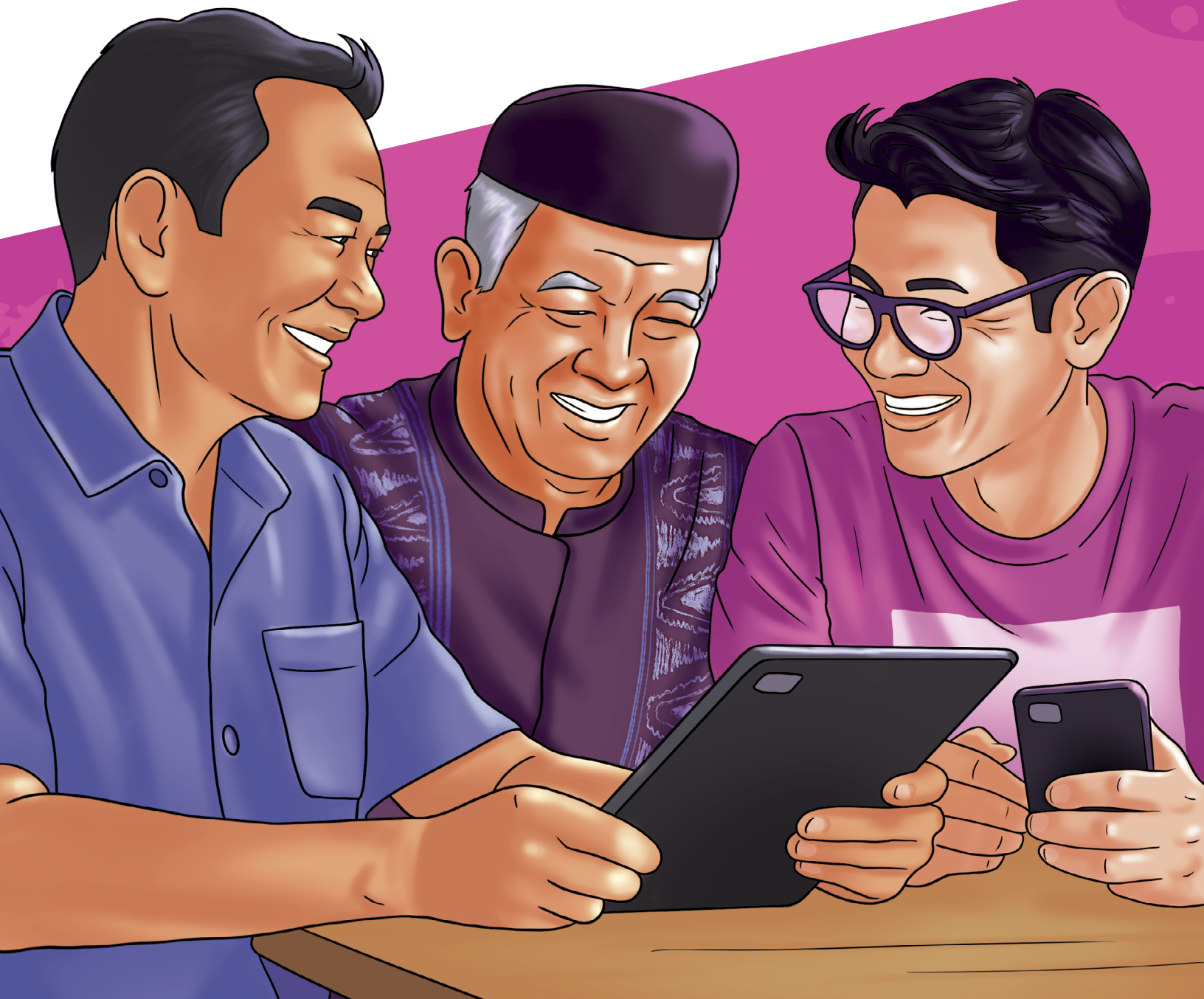


MASCULINITIES IN INDONESIA: OPTIMISM, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, AND DIGITAL LIVES

A study by Equimundo



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT EQUIMUNDO

Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice has worked internationally and in the United States since 2011 to engage men and boys as allies in gender equality, promote healthy manhood, and prevent violence. Equimundo works to achieve gender equality and social justice by transforming intergenerational patterns of harm and promoting patterns of care, empathy, and accountability among boys and men throughout their lives. This study is part of the Generation Gender global partnership and Equimundo's research portfolio that works to strengthen evidence and build partnerships on healthy masculinities with researchers, practitioners, policymakers, media, philanthropy, sports, and the corporate sector. *Find out more about [Equimundo](#).*

ABOUT GENERATION GENDER GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

Imagine a world where you can be who you want to be. A gender-just and violence-free world where everyone can live in their full diversity. It's possible. But it requires fundamental change. The Generation G partnership strives to do so. It equips youth leaders and civil society organizations to address the root causes of gender inequality and encourages sustainable change. The Generation G partnership places young people at the heart of the program: as catalysts for systemic change and as a key target group. Doing so we will achieve sustainable, inclusive, and stable societies. *Find out more about [Generation Gender](#).*

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, conceptions of masculinity for young men (roughly ages 18 to 40) develop at the intersection of deeply rooted tradition and dynamic social change. Men are widely expected to become the primary breadwinners and heads of household, and these expectations are reinforced by both legal codes and cultural values.

