Meghna Vesvikar

Social Contexts Shaping Masculinity: A Social Work Perspective

Abstract

The exploration of masculinity in social work is a critical endeavour that seeks to understand, challenge, and transform the social constructs surrounding gender and identity. This chapter embarks on a journey to investigate the intricate interplay of social contexts in shaping the concept of masculinity. We delve into the evolution of masculinity through history and its contemporary manifestations, focusing on how social work can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive understanding of what it means to be a man.

The chapter presents a study of underprivileged young people in Mumbai, highlighting the power of social work to foster a more diverse and equitable understanding of masculinity, enabling individuals to define and express their identities without constraint.

INTRODUCTION

'Masculinity is produced by society and culture and reproduced in daily life.'
Pierre Bourdieu

Masculinity encompasses the attributes and qualities traditionally associated with men, comprising both behavioural and societal roles. While it is fundamentally a social construct, it is influenced by certain biological factors. Notably, the standards of masculinity exhibit variations across different cultures and eras. For instance, ancient legal codes like the Code of Hammurabi from 1750 BC mandated a man's consummation of marriage for his wife to be officially recognised. The Hebrew Bible of 1000 BC contains passages, such as King David's counsel to his son Solomon, urging him to "Be strong and show yourself a man." In Tacitus's work "Germania," written in 98 AD, the warrior Arminius's penchant for violence was exacerbated when a Roman general abducted his wife, ultimately inciting him to call for war against the Roman Empire. Medieval masculinity emphasized qualities like chivalry, courage, and the virtue of generosity, with respect for women across all social strata, epitomized by characters like Beowulf. The Victorian era witnessed a transformation from traditional heroism to a novel, albeit ambiguous, manifestation of masculinity, which crystallized in the 19th century in America and Europe, notably in the form of bare-knuckle boxing. The early 20th century perpetuated the notion of masculinity as being the family's provider, while women were primarily homemakers. In the latter half of the 20th century and into the early 21st century, masculinity came to be associated with traits like independence, sexual assertiveness, athleticism, and various other markers.

However, over time, the idea of masculinity has remained anchored to the ideas that the man is the protector and provider whereas women are the recipients of the said protection and Socialization has played a crucial role in the continuation of traditional notions of masculinity. To challenge these ideas, Gillette, an American company that produces shaving products for men, launched a groundbreaking advertising campaign that aimed to redefine what it means to be a real man. The campaign questioned whether traits like aggression, bullying, and sexual harassment are truly indicative of masculinity, and suggested that being caring, supportive, and emotionally aware can also be qualities of a real man. However, the campaign received mixed reactions. While some people welcomed the idea of a more well-rounded definition of masculinity, the majority of people rejected it, viewing men who exhibit traditionally feminine traits as weak and unmanly. Despite the popularity of ideas like metrosexuality, the stereotype of masculinity has remained dominant and unchanged in recent times.

Masculinity is a fragile state that is not innate. Instead, it is attained by conforming to stereotypical masculine behaviours such as supporting hierarchy, aggression and homophobia. One's social status and dominance can be easily lost by going against the stereotypical role of being an emotionally inarticulate protector-provider. These rigid standards of masculinity are enforced by various sources of socialization, from families to governments. For instance, mothers often tell their sons not to fight with their sisters because they will miss them once they are married off. Additionally, there is a widespread preference for male children across many cultures. Young men, whose self-image may still be developing, often explore these ideas with their peers who are also in the same situation. Unfortunately, in the absence of a supportive adult who is willing to discuss these ideas without judgment, most of these concepts remain anchored to half-baked ideas from unregulated sources such as magazines, television, and social media.

