

U T O  
P I A



# Masculinity in the Workplace

2020

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My version of masculinity is somebody who is willing to cry, to be vulnerable. When you try to define yourself as it is described by others, that is a problem. To be able to be yourself, the good things and the bad things, success and failure.

**Gareth Thomas**, Former Wales and British Lions  
Rugby Star and LGBTQ+ advocate

# Mindful Masculinity And Vulnerable Leadership - A Remedy For Challenging Times And Beyond.

## Foreword

With our Masculinity in the Workplace event in its fourth year, it was fitting we focused on leadership. For as we face challenging times, leadership has a more important role to play than ever.

What did we uncover through our annual insight research? While a minority of people do not feel that their cultures are masculine, leadership traits that are traditionally masculine still dominate the workplace. The impact of this creates a dominant culture which prevents authenticity, empathy and vulnerability from shining through.

The research revealed a tension in the workplace - employees are seeking a new, more empathetic form of leadership, yet this is not currently valued or rewarded by leaders. It is also interesting to see that while vulnerability could appear not to be seen as a key leadership trait (only 4% of workers identified it so), 53% overall agreed that “being able to sit with uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure” – in other words, vulnerability – is a key leadership skill. The lack of empathy and vulnerability fostered in the workplace is no

doubt leading to issues such as stress, exclusion and isolation in the workplace. A more tender form of leadership would go a long way to creating workplaces in which everyone can thrive.

Yet we must not underestimate the shift that is needed to create a culture in which skills like vulnerability and empathy are valued. These skills may not come naturally to many leaders, and training and development needs to go outside of developing traditional leadership traits to also foster these new, inclusive leadership skills. Only by doing so can we create inclusive cultures where everyone can belong, perform and thrive. We hope that this report gives you the burning platform to start accelerating your own change.

**Daniele Fiandaca & Roxanne Hobbs**

(Utopia)

(The Hobbs Consultancy)

Co-founders of Masculinity in the Workplace

## Executive Summary

2020 – A global pandemic; an explosive reckoning with racism, in the US and around the world, a summer of protests; and a year that saw a sea change in our relationship with work and the workplace.

Workers were in and out of lockdown, many working from home (for some while simultaneously homeschooling children), not to mention those who fell ill from coronavirus themselves, were furloughed or lost hours or jobs during this time.

Nearly 700,000 UK workers fell from the payrolls during the first five months of the pandemic. Those who did lose work tended to be clustered among lower-earning employees; some workers didn't have a comfortable or even safe home to work from.

Original research we conducted to coincide with our Masculinity in the Workplace event (MIW 2020), on International Men's Day, revealed that the pandemic has exposed a slight rise in masculine workplace culture, even as some entrenched masculine stereotypes were in further retreat, alongside a yearning for a more empathetic style of leadership.

This survey was carried out in September – between waves 1 and 2 of the pandemic – thus there will inevitably be some anomalies in the findings. This report lifts the lid on those findings to reveal:

- **Workers want to see modern leadership traits and behaviours like empathy, vulnerability and cultural intelligence valued and rewarded in the workplace, even though older leadership skills are still favoured.**
- **Encouraging signs that some masculine stereotypes seemed to be in retreat with numbers down compared with 2019's MIW survey (including men feeling slightly less pressure to be the breadwinner).**
- **Discouraging signs that a regression of gender roles is bubbling in the background – exposed by working from home – even while we've glimpsed a potential future of more flexible working for all.**
- **Already-pressured groups including Black, Asian and People of Colour (BAPOC), Under-35s and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Pansexual (LGBTQIAP) workers are more stressed, anxious and isolated during Covid.**

Finally, we offer some solutions including the 3 hacks you can bring into your business tomorrow to start addressing some of these issues.

## Contents

Introduction & Methodology	6
Taking the pulse of masculinity in workplace culture	7
The problem with leadership – mind the skills gap	8
The empathy, vulnerability & cultural intelligence disconnect	11
Mental health – a greater focus but a greater need	14
Working parents under pressure – flexible working for all?	19
BAPOC Focus	21
Under-35 Focus	23
3 practical steps	25
Conclusion	26
Afterword	27
Descriptive terms	28
References	29

## Introduction & Methodolgy

# 2,250 responses

20% South  
23% North  
27% Middle  
17% London  
13% W, S, NI

53% male  
44% female  
3% other

47% with dependents

89% White  
9% BAPOC  
2% other

34% under-35  
46% 35-54  
21% 55+

89% hetero  
8% LGBTQIAP  
3% Prefer not to say

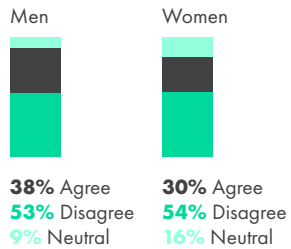
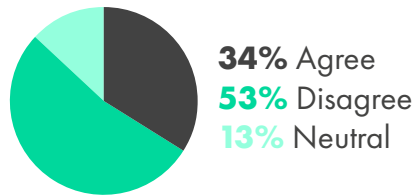
A survey carried out for us by insight agency Opinium, between 21st September and 29th October 2020, polled a representative sample of 2,250 workers, across multiple industries in the UK.