Cultural ideas such as *kodrat* (natural order of things or God's will) bolster the idea that marriage and fatherhood are essential for a man to be considered an adult, and are commonly used to support a father's economic role in childcare (Sutanti et al., 2022; Wulaningsih, 2023). At the same time, rapid urbanization, education, and global media exposure are introducing alternative masculine ideals, leading to more diverse – and sometimes conflicting – expressions of manhood among Indonesia's youth. The result is an evolving landscape of masculinities where duties to family and community meet new influences.

Key cultural, economic, and religious forces continue to shape masculine norms. Financial providership is critical – surveys find 84 percent of urban millennial Indonesians believe men should be the key household earner (Sutanti et al., 2022). Many boys learn early that they must appear strong and unemotional, and they are discouraged from crying or showing vulnerability. Dominant religious teachings also play a defining role. For example, men in conservative Muslim communities are viewed as family protectors and decision-makers, and data shows that those who identify as Muslim tend to hold more traditional views on caregiving and leadership (Sutanti et al., 2022). In the family arena, masculinity is tied to being a responsible son and eventually a *bapak* (father) who upholds family honor, which aligns with norms that uphold male authority, as well as sacrifice for the household (Wulaningsih, 2023).



From social media feeds to community organizing, from global policy debates to the quiet pressure of family obligations, masculinities are evolving. In the United States, for example, disinformation from conservative forces is deliberately targeting men who feel left out of the benefits of gender equality and who may have genuine vulnerabilities, such as economic displacement, curtailed educational opportunities, and unmet mental health needs. Much of this disinformation is being fueled by online platforms.

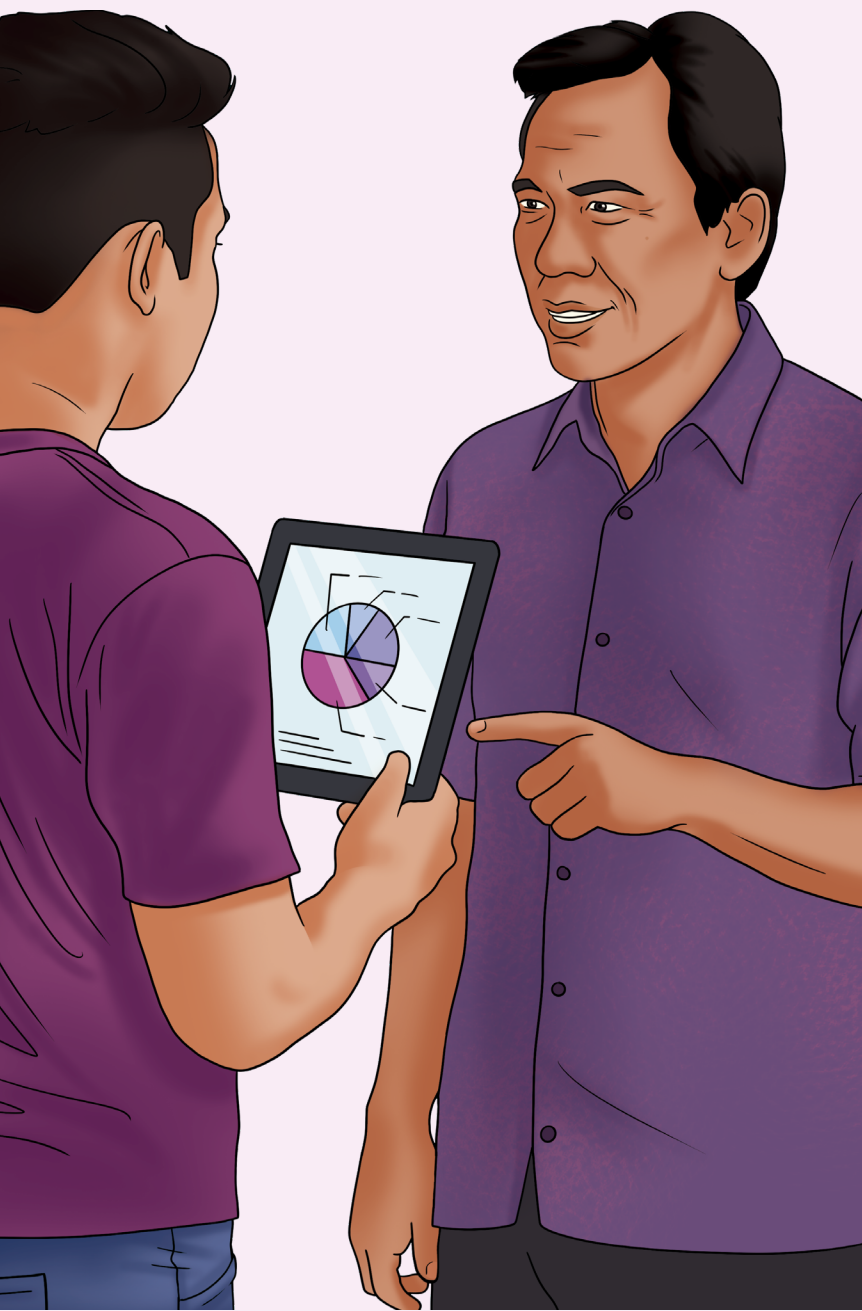
In Indonesia, masculine norms can be seen as gradually changing and diversifying, even though core expectations of male strength, familial duty, and economic responsibility are deeply ingrained. Men are expected to uphold traditional ideals, yet many also embrace contemporary values of egalitarian partnership and engaged fatherhood. Studies find such ambivalence

is common; for example, while most young men voice support for sharing childcare, many still internalize the “provider” identity and prefer to “keep it that way” (Sutanti et al., 2022).

