



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

## **Be a Man - Relationships, Sex, Money**

As part of the annual Movember event, the forum aimed to raise awareness about men's overall well-being including their mental health, financial status, family and general wellness. A lively exchange of ideas explored personal stories, emotional struggles, identity dilemmas, and societal pressures, providing a comprehensive view of modern masculinity.

### **What's Your Story? What Does Being a Man Mean to You?**

The forum kicked off with participants sharing personal stories. Their views on masculinity differed: some saw strength and resilience as qualities, while others emphasised compassion and responsibility. The stories shared at the forum highlighted how men can be men today, challenging the old inflexible ideas of masculinity and opening the door to a more accepting view of what it means to be a man.

### **Crises Men Face**

Men's experiences with crisis were a key topic at the forum, exploring emotional struggles. Peter Nduati, the CEO of True Blaq Group Ltd, spoke about the struggles men have with mental health, highlighting the difficulty in seeking help due to societal expectations of toughness and self-sufficiency. They discussed how emotional distress often leads to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. He shared his story of going through a divorce and losing his businesses and having to rebuild this with sometimes little support as men are expected to be strong.

### **Identity and Purpose**

A significant part of the discussion revolved around identity and purpose. Simon Mbevi, a visionary for the Man Enough program, discussed the societal pressures men grapple with in defining their identities in a rapidly changing world. Traditional ideals of masculinity often clash with modern values, creating a sense of confusion and conflict. This affirms that reconciling these competing ideals ensures a coherent connection of self.

### **Identity and Emotional Struggles as a Man**

Men also grapple with emotional hurdles tied to their sense of self. Simon Mbevi openly shared his personal story and how feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy, magnified by societal pressures to adhere to a stereotypical version of manhood influence men daily. These pressures can lead to profound sadness as men strive to align their authentic selves with societal norms.

### **Generational Changes in Upbringing**

Dr Amakove Wala, an entrepreneur and health systems strengthening expert, discussed a significant shift in how men grow up in different generations and explores how these shifts

shape modern masculinity. She highlighted how it is difficult for her as a successful woman to attract a genuine man as a partner due to the stereotypes about successful women. She opined that our upbringing, characterised by strict gender roles, and limited emotional expression is to blame for the stereotyping.

However, there is a ray of hope, as younger men explore a more open and supportive environment that encourages emotional honesty and vulnerability. This shift indicates a broader cultural evolution towards more progressive and inclusive understandings of masculinity.

### **Societal Pressure for Men to Achieve a Certain Level**

The societal pressures for men to attain success and maintain a certain status. Dr Sam Mucheru, a family physician at Aga Khan University Hospital, adds that society often pressures men to excel in their careers, relationships, and social status. These pressures can lead to immense stress and burnout as men strive to fulfil roles that may not align with their values and aspirations.

### **Responsibility**

A recurring theme was the concept of responsibility. Peter Nduati emphasised the importance of taking ownership of one's mistakes and learning from them. This sense of accountability was a crucial aspect of personal growth and integrity. Additionally, the forum encouraged men to be ambitious, not only in their careers but also in their personal development and relationships striving for continuous improvement and setting goals as vital components of a fulfilling life.

The discussions underscored the significance of redefining masculinity, embracing vulnerability, and rejecting outdated stereotypes. By addressing emotional distress, identity dilemmas, societal pressures, and the importance of responsibility, the forum highlighted the multifaceted nature of men's experiences. The forum advocated a more compassionate and inclusive approach to masculinity, where men can thrive and lead fulfilling lives.