “if there’s a girl in the other lane and she outruns me, I’m not very happy with myself or with the rest of the day. And to be honest, it is very immature. But it’s there. And I’d be lying to myself if I pretended it wasn’t.”

Ed says the expression could be used positively, to encourage men to “get your head on, be strong, show some courage . . . Courage, smartness, common sense, strength, leadership, those are all positive ways of using that term,” he says, but “the way it’s used primarily, it’s derisive.” These derisive attacks leave men psychically wounded and women castigated as inferior—often as “girls” (not adults), not deserving of respect. The same mentality within the military
resulted in World War I soldiers suffering from combat stress and PTSD (as we now recognize it). They had their manhood questioned and were thrown back into combat with the idea it would help them get over their “shell shock.” Psychiatrists attributed these men’s visceral reactions to the horrors of trench warfare (paralysis, uncontrollable shaking and crying, nightmares) not as the consequences of the atrocities they witnessed and participated in but as individual character flaws. All too often, historically and contemporarily, when men fall short of the cultural ideal, they are told to double down by “manning up.” We question individuals, not the unrealistic and unhealthy ideals to which they are held.

A couple of men say the phrase could be used positively to encourage men to be responsible fathers. PHC member Brandon says he used it to pressure a friend to take care of the baby he accidentally fathered, especially because he didn’t use protection. Stay-at-home father Peter, who quit his career to follow his wife out of state, says he gets “nosebleed pissed” when men father kids and promptly abandon them:

If you’re married or even if you’re not married, [if] you have kids, “man up” means “put the needs of everybody else in front of [yours].” To me, that’s manning up—that you can’t allow yourself to be self-consumed with woe-is-me-isms, or “poor me,” or what-I-want-isms over what’s best for your children or your family. I see these dudes that aren’t taking care of their kids—I’ll be honest with you, they’re a bunch of bitches, if you ask me. That’s the worst type of man. If my son grew up like that, I’d be so disappointed. You father these children and you don’t take care of them—no way, that’s not being a man. I’m comfortable saying that’s being a bitch. I’m sorry, it just is.

By all accounts, Peter has been transformed by his transition from career man to stay-at-home dad. He has begun redefining manhood to prioritize the well-being of his partner and kids over his ego-fueled career and income. He aspires to raise empowered and antisexist kids, regardless of their genders. However, when enforcing this ideology, he can’t help but slip into language that conveys the inferiority of women. Peter’s use of the term bitches is not meant to be equivalent to the group, women, to whom this term is derisively applied. It makes no sense in this context—women mostly do take care of their kids! Instead, he uses it for men who are irresponsible, who have failed his litmus test for manhood. A man who is called a “bitch”—whether because he cries too much, is too dependent on his wife, or fails to take care of his kids—is no man at all. He is the opposite: a woman. Ironic in this context.

Some men critique the sexist basis and consequences of the expression, indicating a desire to abandon it and perhaps the ideals it represents. “Yeah, I fucking hate that expression,” GFC member Asher says when I ask him about
the phrase. “It’s basically saying, ‘Be a straight—be this American, macho, predominantly straight [man]’ . . . or it’s like saying, ‘If you’re not a man, you’re a pussy.’” Another GFC participant, Barry, thinks the expression is so outrageous it invites mockery: “I love that expression. Well, I mean, it’s a funny expression. To me, it’s like an anachronism. I don’t think somehow that as a sex, we’re better able to handle certain things or rise to certain occasions. To me, it’s like this giant cosmic sort of joke. I think that a four-year-old girl can man up just as easily as John Wayne.” Barry says the expression is about recognizing what we can and can’t change and trying our best regardless. He says someone might think, “I’m absolutely doomed to failure if [I’m] to be judged by my ability to achieve perfection,” but if they still press on, they are manning up. Then he deconstructs it: “If a four-year-old does that, that’s manning [up]—and it’s not even fair to say that’s manning up, because what, am I claiming that those are traits that are somehow unique to men? I don’t think that. And that’s why I think it’s fun to say ‘man up’—because it’s so ridiculous.”

