Conversations with Male Students at a Rural University in South Africa: Implications for Peace and Development for our Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa

Samukezi Mrubula-Ngwenya

Department of Cultural and Political Studies
University of Limpopo
E-mail: samukezi-mrubula-ngwenya@ul.ac.za

Saraswathie Govender

Department of Psychology
University of Limpopo
E-mail: saraswathie.govender@ul.ac.za

&

Mpho Maotoana

Department of Psychology
University of Limpopo
Email: mpho.maotoana@ul.ac.za

Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) is understood within the context of men's and women's relative social and economic disadvantage and discrimination. Men are always considered as perpetrators of GBV and rarely as victims. While the authors

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take into consideration the continued violence perpetrated against women and children in South Africa, the authors want to reveal the silence and the realisation that in the fight and advocacy for and against GBV, men and boy children are left behind. South Africa, as cited by President Cyril Ramaphosa is dealing with a second pandemic which is GBV (COVID-19 as the first pandemic). However, when narrating and finding solutions for this scourge, the focus has always been on women and children, thereby invisibilising and silencing men's voices as victims of GBV. Therefore, this article unpacks the discussion that the authors had with male students at a South African rural university where these young men reflected on issues such as brotherhood, love and unity, understanding gender identity, and the role of culture in constructing a man to name a few. Theoretically, this article is guided by the Hegemonic Masculinity theory (re)theorised by (Mfecane 2020), which calls for a decolonised scholarship on African men and masculinities that truly comprehends the narrative from African men's perspective. An Afrocentric lens is adopted to reflect on conversations with young men about GBV and its implications for peace and development among Sub-Saharan African youth. This chapter recommends that there is a need for inclusive programmes and policies that realise that men, just as women and children, are victims of GBV.

Keywords: *Youth; Development; South Africa; Male Students; Gender-based violence; inclusion.*

Introduction and background

Since 1994, post-apartheid South Africa has significantly progressed toward gender equality, ranking among the top 10 countries for improving women's legal rights (Smout et al., 2020; World Bank 2020). However, gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most pressing issues affecting South Africa with far-reaching repercussions (Pyke, 2022). Many studies have addressed the issue of GBV from diverse perspectives. In many of these studies, GBV focusses mainly on women suggesting that women and girls are more at risk of GBV than men (Oparinde et al., 2021). However, Thobejane et al. (2018) indicated that men often do not speak out about their experience of violence due to the stigma attached to them being victims of such violence, but this is not to assume women are the only victims of GBV. Although men are also victims of GBV, available evidence suggests that the frequency, severity, and intensity of violence are much greater than men (Oparinde et al., 2021). These authors suggest that GBV is defined as an extreme manifestation of gender inequity, often targeting women and girls because of their vulnerable position in society,

which is reinforced and perpetuated by patriarchy. GBV can take many forms, including psychological, physical, or sexual abuse, and has lasting impacts on the survivor's physical and psychological health. Thus, against this backdrop, our understanding of GBV in this study is premised on violence against men.

Masculinity is the term given to the behaviours and practices that are expected and adopted by males as compared to what is non-masculine (Connell & Masserschmidt, 2005). While most research has been inherently influenced by the West (Mfecane, 2018), there has been a growth in the available literature and research interest on the construction and conceptualisation of masculinity in the African context which has highlighted the intersectionality of gender, race, culture and sexuality (Manone & Hurst, 2018; Pyke, 2022). According to Maluleke (2018), the one practice that has depicted the intersectionality of culture, sexuality and masculinity, is traditional male circumcision. Maluleke (2018) claimed further that acquiring manhood status through the process of initiation provides one the authority to display or practice masculine characteristics and identity.

Patriarchy is a form of male domination based on the powerful role of the father role as head of the household and is, expressed in a multitude of ways (Morrell et al., 2012). The phenomenon is observable internationally, in the African continent and South Africa (Maluleke, 2018; Mfecane, 2018). Historically constructed gender power relations in most societies favuor male interests (Connell& Masserschmidt, 2005). This means that men assume headship or dominance over women who are regarded as subordinates. However, different ways of being male occur within the broad imbalances of economic, cultural, political, sexual and educational power between males and females and between males and males. In much of Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, conservative cultural and traditional norms feed into patriarchy and facilitate sexual and verbal abuse against women (Nel & Govender, 2019). These authors assert further that many of these traditions are bound to cultural values that are often unstated and must live up to their role as the dominant person in any relationship.

