

## MEAT AND MANHOOD: UNPACKING RESISTANCE TO REDUCED MEAT CONSUMPTION

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**Excessive meat consumption is increasingly scrutinised for its impacts on the environment, animal welfare, and public health. Men’s consumption of meat is higher than women’s, driven not just by taste preferences and higher caloric needs, but also social expectations surrounding men’s diets. Public messaging to reduce a behaviour as deeply ingrained as meat eating—a food that humans have consumed for at least 2.5 million years<sup>1</sup>—can expect to face significant resistance. Behavioural public policy may offer unique tools to address this, but has to be careful not to trigger psychological defences.**

Back in 2006, *Burger King* released an ad promoting its “Texas Double Whopper” to furore from feminists and public health campaigners. “Manthem” was an ode to masculinity as much as it was a protest against a world trying to turn men into salad-eating tofu apologists. Ironically set to the tune of Helen Reddy’s feminist anthem “I am Woman”, Manthem’s protagonist rejects both his female date and the meagre portion of food he is served at a restaurant to go out and protest in the streets with thousands of other men. They admonish “chick food” while hurling a minivan off a bridge and unfurl a banner reading “Eat This Meat”, ultimately celebrating a massive, meaty burger<sup>2</sup> (so massive, in fact, that some jurisdictions banned the ad<sup>3</sup>). You can’t say it was subtle, but it effectively captured the deep-seated cultural associations between masculinity, meat, and freedom. It also illustrates the challenge policymakers now face: How do you get men to engage less in something that does not just form an important part of men’s diet and culture, but also their identity?

As carnivore diets grow in popularity,<sup>4</sup> particularly among men, some are contesting the health harms that excessive meat consumption is claimed to impose. Indeed, the evidence for increased mortality from causes such as cardiovascular disease and cancer from unprocessed meat remains relatively weak, as a 2022 review published in *Nature Medicine* points out the effects on health

are, at best, small.<sup>5</sup> Some researchers have also warned against anti-meat militancy in academic and policy circles, noting reduced meat consumption may pose risks to public health and livelihoods, especially in the Global South.<sup>6</sup>

However, the established facts are that meat production is responsible for the slaughter of approximately 80 billion land animals annually—96 percent of which are poultry,<sup>7</sup> most of whom are raised in high-density barns. Conditions are optimised for production efficiency but pose welfare challenges due to limited space, a high risk of bacterial infections from prolonged contact with waste, and rapid growth rates that contribute to a high prevalence of skeletal disorders.<sup>8–10</sup> Further, an estimated 14 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the procurement of meat (ranging between 11 and 17 percent<sup>11</sup>).

Polling shows varying support for considering animal welfare when purchasing food products, but most suggest that people are generally concerned about how farm animals are treated,<sup>12</sup> and that they care about environmental matters.<sup>13</sup> However, consumers also seem to generally lack knowledge about farming practices,<sup>14</sup> and rather than seeking out such information, most actively avoid it,<sup>15</sup> aided by producers’ clever marketing campaigns.<sup>16</sup>

Men show less care for these matters than women. In Western countries like the US,

men consume about 40 percent more overall and 50 percent more processed meat.<sup>17</sup> This gender difference also exists in non-western countries, though the discrepancy is much smaller.<sup>18</sup> In line with this, men consistently show fewer intentions to reduce their consumption and are underrepresented among vegans and vegetarians. Part of the reason is simple—men have stronger taste preferences for meat than women<sup>19</sup>—but empirical work is also increasingly showing that meat and masculinity are intricately linked.<sup>20</sup>

### Meat and masculinity

In a growing field of academic literature, studies consistently show that people make symbolic and metaphorical associations between meat and masculinity.<sup>21</sup> For example, when rating individuals based on their food choices, men who prefer beef are rated as significantly more masculine compared to those who prefer fish or vegetables. Men and women also use different strategies to justify meat consumption, where men are more likely to claim its rightfulness by asserting a right to eat animals due to our position in the food chain, while women are more likely to actively avoid thinking about the origins of meat.<sup>22</sup> At the social level, barbecuing is linked to masculinity,<sup>20</sup> extending these associations into social settings. Due to this, at activities like barbecues and family holiday gatherings, men who abstain from meat risk being excluded or sidelined, as research suggests they are often viewed as weak, weird, and even as less attractive.<sup>23</sup> It is thus unsurprising that many men show resistance to calls to reduce consumption.

A recent study suggests that about 1 in 3 men may fall into this “resistant” category; characterised by little care for the health and environmental implications of meat consumption and a particularly low receptiveness to animal welfare appeals.<sup>24</sup> In fact, attempting the latter is likely to incite defensive reactions. While appealing to conservative values such as purity may help

somewhat in making meat reduction more appealing to this demographic, it has generally been recommended to improve the quality and accessibility of meat alternatives and frame them as masculine or superior to conventional meat.

The advent of cultivated meat—meat grown from animal cells—poses interesting opportunities here. Although one study has found that men may perceive it as a threat to manhood,<sup>25</sup> heavy meat-eaters generally show higher receptance towards it than other alternatives,<sup>26</sup> as its potential for mimicking the taste and texture of real meat makes it a promising option. However, economic feasibility of the technology remains a question,<sup>27</sup> as hybrid meat technologies combining cultivated and plant-based elements are more likely to materialise in the near-future.

### The role of behavioural policy

The behavioural tools available to policymakers to address meat consumption are not groundbreaking. The hallmarks of BPP, default options and nudges, have been shown to reduce consumption in some settings,<sup>28</sup> though their long-term effects remain uncertain. Social norming has been attempted, with one study using masculine role models to promote plant-based diets, but it was unsuccessful at inspiring dietary change.<sup>29</sup> The promotion of gradual changes, such as engaging in Meatless Mondays, is generally more effective than advocating for drastic dietary overhauls, as small steps often pave the way for larger reductions over time.<sup>30</sup> Reframing meat reduction and alternative proteins to align with masculine values may also be fruitful, though this remains largely untested.<sup>31</sup> Some reduction advocates also recommend focusing on health benefits rather than other externalities, but this may encourage swapping out red for white meat,<sup>32</sup> which significantly increases the number of animals killed for one’s diet. Americans, for example, consumed 274 times as many chickens<sup>33</sup> as they did cows<sup>34</sup> in 2023.

Thoughtful framing and careful consideration of these trade-offs is essential for effective policy design.

So how should gender be taken into account in campaigns addressing meat consumption? Two studies suggest that the compassion-based appeals commonly used by animal rights groups may produce opposing effects on men and women. In an Australian study, detailing the life of a lamb—its intelligence and the industry's processing methods—led women to reduce their attachment to meat and show greater concern for animal welfare. Men, however, reacted in the opposite way: they were largely unaffected and increased their attachment to meat.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, a US study displayed photos in a restaurant of men holding pets in compassionate ways and tracked sales data to

assess behavioural change. While women became less likely to purchase meat, men became more likely, seemingly doubling down in response to a perceived threat to their masculinity.<sup>36</sup> This might partially explain why men have historically been less drawn to the animal rights movement than women,<sup>37</sup> as animal rights' campaigns often rely on evoking strong emotional reactions that are likely to trigger their defences.<sup>38</sup>

Addressing meat consumption through behavioural public policy thus requires more than just clever nudges or blanket appeals—it demands a nuanced understanding of how deeply gender, identity, and culture shape dietary habits and attitudes, and strategies that resonate with men rather than trigger their defences.

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