Other men worry the expression is not to be taken lightly because of its serious consequences. Travis and several others believe men use “man up” to humiliate other men. He says it is used in the military, especially during training, to get individuals to stop complaining and fall into line—that is, to conform to the group and set aside their individual concerns. Perhaps civilian men use it similarly as a means of punishing men who stray from hegemonic ideals to help ensure group cohesion and a (privileged) collective identity. One man’s failures might be seen and responded to as a threat to all.

PHC member Tomás has felt that sting many times, such as when he cries watching films. Other men have told him, “‘You’ve got to man up. You can’t cry, because you cry like a woman,’ or, ‘You cry like a baby.’” Tomás thinks “man up” is used as “a big putdown, [such as when] somebody is dressed differently. So you know, they need to man up, and they [need to] start to look more like a man. It’s like, come on, get over this stuff.”

Another Club member, Bryan, thinks it can be used to get someone to mindlessly conform to prove his manhood: “It’s kind of used as a way to get people to follow the pack. In my adolescent days, any number of things any day, you know, [other boys would say] ‘Come on, pussy, you know, ‘Chicken,’ whatever.” He says that if you conformed, you “might kind of gain respect in the eyes of your buddies, but at the end of the day, it’s like, really, does it matter that I jumped over the ravine or not?” In adolescence the challenge might be innocuous, but as boys turn to young men, the stakes are often raised. Jumping ravines might later become “man up, drink these 12 beers,” says Travis, describing this as “emotional blackmail” and a “manipulative tool.” I ask him why he thinks it’s such an effective tool. He explains, “Because it questions your very manhood. The person that’s saying ‘man up’ is asserting that ‘you are not a man if you don’t do what I just said.’ I disagree with the precept because I feel that a
man clearly is the master of his own actions, not dependent on the approval or disapproval of anyone else.”

Travis, Tomás, and Bryan reject the practice of wielding as a weapon the threat of emasculation. Most voluntary stay-at-home dads, and many other men I interview, largely reject the ideals altogether. They propose to redefine manhood so as to make responsible and engaged fatherhood its centerpiece. Periods of change and flux create tensions and contradictions. We must ask ourselves how such conflict and uncertainty can be leveraged to foster progress.

Ways to Move Forward

Fully realized feminist change should bring a “crumbling of gender divisions and statuses,” and if viewed in historical terms, it’s possible it isn’t far off.22 The only path to gender equality, many feminist scholars argue, is to eliminate gender as a category of difference associated with sex. Anthropological, sociological, psychological, historical, and other evidence supports this possibility; our biology does not constrain us from doing gender in any way we prefer. It is possible to shed all of the gendered cultural baggage that weighs us down. However, long-standing structural and cultural constraints—despite some changes and progress—are formidable obstacles to a utopian gender-free society. We must create bold visions before we can transform societies. This is a vision I share. In the immediate future, though, that mission seems as impossible as current manhood ideals.

I propose we build a bridge to this potential revolutionary future by attempting to fundamentally reform manhood, along with the institutional and cultural scaffolding that maintains the toxic current ideals. Perhaps this is the only viable bridge to the gender-free goal, as we have no contemporary society to look to for a road map. This is still a daunting task; systemic social change always is. It will require redefining manhood in such a way as to make the new dominant version nonhegemonic—that is, it cannot be based on power differences among men and between women and men. I propose we pursue “equality masculinities,” which “legitimate an egalitarian relationship between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men.”23

Woman feminists have long led this effort. They have also long argued that men must be active participants, or “comrades in struggle,” as feminist scholar and author bell hooks referred to men doing antisexist work more than three decades ago. She critiques the view among a subset of radical “bourgeoisie white feminists” who view all men as oppressors. This view ignores the relative lack of power enjoyed by many men of color and other men and turns off women who partner with them and share their racial and class struggles.
hooks opposes separatist agendas, instead arguing that we should recognize the costs of masculinity while still holding men accountable to sexism. Ultimately, hooks says, “Since men are the primary agents maintaining and supporting sexism and sexist oppression, they can only be eradicated if men are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming their consciousness and the consciousness of society as a whole. . . . This does not mean that they are better equipped to lead feminist movement; it does mean that they should share equally in resistance struggle.”24