Workers were asked about masculinity in the workplace, how inclusive they felt their workplaces to be and about how they were feeling regarding their workplace in general. Respondents were also asked how Covid-19 had affected how they were feeling about their jobs and workplaces.

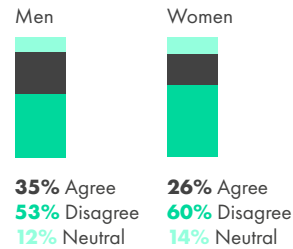
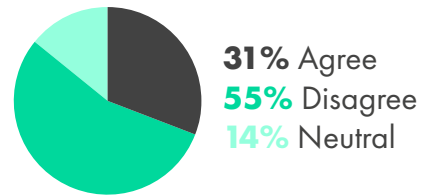
For the purposes of this year's survey, a masculine workplace culture was defined as: "one where traditionally masculine traits are valued and rewarded".

## My workplace has a masculine culture:

2020

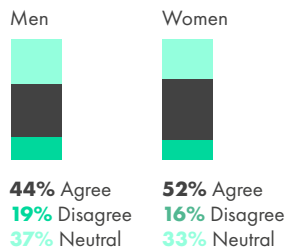
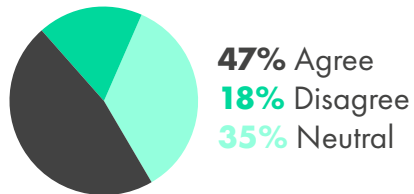


2019

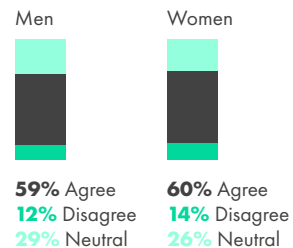
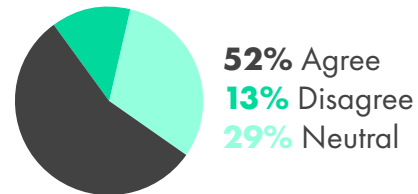


## Men are pressured to be breadwinner:

2020



2019



Our survey this year found that although there was a slight rise in people feeling their workplace had a masculine culture – compounded by Covid – some of the stereotypes for men in the workplace seem to be waning compared with 2019.

Younger men particularly seemed to be on the receiving end of this mini surge in masculinity, with 49% of Under-35 men believing their workplace had a masculine culture.

In the aggregate, 16% felt their workplace had become more masculine due to Covid, with a fifth of men believing this to be the case vs. 11% of women. Delving deeper, more younger workers (23%) felt this than their older counterparts, with more young men (33% of Under-35 men) feeling this in comparison to younger female workers (15%). Meanwhile 26% of BAPOC workers and 41% of carers also felt their workplaces had become more masculine during the pandemic – perhaps as a result of both these groups coming under significant pressure this year.

Our survey suggests that younger workers were more likely to buy into the traditionally masculine stereotypes of a long-hours culture and separation of work and home lives, with more than half (51%) believing that working long hours makes you more successful, and a similar number agreeing that ensuring family life doesn't interfere with work was important for success. This echoes our earlier research, which shows Under-35s reverting to these masculine tropes as they feel under immense pressure to succeed.

## Workplaces Are Still Not Diverse, But Slightly More Inclusive For Some Due To Covid

More than a third of respondents (37%) thought their workplace was not diverse, with this spiking for those who identified as neither male nor female at 62%. But when we asked about how inclusive they felt their workplaces were, we saw a more mixed picture.

Some groups agreed it had become more inclusive as a result of Covid: 45% of BAPOC workers, a similar number of workers who identified as having a disability, and 48% of those who identified as neither male nor female agreed that this was the case. Nearly half of employees who identified as carers of dependents (49%) also felt their workplaces had become more inclusive since Covid. This could be because employers are having to be more accommodating to employees, taking into account their personal circumstances, caring responsibilities and family and home life during this time.

