

ALL MEN

MALE VOICES TELLING THEIR STORIES TO MAKE A CHANGE

01 The first time you realized you were a boy

Excerpts of testimonies are heard

Man 1:

I'm the only one who never cried in all five years of elementary school.

Man 2:

On so many occasions, especially at the time, if you didn't do what everyone else was doing, you weren't part of the male category.

Man 3:

Do I feel like a man? What does it mean to be a man?

Musical break

Irene:

Welcome to all men.

I'm not used to speaking only in the masculine tense, but in this context it seems appropriate. Although I know that several of the people listening are not men, this podcast speaks first and foremost to men, so I start with a welcome to all men. But also welcome to all of you. I am aware that there will be many more people among those listening, and that is because there are many who are interested (or that are obliged to take an interest) in men's issues, and listening to these stories may help them to understand them a little more.

I'll let you hear my voice just barely, but don't get attached to it, it won't be here for long. Because this is "All Men. Male voices telling their stories to make a change." A podcast that starts with the belief that the role of the male in eliminating gender-based violence is central, but that does not mean it is simple. And so here to talk about it will be men who during long (very long) interviews answered questions about themselves, their relationship with other men, and their relationship with women.

And they did so to challenge themselves, to share doubts and questions, and to make it clear to all those men who would like to do their part but do not know where to start, that they are in good company. Because if the problem is systemic, the solution has to be collective.

In this episode you will hear these men answer the first interview question. I will not interrupt them or comment during that. I'll get back to you at the end of the episode to try to see together if some of the answers are similar, if there are patterns, and what these patterns tell us.

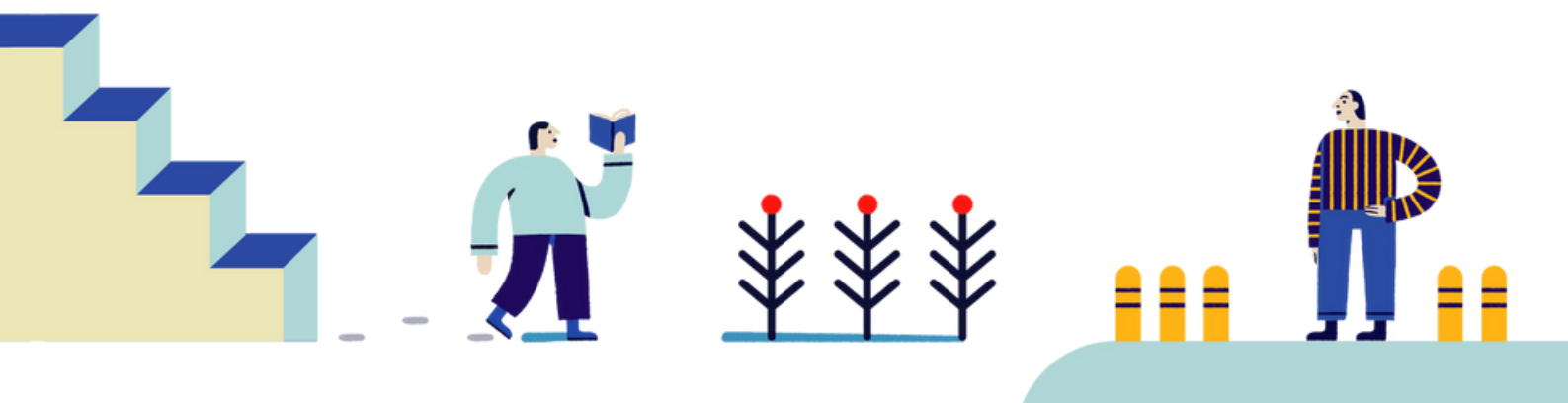
The question goes something like this:

A classmate of mine called me a slut in elementary school once. I must have been seven or eight years old. Actually, he was not only my classmate, he was also my boyfriend at the time. If I ever make a new podcast titled "Irene Doesn't See Red Flags" I'll tell you this story more in depth.

He didn't actually call me a slut, he called me a "trota", which means trout, instead of "troia", which is the actual insult. That's because he said it in front of the whole class, including the teacher, and he obviously feared punishment for saying a bad word.

