

# Exploring the Nexus between Masculinity and Men's Mental Health: Case of Goromonzi Peri Urban Mashonaland East Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

The heavy politicization of masculinity within societies has magnified help seeking skepticism and presents a major public health challenge. While previous studies have focused on efficacy of interventions, less has been done with regards to the recipients of services. This has spurred the rationale for this study which sought to explore the nexus between masculinity and men's mental health. Courtenay's relational theory of gender and men's health was used in this study. A convenient sample of 50 respondents were purposively and randomly selected from across the various ranks of the population of the study. Sampled were 5 boys, 5 girls, 20 men and 20 women who were later involved in both Focused Group Discussions and interviews. Extra data was obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with both females and male in Goromonzi staff. The interview results identified and outlined themes on the health-seeking behaviour amongst men in the peri urban areas of Goromonzi. The paper argues that despite availability of health centres, men still resent or detest consulting on health issues. Findings showed that health promotion programs go a long way towards promoting a change in individual behavior including health seeking tendencies. Results shows that cultural milieu, masculinity and cultural norms remain major influencers of men's health-seeking behaviour. This study concludes that being a man takes on a universal status, generalisable and immutable. Aggression, reason, a need for control, competitiveness, and emotional reticence. From the above conclusion, the study recommends robust health education, sensitization and campaigns to enhance health-seeking behaviour amongst men in communities. Further recommendations include addressing cultural norms, supporting community health care workers as well as employing the multi sectoral approach at community level.

**Keywords:** Exploring , nexus between masculinity, men's mental health, Goromonzi Peri Urban, East Zimbabwe.

## INTRODUCTION

According to WHO (2000), Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It does not merely relate to the absence of a disease or mental disorders. Whilst it exists on a complex continuum, it is highly impacted different social, political, economic and other environmental dynamics. The relationship between masculinity and men's health-seeking behaviour is a multifaceted global discourse which is quite enlightening when viewed from varying perspectives. Ordinarily, cultural and patriarchal norms repeatedly impact the chauvinistic character of men with regards to their health, including mental health. It is in line with this that the researcher explored the nexus between masculinity and men's mental health. Also, this gender deviation that has buttressed the need to explore men's health seeking behavior and its subsequent impact on men's mental health.

## BACKGROUND

Health promotion programs worldwide have long been premised on the idea that providing knowledge about causes of ill health and choices available will go a long way towards promoting a change in individual behavior. It also contributes towards more beneficial health seeking behaviors. Despite this, the health or

help seeking behavior of men has been not so impressive compared to that of women. Scratching from the surface, the issue of these differences can be closely linked to the aspect of gender dimensions.

Gender as defined by FAO is the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material. Gender is not determined biologically, as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men but is constructed socially. This brings in the aspect of personal human perceptions or views about gender dynamics. <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1583en/cb1583en>.

In an effort to buttress the discourse in proper perspective, Courtenay's relational theory of gender and men's health was used in this study. Relational theory holds the philosophical position that a person is a social animal and that human satisfactions are realizable only within a social community. Due to its positivist inclination, it hypothesizes that being a man takes on a universal status, generalisable and immutable associated with aggression, reason, a need for control, competitiveness, and emotional reticence. This dimension assisted the researcher in identifying factors that impede men's acceptability of and accessibility to available healthcare facilities.

Patriarchy is one of the sole most life-threatening socio-political ailments attacking both men and women of our society globally despite it being denounced by feminism on the women's liberation front. It is a socio-political and economic structure that stands resolute on the notion that males are biologically aggressive, dominating, and superior to everything and everyone. It further wields unfettered superiority over other groups of people, especially females who should be taken as weak, subservient, and modest. Gupta M, Madabushi J S, Gupta N (2023)

Patriarchy has physically and psychologically enforced specific gender roles throughout generations. Under this guise, uncountable men while supporting patriarchy, ignore the plight of their mental health and emotional capacity. It is because while men reside in the patriarchal system and being repeatedly told to toe societal expectations are inculcated from childhood dictating that men should be the breadwinners of their family, and emulate masculine traits of aggression, stoicism, physical strength, and dominance.

Harmful gender norms, especially those related to rigid notions of masculinity can also affect boys and men's health and wellbeing negatively. Some authors suggest that conducting oneself in a way that conforms to these traits of masculinity under strict patriarchal norms has correlated with increased anguish, poorer mental health, and a reluctance to reach out for support as they feel that they cannot speak about their emotions, Tipping, G & Segall, M (1995). Those who do speak out and try to get help are often told to "man up" and to dismiss the existence of the problems they face. This immemorial taboo of the macho thing, a relic of previous generations that doesn't speak to the current medical understanding of mental illness has contributed immensely to a very poor or negative health or help seeking behavior. Health or care seeking behavior has been defined as any action undertaken by individuals who perceive themselves to have a health problem or to be ill for the purpose of finding an appropriate remedy.

Research often suggests that men's help-seeking behavior regarding depression is directly linked to traditional masculine norms such as being strong, successful, self-reliant, in control, and capable, along with an emphasis on avoiding emotions. As a result, countless men have been diagnosed with mental health illnesses but fail to take any action because they feel that it makes them weak. Due to a fear of judgment and the taboo surrounding men's mental health, they fail to pick up their antidepressants from the pharmacy. Instead, they hide their emotions with anger, aggression, or isolation. As per the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, men passed away by suicide at a higher rate of 3.54 percent than women in 2017 <https://afsp.org/about-afsp/>. The NGO, Mental Health America documents that more than 6 million men are affected by depression annually in the United States. <https://www.mhanational.org/>

Depression and suicide are ranked as a leading cause of death among men, and yet they're still far less likely to seek mental health treatment than women. Mental illnesses, such as depression, and suicide are

categorized as the leading cause of death in the male population, and men are still far less likely to acquire mental health support and therapy than women.