However, the numbers for diversity and inclusion are still fairly low. Additionally, those who felt their workplace had become more exclusive to certain employees since the pandemic included fathers/

male parents (39%) and men Under-35 (40%), indicating that male workers may now be facing issues that women and other groups have experienced for some time – the tensions of working flexibly, parenting pressure and childcare are among issues that loomed large for this year's cohort. With 41% of BAPOC workers also reporting their workplaces had become more exclusive to some during Covid, the survey indicates while some businesses have made progress on inclusion, in others a harsher environment prevails.



## The Problem With Leadership - Mind The Skills Gap

### Leadership traits – what is rewarded VS what *should* be rewarded

Two of the top 3 leadership traits workers feel are rewarded in their workplace were traditionally identified as “masculine” and included: confidence or assertive (43%), being result-focused or action-oriented (39%) and flexibility (31%). The top 5 also included ‘collaborative’ and ‘ambitious or competitive’. While it is notable that collaboration and flexibility were both ranked highly, of the top 10 list, the majority were traits commonly identified as traditionally “masculine”.

#### Top 10 leadership traits workers feel are currently rewarded in the workplace

1. Confident, Assertive - 43%
2. Action-oriented, result-focused - 39%
3. Flexible - 31%
4. Ambitious, Competitive - 29%
5. Collaborative - 24%
6. Creative - 21%
7. Strategic - 19%
8. Empathetic - 19%
9. Analytical - 16%
10. Authoritative - 13%

Meanwhile, traits like vulnerability limped in last on the list (3%) as one of the least-rewarded traits in the workplace.

When it came to the leadership traits workers felt *should* be rewarded though, flexibility was the only trait to still be ranked in the top 3, alongside empathy and collaboration.

#### Top 10 leadership traits workers feel should be rewarded

1. Flexible - 36%
2. Empathetic - 34%
3. Collaborative - 34%
4. Action-oriented, result-focused - 32%
5. Assertive, confident - 32%
6. Creative - 31%
7. Strategic - 22%
8. Analytical - 18%
9. Self-aware - 18%
10. Culturally Intelligent - 16%

The fact workers rated empathy so highly as a trait that should be rewarded suggests they have a growing awareness of its importance for good leadership. Another indicator of growing awareness is workers' rating of self-awareness and cultural intelligence as important leadership traits that should be rewarded, but the disconnect with what is actually valued and rewarded in the workplace shows there is still some way to go.

Additionally, some other key leadership traits like vulnerability (4%) were still rated relatively poorly by workers when it came to those that should be rewarded by employers. However, more than half (53%) of workers overall agreed that "being able to sit with uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" – in other words vulnerability – is a key leadership skill.

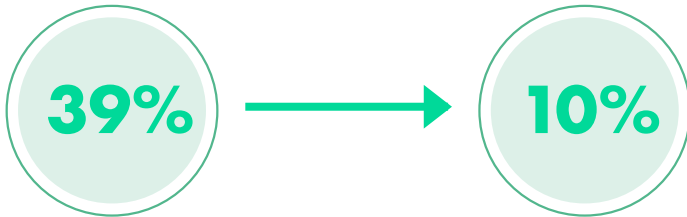
In an exceptional year during a global pandemic, workers and businesses have been forced to adapt to survive, whether that be working from home, pivoting business models from physical to online spaces or changing wholesale the direction and purpose of their business in response to drastic falls in income. Workers who have

been able to continue working, but whose jobs dictate they can't work from home, have also had to rapidly adapt working hours, practices and protocols.

While studies show flexibility (particularly in relation to reduction in working hours) is traditionally regarded as a "feminine" trait in the workplace (1), it is perhaps unsurprising that flexibility is prized more than ever as a top leadership trait under the working conditions wrought by a pandemic.

## The Problem With Leadership - Mind The Skills Gap

### Cultural Intelligence

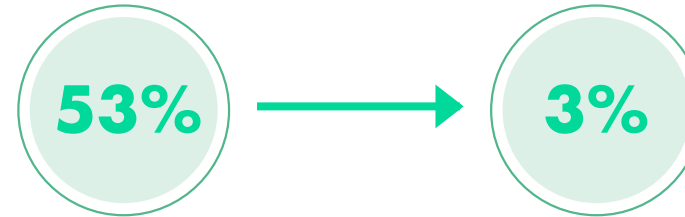


Want a culturally intelligent employer, even if it means changing jobs

Think cultural intelligence is currently rewarded in the workplace

**60%** Of BAPOC women want a culturally intelligent employer, even if it means changing jobs

### Vulnerability



Think vulnerability is a key leadership skill (being able to sit with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure)