The Generation Gender partnership, together with youth leaders, tackles gender inequality by increasing public support for gender justice, developing youth-inclusive policymaking and legislation, and strengthening civil society so it can fight for gender justice. This report contributes to evidence from Indonesia, one of the Generation Gender partner countries. This study specifically examines men's perceptions of masculinities and gender equality and how these ideas influence their on purpose in life, optimism, and political ideology. It also investigates men's political engagement and the nature of their online lives. The report concludes by offering recommendations for advocacy, programming, and policy.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The data presented in this report comes from an online questionnaire administered to 800 participants in Indonesia.



The questionnaire draws on questions developed, tested, and used by Equipundo and partners, all informed by existing research on men (van der Gaag et al., 2023). Rep Data recruited participants from various research panels and applied minimum quotas and maximum limits so that the sample closely matched the socioeconomic and ethnic demographic distribution of the country's actual population. Men were oversampled to draw a nuanced portrait of what it means to be a man in Indonesia. The survey was administered between November 2024 and February 2025, and data was analyzed in Stata.

Key indices and scales that this study uses gauge purpose in life, optimism, attitudes about masculinity, gender threat, trust in political institutions, and online behaviors and influencers. Attitudes about masculinity were measured using Equipundo's Man Box scale, capturing men's adherence to restrictive, dominance-driven views of manhood (Hill et al., 2020; Barker et al., 2023). Examples of items under the Man Box include "men should be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families," "men make better business executives than women," "a gay man is a not a 'real man,'" and "successful men have families." Examples of items related to gender threat include "men have it harder than women when it comes to new opportunities," "no one cares about men's issues today," and "feminism is about favoring women over men."

Table 1 shows that over 43 percent of the Indonesian men sampled have at least a bachelor's degree, and more than 82 percent are employed. More than half (61 percent) of the male respondents reported being engaged in caregiving. A notable proportion are single and not looking for a partner (15 percent), while the rest are either looking for a partner or in a relationship/marital union.

TABLE 1 | SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF MEN PARTICIPANTS IN INDONESIA (n=436)

	Indonesia (%)
AGE	
18-23	30.3
24-30	39.5
31-40	30.3
EDUCATION	
Less than high school	6.0
High school	42.0
Vocational degree	8.3
Bachelor's degree	42.9
Master's degree	0.9
RELATIONSHIP STATUS*	
Single, looking for a partner	34.1
Single, not looking for a partner	15.1
In a relationship, not married	9.1
Married	39.4
Divorced/ widowed/separated	2.3
EMPLOYMENT	
Men	82.6
Partner has an income	69.9
Has children and/or cares for others	61.2
ECONOMIC STANDING	
Basic needs not mostly met	21.6
Middle	55.2
Basic and important needs tend to be met	23.2

Figures 1 and 2 show the regional and ethnic distribution of this sample, with the majority identifying as Javanese. The background characteristics of the full sample (women and men) can be found in the appendix. Care should be exercised when interpreting these findings, as local nuances significantly influence attitudes and behaviors around gender and masculinities.

FIGURE 1 | REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF INDONESIAN MEN (n=436)

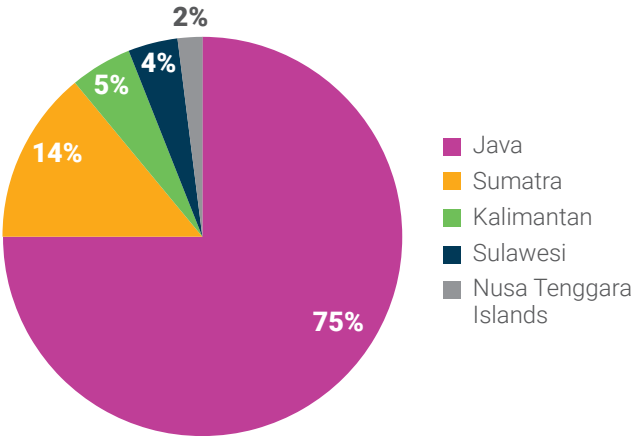
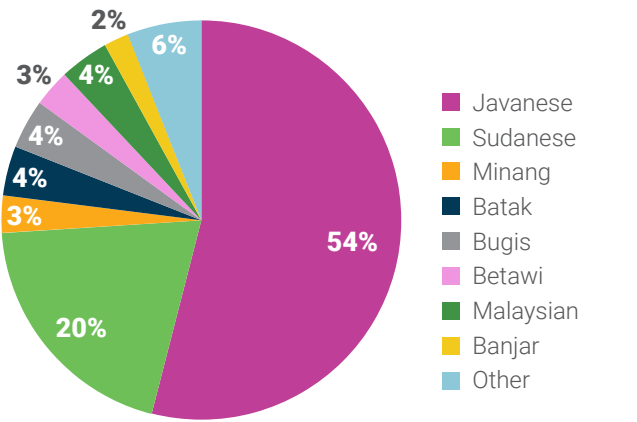


FIGURE 2 | ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF INDONESIAN MEN (n=436)



THE HEADLINES

MASCULINITY IS DEFINED BY PERFORMANCE, CONTROL, AND HONOR, BUT CARE IS INCREASINGLY RECOGNIZED

In Indonesia, masculinity remains deeply tied to traditional notions of financial responsibility, authority, and control within personal relationships. Among Indonesian men, adherence to these norms is particularly strong, with 93 percent of respondents believing men should primarily be responsible for providing financially for their families. Most women also agree (86 percent), suggesting this is part of broader cultural expectations of men. Around half (53 percent) of men and 40 percent of women feel that a

woman earning more than her husband is problematic, suggesting some possible acceptance of such an arrangement with women's paid work. For other aspects of men's economic role, the findings show notable differences between women and men. For instance, 63 percent of male respondents believe that men make better business leaders than women, while only 35 percent of women believe so. This reinforces that men's conceptions of masculinity continue to be shaped by economic power and status.