At the highest echelons, we observe the Chinese government's Ministry of Education issuing an official notification expressing concerns that Chinese male youth are increasingly perceived as displaying traits associated with femininity, as opposed to the traditionally valued attributes of strength and masculinity, akin to those found in professions like defence personnel and firefighters. President Xi Jinping, a football enthusiast, has embarked on an initiative to underscore the importance of physical education in China by appointing retired athletes as coaches, signalling a deliberate move towards fostering physical strength and resilience among the youth. Concurrently, male celebrities, particularly pop stars, are subjected to derogatory labels such as 'little fresh meat,' underscoring societal disapproval of qualities that deviate from traditional masculinity. Notably, other prominent government officials have taken a more critical stance, contending that Chinese male youth have grown to be perceived as weak, fearful, and inferior, with such attributes being attributed to their upbringing by mothers and grandmothers.

It is crucial to acknowledge that individuals fortunate enough to have supportive adults in their families or within their social circles, along with access to well-regulated, high-quality mass media, are more likely to encounter contrasting perspectives. Such perspectives emphasize issues like China's imbalanced gender ratio and the acceptance of the idea that being characterized as 'womanly' should not be construed as derogatory. Consequently, a young man's socio-economic status, educational opportunities, and the nature of his relationships with supportive adults emerge as significant determinants influencing his self-perception, effectively forming a robust external locus of control.

Definitions of Masculinity

The American Heritage Dictionary defines masculine as of or pertaining to men or boys; male. According to Kimmel (1988), meanings of masculinity vary from one society/culture to another, within any society/culture over time, within each individual, and among different individuals in one group at one point in time. Societal standards of masculinity exist but they may or may not be reflected in a man's personal definition of his masculinity (Kimmel, 1988).

Masculinity consists of those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine. Masculinity exists as both a positive, in as much as they offers some means of identity significations for males, and as a negative, in as much as they are not the 'Other' (feminine). Masculinity and male behaviours are not the simple product of genetic coding or biological predispositions (Clatterbaugh, 1990).

Types of Masculinity

Sociologist RW Connell proposed a model named Types of Masculinity. According to this model, the relationships between male individuals consist of four categories of masculinity: hegemony, complicity, subordination and marginalization. These different kinds of masculinity have relations of alliance, domination and subordination. There is exclusion and inclusion, intimidation, exploitation and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity (Connell, 1996).

Hegemonic Masculinity

It is a cultural dynamic through which a male group sustains a leading position in social life. This group is generally exalted and is established by cultural ideals and institutional power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, during the time of slavery, American society was patriarchal and many white men popularized their supremacy by defining themselves as a superior race. Conversely, for African boys growing up as slaves, their future masculinity was already being subordinated (Gómez, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal and violent. Among its defining features are misogyny, homophobia, racism and compulsory heterosexuality (Connell, 1996).

Complicit Masculinity

It refers to the extension and institutionalization of a male power group under mutual agreements. Thus, a group agrees on the procedures through which subordination is going to be carried out. Hegemony is not effective if a careful and strategic plan is not well designed to guarantee power control. This is why complicity is a cautious conspiracy and one of the main important factors in the power of masculinity because it refers to the intellectual planning to dominate other groups (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, slaves in the United States were treated inhumanly not just by their masters but also by magistrates, legislators, professors of religion, preachers, governors, gentlemen of property and standing and even women. All the influential and intellectual men in the political, educational and religious spheres established a conspiring plot to show slavery as a legalized institution (Gómez, 2007).

Subordination Masculinity

It deals with any political and cultural exclusion, including legal violence to dominate another masculine group. It directly has to do with the actual performance of authoritarian power based on established methods of control such as physical and psychological abuse, punishments, economic, social and cultural discrimination, verbal insult, any kind of humiliation, personal boycott and even condemnation to death, if necessary. Subordination, then, becomes corrupt and immoral (Connell, 1996). For example, many whites believed that slavery was noble, a divine providence – God had predisposed Africans' fate to be submitted since they were thought to be animal-like and inferior and, in a deeper sense, because slave labour was a profitable business tactic (Gómez, 2007).