Gender-based violence against both women and men are human rights violation and constitute a crime. However, the current Gender-based Violence (GBV) framework is largely one of violence perpetuated against girls and women as aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (United Nations, 2015), which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. This is understandable given the scope of the scourge of and worldwide perpetuation of gender inequalities, which overall result in women being more vulnerable than men. However, the

challenge with this dynamic is that it largely mitigates the reality and extent of GBV against boys and men. The scale of GBV against boys and men is a hidden issue, which many organisations are reluctant to engage further. Opposition to promoting GBV awareness for men complicates the situation, driven by the misconception that it promotes misogyny or detracts from the severity of GBV against women and girls. GBV against girls and women. This has resulted in a lack of research and little empirical evidence to carry forward policies, advocacy and strategies to assist, prevent and intervene against boys and men.

Gender-based violence on boys and men has a long-term physical, mental and emotional impact (Zinyemba & Hlongwana, 2022). It affects their physical, psychological and sexual health. Often, the impact is on social development, such that these young boys or men are unable to develop to their full potential and positively contribute to society, for example, they become desensitised to suffering and learn to use violence as a means to an end. This further contributes towards the perpetuation of the inequalities, which are an overwhelming factor in GBV against girls and women. Africa has the youngest population in the world with 70% of sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30. This key is a clear opportunity for Africa's sustainable development. Having a young population that is empowered brings many opportunities for the development of social economic growth, peace and innovation.

Men, masculinity and GBV in South Africa

South Africa is known for its high levels of violence. Thobejane et al (2018) explored the experiences of men who are victims of gender-based violence where women are perpetrators. Their findings indicated that men usually do not speak out about their experiences due to the stigma attached to them being victims of female-perpetrated domestic abuse. Furthermore, their data showed that male victims of domestic violence are reluctant to speak out about their ordeal due to fear of being ridiculed by significant others in society, such as their family members, peers and police officials.

Thobejane et al (2018) suggest that GBV comes in different forms—namely physical, sexual, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse, economic abuse, intimidation, harassment, as well as stalking. GBV can also manifest in the perpetrator damaging the property of the victim and aggressively forcing him/herself into the house or residence of the victim. They maintained further that domestic violence is a global phenomenon without national, economic, religious, geographic and cultural boundaries. The authors also reported that violence committed by women against their

male partners is ignored for several reasons, such as stereotypes that are fuelled by the perception that a man is strong, while women are perceived as submissive, weak and obedient.

Domestic violence is a daily occurrence and women are reportedly the victims, largely because they are more likely to report it, while men do not do so, owing to the patriarchal nature of most societies (Thobejane et al., 2018). Men may also be reluctant to talk about being victimised, considering that this is irreconcilable with their masculinity, particularly in societies where men are discouraged from talking about their emotions. However, that does not mean that men are not victims of domestic violence in their private domains. Female-to-male domestic violence is a catastrophe that has always existed but has never been given the attention it deserves, like domestic violence perpetrated against women. In the same vein, violence against men has been trivialised as it is influenced by social and gender stereotypes that define men as heads of households, who are supposed to be strong defenders of families and other dependents and breadwinners as well (Thobejane, et al., 2018).

Silenced voices: Men as victims of GBV

While it is true that most gender-based violence occurs against women, it is not true that women are the only victims and that men are, the only perpetrators. Women are perpetrators of this violence against men just as men are. The difference however is that the rate at which women perpetrate this violence is low as compared to that of men. According to Ratele (2014), it is the bias in research that has led to the framing of gender-based violence as solely perpetrated by men against women portraying the latter as only victims. Zinyemba & Hlongwane (2022) revealed that women are violent towards men and this was confirmed by both men and women recruited in this study. The study advanced varying reasons why women are violent towards men such as poor financial support, infidelity, beer drinking, non-involvement in household chores, suspicions and jealousy, and dependence of husbands on their wives due to a lack of a source of income.