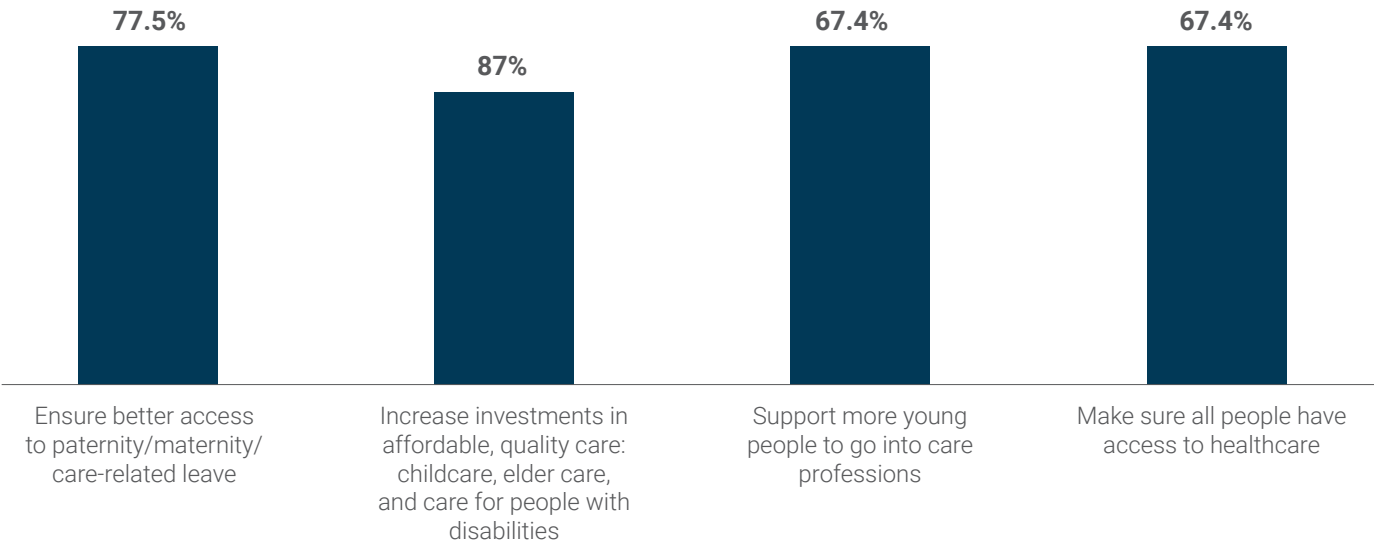
Control and surveillance are prominent features of Indonesian masculinity. An overwhelming 89 percent of men and 81 percent of women assert that men have the right to always know their partners' whereabouts. However, when it comes to decision-making, a large proportion of men (80 percent) believe men should always have the final say in their relationship or marital decisions, while only 51 percent of women agree on this. Honor also remains central in Indonesian masculinity. Virtually all men surveyed (97 percent) agree that ensuring women's modesty is integral to protecting family honor, signaling a deeply entrenched norm linking masculine identity to control over women's behavior. This aspect of men's control in relationships is often considered a form of care or protection. **Overall, these statistics bolster that men's conceptions of masculinity are defined by economic performance, control, and honor, while women's conceptions of masculinities vary much more.**

Yet tensions exist between internalized ideals and lived realities. Indonesian men express significant insecurities around personal vulnerability, with 63 percent agreeing that men should manage personal problems independently without seeking help, and 75 percent feeling that "no one really knows the 'real me' well enough." This suggests an emotional isolation driven by

rigid masculine norms. Further, an overwhelming majority (92 percent) express a desire to become even more masculine, illustrating the internal pressures that men face to adhere strictly to traditional masculine norms.

Alongside these findings, though, there are signs that care is becoming a more visible dimension of Indonesian masculinity. A substantial majority of men value governmental action to enhance support systems for caregiving (Figure 3). Specifically, 87 percent support increased investment in affordable, quality care, including childcare, elder care, and care for people with disabilities or special needs. Additionally, 84 percent of men highlight the importance of universal access to health services, even for those employed in non-office jobs, and nearly 78 percent prioritize improved access to paid leave for caregiving responsibilities, reflecting an acknowledgment of care as important for their loved ones. However, despite this clear endorsement of caregiving systems, such care-related attitudes are overshadowed by more traditional expectations around financial control and authority. This gap mirrors global patterns where caregiving, though increasingly acknowledged as beneficial, still struggles to gain widespread recognition as inherently masculine or valuable in men's public and private lives (van der Gaag et al., 2023).