Marginalization Masculinity

It involves the relationship between masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, in the time of slavery, whites labelled blacks as docile and passive males. Whites gave orders, and black males obeyed. Whites decided on their lives but blacks were not even able to make decisions about themselves, their wives or children because all three were the master's property. Since black men constituted a subservient kind incapable of freely expressing their masculinity and in correspondence to their African cultural ideals, they developed other types of masculinity based on a strong Christian faith resembling the masculinity of Jesus Christ (Gómez, 2007).

Masculinity Ideology

Masculinity ideology, a fundamental component of gender-related attitudes as identified by Pleck, Sonenstein, and Ku (1993), profoundly influences nearly every facet of a man's existence. This comprehensive impact extends from his interpersonal relationships and professional pursuits to his interactions with women. Within the realm of gender perceptions, masculinity ideology encompasses a wide spectrum of issues that can be analyzed through a gender-centric lens, including but not limited to topics like domestic violence, both homosexual and heterosexual relationships, the use of contraception, experiences related to pregnancy, and the dynamics of parenting.

This ideology is often characterized by its rigidity, confining men within a restrictive framework. Commonly referred to as the "man box," this construct is predominantly role-based, emphasizing dominance, authority, command, control, and conformity. Unfortunately, these constraints undermine the development of relational capabilities in boys and men. These capacities empower individuals to collaborate, co-design, relate, hold uncertainty, empathize, and connect across diverse perspectives. As a result, the early emotional perceptiveness, articulateness, and responsiveness exhibited by boys are frequently suppressed, starting as early as preschool.

Boys are conditioned to conceal vulnerable emotions like sadness, fear, and pain, often stereotypically linked with femininity. Our culture projects these stereotypes onto them, as observed by Chu (2014). Regrettably, as they mature, boys' capacity for joy in friendship and connection diminishes, eroded by the prevailing notion that desiring or needing close friendships is seen as childish, girlish, or associated with being gay. Consequently, men often repress their emotional expressions, leading to heightened levels of violence and substance abuse, perpetuating a cycle of isolation and reactivity (Way, 2011).

The message that males receive from an early age is that they must measure up in various dimensions—appearance, friendships, relationships, profession, attitudes, choices, and behaviours. This message is pervasive and emanates from diverse sources, including family, friends, educational institutions, workplaces, older adults, romantic partners, social groups, clothing, lifestyle choices, print, visual and social media, as highlighted by Harris (1995). Importantly, this message is not sporadic but rather a relentless deluge of information and images.

A significant challenge arises from the absence of alternative constructs of masculinity that are sufficiently compelling and robust to challenge the prevailing stereotypes. Furthermore, the absence of role models who embody

such alternative masculinity makes it even more challenging to disrupt the prevailing narrative. Even celebrities who have embraced unconventional aspects of masculinity, such as wearing makeup or engaging in traditionally non-gendered occupations, have faced backlash, particularly on social media, making it difficult for others to follow suit. The deep-rooted belief that a man must adhere to specific image and role criteria within the family, education, profession, and income, further fortifies the barriers that confine masculinity within a rigid framework.

Another challenge lies in the portrayal of masculinity in media. While minor adjustments may have been made to the 'script' of masculinity in films and TV series, there has been a consistent lack of images or roles of men that effectively challenge the established stereotype over time. The pervasive influence of masculinity, rooted in the power dynamic of gender relations, interacts with other hierarchies of power such as age, physique, education, occupation, income, religion, and nationality, creating complex and intersecting layers of influence.

All of these challenges collectively contribute to the difficulty of crafting a more personalized and inclusive construct of masculinity. This complexity also poses hurdles in integrating men as active participants in reshaping and improving gender relations rather than perceiving them solely as part of the problem.

It's imperative to recognize that masculinity is fundamentally a socio-cultural construct, deeply influenced by every facet of an individual's life that can potentially be used to establish hierarchies. This influence extends to characteristics such as physique, age, abilities, caste, education, employment, income, interpersonal relationships with peers and women, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Each of these elements intersects with masculinity, contributing to its diverse and multifaceted nature.

