

Using Positive Narratives to Engage Men in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

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Abstract:

Recent worldwide push-back against Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies has highlighted a recurring weakness in many programmes: limited, practical guidance for men who are unsure how to locate themselves in a changing social landscape. When appeals to equity are heard chiefly as calls to relinquish status or abandon familiar identities, some men disengage, while others gravitate toward voices that promise certainty in more traditional norms. Ensuring that the progress of the last decade is consolidated and expanded requires pedagogical approaches that invite men into EDI work without framing masculinity and male identity itself as the problem.

This paper presents an interdisciplinary framework developed by MenEngage Europe and PathForge, for what we term identity-sustaining change narratives: stories, metaphors, and learning sequences that encourage men to develop more inclusive practices while allowing incremental, manageable shifts in masculine self-conception. The framework synthesises findings from narrative theory, virtue ethics, behavioural psychology, and a comparative analysis of outreach materials and workshop curricula used by European NGOs working with men and boys.

Three recurrent narrative patterns emerge:

1. Balance Narratives (Virtue Lens). Traits traditionally coded as masculine—such as resolve, protectiveness, or competitiveness—are not rejected but recalibrated toward a “golden mean,” echoing Aristotelian ethics. Excess and deficiency are both presented as limiting, while balanced expressions support psychological well-being and collaborative leadership.
2. Evolution Narratives (Futures Lens). Social change is framed as a long-term, collective project comparable to previous technological or economic transitions. Men are invited to apply existing strengths to new challenges—climate adaptation, digital ethics, equitable caregiving—thus linking personal purpose to wider societal needs.
3. Capability Narratives (Skill Lens). Emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and inclusive decision-making are introduced as learnable competencies that enhance personal resilience, family relationships, and professional effectiveness. This emphasis on skill acquisition aligns self-development with EDI objectives.

Across case materials, these patterns reduce defensive responses by avoiding binaries of “good” versus “toxic” masculinity and by positioning growth as additive rather than subtractive. They also provide concrete entry points for curriculum design, peer-learning formats, and organisational training.

The presentation will (i) outline the analytical method used to formulate these patterns, (ii) illustrate each narrative with examples from NGO practice, and (iii) propose guidelines for educators and policy designers who seek to integrate identity-sustaining change narratives into EDI - related learning environments. By reframing inclusion as



an opportunity for meaningful masculine development, rather than a threat to men's identity, the framework aims to support more durable and broadly shared progress in EDI.