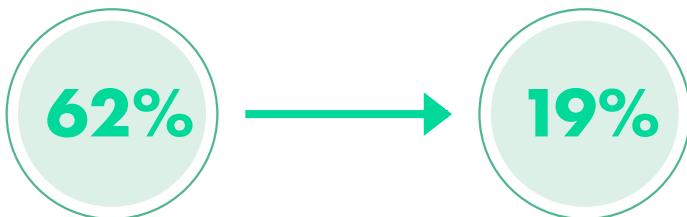
Think vulnerability is currently rewarded in the workplace

**47%** Think men are taught to suppress their feelings  
**51%** in 2019

**49%** Think men are taught not to be vulnerable  
**53%** in 2019

**48%** Women junior/middle management say it's dangerous to show vulnerability in the workplace

### Empathy



Think empathy is critical for business success

Think empathy is currently rewarded in the workplace

## The Empathy, Vulnerability & Cultural Intelligence Gap

Our survey shows employees, especially women, want empathy to be valued in their workplace but it is currently not rewarded enough - just 19% of workers believe it is. Indeed 72% of women overall (spiking at 74% of women aged 35-54 and 78% of BAPOC women) and 56% of men felt it was critical to business success.

Furthermore, 60% of employees who feel that men are taught to suppress empathy agree that it has a negative effect on their ability to be an inclusive leader, and a similar number (59%) say the same about their ability to be an effective leader.

The good news is that more than half of employees (56%) believed empathy is a skill that can be learned (slightly higher for under-35s, with BAPOC workers at 58% and spiking for BAPOC women at 73%).

It seems that general awareness of empathy and vulnerability as being important in the workplace is rising, as is evidenced by the high numbers of respondents who rated empathy in particular as business critical. This is particularly important given the World Economic Forum identified it as one of the key skills for workers of the future (2).

But workplaces are still not valuing or rewarding these behaviours in practice, and this was more evident in some industries and sectors than others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents working in the more traditionally male-dominated sectors of manufacturing, technology services and transport were more inclined to agree that it was “too dangerous to show one’s vulnerability in their workplace” than those working in healthcare or marketing, advertising and PR, for example.

Furthermore 44% of female junior/middle managers also felt it was dangerous to show vulnerability at work, while more than a third of workers overall (34%) did not believe vulnerability was valued in their workplace.

While we know that vulnerability is one of the key drivers of innovation and creativity (3), workplace training to recognise it as a key leadership skill still seems to be lacking. More than a third disagreed that their workplace had taught them to see vulnerability and authenticity as leadership skills, and similar numbers across all groups had not been taught to see the link between vulnerability and trust and connection – although slightly more BAPOC employees (34%) had, as had IT industry workers.

Many groups said they had been brought up to believe vulnerability was weakness but despite this some now view it as courage, particularly younger workers (50% of Under-35s), women (50%) and markedly BAPOC women (60%). This reflects the ubiquity of the message that vulnerability is an essential quality for modern leaders.

Despite 30% of senior managers acknowledging the importance of vulnerability, the fact that so many workers do not themselves rate it as an important leadership skill, which is actually valued or rewarded in their workplace, shows a disconnect between policy and practice. The fact that the message seems to be taking time to translate into action for many indicates that more training is needed to embed the importance of empathy and vulnerability and their value to business across all sectors.

“

Maybe at a time when people are really uncertain, they want leaders to be strong. People do need leaders to lead but not overplaying that is a difficult balance. Getting the balance between authentic vulnerability and credible optimism: saying 'I know this is hard but look how far we've come already'. Sometimes the strongest thing a leader can do is be vulnerable. Having the strength to be weak – to not pretend you know everything.

**Phil Bartlett**, president, CDM

## How High Is Your CIQ (Cultural Intelligence Quotient)?

In an increasingly globalised world with international teams, it is concerning that only 10% viewed cultural intelligence as something that is valued and rewarded in their workplace and around a third said their employer had provided training to understand, respect and acknowledge cultural differences. Here, the survey also shows a disconnect between how culturally intelligent employees believe themselves to be, and what this really means in relation to business. Just 37% say they know how cultures differ in how they do business, with men rating themselves slightly higher than women in this respect (39% men vs. 34% women).

This mismatch underscores the fact that more training is needed to fully reap the benefits, seeing as two-fifths of workers overall (39%), 46% of Under-35s & BAPOC workers, and 49% LGBTQIAP employees say they want a culturally intelligent employer even if it means changing their role.

This is crucial insight, given that cultural intelligence is about so much more than just knowing how other cultures do business. It extends to understanding and embracing difference, whether that be understanding what it's like for an employee to experience menopause, adopt a child or abstain from food and drink in daylight hours during Ramadan. These are all vital components in leading diverse teams and ensuring employees feel included, valued and like they belong.

## Mental Health - A Greater Focus But A Greater Need

While many workers reported an increased focus by their workplaces on mental health during Covid, it was clearly in response to a much-increased need – 44% of workers say their workplace has increased attention to mental health since the pandemic began.