Complex Landscape of Masculinity among Underprivileged Youth in Mumbai

Societal standards of masculinity often coexist with a man's perception of his masculinity, as discussed by Kimmel (1988). It is important to recognize that an individual's socio-economic standing exerts a profound influence on their sense of masculinity. A man's identity is intricately woven into the social structures that extend beyond their actions, as elucidated by Edley and Wetherell (1995).

However, a noticeable gap in existing research pertains to the influence of factors such as religion, caste, poverty, education, occupation, and income on the evolving masculinities of younger men, especially within the context of India. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, it is essential to explore the intricate processes through which these ideals are internalized by these young men, the potential conflicts they encounter when exposed to more equitable norms, the available resources, spaces, role models, and allies they can leverage, and the impact of intervention measures.

To address this gap, a quantitative study was undertaken, focusing on the masculinity of underprivileged youth in Mumbai. This research aimed to delve into their conceptions of masculinity, identify the sources that shape these perceptions, ascertain the factors influencing their masculine behaviours, and pinpoint the services and support systems they require to cultivate a more equitable understanding of masculinity. The ultimate goal was to uncover potential policy implications and avenues for creating a more inclusive and diverse perspective on masculinity in the Indian context.

Given the objectives and nature of the study, the researcher used a survey design to collect quantitative data using personal interviews. The study included 30 respondents who resided in slums in the suburbs of Mumbai and were between 18 to 25 years of age. The interview schedule contained checklists and Likert scales to assess culturally relevant masculine behaviours and roles, such as being in a romantic relationship and providing for one's family.

Findings from the Study

Education and Belief in Masculinity

The level of education among the young men exhibited a significant correlation with their adherence to traditional notions of masculinity. Those with lower educational backgrounds were found to hold these beliefs more strongly. Additionally, this group reported having less reliable sources of information regarding masculinity.

Income and Implementation of Masculinity

Young men with lower income levels encountered greater difficulties in translating traditional notions of masculinity into practice, suggesting a financial barrier to the alignment of their behaviours with these ideals.

Economic Status and Experiences with Masculinity

A clear pattern emerged, with respondents of lower economic status more likely to report negative experiences with masculinity. These findings underscore the challenges faced by individuals from disadvantaged economic backgrounds in navigating their masculine identities.

Education and Self-Evaluation

A direct relationship was observed between the educational background of young men and their self-evaluation. Those with lower levels of education tended to have more negative self-evaluations, pointing to the potential impact of limited educational opportunities on self-perception.

Household Headship and Belief in Masculinity

Respondents hailing from male-headed households were notably more inclined to uphold traditional notions of masculinity. The household structure played a pivotal role in shaping their beliefs.

Household Headship and Deviation from Traditional Masculinity

In contrast, respondents from female-headed households exhibited a decreased inclination toward traditional notions of masculinity. The headship of the household significantly influenced their beliefs regarding masculinity.

Influence of Caste, Religion, and Cultural Notions

Respondents from specific castes, religions, and cultures with culturally sanctioned notions of masculinity displayed a higher likelihood of adhering to these beliefs, highlighting the role of cultural and religious influences in shaping masculinity ideals.

Caste and Religion Hierarchy

Within the hierarchy of caste and religion, the impact of traditional masculinity notions was more pronounced among individuals occupying lower-status positions. These findings underscore the intersection of factors influencing perceptions of masculinity.

Occupation and Belief in Traditional Masculinity

Young men engaged in occupations traditionally associated with masculinity were more likely to uphold conventional ideals of manhood, indicating that one's chosen profession played a significant role in shaping their beliefs and behaviours related to masculinity.

Discussion

The finding that young men with lower educational levels tend to adhere more strongly to traditional masculinity ideals suggests that limited access to education may contribute to a more rigid adherence to conventional gender norms. Additionally, the lack of reliable sources of information indicates the potential need for more comprehensive and accessible education regarding alternative forms of masculinity.