The patriarchal model of society supports the idea that intimate partner violence is a gender issue, perpetrated by men toward women. Generally, men are physically stronger than women; therefore, they appear to be less vulnerable to violence perpetrated by intimate partner violence (IPV). Women are considered the most important victims of this type of interpersonal violence while men are more likely to be victims of violence perpetrated by a stranger or an acquaintance. Carmo et al. (2011)'s studies

on IPV found equivalent rates of assault perpetrated by men and women. Domestic violence against males is an elusive and serious problem. It can include assaults such as pushing, grabbing, slapping, shoving and hitting which are classified as minor assaults and more serious assaults such as rape and even murder (Devaraj 2018). The author also reported that men who are victims of domestic violence tend to keep their feelings deep inside leading to preponderance of the feelings of guilt and shame. This may lead to the development of psychological problems such as substance abuse and even suicidal ideation or attempts of suicide if not identified early.

When men become victims of domestic violence, they usually find it hard to seek help. They are ashamed to admit they are vulnerable and fear no one will believe them, because of the societal framing that *'a man needs to be strong'* and *'a man is the head of the house.'* Male victims are silent about domestic violence incidents and do not contact authorities because they think that it is a personal matter and they can take care of it. Battered men think that they are not taken seriously when they go to the authorities to report due to the stigma that domestic violence only happens to women and not men (Neeley-Bertrand, 2010). Gathogo (2012) argues that domestic violence against men manifests itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes it begins with insults to the man in front of their children who sometimes take sides with their mother-particularly when they are first incited against their father. In such cases, children in their teenage years may participate in attacks against their respective fathers. Culturally, an African man's inability to vocalise being beaten by a woman or child can lead to his death. Other forms of men battering include slapping; pouring hot water when asleep or pouring hot water over an innocent man; chopping a man's genitals; verbal insults; insults before children; slashing; pouring petrol over him and setting him on fire; whips; throwing chairs, benches, stools, utensils and other objects in the house at the man, especially after serious disagreements in the house (Gathogo, 2012).

Research Questions

The overall research question was: What are the experiences of a young male student at a rural university in terms of their masculinity, gender-based violence experienced by men and in relation to culture and development. Throughout the focus group discussions, participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions to probe discussions to ensure that they were allowed give an in-depth account of their experiences of

masculinity and its impact on gender-based violence experienced by men in society and its impact for development.

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

According to Morell (1998), masculinity is a collective gender identity and not a natural attribute. Masculinity is informally created and unsolidified. This statement suggests that masculinities are produced when individuals choose to respond to a given situation in different ways. Dolan (2002) posits that the very notion that there are masculinities rather than a single masculinity acknowledges that there are potentially many ways to be a man. Connell and Masserschmidt (2005) discuss the practices and relations that construct the major patterns of masculinity. He develops the concept of multiple masculinities and examines a hierarchy and relations of power among these masculinities. He shows that there is hegemonic masculinity, a form that dominates other masculinities and holds a position of authority. Hegemonic masculinity comprises a group which claims and sustains a leading position in social life. It is seen especially when men dominate over not only women, but also fellow men of a different class or race or sexual orientation. This form of masculinity is seen in top levels of institutions, such as governments, and it is often reinforced by violence (Connell& Masserschmidt, 2005).

In a now classic piece of work on the social organisation of masculinity, Connell (1995) identified four different types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinate, complacent and marginal. In the first case, hegemonic masculinity is the form embodying male domination and exercising power and authority over women (and other men), with all the consequences of oppression, violence and privileges. Hegemonic masculinity represents the traditional, patriarchal archetype of virility and male stereotypes. This concept of hegemony, derived from Gramsci's analysis of class relationships, refers to the cultural dynamic through which one group demands and maintains a position of leadership in social life (Fernández-Álvarez, 2014).

"What would appear clear is that hegemonic masculinity is at the root of patriarchal tyranny, and the injustices and violence to which so many women (and so many men, too) are subjected around the world. Furthermore, it has nothing to do with any supposed essence of masculinity that condemns men to be as they are and to act as they act, but rather is an outcome of a cultural link between traditional forms of masculinity and power" (Fernández-Álvarez 2014, p, 5). The concept of hegemonic masculinity is part of a theoretical framework developed to

analyse men's power. It proposes a multiplicity of masculinities and hierarchies of power and shows how men exercise power over women and other men (Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1985).