Our survey showed the groups who say they are stressed in these Covid times included:

- **47% of female parents**
- **48% of BAPOC employees** (see breakout box on page 16 for further detail)
- **54% of carers**
- **55% of Under-35 women**
- **67% of workers with disabilities**

These groups have suffered particularly acutely - they've been hit by the fall-out from job insecurity, higher domestic workload, more caring responsibilities and worries about physical and mental health.

Meanwhile, men were more likely than women to report there was sufficient support for mental health in their current workplace (59% men vs. 52% women) and white male employees seemed to be the least anxious of all the groups.

On many of the survey responses related to mental health, stress or anxiety, men in general scored themselves lower than most women. However, when we unpacked these stats, we uncovered some conflicting views. For instance, more men than women said there is a stigma around mental health in their workplace; and of those, BAPOC men (47%), Under-35 men (40%) and fathers (42%) felt this more strongly than other groups. But men also said they were less uncomfortable than women talking about their mental health with colleagues, managers and HR.

This begs several questions: do men have a lower awareness of the effects of the pandemic on their own mental health, do they genuinely not feel the effects so sharply because of their systemic privilege or do they feel less able to report it? In other words, could they be retreating into the masculine stereotype of “being strong” in a time of crisis?

“

Through the interactions that I have with men in the workplace and through my mental health platform Surviving Sundays, I do know that there is an emphasis in 'pushing through', of 'keeping calm and carrying on' in times of crisis. Because that's what strength and resilience is **supposed** to look like. I also know that some people fear labels and only recognise themselves as anxious or depressed at the point of breakdown or burnout. And, on the lead up to this, signs are ignored and the word 'stress' is used as a more acceptable way to describe a multitude of difficult feelings and experiences.”

**Emma Mainoo**, Utopia's Head of Mental Health and Founder of Surviving Sundays



It is clear that a reluctance to report mental ill health could be storing up problems for men as the economic downturn plays out. Samaritans confirm they have seen a 35% increase in emails from men during lockdown, with worries about loneliness and isolation, finances, jobs and family concerns most common among them. Their research highlights that lower-income men living in the most deprived areas are up to 10 times more likely to die by suicide than well-off men from affluent areas, and that this group is also more vulnerable to the adverse effects of economic recession (4).

Indeed, our survey showed nearly half (48%) of men earning £10,000-£20,000 felt more down or depressed, and 40% felt more isolated, during Covid. With 2019's male suicide figures at a 20-year high, Utopia's Head of Mental Health Emma Mainoo highlights: "We are still a long way from creating healthy dialogues around emotions and vulnerability - healthy dialogues that will free men from old fashioned and harmful ideas of what a man 'should' be."

That women are reporting more stress and anxiety than men during the pandemic could also be in response to a very real threat – a UN study of the Covid crisis and its gendered impacts shows, "the impacts of crises are rarely gender neutral and Covid-19 is no exception" (5) and women's jobs are estimated to be 1.8 times more vulnerable during the crisis than men's (6). Unpaid work during Covid has increased sharply particularly for women and BAPOC workers, as they try to balance the challenges of work, unpaid care and homeschooling, as well as dealing with systemic inequalities due to

the intersections of gender and race (7). Meanwhile, the gender poverty gap for all women is set to increase (8).

While the Covid-driven focus on mental health by employers is positive, there are signs that in practice the beneficiaries of this are mainly more senior workers – with 63% of senior managers feeling there is enough awareness and support around mental health in their workplace, compared with 50% of those with no management responsibility. More research is needed as to whether this is because senior workers are more aware of the support that exists, or they are better able to access resources than their junior colleagues.

But this gap in perception of support is clearly problematic. A recent University of Glasgow study, carried out in the midst of the first UK lockdown in May (9), confirms Covid has had a major impact on mental health, including an increase in suicidal thoughts - particularly among younger people (18-29-yr-olds). This age group has been hit hardest by the economic downturn, mainly because they tend to be clustered in insecure, low-earning jobs including the hospitality and retail sectors, and are likely to need even more support in the months ahead.

Some organisations will have found themselves better equipped for the mental health challenges Covid has exposed than others – those that laid the groundwork for employees' wellbeing before the pandemic hit will likely fare better on the other side of it.

“

Some organisations did not have the resources or infrastructure in place to deal with what is happening – those that had already started to lay the foundations with talking about mental health and remote working pre-pandemic are those that are doing well now.

**Adé Adéniji**, The Hobbs Consultancy

Under new restrictions, record UK redundancy rises and a worsening economic climate, the winter ahead potentially presents an even more challenging time for all employees' mental health.