The observation that lower-income young men face greater challenges in translating traditional masculinity into practice highlights the financial constraints associated with conforming to these ideals. This suggests that socioeconomic factors play a critical role in shaping how men express their masculinity. The connection between lower economic status and negative experiences with masculinity underscores the unique challenges faced by men from disadvantaged backgrounds. This may include pressures to conform to traditional norms and the potential for heightened vulnerability in these individuals.

The link between lower education and negative self-evaluation suggests that limited educational opportunities can impact how young men perceive themselves. This indicates that improving access to education might not only enhance employment prospects but also contribute to healthier self-esteem and self-image. The influence of household headship on adherence to traditional masculinity norms highlights the role of family structures in shaping these beliefs. Male-headed households may foster more traditional ideals, contributing to the perpetuation of conventional gender roles within the family unit. The decreased adherence to traditional masculinity among respondents from female-headed households underscores the significance of diverse family structures in challenging conventional gender norms. It suggests that different family dynamics can promote more flexible and inclusive interpretations of masculinity.

The finding that respondents from specific castes, religions, and cultural backgrounds are more likely to uphold culturally sanctioned notions of masculinity emphasizes the powerful impact of culture and religion on gender

beliefs. Cultural and religious teachings play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' perceptions of masculinity. The greater impact of traditional masculinity notions on individuals occupying lower status positions within caste and religion hierarchies reveals the complex interplay between various societal power structures. Lower-status individuals may feel a heightened need to conform to traditional ideals to secure their sense of identity and belonging. Moreover, the connection between masculine occupations and adherence to traditional masculinity highlights the role of work environments in shaping beliefs and behaviours. This suggests that individuals in traditionally masculine professions may face stronger pressure to conform to established gender norms.

In summary, these findings collectively underscore the intricate and interconnected factors that shape men's beliefs and behaviours regarding masculinity. They highlight the importance of education, economic opportunities, family structures, cultural influences, and occupational contexts in influencing how men perceive and express their masculinity. Recognising these nuances is essential for developing interventions and policies that promote more inclusive and diverse interpretations of masculinity and support men in breaking free from rigid gender norms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the intricate dynamics revealed in this research emphasize that social contexts profoundly impact the formation of masculine identities. As social work practitioners, we are presented with a significant opportunity to challenge and transform these traditional norms, promoting more inclusive and diverse interpretations of masculinity. By addressing barriers to education, economic empowerment, family dynamics, cultural influences, and workplace expectations, we can contribute to a more equitable society where individuals of all genders are free to define and express their identities without being constrained by rigid gender norms. This chapter underscores the critical role of social work in the ongoing evolution of masculinity, supporting men in their journey to break free from traditional stereotypes and embrace a more diverse and inclusive understanding of what it means to be a man in today's world.

References

Chu, J. (2014). *When boys become boys: Development, Relationships and Masculinity*. New York University Press.

Clatterbaugh, K. (1990). *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity: Men, Women, and Politics in Modern Society*. Routledge.

Connell, R. W. (1996). *Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender. Strategies for Schools.* Teachers College Record, 98(2), Winter 1996. Teachers College, Columbia University.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity. *Gender & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (1995). Men in perspective. Pearson Education Limited.

Gómez, L. F. R. (2007). Relations among masculinities: Controversy in Uncle Tom's cabin. *Folios*, 25, 115-124.

Harris, S. M. (1995). Psychosocial development and Black male masculinity: Implications for counseling economically disadvantaged African American male adolescents. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 73(3), 279-287.

Kimmel, M. (1988). Changing men: New directions in research on men and masculinity. *Family Relations*, 37, 237.

Pleck, J. H., Sonenstein, F. L., & Ku, L. C. (1993). Masculinity ideology: Its impact on adolescent males' heterosexual relationships. Journal of Social Issues, 49(3), 11-29.

Way, N. (2011). *Deep secrets: Boys' friendships and the crisis of connection*. Harvard University Press.