With this understanding of how masculinity has been theorised Ratele (2021) and Mfecane (2020) offer a decolonial meaning of masculinities arguing that masculinity as theorised by Western theorists does not represent and speak to black men, especially black South African men realities. Ratele (2021) offers a decolonial understating of masculinities in African men, by indicating that studies of men and masculinity have shown that masculinities are plural and fluid in widening the analysis of men and masculinities within the gender order.

Thus, in alignment with Ratele (2021) and Mfecane (2020) the Afrocentric lens endorses that the gathering of indigenous knowledge which is culture should be reflective of values, beliefs, art, skills and the life of African people as a whole (Asante, 1998). Thus, in this study, Afrocentricity is also an appropriate underpinning of the research because it deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people as centred, located, oriented and grounded in a South African context. It focusses on cultural concepts that originated in Africa, which include for instance differences in social practices. Afrocentricity advocates for phenomena to be viewed by the African cultural vantage point and is informed from the African worldview. The theory proposes that any analysis of African people should place African culture at the centre. The theoretical lens adopted for this study is Ratele (2021) and Mfecane (2020) who advance a decolonised meaning of masculinity that properly captures the real lived experiences of black South African men. In our context, black men as victims of GBV, and young black men from a South African university.

Thus, this paper aims to discuss the experiences of masculinity and its impact on gender-based violence experienced by men in society concerning culture and its implications for peace and development for our youth in sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodology

Research Approach

This preliminary qualitative research used an exploratory phenomenological research design, to explore the experiences of young university students regarding masculinity and its impact on gender-based violence, within a Rural University in South Africa. According to Nigar

(2020), phenomenological research designs look at the experiences of people, aimed at gaining in-depth lived experiences on a specific phenomenon.

Sample and Sampling

The researchers used snowball sampling to recruit participants for the study who met the inclusion criteria. While the exclusion criteria were all female students. The inclusion criteria were: men and university students. Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie (2017) state that snowball sampling is a purposive sampling method frequently used in qualitative research, used regularly when the target group has characteristics that are not easily accessible to researchers. The researchers recruited the first participant through their social network, identifying him as a potential participant and then asked the participant to recommend other potential participants. The sample size of ten undergraduate young male students between the ages eighteen to twenty-five registered at a South African rural university was selected. Data saturation indicated an appropriate sample size (Burns, 2000).

Data collection

Data was collected utilising semi-structured interviews, though focus groups, where participants were carefully grouped, aimed at obtaining perceptions, opinions, attitudes and experiences from multiple participants at once (Nigar, 2020). Once the potential participants were identified, they were invited to a briefing session where the nature and purpose of the study, participant's involvement, assurance of confidentiality and benefits for the participant were explained. Arrangements for the focus groups were scheduled by discussing the suitable dates and times.

Participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions to probe discussions, this was done to ensure that they were given the opportunity to give an in-depth account of their experiences of masculinity and the impacts thereof in relation to gender-based violence (Burns, 2000). A focus group discussion ensured that the researchers gained insight from the participants themselves, conducting group sessions uncovers the social structure of the participants that one is working with (Nigar, 2020). The participants were also informed that they have a right to withdraw from the study at any time and they would not be discriminated against for doing so, and an informed consent form was given to each participant, prior

commencement of the study. The researchers facilitated three focus group interviews, each lasting approximately two (2) hours.

Quality Criteria

We confirmed research reliability through the use of credibility and trustworthiness of the data. To this, we ensured that we verified our transcriptions of data with the participants during and after the focus group discussion process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). We, as researchers, were also involved in daily discussions during the analysis process to ensure that the outcome was authentic and reliable. The study enhanced the confirmability of the study through reflexivity.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, the authors employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which, aims at understanding critical social issues. CDA is commonly, used to understand social problems, such as those of gender, sexism, colonialism, race, colour and other forms of social equality (Sankar, 2022). This analytical method was useful for the focus group findings because the study's socio-political subject matter highlighted power issues.

Ethical Considerations

All participants signed an informed consent form which ensured confidentiality and anonymity. No participants were harmed during the study. The purpose and nature of the study were communicated to the participants before any data was gathered, and the participants were given pseudo-names to ensure confidentiality. The audio recordings were kept digitally under a password-protected file.