At the time I did not know how to react. I was eight, I was not able to realize that the real issue was that the word slut was perceived as an insult. And so, I was looking for a comeback that could hurt him as much, but I couldn't find it. That was the first time I realized that I was a girl.

Until that moment I did not think of me as a female. I simply thought of me as Irene. In that moment it hit me, I was part of a category, a category for which very specific insults were reserved. When was the first time you realized you were a boy, and not just that you were one, but that you were expected to be one and that in order to be one there were certain things you had to do, or couldn't do?



Man 1:

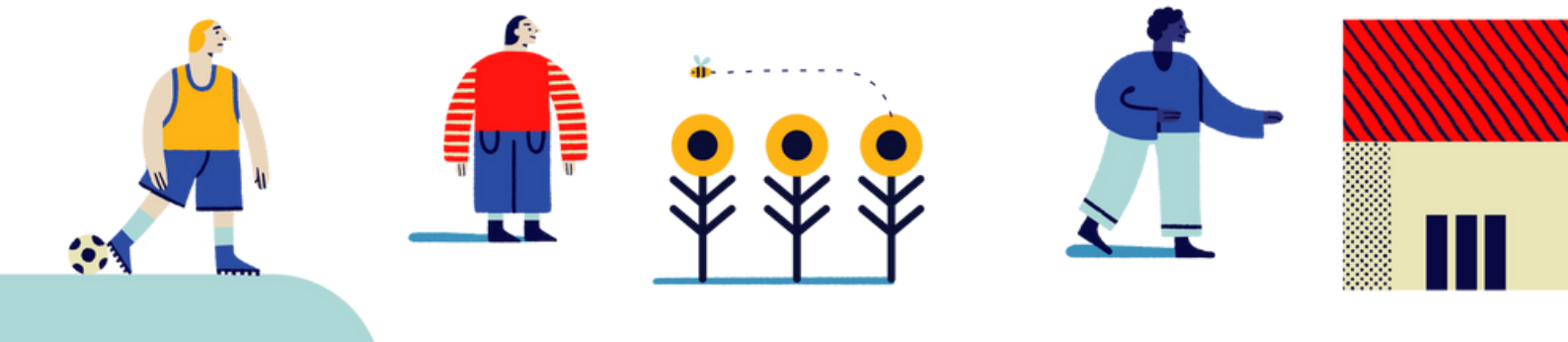
Uhm, the first time -- let's say digging into the past is a little difficult.

For sure one of the first times was when I was denied to come back home after I got into a fight with one of my classmates and I didn't beat them up enough. And the message was, if you come home after someone beats you up, I'll beat you up double that and if you cry I'll beat you up even more. And there was a moment where I thought, "oh okay, so I have to prove that I deserve the male status." I think that was one of the very first moments when I realized that I was male. I must have been probably six years old, considering that I grew up in a constantly violent environment, both in school and in the neighborhood where I lived, it was all about performing. In retrospect I realized that it was always all about trying to prove that I was manly enough, strong enough, or whatever, male enough in the broadest term that I can use. So yeah, that one time was likely the first time I realized I was male and it probably hurts more thinking about it years later because this response came directly from my parents. It was not possible to see myself validated in my sensitivity. I mean, I had come home, I was devastated and I wanted to cry because some classmates had teased me, they had insulted me, they had put their hands on me and I had reacted. And seeing that I had kind of a scratch here under my eye, this response kind of made me say, "oh, okay, I have to do more, I'm not enough, next time I have to hit harder, I have to be stronger, I have to be more aggressive, meaner." That's probably my first memory of being male.

Man 2:

I don't think there's a specific episode, I think it's more the consequence of phrases said during childhood that are "don't cry, don't be a sissy...." I remember an episode when I was very young, I don't remember my age, when us boys used to play in the yard with our little cousins. I had hurt my female cousin and I remember that my dad scolded me for this and explained to me that as a male you have to behave in a certain way, especially towards the female gender.

That going back is probably the oldest event in my memory of the first time I felt a difference between genders.