A lot of guys don't want to admit they have this problem. They still see depression as a sign of weakness. Furthermore, they see men's mental health struggles as a personal issue and a lack of personal fortitude. While much has been done in reducing stigma and expanding opportunities for support, men still may be experiencing shame and guilt that could lead to them being less willing to ask for help.

Untreated mental health conditions can lead to high-risk behaviors including substance abuse, gambling and other forms of addiction. Unheeded emotional problems can also cripple a man's ability to fully function in society and within his family.

In most households, young boys are instructed that "boys don't cry". These colloquialisms transmit the message that due to being a part of a certain gender, these rigid expectations almost strip away humanity from these young boys. If they do not conform to these gender roles, boys are reprimanded in a gendered way, often by senior male figures in their lives. They are either met with violence, child abuse, and homophobic, trans phobic, and feminizing slurs as if being a woman, homosexual or transgender person is an insult to the superiority of a man.

As a society, we need to comprehend the basic understanding of when discussing men, we are focusing on a socially constructed gender identity that lies on a spectrum and does not lie isolated. When addressing masculinities, we note attitude, character, and specific actions attributed to men and the various paths of being a man.

However, this does not take away the fact that some attributes can actually be gender specific like emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence commonly referred to emotional quotient or EQ is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict. Even though both genders are equal in overall EQ, men and women possess different EQ strengths or competencies that are considered gender specific. Women tend to score higher than men in areas of empathy, interpersonal relationships and social responsibility. Men tend to score higher than women in areas of assertiveness, stress tolerance and self-regard (or confidence).

It may come as no surprise to you that men and women are hard-wired differently, meaning that we have differences in our neuro anatomy or brain structures. At a basic level, these differences cause us to think and behave differently. However, I believe that socialization, the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society, can be even more powerful in shaping who we become in society. Hence the aspect of patriarchy.

Due to a lack of emotional capacity, men may encounter troubles in their relationships and interpersonal intimacy. As they were never educated on how to deal with their mental health, they may face immense depression and anxiety, and cope through self destructive behaviours like suicide, murder, substance abuse and alcohol addiction. Also, they may be unable to perform daily tasks, have bodily insecurities, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts. On a greater level, men who have been deeply ingrained with the concept of toxic masculinity may resort to violence, such as sexual assault, physical abuse, and rape. This is premised on the notion that men's harsh and violent control emasculates them. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Trusted Source puts the annual number of men dying due to alcohol-related causes at 62,000, compared to 26,000 women.

### **The role of men in African culture.**

The African culture characterised by traditional ideologies and masculine beliefs delineate men as brave,

noble, emotionally intelligent, and strong, and thus, must not be irrational or emotional in the face of challenges or overwhelming events (Odimegwu and Okemgbo, 2008; Van Heerden 2015). Men who are severely affected by these stereotypes are at higher risk of developing mental issues, including anxiety and depression. They are also more likely to commit harmful acts, including domestic violence, online bullying, sexual harassment, and violence against women.

Their mental health is also affected by the hegemonic masculinity in Nigeria. Ouriaghli, Godfrey, Bridge, Meade, Brown (2019) alluded that, men can find it hard to seek help because culturally dominant, hegemonic forms of masculinity are characterized by emotional control and a lack of vulnerability, and that depression is most often associated with powerlessness and uncontrolled expression of emotion.

According to an American writer Fields (1990) added that the stereotype that men don't need help persists. Evidence shows fewer men seek out assistance for mental health challenges compared to women.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study could not include urban area, was only done in one rural setup in namely Goromonzi rural area.

## RESULTS

Findings have pointed to the fact that being a men can have a serious negative mindset in as far as health or help seeking behavior is concerned. More specifically, the study managed to establish the extent to which male gender or masculinity influences the health-seeking behaviour amongst men and its impact on their overall health. The man factor as reflected in hegemonic masculinity has been a risk to men's mental health through poor help-seeking behaviour. The effects will then emerge as signs and symptoms of mental illness, psychosis, and violent tendencies.

During the last few years in America, the author has witnessed a rise in awareness about mental health issues. Celebrities and star athletes have promoted increased advocacy for mental health. Yet, men still are negatively affected by toxic masculinity and the fear of showing vulnerability. These factors and more can lead to men not getting help when they might need it.

A 2023 survey of 1,600 American dads conducted by Very well Mind and Parents found that only a slight majority of men feel comfortable feeling or expressing emotions.

The future research should include a bigger and wide area in its studies.

## CONCLUSION

It can be seen from the above that this hegemonic masculinity built into the society's classification of men as immune to pain and suffering is positively correlated with increased anguish and poor mental health. Patriarchy is a major influencer of men's health care patterns and provides crucial parameters for estimating the full burden of common mental health issues among men and boys. Conclusively, findings demonstrate the strong link between poor health seeking behavior and mental health stability as a result, we need to build on these findings towards a new and more holistic health dimension.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Having unearthed facts of such magnitude, it then suffices to proffer recommendations and the following have been noted to be outstanding:

1. Foster sustained changes in behavior by shifting attitudes.
2. Addressing cultural norms to alter perceptions.
3. Support community health care workers.
4. Employ the multi sector approach at community level.
5. To upscale social accountability approaches for health.

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