

MASCULINITY AND VEGANISM

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KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic objectives:

- **1.1** More people go and remain vegan
- **3.3** More reports and peer-reviewed papers on veganism and related topics.

Problem/gap in knowledge:

- Of the 1.35% of the UK population that are vegan, the overwhelming majority are women. It's important that The Vegan Society can develop effective campaign and messaging strategies to target underrepresented groups.
- The purpose of this Briefing is to address the key barriers that men face to going vegan and to identify opportunities for future research and campaign work.
- Research question: Why aren't more men going vegan and what is the best way to convince more men to do so?

Principal findings:

- A key barrier that men face to going vegan is the expectation of social stigma or ridicule from friends, peers, family, or society more generally. Meat eating has become a core aspect of how masculinity is "performed" – by refusing to eat meat (or participate in the consumption of other animal products), a man could be perceived as breaking gender expectations, inviting hostility from those who place importance on gender roles.

- Misinformation relating to nutrition (specifically that a vegan diet lacks protein or that soy negatively impacts male bodies) is a further barrier putting more men off going vegan.
- Men are more likely than women to consider animal product consumption to be "natural" and are likely to engage in cognitive dissonance to justify their behaviour.
- Most vegan men are likely to reject rigid gender expectations rather than frame their veganism as fully compatible with mainstream masculinity. Veganism may be a pathway for men to break away from rigid gender norms and expectations.

Recommendation 1: Carefully consider the use of vegan male influencers. Research demonstrates that these influencers can promote alienating messages or reinforce narrow understandings of masculinity.

Recommendation 2: Testimonies from non-famous, 'ordinary' vegan men may be more powerful and relatable and provide more practical advice for men considering going vegan.

Recommendation 3: Further research with vegan men is needed to understand how they've managed stigma and judgment from peers or wider society. Interviews or focus groups would be a good place to learn what would have made it easier for these men to go vegan. Research should address the intersectionality of race, class, and other factors on the experience of different men.



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Research shows that men are less likely to go and remain vegan than women.

SUMMARY

One of The Vegan Society's core objectives is to convince more people to go and stay vegan. In order to rise to this challenge, we must address the obstacles that prevent many from going vegan and understand that different groups face different barriers. For this Research Briefing, we focus on the barriers that men face, particularly in the context of gender role expectations and social pressures. The aim of

this Briefing is to fill key knowledge gaps and support our campaign work. By providing a succinct overview of the issue, this Briefing will be a valuable resource for all those seeking an answer as to why more men aren't going vegan and the steps we can take to address this issue.

CONTEXT

The Vegan Society's mission is to demonstrate that veganism is for everyone. However, certain demographic groups are underrepresented in the UK vegan population: Research shows that men are less likely to go and remain vegan than women. This finding highlights the need to understand the specific barriers that men may face, and by doing so, develop effective and targeted campaign strategies aimed

at convincing more men to go vegan. This is a complex and sensitive issue and we are mindful that it cannot be covered in full in this Research Briefing. Rather, the aim of this Briefing is to demonstrate that there are significant gaps in knowledge that future research should address and pinpoint where and how we should target our efforts.

METHODOLOGY

The gender imbalance within the wider vegan movement has stimulated increased academic interest in recent years in this topic. As such, this Briefing is grounded in recent academic research, including from members of The Vegan Society's Research Advisory Committee and Researcher Network.

A non-systematic review of the existing academic literature was conducted to gather evidence for this Briefing. The first stage involved a close reading of a large selection of literature covering the relationship between gender and veganism, providing the necessary information to understand this broad

topic. The second stage of the research involved investigating specific barriers that men may face when going vegan, including social stigma, nutrition concerns and the politics of masculinity. The recommendations, which can be found in full at the end of this Briefing, are informed through careful consideration of the literature review and research into effective campaign strategies.

This Briefing has been through a peer review process with members of the Research Advisory Committee.

MEAT AND MASCULINITY

Masculinity can be broadly understood as a set of attributes, behaviours, and traits that are associated with men and boys. It can be argued, however, that this does not fully encapsulate masculinity in a satisfying way. Masculinity is dynamic in that masculine behaviours are not exclusive to those who identify as men, and what constitutes “masculine behaviour” differs according to time and space. Social expectations of men may include an emphasis on factors such as physical and emotional ‘toughness’, hierarchical social attitudes, and heteronormativity.

