Review

Norms Of Masculinity And Gender Socialization Among Young Boys In South Africa: Implications For Gender-based Violence, Policies And Interventions

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Norms of Masculinity and Gender Socialization Among Young Boys in South Africa: Implications for Gender-Based Violence, Policies and Interventions

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Abstract: Masculinity norms and gender socialization play a critical role in shaping boys' attitudes, behaviours, and interactions within society. In South Africa, historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid, coupled with deeply ingrained cultural and societal expectations, have contributed to rigid masculinity norms that emphasize dominance, emotional restraint, and aggression. These constructs not only influence boys' development but also have significant implications for gender-based violence (GBV). This paper explores the ways in which masculinity norms are embedded within societal structures and reinforced through family upbringing, education, media representations, and cultural traditions. By encouraging dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression, these norms contribute to power imbalances and normalize violence as a means of asserting control. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as hegemonic masculinity, intersectionality, and social learning theory, the study examined how historical, racial, and socio-economic factors shape gender socialization and influence boys' developmental trajectories. Through an intersectional lens, this paper underscored the urgent need to challenge harmful masculinity norms and promote alternative models that encourage emotional expression, empathy, and equitable gender relations. Finally, it provided recommendations for educational reforms, community interventions, media engagement, and legal frameworks to foster healthier masculinity norms and reduce GBV.

Keywords: masculinity norms; gender socialization; gender-based violence; gender equity; South Africa

Introduction

The process of gender socialization plays a pivotal role in shaping individual identities and reinforcing societal expectations regarding masculinity and femininity. In South Africa, where gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pressing issue, understanding how young boys internalize masculinity norms is crucial [1]. Masculinity is not an inherent trait, but a socially constructed identity learned and reinforced through family, educational systems, religious teachings, and media representations [2]. This paper explores how masculinity norms are embedded in the socialization process of South African boys, the implications for gender relations and GBV, and the role of policies and programs in fostering positive gender socialization.

Gender socialization is a lifelong process influenced by cultural traditions, historical legacies, and socio-economic conditions. In South Africa, boys are often socialized into rigid conceptions of masculinity that emphasize dominance, aggression, and emotional suppression while discouraging vulnerability and caregiving [3]. These norms, reinforced through familial upbringing, peer interactions, educational institutions, and media, contribute to gender inequality and perpetuate cycles of violence [4].

South Africa has one of the highest rates of GBV globally, with an estimated 51% of women experiencing some form of GBV in their lifetime [5,6]. Scholars argue that deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, compounded by socio-economic pressures, sustain a culture in which masculinity

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is often asserted through aggression and control over women [7]. Addressing these harmful norms is essential for breaking the cycle of violence and fostering gender equality.

This paper examines the formation of masculinity norms among South African boys, their connection to GBV, and the potential for policy interventions to reshape gender socialization. By drawing on theoretical perspectives and existing literature, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how masculinity norms can be challenged and redefined to promote more equitable gender relations.

Research Gap and Review Aim

Despite an expanding body of literature examining the relationship between masculinity and gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, critical gaps remain—particularly concerning the early stages of masculine identity formation among boys. Much of the existing research tends to focus on adult men, with masculinity often treated as a fixed and homogeneous construct [3,8]. This perspective overlooks the dynamic and evolving nature of masculine identities, especially during childhood and adolescence, when boys are first introduced to and begin internalizing gender expectations [1,9].

Importantly, there is a lack of integrative, multi-contextual studies that holistically examine how young boys in South Africa are socialized into dominant and often harmful masculinity norms. While individual studies have explored the influence of the family, education, media, or cultural rites of passage [10,11], few have synthesized these various domains to offer a comprehensive understanding of how multiple institutions collectively shape boys' gendered identities. Moreover, intersectionality remains underutilized in existing literature. Limited attention has been given to how race, class, and historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid intersect with gender norms to shape boys' lived experiences in distinct ways across different communities [12,13].

Another significant gap lies in the translation of research into practice. Although many studies acknowledge the harmful effects of rigid masculinity norms, there is insufficient focus on practical, context-sensitive interventions that target boys during formative developmental stages. Most existing programs are reactive, engaging men only after harmful behaviours have been normalized [4,14]. There is a pressing need for proactive, evidence-based strategies that challenge harmful norms and promote positive models of masculinity from an early age [1,15].