Presentation of findings

Five (5) major themes related to gender-based violence from the perspectives on males' students at a South African University. The presented responses are mostly verbatim, however; some were edited to ensure they met the standard for grammatically correct English. For confidentiality, participants' names were not mentioned.

Theme 1: Men are silenced, and females are prioritised more than men

Throughout the focus group discussion, participants indicated that the cases of GBV reported by men are not as many as compared to those reported by women. This is attributed to the fact that women feel that they are the victims and are more likely to report cases related to GBV. The participants also reported that when men report cases to GBV, they are harassed and end up not reporting the incidents. Thus, they felt that there is a need to find a platform to encourage men that are abused to report the incidents and not feel ashamed. Participants' agreement throughout the discussion indicated shared views, extending beyond their cultural and religious experiences to encompass their experiences as young males in the larger society.

Throughout the study, one participant, identified himself as a victim about GBV. Although he did not go into detail of his circumstances and what happened to him. He articulated that on different occasions, sometimes even with friends, he attempted to share his story but instead, he would be laughed at. This was supported by participants' responses:

"I was a victim of GBV, and when I talk about it, people talk and laugh"

Participant A's story reminds us of the loud silence on men's issues. This silence is cited by all ten participants from a place of concern about how black societies have constructed the idea of a man.

This was supported by Participant B, who brings in the mental and emotional aspects that are largely ignored when dealing with men's issues. He states:

> We are all emotional beings; we are all allowed to cry. I am not afraid to cry, I break down. It is not a sin to cry. Growing up, we were told men don't cry, but I believe this saying is wrong because men have rights and their rights should be protected.

Participant C: *"We come from violent societies, and we need counselling as men in these violent communities."*

All the participants argue that cultural teachings that educate young boys that men do not cry are aiding the violence when these young boys grow

into men. Cultural norms demanding unemotional, strong masculinity perpetuate silence around men's issues.

Additionally, participants describe societies that discourage men from showing weakness, crying, or being vulnerable. They believe that, black societies contribute to men's rights being violated, and they further contribute to the making and creation of '*violent and angry men'*.

Theme one reveals the importance of continuous advocacy for equality. Participant's narratives reveal to us that to fight the scourge of GBV, we need to consider men and women's experiences. GBV is not a women's issue, rather it is a societal issue and therefore, needs collective action from all members of the society. Below are the responses from participant D:

> Check mainstream media, check the government initiatives, everything on GBV has been geared towards the protection of women and children, what about us? What about men who are suffering in silence?'

Participant D questions the continuous loud silence in the advocacy of men as victims of GBV. Understandably, and statistically, women, children and the gender non-conforming community have been the most affected by gendered violence. And it has also been proven that men are often the perpetrators. However, we need not turn a blind eye to revelations that men are also victims of gendered violence. The absence of an empathic response from police and social support services are reflected in common reactions when men disclose that they have been victims of GBV. Their complaints are not viewed seriously, and most often, male victims are belittled. Many countries, such as South Africa do not go as far as collecting data on men who have experienced GBV, which effectively results in them feeling invisible.

Theme 2: Men are provoked every day.

In this theme, participants shared concerns about the incidents where men are falsely accused of crimes they did not commit. The following are the responses:

Participant C:" we are losing men who are innocent in this country. Men are being implicated in things they didn't do (false rape accusations)".

. Participant D: "before we ask why men are killing, we need to determine what the root cause is. For me, I think the environments in which we come from, we come from different backgrounds and this makes us different people."

The participants address situations wherein we see when a woman reports a case, the alleged perpetrator gets arrested sometimes without due diligence/proper probing. Participant D's collaboration with participant C's articulation, prompt us to dig deeper to find the real cause of GBV. Participant D brings in an interesting dimension of intersectionality and prompts us to think about the ways our identities are interconnected. He prompts us to understand that some men, who eventually become perpetrators of GBV are wounded. Therefore, before anything else, before entering into relationships, prompts men to deal with their wounds (traumas). The above sentiments were collaborated by Participant E when he stated:

"The foundation of everything we need to acknowledge is we are broken".

Participant E emphasises that most black men grew up in households where they witness their fathers believing that they have authority over their mothers. The patriarchal script asserts 'a man is the head of the household.'