Some researchers have theorised that masculinity is something which needs to be proved and maintained and is therefore precarious (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). This concept of “precarious masculinity” explains why men who are concerned about their masculine status – or pride themselves on their “manliness” – avoid behaviours that could be interpreted as ‘unmasculine’. Consuming meat is perceived by many as a core aspect of how masculinity is performed. Meat has come to be associated with strength, high performance, and dominance over other species – traits that are valued highly within hegemonic masculinity. This is reinforced in pop culture and advertising (Salmen and Dhont, 2022).

Vegetarian or vegan diets – or any food choice which doesn’t centre on meat – is often perceived as feminised. As such, vegans and vegetarians are thought of as unmasculine or feminine – this is supported by multiple studies

investigating people’s attitudes towards vegans/vegetarians (ibid). Research by Thomas (2016) indicates that vegan men specifically are perceived as less masculine.

Studies have shown that when a man chooses to abstain from meat eating, it can induce a negative response from meat-eaters who view this act as a “gender role violation” (Salmen et al, 2022). Such gender role violations may elicit harsh judgement or hostility from meat-eaters. By making the conscious decision to avoid animal products, vegans represent a symbolic threat to the meat-eating status quo and result in inter-group hostility and judgment (Rosenfeld, Rothgerber, and Tomiyama, 2023). Fear of experiencing such judgments can be a powerful reason not to go vegan for many. Whether it’s fear of being perceived negatively by friends and family, experiencing social exclusion or being seen as less ‘manly’, ultimately, the desire to conform to societal expectations is a powerful and challenging barrier to overcome (Lockwood, 2018).

Most research into the act of eating and masculine performance has focused almost exclusively on meat and not on other animal products. However, dairy milk consumption has been tied to masculinity in a similar way, whilst soya milk consumption has been actively feminised in ‘alt-right’ circles (Gambert and Linné, 2018). This has given rise to terms such as ‘soy-boy’, used as a slur to describe vegan and non-vegan men who do not conform to idealised forms of white Western masculinity (Ibid).



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BARRIERS TO VEGANISM

Social exclusion: In light of the gendered expectation of men to eat animals, a barrier that men may face to going vegan is the fear that their choice will not be accepted by their friends, family, or wider society, and may result in hostility, mockery or a perceived drop in social status. Indeed, recent research has shown that vegan men are disliked more than vegan women by non-vegans (Salmen and Dhont, 2022). Salmen and Dhont's findings support the theory that vegan men are disliked by meat eaters because they're perceived as less masculine and are likely to experience social bias against them.

Salmen and Dhont (ibid) highlight the seriousness that the fear of social exclusion can have on someone considering going vegan; *"Given how detrimental social exclusion can be to the emotional and physical well-being of those excluded (Williams & Nida, 2011), anti-veg*n bias can come with grave consequences for veg*ns."*

Misinformation: There are certain 'urban myths' that have become popularised in recent years which undermine efforts to encourage more men to go vegan. For example, the misconception that consuming soya will reduce levels of testosterone due to the oestrogen present in soy. A recent meta-analysis demonstrated that **there is no relationship between soya consumption and decreased levels of testosterone** (Reed et al, 2021). Another misconception is that vegan diets are lacking in protein and therefore vegan men are less muscular or lack physical strength. Again, this argument lacks scientific evidence, and it is indeed possible to meet our daily protein needs on a vegan diet ([The Vegan Society](#)). Given that hegemonic masculinity places importance on muscular physical appearance, this myth proves to be a significant barrier to convincing more men to go vegan.

Cognitive dissonance: Research has demonstrated that when men are challenged or questioned about their animal-product consumption, they often respond by rationalising their behaviour as 'natural' or demonstrate hierarchical attitudes to justify themselves (Dowsett et al, 2018). Women, by comparison, are more likely to admit feelings of guilt, shame, or unease and under-report on their meat-eating (ibid). The most likely explanation for this phenomenon is that women are socialised to

embrace their empathic feelings for others, whereas empathy is not a trait valued highly within hegemonic masculinity (Brookes and Chatupnik, 2022).

Studies with vegan men have shown that rather than attempting to frame their veganism as compatible with hegemonic masculinity, most vegan men are openly embracing the compassionate image associated with veganism, despite this trait's association with femininity (Oliver, 2023).


Some scholars have referred to this renegotiation of masculinity as 'hybrid-masculinity', where men embrace these typically 'feminine' traits while still maintaining that their veganism doesn't come at the cost of their masculinity or 'manliness' (Greenebaum and Dexter, 2017).

This is not, however, true of all vegan men. In fact, research has shown that vegan male influencers in particular promote an image of vegan men that is still firmly rooted in hegemonic masculinity (Catherine Oliver, 2021). Some vegan male fitness influencers promote veganism as a pathway to increased strength, performance etc. In contrast, vegan male influencers who focus on ethics or the environment frame their messaging in terms of man's role in society as the 'hero', 'saviour' or 'protector' of the weak (i.e., farmed animals).