I believe appeals for a new version of manhood that are most likely to resonate with men, and all Americans, are those that borrow from, extend, and redirect entrenched ideals. Also, I expect that men are more likely to gravitate to new models of manhood that are more attainable than the current one. We can construct an egalitarian, achievable dominant version of manhood if we strip out the pursuit of power and control. We can redirect the expectation for men to be responsible away from requiring that they be financial providers and physical protectors and toward an all-encompassing definition of being a provider, with an emphasis on caretaking. Responsible fatherhood means contributing to parenting to ensure all of the children’s needs are met: financial, physical, emotional, developmental, and more. Love is not a scarce resource.

Many men already fully embrace nonhegemonic masculinities. Many others desire to and partially do; they just need greater cultural and institutional support to help them traverse the obstacles that stall their progress. Ryan is one of these men; a little more support would help get him over the hump. He now critically reflects upon sexist and homophobic language and doesn’t use it. But he is caught between two worlds:

I think even in sort of addressing these things with language and stuff like that, there are times when I am feeling down and feeling this sort of—feeling depressed and down—and I feel like I am not being a man. That I’m like—that there is still this feeling of being weak or letting emotions dictate how I react. And then sort of examining that and wondering if that’s, you know, if that’s true. But there are times when I feel like I’m sort of caught between this still evolving, not fully formed idea of what being a man is and this cultural sort of norm that I’ve grown up with, and you know, [feeling that I’ve] sort of fallen short of both of them.

Ryan could be relieved of his masculine insecurities if we broadened and redefined manhood to allow men to feel vulnerable and express more emotions. Others just need a push, too. PHC member Andre rejects “shallow” definitions of manhood that include physical and sexual prowess or penis size, but he says, “I have my weak moments where I feel like less of a man for not being
hung.” By his own report, his size is actually well above average, but distorted pornographic images combined with stereotypes of African American men leave him susceptible to some orthodox ideals he consciously opposes.

Men want a new mission—a doable one. “I think that it’s absolutely true that no man could live up to these things all the time,” Barry says. Jason implicitly critiques George and some others at GFC: “[They] simply react against what they see as effeminate definitions of modern masculinity versus personal fulfillment. We can be whatever we want to be. We don’t have to wholly reject modernity. We don’t have to wholly absorb being metrosexuals either. We can do anything that we want to do. It doesn’t have to be automatically, ‘This is OK for guys,’ ‘This is not OK for guys.’ We’re not necessarily limited to old, worn conceptions of masculinity, or we shouldn’t be.” As one stay-at-home father put it, “This ain’t the 20th century. There are 300 million people in the U.S., so there are 150 million ways to be a man.”

A plea to men’s individuality would resonate with many in our culture. This would merge men’s expectation to be independent with American culture’s individualistic focus. But social norms and dominant-culture ideals are not about to be replaced with 150 million individual agendas. A structure will remain in place. What if we could construct a new version of ideal manhood that eliminates the shame and humiliation men feel for not fulfilling current ideals? Stay-at-home dad Matthew is more or less already there. He says he feels “more manly in a way” because intensive parenting has provided him with “more a sense of self.” His peer, Tim, agrees, saying, “It’s made me a better man, and a better husband, easily. I’m just more in tune to kind of the needs of the family.” He says being at home “makes you look differently at life” and that “having a daughter, I’m much more cognizant of how women are treated, you know, media depictions of women.” Being an engaged parent to a daughter—being attuned to her experiences, needs, and desires—has given him a depth of intimacy and empathy that marks too few father-daughter relationships. He now recoils at the toy store aisles that are gender segregated: “I think that’s just crazy. I think we’re still trying to pigeonhole men to be—to fit into this box, [which] makes it hard to raise good men who aren’t abusers to women and who respect women. You know—boys don’t cry, boys shouldn’t be crying. Boys have to be tough, not show their emotions.”