Man 3:

I must have been seven or eight years old and I had grown up only with women until then. My father had left when I was only a few months old, and at home there was my mother, my grandmother, my five or six aunts would come too, some female neighbors... And one day my mother convinced herself that I needed a male archetype, momentarily at least, and so she convinced my uncle to shower with me. And it was a peculiar moment, I remember it very well, I remember everything about him, I especially remember his embarrassment because he was forced by my mother to come and take a shower with me and there, I realized that I was male.

I knew I had a penis, I knew I had a different body from all the people who were around me usually, and from my female classmates. But there I realized that there was something strange, I mean, why was it necessary for me to see a naked male body beside me? Why did my mother consider it necessary? Why was my uncle so embarrassed? I mean, we were only showering. I used to shower with my mother, with my grandmother, all right, now I also shower with my uncle, what's the big deal? And that's when I realized that there was something wrong. Not so much in the act of showering, but the necessity of the shower, my uncle's embarrassment and my mother's urgency made me say, wait, but then I'm a boy! And from there the problems began.

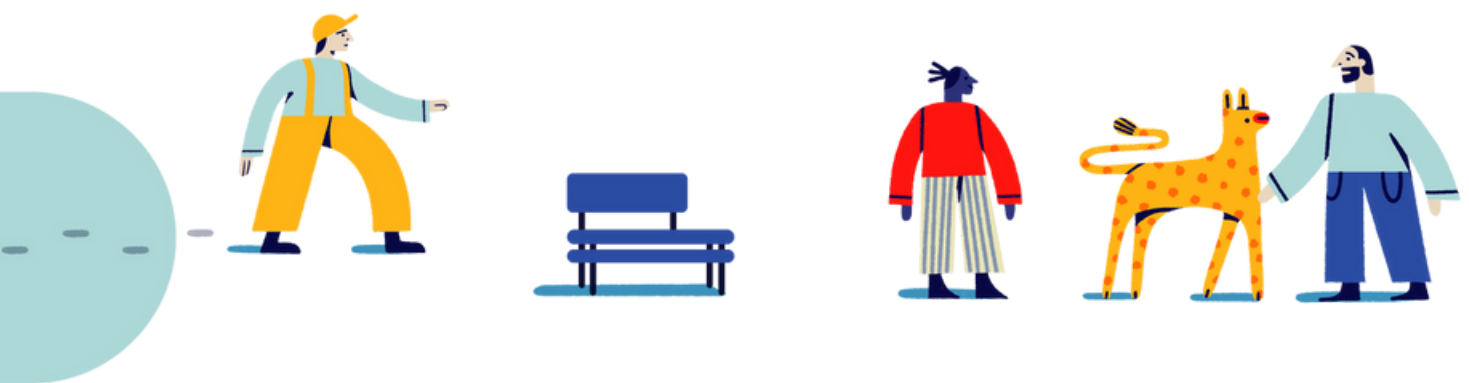
Man 4:

Maybe an 80s toy commercial where there was this clear division between boys and girls and the boys did tomboy stuff.

Man 5:

Look, I won't tell you an anecdote either because I think it's just an image somehow-that I remember well, though being just an image I think it goes back to before I was six years old, so I was about four or five years old probably. And I remember when I was four or five years old I experienced for the first time getting erections. Now I don't know if they were biological, random or if there was a reason, maybe because I stimulated myself, I have no idea. But I do remember experiencing erections, and I remember when it happened I looked out the window and I looked at the women walking down the street thinking, "Okay, she was the one who gave me this erection." So I had internalized the thought that erections were due to a female presence causing them.

But I don't know if in me there was already the sociocultural construct that as a male, erections absolutely and necessarily had to be caused to me by women.



Man 6:

I think I can make two distinctions, in the sense that the first time I realized sexually that I was male I was very little. For as long as I can remember, since I was three years old I think, I was aware that I had a sex that was different from the female sex, and actually I always had a very particular relationship with sex, in the sense that when I was little I already knew, although I didn't know in detail, that I felt certain urges, I already knew that I liked girls, I mean there are in fact some anecdotes that I would tell as well, which today, thinking about it, I am a little bit ashamed of.