FIGURE 3
MEN WHO FEEL IT IS IMPORTANT FOR GOVERNMENTS TO TAKE CERTAIN CARE-RELATED ACTIONS (n=436)



YOUNG MEN REMAIN OPTIMISTIC, EVEN AMID PRESSURE TO PROVIDE

Indonesian men express remarkable optimism regarding their futures, despite ongoing financial pressures. More than 92 percent of men anticipate improvements in their family lives within the next decade, while nearly 85 percent foresee better economic security, and approximately 78 percent are optimistic about improved romantic relationships and job opportunities. However, this hopeful outlook coexists with financial concerns: approximately 69 percent worry significantly about their own and their families' financial future,

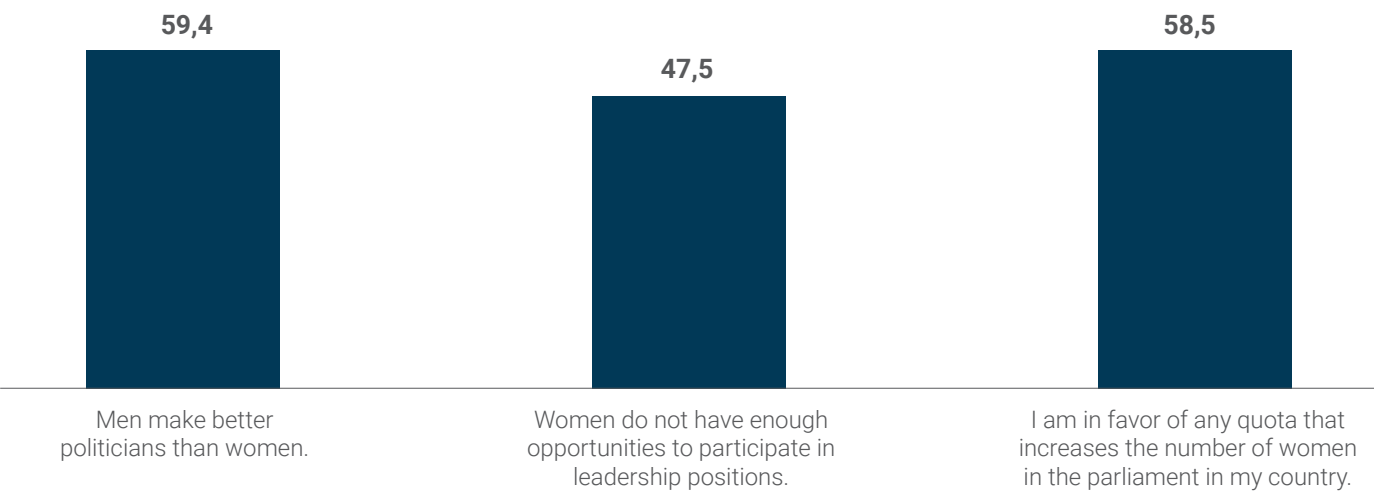
even though about 75 percent report having sufficient income for daily needs. Such contradictions could have emotional consequences – nearly 30 percent of men report high levels of depression symptoms. This aligns with global research highlighting the emotional strain that men experience when they face pressure to fulfill traditional masculine norms without adequate means to achieve them, leading potentially to frustration and disengagement (Connell, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2011).

Support for gender equality exists alongside Man Box ideals.

Indonesian men demonstrate complex attitudes toward gender equality, reflecting support for both traditional beliefs and progressive policy. Nearly 60 percent of Indonesian men report that men make better political leaders than women, which is significantly higher than among women (31 percent). Simultaneously, almost 59 percent of men support quotas designed to increase women's political representation, even though this support is lower compared to women's (81 percent).

This contradiction highlights a tension between broader social norms and the acceptance of structural initiatives aimed at gender equity. Furthermore, close to half (48 percent) of Indonesian men acknowledge that women lack sufficient opportunities in leadership, suggesting some openness to recognizing gender inequalities. Such mixed attitudes offer potential entry points for campaigns aiming to shift entrenched gender norms.

FIGURE 4
AGREEMENT ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG MEN (n=436)



Men see feminism, gender equity, and women's gain as a loss for them.

Globally, research indicates men frequently perceive gender equity as a zero-sum game, particularly when their own social status feels uncertain (Barker et al., 2011; Connell, 2005). This sentiment of men being "left behind" is reflected among Indonesian men.

A significant proportion of men in Indonesia perceive threats to their traditional masculine status. For instance, 52 percent view feminism as favoring women over men, and 65 percent feel that "when jobs are scarce, they go to women"; a majority (58 percent) contend that men today face greater discrimination than women. Remarkably, 83 percent still hold traditional

views, agreeing that it is better when men are the primary earners and women focus on domestic roles. By contrast, less than one in five (18 percent) believe society would improve if women occupied more powerful roles while men contributed more at home, showcasing a resistance to adjusting gender roles. **These findings highlight a sense of gender threat among Indonesian men, where perceived gains for women translate into anxieties around diminished male status, respect, and opportunities.** Such anxieties are heightened by broad agreement (81 percent) that women inherently seek men of higher status, intensifying the financial pressure on men.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND EMOTIONAL LIVES

Men see feminism, gender equity, and women's gain as a loss for them.

The findings indicate that while social bonds remain relatively strong in Indonesia, a substantial portion of men experience emotional disconnect or difficulty genuinely relating to others. Approximately 68 percent of men felt emotionally close to others during the previous two weeks, and 82 percent experienced a sense of belonging; nearly 80 percent felt accepted by others. However, these strong social connections coexist alongside significant emotional distancing – 54 percent report feeling unable to relate to most people, and 46 percent feel distant from people. Over one-third (37 percent) even report feeling like an outsider.

This aligns with global observations that dominant masculine norms emphasizing emotional toughness limit men's opportunities for emotional intimacy and genuine self-expression (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2018). Less than half (42 percent) of Indonesian men allowed themselves to experience distressing emotions in the past month, reinforcing the notion that emotional openness remains challenging. The resulting contradiction between men's stated optimism about the future (over 90 percent anticipate improvements in family life) and their emotional isolation reveals a complex landscape, possibly revealing the influence of restrictive masculine norms that equate emotional vulnerability with weakness.