What men have not yet quite figured out is that if they humanize women, they will also more deeply humanize themselves. Men have always had women in their lives—as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, girlfriends, and more—but historically, these relationships included or were defined by a power dynamic that compelled men’s emotional distance from women. At-home fathers and working mothers might reduce gender inequality by reducing couple’s gendered parenting differences. Further, at-home fathers who return to the workforce may make personal and professional choices to allow
them to remain deeply engaged parents, may challenge stereotypes about women and men workers, and for those who end up in positions of power, might create policies and practices that facilitate a better work-family balance and chip away at the “mommy track” and general “motherhood penalty” experienced by working moms. Some research has found that male judges and CEOs who have daughters are more supportive of women’s rights and more likely to close the gender pay gap.27

Of course, not every man wants to or will father children, let alone raise a daughter specifically. Establishing new ideals that are similarly inaccessible poses some of the same problems. There are many other avenues to establishing equality masculinities. Responsibility to family could be defined as being responsible in part for the well-being of all friends and family, which would leave men more deeply connected to others, staving off their greater social and emotional isolation and getting them to see the world through others’ eyes. The movement to transform our culture is well under way. Many agents of change have been challenging sexism and hegemonic masculine ideals for decades, whether they be feminists or profeminists, antiviolence activists, gender benders, or the more recent phenomena of breadwinning moms and stay-at-home dads. The biggest missing piece, to date, probably has been the lack of institutional support for these efforts.

Change here, too, seems more possible within the next generation given the current political and social climate. After decades dismantling of the social safety net, there is now political momentum for an array of policy changes that would allow families greater flexibility and support. Many changes have already been adopted by cities and states and, unilaterally, by private employers. The populist appeal that arguably colored both major parties’ 2016 presidential primary seasons suggests in part that people need and want more help. The lingering effects of the Great Recession and the irreversible changes wrought by technology and globalization have created instability, stagnant wages for working- and middle-class employees, and many home foreclosures. Health care, housing, and student loan debt have skyrocketed. The mental health consequences are visible everywhere, from an epidemic of opioid addiction to a spike in suicides. Government policies can and do move the needle. For example, research reveals that generous unemployment benefits can reduce suicide rates.28

We need look no further than Scandinavia to find models that would promote more gender equality while simultaneously reducing an array of accompanying social problems.29 Let’s be clear: None of these countries has eradicated gender inequality. But combinations of more progressive gender ideologies and a series of national policies and programs leave them way ahead of the United States.30 For years, U.S. activists, scholars, and even some politicians have proposed a series of modest policy changes—ones widely enacted
among virtually all other developed nations—that could fundamentally alter gender arrangements and make our lives not only more equitable but generally healthier. These policies include pay equity, lengthier and paid family and medical leave (including separate “use it or lose it” benefits for two-parent families), subsidized and expanded day care and before/after-school care, Social Security credits for at-home caretakers, higher minimum and median wages, shorter work weeks, flexible work schedules, and universal health insurance. These would help address gender, race, class, and other inequities that constrain people’s and family’s choices to do what they prefer and perhaps what suits them and their children best: “Achieving these goals means creating policies that provide equal opportunities for women at work, for men in caregiving, and for families to weather unpredictable changes in their economic fortunes and household composition. As a package, such policies provide greater economic security, lessen work-care conflicts, and constrain inequality within and between families. They also begin to redress the imbalance that places a higher social and economic value on market work than on caregiving in its many forms.”

Systemic, structural inequities and problems need systemic, structural solutions. It is unrealistic to expect the gender revolution to be finished or to expect manhood ideals to be transformed solely by individuals and families. It requires institutional support to enable them to make such changes. Addressing these problems will not entirely eliminate toxic masculinities, and eliminating toxic masculinities won’t eliminate all social problems. However, with cultural and institutional support, we can redefine manhood to be nonhierarchichal and less destructive. We can undermine gender inequality by creating an ideal version of manhood that is both more possible and more equitable.