But clearly I was four years old, probably it was my naivety... Like I remember when one of my female classmates, we were in kindergarten, had gone to the bathroom, but in kindergarten bathrooms didn't have doors that closed and I went there and looked and as I looked I realized that I liked what I was looking at. So I always had this kind of -- I always felt male from that point of view. There were other children who would say, "Females are gross!" here and there, and I would think, what do you mean?

Whereas the first time I realized that I was male and that I had to do some male things, is kind of funny but also sad at the same time.

Basically I had gone to basketball practice, I was eight years old, I come home and as I'm going up the stairs with my dad in front of me I get a cramp, I'm bending over in pain. I slumped on the stairs. I was crying in pain because I had never experienced such a thing. It almost felt like my muscle was going to explode. And my dad looked at me and laughed and he was like, "Oh you're a boy, you don't have to cry for stuff like these" and I was like, what do you mean?

It hurts me, it hurts so bad. And so I think that event got me into that male world. You are a male, you have to do male things. There are some things that are reserved for females, even crying about excruciating pain that you've never felt before is a female thing. Instead, you have to be strong.

Man 7:

I don't remember when it was that I realized I was male, meaning that I was in a subsystem of a larger but recognizable whole, distinctly separate from another subsystem. I think I assumed quite naturally that being male meant doing certain things, for example, you can't cry, you can't be afraid... several things, but I never considered it as something worthy of reflection, but as something that was inherent in human nature.



If you're male you're going to play with toy cars, not dolls, if you're male, if you cry you become a sissy, so you better not. You have to be a little rougher in your attitudes, in your behaviors, but let's say if I think back to my childhood in elementary school I remember always thinking of myself as a boy. I had a girlfriend, so I did everything according to what seemed to me to be the nature of things, the naturalness of things, including precisely a series of "you have to do it, you mustn't do it" that I always considered part of my gender by definition.

Man 8:

The first time I realized that I was male is probably when people, more or less kindly, made me understand that I should not play with dolls. Probably the first time I felt that I had to be male, that I had to prove myself in some way was when I began being compared to my older brother. About ten years older than me, extremely athletic, dynamic, dismissive, and definitely a person who took life aggressively. I was much smaller than him and I wasn't like him and so I didn't feel like I fit in as much and this caused me if not immediate discomfort, certainly questions.

Man 9:

The first time I can remember is again something that came from the school setting and I understood it as a need for competition, for ranking. The constant noticing not only that in a system like the school one we were ranked, not only because there are grades that immediately create a ranking but because as a male there were other things as well. Having done or not having done certain things, having or not having certain assets, being able to play or not being able to play certain sports. All of that qualified me in a ranking of maleness because it was only done among males or anyway females did not participate. So obviously there was a ranking in which I had to first off try not to be last, and that's when I realized this was something that only concerned my gender because the other gender did not do that.



I was never too interested in being at the top, but certainly I couldn't be the last one, so I had to find an area in which I could excel or somehow gain special points. And it was easy because, for a whole series of circumstances in my life at the time, my area was studying. So I certainly wasn't the best at sports, I certainly wasn't the best at different playful activities that happened let's say, outside the home or outside the school setting, however in school in front of the class you could say I was in charge.

Man 10:

It's difficult. I don't know. I mean, I can't find a specific time. I would have to think about it a for a long time, however, we're not short on time, right? One thing that comes to mind is related to middle school, kind of the locker room dynamic if you will, since I didn't play the way some of the other boys and classmates played they accused me of being gay. I mean, you can't do that? You're gay, gay, gay, gay. On so many occasions, especially at the time, if you didn't do what everybody was doing, you were not part of the male category.

And I often actually found myself in this situation because I was never particularly comfortable in certain situations anyway, all those behaviors kind of like bullying, teasing the weaker, mocking at all costs are attitudes that never belonged to me. I found myself being out of that group or even the one who was teased exactly like the others because I didn't submit to certain required dynamics. Exactly like the locker room, right? My whole life the locker room was the place I least wanted to be in the world, I mean I've always played sports but I never said, "It's so nice being in the locker room." I never made a big deal of it but in that context I realized that to be male a certain kind of attitude was required, a certain kind of behavior, accepting and submitting to certain behaviors.