Men who feel their status is threatened are more likely to disengage or push back.

An analysis of gender threat perceptions among Indonesian men underscores significant risks for disengagement and emotional distress. Men who perceive their status as increasingly threatened by shifts in gender dynamics, such as those who feel "society says men are getting weaker" (63 percent), believe men's issues are ignored (59 percent), or report that men face greater discrimination than women (58 percent) are likely experiencing deeper emotional insecurity and social isolation. Furthermore, perceptions that opportunities disproportionately favor women (65 percent) during times of scarcity or that men's reputations can be easily destroyed for speaking openly (51 percent) possibly indicate underlying resentment or frustration.

Such beliefs often manifest in behavioral backlash or emotional withdrawal as men struggle with traditional masculine ideals and shifting societal expectations. Indonesian men's experiences align with global findings that perceived gender threats correlate strongly with pessimism, emotional disconnect, and opposition to gender-equitable reforms (Barker et al., 2011). This reflects a broader phenomenon of men responding to perceived gender-related displacement by reinforcing traditional norms or retreating from emotional engagement.



MASCULINITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A REAL INFLUENCE ON PERCEPTIONS OF ONESELF AND THE WORLD AND ON SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Young people engage extensively with digital platforms. Around 58 percent women and 47 percent men surveyed spend six or more hours online daily. Digital platforms serve not just as professional and entertainment hubs but also deeply influence young people's perceptions of identity, status, and interpersonal relationships. For men, these spaces are also arenas for performing, reinforcing, and sometimes challenging notions of masculinity. Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are the most popular platforms among men.

Online environments enable social connections. While 73 percent of men report that the internet enables them to connect with like-minded individuals they would not otherwise meet, only 31 percent of men find their online social lives more engaging and rewarding than their offline interactions (Table 2).

Men also express a high degree of psychological and emotional investment in their online activities. Nearly 73 percent of men state that the online content they consume motivates them, with an equal percentage agreeing that the influencers they follow make them think, and about 75 percent reporting that the content they watch online shares important views on how society functions. Additionally, 68 percent follow influencers because they help improve self-esteem, and 64 percent find a sense of purpose through online influencers.

However, alongside these benefits, men also acknowledge challenges. About 64 percent frequently feel they should spend less time on their phone or online, showcasing concerns about their digital habits. Furthermore, 52 percent often rely on influencers rather than journalists for news, possibly indicating their vulnerability to biased or unverified information sources.

TABLE 2 | **INDONESIAN MEN'S AGREEMENT ON THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS**

	Indonesia (%)
I often get my news from influencers rather than journalists.	52
I follow social media accounts because they give me advice on women and dating.	26
My online social life is more engaging and rewarding than my offline social life.	31
I often think that I should spend less time on my phone or online.	64
The internet allows me to connect with like-minded people I wouldn't meet otherwise.	73
The content I watch online motivates me.	73
I follow influencers because they make me think.	73
The content I watch online shares important views about how the society works.	75
I follow influencers because they help me feel better about myself.	68
Listening to influencers on social media gives me a sense of purpose.	64

Online influencers shape masculinity narratives.

Influencers significantly shape how Indonesian men view masculinity, success, and personal growth. Among the influencers named by respondents, prominent figures include Raffi Ahmad, Deddy Corbuzier, Raditya Dika, Timothy Ronald, Ferry Irwandi, and global sports figure Cristiano Ronaldo. These figures collectively represent a diverse spectrum of masculine norms, from traditional displays of wealth, fame, and physical strength to entrepreneurship, intellectual commentary, and humor-driven social commentary.

Deddy Corbuzier, one of the most frequently cited influencers, epitomizes a version of masculinity that mixes assertive individualism, authority, and charisma with aspirational ideals of self-made success. Similarly, Raffi Ahmad and Raditya Dika are well-known for their celebrity status and entertaining, entrepreneurship-savvy, and approachable personalities. The presence of global influencers such as Cristiano Ronaldo indicates the resonance of athletic skill and international fame in constructing Indonesian masculine ideals; Ronaldo, renowned for his discipline and achievement in sports, symbolizes aspirational masculinity. These figures offer young Indonesian men models for navigating challenges, aspirations, and relationships.

There was some diversity of influencers, ranging from spiritual leaders like Ustadz Abdul Somad and Ustadz Adi Hidayat to journalists and entrepreneurs like Najwa Shihab and Jerome Polin. This suggests that some young men in Indonesia do not exclusively follow rigid masculine norms; they also follow influencers who emphasize intellectual curiosity. This diverse digital landscape suggests some openness to diverse influencers alongside more traditional masculine ideals.

Men and women use technology to exert control in relationships.

The data clearly demonstrates that technology-facilitated violence is prevalent among Indonesians, in terms of both experiencing and perpetrating these behaviors. Among men, between 12 and 39 percent report experiencing various forms of technology-facilitated violence one to five times in the past year, with an additional 4 to 17 percent experiencing these acts six or more times. For women, the range is similarly high: 7 to 41 percent for one to five times and 3 to 12 percent for six or more times. The most frequently reported experiences involve surveillance behaviors, such as having someone look through their phone without permission (55 percent of men, 53 percent of women) and being asked to send location photos as proof of location (46 percent of men, 36 percent of women).