These are common tropes in hegemonic masculinity. Interview-based studies have shown that although these influencers are gaining reasonably large followings, vegan men struggle to relate to such content (ibid; Parkinson, Twine and Griffin, 2019).

We should challenge the idea of gender as fixed. The narrow, normative and mutually exclusive meanings of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' fail to capture the dynamic nature of gender identity. Not only may a more dynamic, contested and plural understanding of masculinity make vegan practice more likely, but it also offers a much broader emancipatory pathway for men in other parts of their lives. For example, improvements in emotional literacy, self-care and wellbeing may come from rejecting narrow and mutually exclusive understandings of masculinity and femininity. Veganism may be a pathway for men to break free from

some of the pressures to conform to toxic ideas of masculinity, and by doing so may open up the possibility of cultivating more "ecological masculinities" that are more empathetic to all species (Aavik, 2021).



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CAMPAIGN CHALLENGES

Our research found a distinct lack of campaigns which specifically encourage men to go vegan. Although efforts have been made by various organisations, including [The Vegan Society](#), to bring attention to the issues mentioned in this Briefing and to highlight the benefits of veganism to men, these do not amount to an organised campaign. Some organisations have had success encouraging men to reduce their meat consumption by presenting this dietary change as a personal challenge and to test themselves (Hubbub, 2016).

The Game Changers, a Netflix documentary, promotes a vegan diet as the optimal diet for athletic performance, which directly challenges widely held beliefs that eating meat is a necessary prerequisite for physical strength. This kind of campaign messaging essentially exists as a challenge to the meat-masculinity link, and while this strategy may work to convince some men, particularly those whose main concern is about their health or physical appearance, it can be an alienating message for others. Salmen et al (2022) suggest that communication strategies such as those found in The Game Changers may actually reinforce the damaging idea that to be masculine is to be physically strong.

So, what is the alternative? Salmen et al (ibid) suggest that vegan campaigns that encourage men to go vegan should avoid attempts to frame veganism as compatible with hegemonic masculinity, and instead promote modern conceptions of masculinity: i.e. that men shouldn't be afraid

to show compassion and stay true to their values.

There remains, therefore, a question mark over the best way to encourage more men to go vegan. Do we lean into masculine clichés or reject the toxicity of hegemonic masculinity altogether? It could be argued that a middle ground may exist that challenges vegan stereotypes, whilst continuing to promote veganism as a deeply compassionate moral belief system. Some men will be receptive to messaging which portrays a vegan lifestyle as compatible with mainstream masculinity, whilst others will be far more willing to confront the social norms and expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

Is there a way to showcase the advantages that going vegan has on men in a way which challenges the dominant attitude that male health is all about physical strength? Research suggests this may well be an effective strategy: A 2021 study of Finnish and Estonian vegan men found that going vegan encourages positive changes in men's health behaviour (Aavik and Velgan, 2021). The study found that these men reported feeling better not only physically, but also mentally. Furthermore, [a 2022 concept report](#) by The Vegan Society found that going vegan can be a pathway towards a greater sense of wellbeing. Therefore, a campaign encouraging men to go vegan would do well to emphasise the positive changes that going vegan can have on men's physical *and* mental health.



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REMAINING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Our review of the current literature has revealed three main knowledge gaps that should be addressed with further research:

1. Most research on this topic treats men as one homogenous group. It would be useful to **understand how different demographics of men view the relationship between veganism and masculinity**. For example, the barriers that transgender men may face could be different to those experienced by cis-gendered men. Furthermore, this Briefing has focused exclusively on men owing to the lack of available literature on boys, causing this research to

be adult-focused. Future research should address this gap in knowledge and make links with vegan-inclusive education.

2. The majority of the studies in the literature have focused on the barriers that men face to going vegan. There remains, however, a lack of research that addresses how vegan men overcame these barriers. Interviews or focus groups with vegan men would be useful to understanding this gap in knowledge.