Man 11:

I remember that as a child, when I was in elementary school, I am almost sure of this: I am the only one who never cried in all five years of elementary school, maybe it happened once on a particular situation but I didn't let anyone see me. Because I grew up with my parents that, even when someone beat me up, used to say "don't cry, you're a boy, don't cry", I remember it well. In hindsight, I think that behind this gesture were hidden a lot of things that prevented me from living my vulnerability to the best.



But yes, it was just "you have to be strong". I remember there was a time in school when I really played into this strong character and I used to beat up my classmates. I was very mean, because I had to be a boy. Then, at some point, around six/seven years old, I moved to this neighborhood where I'm from where mostly foreigners live. And while before I lived in a totally rural town, in Valle Camonica, moving to a disadvantaged neighborhood led me to get out of my childish and playful innocence too early, entering a world where the law of the strongest was in play.

So I had to show myself strong, despite the things that my parents said, that is not to cry etc., were not in my nature, it was not necessarily in my nature to bully people physically. It was the "don't cry" and "if you don't fight to win, you're not man enough" that created a mix in me that for a few years has made me more aggressive than I would have liked.

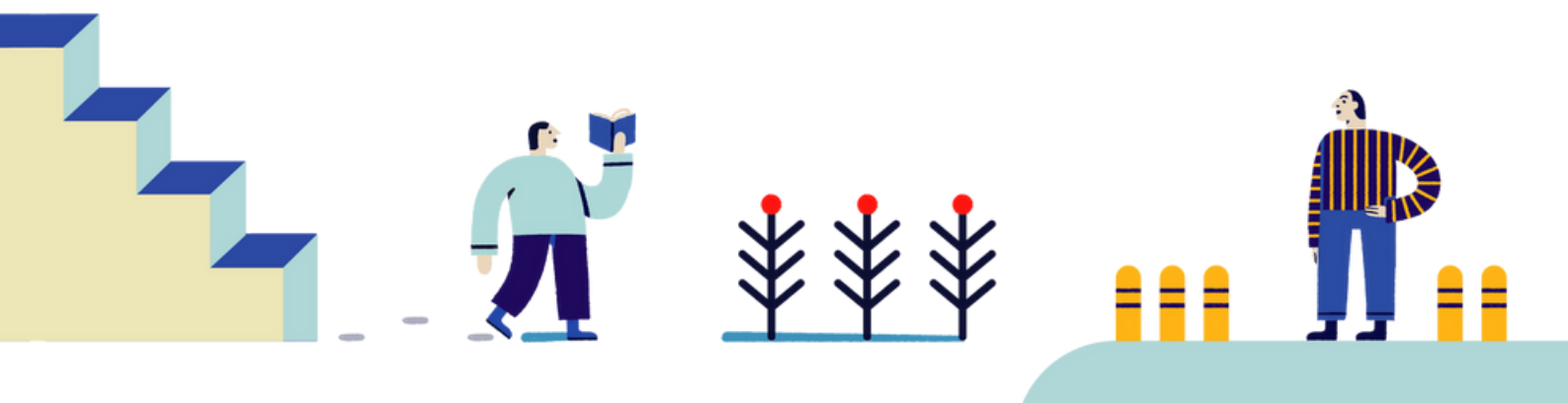
Man 12:

I think it was during elementary school, too. Well first of all I didn't even know the word "trotta" in elementary school. I knew "trotta" as a fish, but not the other one. When I was a very small child, even before kindergarten, I used to play a lot with a Barbie doll. Don't ask me why, it was just there and when this thing became known, in kindergarten or maybe during the first 2 or 3 years of elementary school, because my mom told the other moms as if nothing was wrong, she was considered, and then I was considered, a little weird. As if to say, "Oh my God, is he crazy?". Or still at the time, I would see the other kids who just for fun, messing around, would hit each other. I had a friend who was my closest friend at the time who basically used to beat me up and I didn't react. And then one day at the park this little boy's mom took a little stick, I don't remember what he had done to me, she took this stick, she gave it to me in my hand and she said "now return him the favour".