Perpetration of these controlling behaviors is also common. For instance, 33 percent of men report looking through someone's phone without permission at least one to five times in the past year, and 25 percent have checked on someone's location through cell phone pictures. Although these behaviors are reported by both genders, men typically report slightly higher perpetration rates than women across nearly all behaviors measured. Such actions are often normalized or justified, disguised as protection or affection, yet they signify control and surveillance as inherent parts of masculinity.

Men's experiences with online dating, however, remain mixed. Approximately 67 percent of men have used online dating apps, with another 32 percent indicating they would likely use dating apps in the future. Among those who have used dating apps, approximately 56 percent of Indonesian men report somewhat or very positive experiences, which is higher than their female counterparts (43 percent). Yet the presence of negative experiences (44 percent of men reporting somewhat or very negative outcomes) highlights the complexity of online interactions for young men. While dating online offers new spaces for connection, the outcomes remain complicated and uneven.

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND POLITICAL LEANINGS

The data illustrates that institutional trust, civic engagement, and support for equity are interconnected yet complex, overlapping, and diverging in sometimes contradictory ways.

Trust in institutions is fragile among Indonesian men.

Indonesian men report notably low levels of trust in institutions, reflecting deep-seated skepticism toward governance and civic structures. Political parties (73 percent), the police (70 percent), parliament (65 percent), and the courts and legal system (64 percent) are often distrusted by young men. This institutional skepticism likely reflects broader national dynamics, including perceived corruption, limited accountability, and frustrations with governance systems that may be unfair or unresponsive. Additionally, approximately half of young men express distrust toward local governments and civil service, reinforcing the fragile trust across multiple layers of governance.

Despite institutional distrust, Indonesian men remain civically active. Over half (55 percent) of men report having worked with others in their community to solve problems, and about a third (34 percent) have attended political meetings on local, town, or school affairs. This suggests that while formal institutional engagement may be distrusted, informal or locally driven participation is a more meaningful form of civic engagement.

Ideologically, most Indonesian men position themselves as moderate (48 percent), with a smaller but notable proportion identifying as liberal (29 percent) or conservative (23 percent). This moderate majority indicates young men are not rigid in their ideologies. Instead, their political views appear pragmatic, possibly reflecting a desire for stability, fairness, and tangible outcomes.

CONCLUSION: WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ACTION

Young Indonesian men largely embrace the ideal of equality in principle, even as they wrestle with conflicting expectations in practice.

Surveys show that each generation is becoming more open to sharing roles; for instance, 86 percent of urban millennial men say they aspire to share childcare equally with a future partner (Investing in Women, 2020), and many express that both parents’ involvement in childcare benefits their children’s well-being.

At the same time, contradictory attitudes persist. While young men support women’s leadership in theory and believe women are just as capable in the workplace, a 2018 study found over three-quarters of Indonesians still agreed that “men should have more right to a job than women” (Investing in Women, 2020; Cameron et al., 2022).

These findings suggest that young men are not opponents of gender equality – rather, they are navigating mixed messaging. They are caught between egalitarian aspirations and traditional norms, shaped by digital media, interpersonal connections, and cultural influences that sometimes are in opposition (Rutgers, 2020). The following recommendations for action can help promote positive masculinities in this complex landscape.



Address structural pressures.

Beneath individual attitudes lie structural factors that heavily influence young men’s sense of identity and inclusion. Indonesian youth consistently point to economic risk and distrust in institutions as major concerns. In one national survey, a third of young people cited a lack of employment opportunities as the second biggest challenge (after COVID-19), and one-quarter reported the current political economic system as the third issue (Sutanti et al., 2022).

This context fosters anxiety among young men about their future roles. If a man cannot find stable work or trust the system to treat him fairly, he may feel threatened and fear that his masculine duty as a provider may be undermined. Despite women’s rising workforce participation, a quarter of Indonesian men believe that women’s role is childcare, indicating how economic stress can trigger protectionist attitudes (Cameron et al., 2023).

Low institutional trust exacerbates this dynamic, with over half of Indonesians aged 17 to 25 saying they do not trust political parties and an equal percentage not trusting the national parliament (Hidayat et al., 2020). Feeling economically and politically marginalized, some young men become vulnerable to narratives that blame their hardships on gender equality. Research shows that when men cannot fulfill the breadwinner ideal, the resulting frustration can erode mental well-being (Coleman, 2015; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hunter et al., 2017). Addressing these structural pressures by improving livelihoods, restoring faith in institutions, and debunking zero-sum gender myths is crucial for gender equality. Without reducing economic pressure, efforts to foster more equitable masculinities will progress minimally due to the unique anxieties young men face.

Take digital environments seriously.

Today, young men’s beliefs and behaviors are developed as much online as offline. Indonesia’s youth are common users of social media. Nearly 80 percent rely on social media for news, and it is perceived to be the most trusted information source (Sutanti et al., 2022).

On the one hand, online spaces have enabled more diverse masculine identities to gain visibility. A recent media analysis found a “decline in traditional masculine representations from 85 percent to 30 percent between 2019 and 2024” on Indonesian television alongside a rise of “platform-specific masculinities” on social media

(Sonni et al., 2025). Especially on youth-centric platforms like TikTok, young men encounter and often embrace content emphasizing emotional openness and creativity. About 42 percent of sampled TikTok content in one study featured “emotional” masculinity, encouraging men to show vulnerability and empathy (Sonni et al., 2025).