Against this darkening backdrop, it is vital leaders signpost the support available for their workers, and provide training for managers to effectively manage remote teams with care and compassion.

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One absolutely incredible thing to come out of the pandemic is the discussion around mental health. Leadership globally and business leaders in this country are talking about it and that is incredibly powerful. Leaders have to have empathy – after all, we have just been through a national trauma together – so kindness is absolutely crucial, but a bit of firmness as well in encouraging and helping people back to work. Leaders will have to lean in to that.

**Jan Gooding**, executive coach, non-executive chair of Given

## Working Parents Under Pressure, Productivity Challenged... Flexible Working For All?

Many parents in our survey reported being under pressure - they were struggling to cope with the demands of childcare and homeschooling alongside work, and felt insufficiently supported by their workplace in this respect. 63% of workers with children were concerned about parenting pressure – that is, spending enough time with children and financially providing for them. Meanwhile, 70% of parents of U18 children were concerned about family pressure, including caring for parents and living up to family expectations.

Parent respondents noted large increases in time spent actively engaging with their children during lockdown, when schools were closed to most, except key workers' children. But this has fallen disproportionately on women's shoulders, their time rising by a staggering 13 hours a week during lockdown, compared with 6 more hours per week for their male counterparts. And, after the first lockdown had ended, the gender disparity in childcare continued, with women averaging more than double the hours per week than men - even though restrictions were lifted, all parents remained above their pre-lockdown average.

Meanwhile, more than a third of workers (36%) said there was limited or no support for having parenting duties that may negatively impact work - with more men feeling this than women. More men than women also noted there was no or limited support from their workplace when children interrupt work over lockdown, with male parents feeling this more than female parents (55% vs. 44%).

It could be that men feel there is still more of a stigma in their workplace around them actively and openly participating in childcare and more acceptance of female parents. It could also be the case that men are just now facing issues that their female counterparts may have struggled with for some time, who could be more 'used' to them at this point. The fact that this past year, the divisions between work and home become more porous and domestic life "leaks" into the workplace, may have heightened this feeling for men.

Our survey findings also echo research which shows that women dedicate an average of 3.2 times more hours to unpaid care work in general than men, and perform on average three-quarters of the total amount of unpaid care work globally(10). There are, of course, far-reaching implications of women shouldering more unpaid work, including childcare, for the future of workplace gender parity.

### Hours spent actively engaging with their children



The pandemic and lockdowns have also shone a light on how we think about flexible working, whether that applies to changes in working hours, the removal of the stigma of working from home, or the acknowledgement that care-taking responsibilities sometimes impact work. Pre-lockdown flexible working was largely requested by

parents, but even they weren't and still aren't fully aware of their rights; and many fathers, in particular, don't think it applies to them(11). And it's not simply parents that can request flexible working, but actually all workers in the UK who have been working for their company for more than six months have had the right to request flexible working since 2014 – in practice, this just wasn't taken up. This is a problem, since we know the ability to work flexibly increases employee engagement. Since the pandemic, ONS estimates roughly 50% of UK workers were able to work from home during lockdown (12), although the Resolution Foundation found it was mainly the highest earners who were able to work from home (fewer than 1 in 10 workers in the bottom half of earners could do so) (13).

Concerns about challenges to parents' productivity may be less marked during a second national lockdown, when schools have been kept open for the most part. Nevertheless, businesses will have to work hard to ensure progress made in gender parity is not rolled back by a regression in gender roles at work or at home.

A male participant in 2019's MIW conference highlighted the absurdity of being publicly coy about reducing his hours and working more flexibly so he could spend time with his children. He acknowledged that, as a leader, being more open about it could have positively influenced his workplace culture. Now, as many more men will have been enabled to work more flexibly under lockdown, this may become more routine with more positive outcomes for all genders.

## Black, Asian, People Of Colour Focus

In 2020, concerns about physical and mental health understandably came into sharp focus for BAPOC workers. With Black and South Asian communities hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic, BAPOC employees were also dealing with a turbulent year when issues around racism exploded to the surface, following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others in the US; and the re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter movement around the world. Many BAPOC employees were healthcare or care workers on the frontline of the Covid response, or were in other key worker roles (14). Trauma, grief and risk to life in general have been front of mind for this cohort this year.

Our survey showed BAPOC workers were generally more stressed than their white counterparts – 48% compared to 44%. With 52% of BAPOC men feeling more anxious or ill at ease in the workplace since Covid began and more depressed (50% vs 35%) and isolated (47% vs. 33%) than their white colleagues.