I slowly went there, touched him, I don't remember which part of his body, and he got offended, but I clearly did not hurt him. Seeing his face I burst into tears because I thought "Oh my god, what have I done? I did something I shouldn't have done." And from then on I slowly realized how other people behaved with each other and so on.

I said "Oh okay, I am physically like them and if I want to be in this pack" - pardon the expression, I know it's bad stuff, but at that age you don't realize it - "you have to act like that."

In the end I never succeeded, I tried at least. Well yeah, I mean, I tried.



Man 13:

Starting with the easy questions already. So first of all I've asked myself the questions "what does it mean to be a male?" and "are you a male?" not too long ago, because during the last couple of years I started doing therapy - which started and then ended for other reasons -- in which the matter of identity and gender identity came up very clearly. Because at some point the question came to me: do I feel like a man? What does it mean to be a man?

I don't know if I have given myself a comprehensive answer just yet. However, if I think about my life as a child, probably one of the first times I realized that I was a boy was at a very young age, probably in elementary school as well, under circumstances that were probably related to sports, or probably to soccer school. I am the first born child, I have another brother a couple of years younger, and I'm named like my grandfather.

My father as a young man was a very talented and promising soccer player, whose career was cut short due to a very severe injury. So as it is "natural," upon the arrival of the first child one could not wait to raise him and see him grow up with a ball between his feet playing soccer. Currently soccer is still a sport I don't like and have never played and even just seeing a soccer ball, despite being an adult and having done a lot of work on myself, it's still not really a solved issue. But yes, probably one of the first times is linked to this feeling of pressure on me related to the sport practiced by the first male child who has to do things, who has to be good at soccer, has to be good at sports... And somehow in reaction to that I became quite the opposite, I mean I was a boy who, from a very young age throughout high school and then even as an adult, was very interested in video games, school, books, music, but not in sports.

And it was only in adulthood that this got a little bit healed actually and I realized that I've always thought the problem was sports, when really it was masculinity or a type of masculinity that I already rejected as a child, even if unconsciously. And instead I questioned myself on what could be my own type masculinity, one that belonged to me.

Man 14:

So, I can definitely tell an anecdote from when I was very little too, because it's something that has stuck with me. I had asked my dad, with all the innocence of a four-year-old, five-year-old: but daddy, why is it that sometimes the willy is soft and sometimes it's hard?



And let's just say that the answer was not really a comprehensive one, because the answer was, "Uhm, because sometimes it is, sometimes it's not." The end. So that certainly means that there was an awareness of a difference between me and my mom, me and other girls, even as a child.

For example I could also talk about the day my adopted son arrived in some way. Because the fact that at the time he arrived my wife had six months of maternity leave and I had (and thank god I had them thanks to the law that had been just approved) ten days... Um, let's say that this event made me feel a bit of distance, of difference, it had put me in front of this problem.

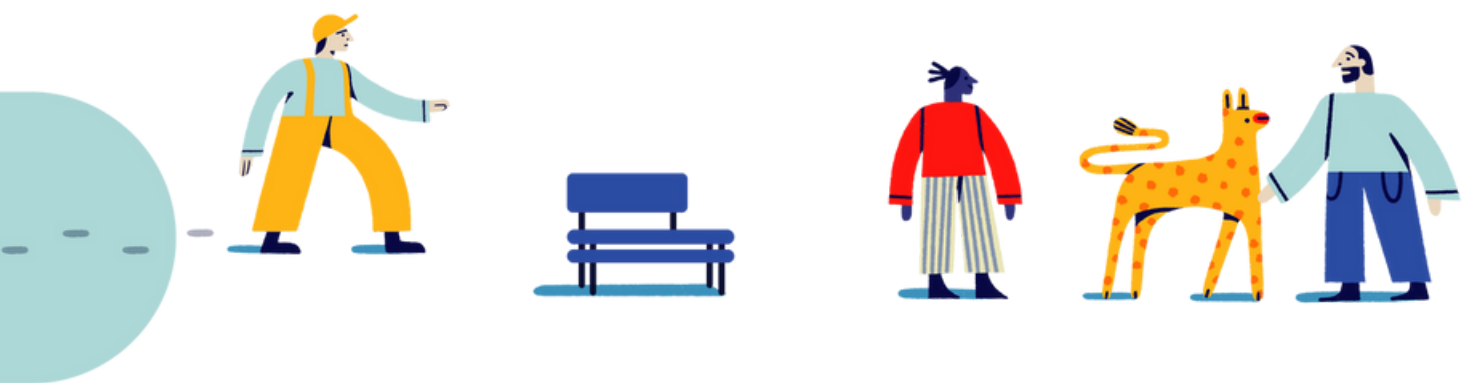
I could certainly mention the time I started working as well, because for sure there is a kind of camaraderie even in competitive environments, in environments that are not just collaborative where there is a certain aggressive attitude that has never been part of my character, because I tend to be a very diplomatic, very conciliatory person, and so this situation of being in a competitive, aggressive and result-driven environment, I don't know how to explain it but in short I had put on a considerable effort in order to deal with all these things, especially in the beginning.