On the other hand, the digital realm also amplifies conservative and extreme influencers who reinforce gender-inequitable norms. For example, popular Islamic preachers, such as Ustadz Abdul Somad and Ustadz Felix Siauw, have amassed millions of YouTube followers by preaching a stern, heteronormative masculinity, often using masculinized humor and morality to ridicule LGBTQ individuals as deviating from “true” manhood (Fadhline, 2021). Such content can intensify gender contradictions and confusion for young men – in one moment, men are viewing gender-balanced parenting content, and in the next, they’re scrolling to a video urging them to “act like a real man.”

Engaging these digital environments is therefore crucial to advancing gender equity since programming must meet young men where they are online and challenge the competing perspectives of manhood.

Reframe care as aspiration.

In Indonesia, the growing openness among young men to redefine care as part of a man’s identity presents an opportunity. Most young men today grew up with fathers who were seldom involved in daily caregiving, yet 86 percent of urban millennial men hope to share childcare with their future partner (Investing in Women, 2020). This signals that “caring masculinity” may be within reach. However, many men lack role models for involved fatherhood or fear criticism if they “do it wrong.” For example, studies note that some Indonesian mothers – accustomed to being primary caregivers – can unintentionally discourage fathers’ deeper involvement by criticizing their parenting efforts, which makes the men retreat (Wulaningsih, 2023).

To normalize men’s caregiving, care must be celebrated as an aspiration, not an obligation or a last resort. Programming must leverage positive messaging through high-profile male ambassadors and even religious leaders, modeling hands-on fatherhood to show that a caring man is an admirable man (Equimundo, 2013). Efforts must link men’s care roles to national goals, tapping into men’s desire to be useful and respected in their families.

Emerging evidence shows men benefit when they are given the knowledge and support to engage as fathers and partners; they become less prone to use violence, their partners report better relationships, and children thrive with more attentive parenting (Equimundo, n.d.). By reframing caregiving, emotional support, and empathy as qualities to strive for, Indonesian society can develop a version of masculinity that aligns with gender-equal values while providing young men a sense of purpose and connection.

Leverage peer connection as a critical driver of change.

For young men, peers are powerful influencers of norms. Much of the behavior coded as “masculine” is policed and reinforced in male peer groups; therefore, engaging those same peer groups is key to challenging gender norms. Research shows that when a young man is surrounded by progressive examples in a workplace, with women in leadership, then he is more likely to adopt equitable attitudes himself (Investing in Women, 2020).

Shifting masculinity often starts with a group process in which men collectively reflect on their experiences, challenge each other, and find new camaraderie in healthier norms. Early evidence shows that peer support can improve well-being and openness by providing men with nonjudgmental spaces to share and learn from each other (Yani et al., 2025). Programs that train male peer educators, facilitate men’s group dialogues, or build brotherhood around positive values could successfully shift masculine norms in Indonesia.

Use mental health as a powerful entry point.

Across all these themes, mental health emerges as a way to engage young men and change gender attitudes.

Emotional well-being remains a silent struggle for many Indonesian men, who have been taught to “be strong” and suppress vulnerability. The costs of this repression can be observed in the national suicide rates: Indonesian men die by suicide at slightly more than double the rate of women (Onie et al., 2024).

Moreover, about one in four youth identify mental health issues as a significant challenge in recent years (Sutanti et al., 2022). Evidence links strict gender norms with poorer mental health among boys, with one global analysis noting that when masculinity is defined narrowly by “provider” or “breadwinner” roles, many young men feel like failures and suffer from low self-esteem (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 2018). By contrast, when men are given permission to share their fears and emotions, they often become more empathetic and adhere less to harmful gender norms.

Many civil society organizations and thought leaders in Indonesia are advocating for the integration of mental health awareness into schools, community activities, and media to reach youth early (Basrowi et al., 2024). In peer support settings, young Indonesian men who bond over common struggles begin to reject the idea that expressing emotion is “unmanly” (Yani et al., 2025). By positioning mental health support as an entry point, practitioners have found a less politicized, relatable way to invite young men into difficult conversations.

Community initiatives can set up counseling hotlines for young men to help them with stress relief, life coaching, or friendship while creating a socially acceptable outlet for men to talk about feelings, loneliness, or trauma. Once trust is built, these groups can gradually delve into root causes, such as rigid expectations or experiences of violence, which are gendered topics. This strategy can engage men’s human side, laying the groundwork for deeper transformations.

APPENDIX, SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Sample	Indonesia (%)
GENDER	
Women (n)	364
Women (%)	45.5
Men (n)	436
Men (%)	54.5
TOTAL	800
	*1 said other
AGE	
18-23	30.5
24-30	38.7
31-40	30.8
EDUCATION	
Less than high school	3.9
High school	36.5
Vocational degree	7.9
Bachelor's degree	50.9
Master's degree	0.9
RELATIONSHIP STATUS*	
Single, looking for a partner	28.6
Single, not looking for a partner	17.7
In a relationship, not married	9.4
Married	42.4
Divorced/ widowed/separated	1.9
CAREGIVER STATUS	
Not a caregiver	36.7
Has children and/or cares for others	63.3
ECONOMIC STANDING	
Low/basic needs not mostly met	17.9
Middle	57.2
High/basic and important needs tend to be met	24.9

Sample	Indonesia (%)
DOES PARTNER HAVE AN INCOME?	
Women	92.1
Men	69.9
ECONOMIC STANDING	
UNEMPLOYED	
Women	12.6
Men	8.9
EMPLOYED	
Women	75.3
Men	82.6
IN SCHOOL, NOT EMPLOYED	
Women	13.4
Men	8.7
OTHER	
Women	3.6
Men	2.3

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