Already facing many systemic barriers to progress at work, BAPOC workers also felt under tremendous family pressure – including caring for parents and living up to family expectations – during the pandemic this year. With 74% of BAPOC employees worried about family pressure overall, 76% of men and 71% of women in this group were concerned about this issue - the highest respondent group. Worries about job insecurity (75%) and, understandably, the health implications of Covid (85%) also spiked for BAPOC men.

Furthermore, BAPOC women were among the highest reporters that “armouring up” or putting on a mask and acting differently to how you normally would is rewarded and promoted in the workplace. 44% of BAPOC women in our survey agreed that masking one’s true self was the way to progress at work. This reflects last year’s MIW research, which showed female BAPOC employees feeling under immense pressure to mask themselves in order to survive, let alone progress, in the workplace. They were more likely to be affected acutely than other groups by a majority-white, masculine work culture.

“

Many Black employees have reported feeling enough is enough in the wake of George Floyd and the BLM protests – these issues were nothing new for these workers, but rather the old residue rising to the surface, and many felt their companies were being very performative about inclusion around that time. They want to know what their company is doing, not just for Black History Month but in the long term.

*Adé Adéniji, coach, group facilitator and mediator, The Hobbs Consultancy*

## Under-35 Focus

Younger workers may have borne the brunt of the economic fall-out from the pandemic, with 16-24-year-olds suffering the biggest drop in employment compared with other age groups.

Just under half of Under-35 workers in our survey (49%) reported feeling stressed at work, and were more inclined to subscribe to traditionally masculine stereotypes, such as believing that working long hours and not letting family life interfere with work were important for success. Under-35 men in particular seemed to be feeling the pressure of the pandemic workplace, with 49% of younger male workers feeling their workplace had a masculine culture (vs 32% young women) and over a third feeling it had become more so due to Covid; and 40% feeling it had become more exclusive to some people during that time.

Regarding mental health, half (49%) of Under-35 workers agreed their workplace had placed more attention on mental health since the pandemic, but they also felt there was a stigma around mental health in the workplace, more so than their older counterparts. More than half (54%) of younger female employees reported they were stressed at work, with their level of stress rising during the pandemic.

Research carried out by Utopia earlier this year showed this cohort to be putting themselves under huge pressure in the workplace but less able than their older co-workers to reach out for help, making them vulnerable to stress and burnout.

While younger workers crave the flexibility to work when and where they want, many found that lockdowns and enforced WFH also brought loneliness, isolation and an inability to “switch off”.



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As leaders, we have to think of our role as coaches and mentors a lot more, especially for younger workers, who may feel they are missing out on development opportunities in the physical workplace, may be feeling isolated, or may not have a comfortable home situation to work from. As a younger person, I know I would have struggled in this situation.

**Phil Bartlett**, president, CDM

## 3 Hacks You Can Do Tomorrow

### 1. Inclusive Leadership Day

It is only by demonstrating that we value traits such as vulnerability, empathy and cultural intelligence that we can overturn damaging stereotypes, to create more inclusive workplaces where everyone can thrive. Organise an event (virtually or physically) that promotes these traits, and ask senior leaders to share personal stories of what vulnerability, empathy and cultural intelligence mean to them, and why they are important to succeed. When inclusive leadership traits are role modelled by leaders, it allows others to be themselves. But do recognise these traits will not come easily to everyone - reinforce the day with comprehensive training and support.

### 2. Fathers Groups

As well as holding mothers groups, or wider parents/carers groups, we would also recommend groups for fathers only. It's important to hold these conversations, as our research shows fathers feel that workplaces are not giving them support nor seeing them as parents outside of their work responsibilities. A safe space for fathers to share their experiences: worries, triumphs and their needs will create equity for all parents and provide an opportunity for fathers (or expecting fathers) to easily access information on the policies the business has put in place to support them.

### 3. Mental Health Support Sessions

Your people will need support for their mental health more than ever in the months/years ahead. Worryingly, it is your younger employees that our research shows are less likely to reach out for help. At Utopia, we hold 'Listening sessions', which allow employees to learn about navigating uncertain times and normalising mental health. It's an opportunity for employees to share how they are feeling in a safe and supported space. Enabling safe spaces for conversations on mental health is the responsibility of leaders to action as part of their inclusive leadership journey.

## Conclusion

A global pandemic with its lockdowns and enforced working from home has meant many workers have experienced, for the first time, life outside the office and the unique pleasures and pains until now reserved for the self-employed (from ill-fitting chairs and noisy housemates, to the joy of zero commute and catching the last five minutes of sunlight in the park).

Meanwhile, key workers must have felt at times that they were operating in a parallel universe, the apocalyptic enormity of the pandemic underscored by the absurdity of empty streets and the necessity to keep going into work while many seemed to have disappeared.