I could mention sports, because that too is an area where all the mumbo jumbo you get about competition, simulated warfare all that teamwork stuff etc. etc. it's also an environment where if you're Italian you tend to play soccer, if you play soccer, unless you have a little girl who is particularly good and really wants to play soccer (but in the 80s, late 80s and early 90s there were few, now there are a little bit more), it usually means that it's an exclusively male environment, both from the point of view of the people but also from the point of view of the kind of relationships that you create, because they're people that you only see there, that didn't go to your school, they weren't friends from other places, they're just sport friends and there's also a kind of camaraderie that is characteristic of being male that also develops as you go through your teenage years going forward.

I could say, I don't know, maybe this.

Man 15:

I think in high school. In high school there was a pretty strong pack dynamic in my classroom, a pack from which I was left out by the way because I lived outside, so I was considered "the countryboy" because I lived along the subway and not in the city center, where the school was. And in high school, in addition to realizing that I actually had this sign around my neck of "countryboy," which is perfectly fine, I also saw a lot of dynamics, there were a lot of pack dynamics, male dynamics that I partly participated in to fit in, definitely.



I can't tell you what behavior in particular, but I realized that there was really a clear male/female distinction and that you had to do certain things and couldn't do other things.

Man 16:

I think around elementary school, because even back then, especially during recess, there were roles, such as: the boys all playing soccer and the girls all sitting down. I was never interested in soccer, to this day I'm not interested, I don't like to play soccer etc. I would just sit and chat with the girls and that automatically kind of excluded you from the group of boys. So basically I started asking myself, "How come all the other boys are doing that? Am I doing something wrong? I mean basically boys have to do that, but I don't like it..." So then I started to understand that canonically there was a role for males. Boys do certain things, girls do certain things. And if you don't do what you have to they look at you funny, you're kind of considered less. And so I kind of felt that way. Later on as I got older I also tried to fit in, to say and do the things that everybody else did, even if I didn't like them, to say, "I'm part of the bunch."

Until at some point I said to myself: if I don't like it I'm not doing it, period.

Why do I have to do it? I mean, who do I have to please?

Man 17:

I can't pinpoint a specific moment, an anecdote, a situation although I have a number of situations that I could identify in retrospect as alienating. The most important situation where I perceived that there was a difference was in middle school I think, in the sense that there was that very strange transition between children in elementary school and teenagers, where even physical differences mattered, who gets there first who gets there later, assuming the goal is to get somewhere. There I realized that there was kind of a sexualization of roles. That is, males behaved in a certain way so they could have a certain look, a certain attitude, and on the other hand, females behaved in another way, and I didn't stay in this binarism, in the sense that I didn't like to play soccer, I did other sports, I didn't have passion for motorcycles, on the other hand I liked books, playing cards... Yes, I liked playing soccer with friends too, but it wasn't the fulcrum around which everything revolved.

I had both male and female friends, in fact more often female friends than male friends. And that was the first moment where I said okay, I don't fit perfectly into what is the norm that I see around me.