3. More understanding is needed as to where inaccurate nutrition information comes from and how to challenge it.

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We have known for some time that human-animal relations are shaped by prevailing gender inequalities and their associated stereotypes and norms, which in turn pressure many boys and men into believing that compassion for other animals is somehow undermining of their identity. Indeed, often such ideas are so dominant that they influence everyone. However, there is also an incredibly positive story and pathway here for boys and men. Not only can boys and men use their own agency to help contest the exploitation of animals. In doing so they can also critically reflect upon how prevailing norms of masculinity constrain their lives in a whole host of other ways, such as impacting how they view and treat women and girls and the serious outcomes that gender norms ultimately have upon their own physical and mental health. The issues raised by The Vegan Society in this Research Briefing are integral to the better understanding of vegan transition because they include the vital consideration of how gender intersects with our human-animal relations and supports the status quo. - Dr Richard Twine, Chair of The Research Advisory Committee

LIMITATIONS

Although the aim of this Briefing is to provide a succinct overview of the literature and recommendations for professional practice, it is important to acknowledge that

further research is needed if we are to make more detailed and evidence-based decisions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

- **Further research** should address the knowledge gaps as identified above.
- **Campaign messaging** should carefully consider the use of vegan influencers. Research demonstrates that these influencers can promote alienating messages or reinforce narrow understandings of masculinity.
- **Campaign testimonies and case studies** using

vegan men from the general public may be more powerful and relatable and provide more practical advice for men considering going vegan.

- **Health-focused messaging** aimed specifically at a male audience, or any audience, should place equal emphasis on physical and mental wellbeing.

Campaign testimonies and case studies using vegan men from the general public may be more powerful and relatable.

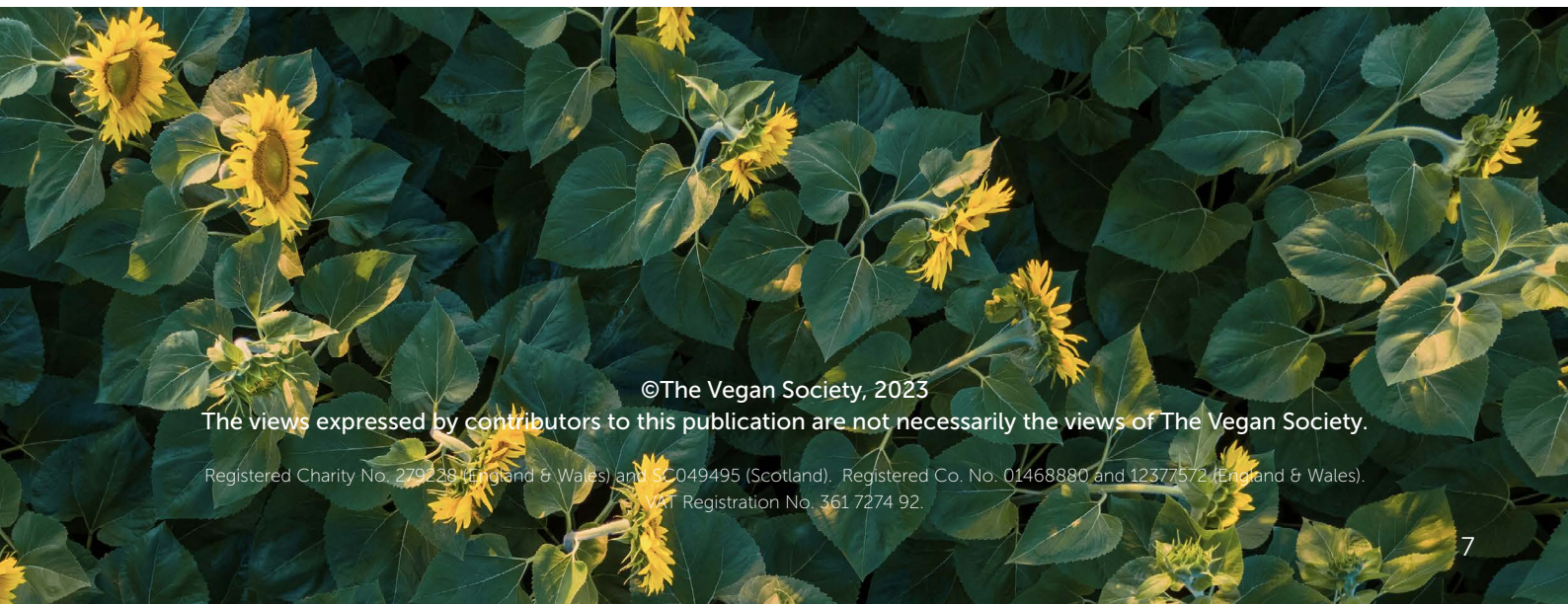
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Research Advisory Committee and Researcher Network for their ongoing support and for lending their expertise to this Briefing.

Thank you also to The Vegan Society volunteers, Isabel Doraisamy and Sarah Prescott-Smith, for their contributions to this Briefing.

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