This was supported by the following statement from Participant D:

I remember there was a time, before my parents separated, my father would tell my mom that 'I am doing you a favour by supporting you.

The argument advanced by the three participants highlight that it is possible that the foundation of everything, the violence against women, children and gender non-conforming persons can be attributed to the environment in which men grew up in. The unstable environment, the one which perpetuates patriarchy can somehow contribute to young boys growing into abusive men. Men later think and feel they have authority over women's bodies.

Theme 3: "We need programmes to conscientise men and encourage the culture of speaking out".

The theme speaks to participants seeking intervention to break the culture of silence. Intervention for both perpetrators and victims. Participants revealed that often, male students complain to student leaders that they are abused by females but their cases are never considered. They further argued that when men attempt to report cases of violence against them,

they are labelled as weak. The following responses support the above statements:

Participant A: "*we are struggling to speak as men because of how the society taught us*".

Participant A is speaking to the societal construction of masculinity in the black communities that have taught young boys to grow up with an understanding that "men do not cry". Some of these masculine teachings find their way in contributing to the ongoing violence and mental health issues. Below are the responses:

Participant F: "*you are told as a man you must man up, and you are told as a man you must stamp authority*".

Participant G: "*As young men, who are growing up to be men, we need to view things differently, we need to break generational curses. Society and culture have affected us so much, but we can change things around*".

Participant H, "*most of the people sitting here I know them, 90% of them are victims of GBV, just that I cannot mention names.*"

The participants indicated that these teachings are somehow dangerous because men start to think that stamping authority means the use of physical power. It is through these sentiments that the participants emphasise the need for continuous programmes that promote equality, programmes that reshape the understanding of manhood and masculinity in the black communities. Participants strongly advocated for equitable societies, revealing an institutional problem where young men are silenced and struggle to disclose their GBV experiences.

The cultural teachings that frame and construct the male identity are further attributed to historical remnants of apartheid. One participant expressed the following:

Participants G: "the problems faced by men comes from systems of apartheid. The white men abused black men and treated them like kids, when they go home, they find their wife and kids. If the black man has a son, he abuses the son and this generated generational trauma. The black family structure in my understanding, before apartheid was solid".

Theme 4: Men lie to one another. *"We fail to tell each other the truth".*

Theme four of this study emerged as what we can call a reflective moment where the participants recognise their direct and indirect contributions to gendered violence. Participants raised a realisation that men tend to blindly support each other even when what they are doing is wrong. These are the responses:

Participant H: "We *encourage dangerous behaviours. If we want to deal with these problems in the future, we should familiarise ourselves with what women are going through. And women need to come into our world and also understand what we as men are going through".*

Participant E "*we have adopted a culture that is strong, a culture that is dangerous, a culture that destroys. As men we are suffering, we are suffering emotionally and mentally and we don't talk."*

Both participants are of the same view that if men called each other out on wrongdoings, we could potentially see a decrease in cases of gendered violence. What these young men are speaking to and calling for is a need to realise the dangers of being silent and complacent. They are envisioning communities that encourage meaningful dialogues with both men and women to find solutions and end Gender-Based Violence.

Theme 5: Men need a better understanding of themselves

The last theme of the study calls for the redefinition of being a man, and a better understanding of what it means to be a man. Participants revealed the need to deconstruct certain narratives and teachings around manhood. This was supported by the below responses:

Participant A: "*Men are programmed as if they are creatures; they are programmed to not be vulnerable. Our education system is also a challenge: it teaches us that women are inferior to men. We are an unequal society even if and when our Constitution claims equality.*"

Participant J: "*One of the problems faced by men is that men don't love each other. We don't give each other time to listen to each other's problems. If I share my problem with my friend, instead of helping me, he laughs at me".*

"Men have challenges with identity, identity which is influenced by the environments/societies we grow up in. and in turn these are influenced by culture. For instance, I am Pedi, and in my culture, I grew up being taught that bomma (mother) is the most important thing in life. Whatever you do you should do for bomma. And this might be different in another culture/homes."