Man 18:

For me obviously it's a little bit different. I think maybe I went through the same experience as you, which is when I realized I was a female. When did I realize I was a female? I don't know. Maybe when I had the feeling that my interest in a girl wasn't right and therefore there was something wrong.

That is, the fact that I felt that attraction was not okay because I was a girl too and so this made me realize that I could not feel that.

On the other hand when I realized that I was a male ... Well let's say that realizing that I was a trans boy was obviously a path that looking back required so much courage in admitting it to myself, because I started this journey when I was almost 26 years old, so we could say I was already "grown up", I already had a life, I lived away from home, and so the detachment that I had with my family facilitated my path of realizing that I was a boy, a trans boy, and I realized that I was a male. Let's say more than anything else I realized that I wanted to start on the journey and so I was convinced to take that path, I was not afraid to suffer the consequences that that decision could bring me because I had come to the realization that I was willing to lose everything in order to begin the transition, so to reach what for me was my truth, my authenticity.

One specific moment can probably be connected to a trip to Canada, which was a trip I took just before I started the medical transition and started taking testosterone. And I remember I was in Canada, I was in Vancouver and there was an Indian festival. There was this strong division between the males and the females and I think there were floats and there were men on one side and women on the other holding a rope. At that moment it's like I had to make a choice and say where do I stand? Where do I belong? I went to the men's side and I remember that tightening that rope for me meant okay, this is what I want, I'm ready, I'm a boy.

Musical break

Irene:

What to say after these words? Well, we can say something.

My job is to close each episode by helping to drive home some closing point, some concept that can stick in our memory. Obviously no reading of reality can be objective and universal, I listened to these answers from my own point of view and it seems to me that there are repeating and recalling experiences.



Surely another person would categorize these testimonies differently, so what I can offer is one way of summarizing this half-hour of content, certainly not the only one.

We must also keep in mind that all these men are men who agreed to answer certain questions, so the sample is definitely flawed.

Despite this, they have different backgrounds, so the fact that their experiences are similar continues to be an interesting fact to bring to the listener's attention.

The first two words that buzz in my head are "comparison" and "competition." Many have spoken of the peer group, more than once calling it a "pack," as a context where you have to excel or at least where you don't have to be last. Penalty: being considered less of a man. It is interesting because it is something that I do not detect in my experience of female contexts for example. Let's be clear, it's not that there is no competition among women, but that's not what defines you as a woman. If you lose you may feel at fault but you are not "less of a woman."

Continuing to look at the references in the content, it seems like an outdated stereotype but in fact there are so many who were told "don't cry," "don't be a sissy" when they were little. I promise that we will come back to what it means to grow up without being able to express some emotions; in fact, we will devote an entire episode to the topic. For now, I'll just point it out to you.

Also, it's unbelievable that the more you realize that you deviate from the stereotype intended for you, the more you realize how present and pressing that stereotype is. And the more you follow it instead, the harder it is to find it and to bring it into focus.

There is also the whole issue of the relationship with the body to be investigated, of how masculinity culturally is tied in knots with having a penis, a certainty that collapses every time one listens to the experience of a trans man and that reveals the transphobia that permeates our society.

Another belief is that masculinity is expressed through interest in females (but not in the feminine, mind you) and that is disproved by all homosexual, bisexual or pansexual men.

In short, even just in the answers to this first question we find insights that could fill the pages of several books. Some have already filled them, and this space is also for learning about these texts, which we will discover as we go along.



Since this is a podcast that aims to collectively discuss the masculine, I am very curious to know how you listeners of the episode would have answered this question. That is why I have created a place for you to do so. If you go to www.irenefacheris.it/tuttigliuomini you will find an anonymous form that you can fill out by writing your response. Some of the testimonies you leave will be read at the beginning of the next episode so that we can continue the discussion.

You will hear from me again, or rather-you will hear from these men-in 15 days, where we will talk about male role models and what it means to embrace them or, on the contrary, to distance yourself from them.

Until then, remember, these matters concern all men.
Because all men have the extraordinary privilege of being able to be heard by other men, such as those who will never listen to this podcast.
Talk to them. Talk to each other. Change things.