There is evidence to show in our survey that some have benefitted from this shift in perception of the workplace – employers and employees at large have faced issues that many women, parents and carers of dependents have faced for decades.

Work and home lives can bleed messily and uncomfortably into each other. That we have home lives and relationships, alongside work lives, which also require our attention, time and energy is perhaps a timely reminder that we are all human and vulnerable.

In a time when very few people are going anywhere, there are few that would mourn the dreaded word “busy”; perhaps it can now be forever banished from our self-important professional lexicon, to be replaced by far more meaningful, humble and honest conversations.

Many younger workers, in particular, have long yearned for the autonomy that WFH brings. Now that has become a reality, many more will struggle to return to the pre-Covid status quo of presenteeism and the office, with as many as 72% of knowledge workers preferring a remote-office hybrid in the future (15). Maybe now, at least, we can finally bust the outdated and damaging myth that flexible working is an arrangement primarily designed for mothers.

Our survey tells us that others – younger men in particular – feel that masculine work cultures have become more entrenched, perhaps as fierce competition for fewer opportunities grows and those still in employment battle to keep their jobs.

Gains made during the pandemic from a focus on mental health, a greater awareness of all workers’ care-giving responsibilities and the possibilities of remote working should not be lost in a rush to return to ‘business as usual’. But, as some leaders also told us, neither should the importance of social connection, creative collaboration and the sense of belonging that work and workplaces, at their best, can bring.

One thing is certain: businesses must grasp the moment. To support the mental health of their workers, lead their employees with empathy and vulnerability, ensure we don’t regress on narrowing the gender pay gap and to realise the ‘diversity dividend’ for their business. In crisis, we have glimpsed the possibility of a more flexible and equitable workplace for all, come post-pandemic. Employers must act now to fully reap the benefits.

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There is a concept of 'anti-fragility' – where systems that withstand shocks, the way they reform is to make themselves stronger and more resilient to shocks – but a lot of the time, businesses don't really re-invent themselves. And I really believe we are at a fork in the road as regards workplaces in the future. This is a chance to say if we could start again and re-design everything – how would we do it better?

**Ete Davies**, CEO creative, Engine Group

## Descriptive Terms Used In This Re-

In our report, you might have come across two terms that you have not seen frequently before. We would like to explain why we chose these terms at this time. We always try to use terms that come from the community it tries to describe themselves, which means they are subject to change when the community's language around these terms change.

### **BAPOC - Black, Asian and People of Colour.**

We decided to not use the UK Government term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), because the community it is trying to define rejects the term for many reasons, one of the most prominent being the term 'ethnic minority'. People who officially fall into this category might be in the minority in the UK, but they are actually in the majority when we observe the world population.

Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) is a term that is currently widely used in the US and was taken up in the UK by the community as well. However, there has been disagreement around its use, since the term Indigenous in the UK encompasses some White people.

For all these reasons, we decided to go with the hybrid term Black, Asian and People of Colour (BAPOC).

### **LGBTQIAP - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual.**

A term more frequently used in the UK is LGBT or LGBT+, however, some parts of the community it tries to describe dislike these terms, as they feel the '+' others them, and without the '+', they're simply not acknowledged at all. The extension of letters is driven by the community, and continues to evolve to cover people of all genders and sexual minorities: People whose sex is neither male nor female, whose gender is neither male nor female and whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual.

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What kind of man became  
the boy who never cried?

Davy Lazare, spoken word poet

## Thanks

This report would not have been possible without the following amazing organisations who helped fund the research and ensure that we delivered an incredible Masculinity in the Workplace event.

All our MIW 2020 partners:



Thanks for your incredible support and we look forward to working together again in 2021.

**U T O**  
**P I A**

Utopia is a culture change business that re-wires organisations for the Age of Creativity. Utopia's purpose is to create more inclusive, more entrepreneurial and healthier cultures.

We do this by disrupting, inspiring and rewiring - from the intern to the CEO, through workshops and hacks - to create happier, inclusive, more productive workforces that deliver competitive advantage. Clients include Coca-Cola European Partners, Google, KP Snacks, Nestlé, Schneider Electric, Spotify and Universal Music. Token Man is part of a number of communities Utopia manages



The Hobbs Consultancy are passionate about putting the humanity into the workplace. We are a team of coaches, facilitators and content creators who are all passionate about transforming business through inclusion.

We support businesses in creating a culture in which people feel able to show up as themselves, where diversity of thought is valued and where people are cherished. We recognise that creating diverse and inclusive organisations is not necessarily an easy path and we help businesses to navigate this complexity, learning the skills required for everyone to be able to step into their inclusive leadership.