Participant I: *"The problem now is that our parents need to understand that they have trauma that they have passed to us. And anger too. Men need to heal and take accountability. Communities are built by families, and families are built by mother/father (nuclear family)." Schools have not taught us about emotions – men do not really know how to deal with their emotions. It's hard to be a man because you are expected to have everything (relationship/financial wise."*

The participants reiterated the same argument on the dangers of the patriarchal script. They argue that there is a need to deconstruct masculinity and the understanding of manhood, exposes the toxic masculinity that exists within men. They indicate that identity comes down to self-awareness and prompts us to ask uncomfortable questions such as *what is the role of men in our societies when they are not self-conscious.* They all reiterate the same sentiments in questioning the real identity of a man and seeking to craft a non-destructive male identity.

The discussions revealed that the hegemonic masculine ideal was evident in the societal roles and responsibilities that participants described. These findings are consistent with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) views that a key aspect of a toxic personality is the social expectation that boys and men should only engage in stereotypically masculine performances of gender. Amongst others, these rigid notions of what constitutes a "real" man restrict the emotions, which men are expected to show publicly. Men are expected to be dominant and to frequently express anger, while the expression of vulnerable emotions such as fear, sadness, vulnerability and pain is prohibited. Hence, many male survivors of GBV are likely to invest strongly in the concealment of their trauma and avoid public disclosure of their emotional and physical trauma or vulnerability.

Conclusion and recommendations

Dominant discourses on masculinity favour an ideal man and participants' definitions of masculinity highlighted these hegemonic masculine traits. The participants highlighted that the role of socialisation and culture is important in defining the ideal man. Additionally, the discussions reveal the multiplicity of masculinity and depict that masculinity is indeed a concept

that is context-specific and historically aligned as alluded to by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Ratele (2021). Thus, while participants drew from tradition and culture in the understanding of masculinity, they also noted the influence of others in society. The findings reveal that participants derived their understanding and definitions of masculinity from traditional notions of masculinity while also crediting the teachings that they have received throughout their upbringing as they interacted with society. From this, one can understand how their knowledge of an ideal man, has been constructed in collaboration with others and that reality is indeed co-constructed as posited by social constructivism (Mfecane, 2020; Pyke, 2022; Sankar, 2022).

The findings showed that there is a need for young men to break the silence on violence as both perpetrators and as victims. GBV does not only affect women, children and gender non-conforming persons, it affects men as well. The young men have advocated that collective voices and outrage, must be amplified, and activism, care and support are all needed from all sectors to bring about change to GBV in men as well. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that GBV, regardless of the perpetrator and the victim, is a very serious violation of the individual's person and personal well-being. These results are consistent with Zinyemba and Hlongwana's (2022) finding that the consequences remain with the victim for life, long after any physical injuries have healed.

To facilitate the healing process, a holistic approach regarding GBV needs to be developed. Established and outdated stereotypes regarding sexuality, gender and power relations must be, challenged and it should be understood that men are also vulnerable in specific contexts and may also, need protection. Adequate mechanisms such as the focus group discussion held for a male-only group in this study, should be developed to encourage male victims to disclose their traumatic experience freely, knowing that their voices are heard and taken seriously. Systematic collection of data regarding the incidence and nature of GBV focussed on male victims is essential, to justify the provision and services and to leverage for funding. Members of police officers and other protection services need to be educated about the realities of men as victims of GBV and to take any reports of male victims as seriously, as those reports of females. Psychoeducation of communities regarding the nature and consequences of all forms of GBV needs to be, prioritised. These strategies can help men cope with such sensitive issues. The longer these offences remain hidden, the more serious physical, emotional and psychological damage occurs.

Finally, despite the diverse challenges confronting youth in sub-Saharan Africa, youth groups are resilient in their pursuit of peace and

sustainable development in this region. Resilience in this context is understood as the ability to recover from a given situation, endure hard times and cope with the pressure of operating in a challenging environment while standing up for a noble cause. The ultimate goal of resilience building is to claim the kind of spaces that allow them to play a meaningful role in shaping policies and societal dispositions towards youth issues. There are youth groups in this region that are actively involved in advocacy for gender-based violence, gender equity and equality. With limited resources, they leverage social media to advocate and campaign, compelling policymakers recognise and respond to their calls for action. Thus, it is important to invest in more evidence-based research and documentation on youth activities to inform more balanced, appropriate and timely interventions on peace and youth development in sub-Saharan Africa.

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