Against this backdrop, the present review aims to fill these critical gaps by synthesizing existing literature on the gender socialization of boys in South Africa through multiple institutional lenses. By adopting theoretical frameworks such as hegemonic masculinity [2], intersectionality [16], and social learning theory [17], this review explores how dominant masculinity norms are constructed and reinforced, and how they contribute to the normalization of GBV. Furthermore, it seeks to offer strategic recommendations for fostering alternative masculinities grounded in empathy, respect, and gender equity.

Theoretical Framework

The socialization of masculinity among young boys in South Africa can be understood through several interconnected theoretical frameworks, each shedding light on different aspects of how masculinity norms are constructed and reinforced. These include Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, and Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how masculinity norms are shaped by societal structures, intersecting identities, and learned behaviours.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity [2] explains how dominant forms of masculinity sustain male privilege and reinforce patriarchal structures. In South Africa, hegemonic masculinity is often associated with physical strength, control over women, economic dominance,

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and emotional suppression [8]. Research has shown that young men who exhibit dominance and aggression are more socially accepted than those who display vulnerability [3]. These norms not only shape boys' identities but also contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory [16] highlights how multiple forms of oppression—such as gender, race, and class—intersect to shape individuals' experiences and identities. In the South African context, masculinity is profoundly influenced by the country's historical legacies of apartheid and racial segregation. For example, men from historically disadvantaged communities may experience economic exclusion and societal marginalization, which compels them to assert their masculinity through alternative means, such as crime or gang culture [18]. Intersectionality provides insight into how race and class influence the construction of masculinity and the behaviours that are deemed acceptable within different communities.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's social learning theory [18] emphasizes the role of observation and imitation in the learning process. Boys often model their behaviour on male figures within their families, communities, and the media. If they witness domestic violence or grow up in environments where aggression is normalized, they are more likely to replicate these behaviours in adulthood [19]. Social learning theory underscores the importance of early socialization in shaping boys' attitudes and behaviours towards gender roles, reinforcing the idea that masculinity is learned and not innate.

By synthesizing these theories, we can understand how masculinity norms in South Africa are constructed through a combination of societal expectations (hegemonic masculinity), intersecting identities (intersectionality), and learned behaviours (social learning theory). This comprehensive framework allows for a deeper exploration of how these norms contribute to gender-based violence and the broader social dynamics within the country.

Methodology

This paper adopted a thematic literature review approach to examine how norms of masculinity and gender socialization among young boys in South Africa contribute to gender-based violence (GBV). A thematic review allows for the synthesis of existing scholarship by identifying, analysing, and organizing key themes and perspectives across diverse sources, including empirical studies, theoretical contributions and policy reports.

Purpose and Scope

The review explored how masculinity is constructed and transmitted through socialization processes, and how these constructs intersect with broader societal issues such as gender-based violence. The review is grounded in the South African context, focusing on literature that highlights the role of family, education, media, culture, and structural factors in shaping boys' gendered identities and attitudes.

Literature Search Strategy

Relevant literature was sourced from academic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online, using keyword combinations such as: *"masculinity norms" AND "South Africa"*, *"gender socialization" AND "boys"*, *"gender-based violence" AND "masculinity"*, *"hegemonic masculinity"*, *"intersectionality and masculinity"*, *"social learning theory" AND "gender roles"*. A snowballing technique was also used, whereby references from key texts were reviewed to identify additional relevant literature.

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Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain focus and academic rigor, the following criteria guided the selection of sources:

- **Inclusion**: Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and reputable policy documents relevant in the study; studies focusing on South Africa or applicable to the South African or other relevant context; literature that discusses masculinity, gender norms, socialization, or GBV.
- **Exclusion**: Opinion articles, non-peer-reviewed blogs, and sources not directly related to the core themes.

Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

A qualitative, inductive approach was used to extract and organize data. Each selected source was reviewed to identify:

- Key arguments and findings related to masculinity and gender socialization.
- Theoretical frameworks employed (e.g., hegemonic masculinity, intersectionality, social learning theory).
- Contextual factors influencing masculinity

Emergent patterns and recurring themes were identified and grouped under thematic headings that form the structure of the review. These included:

- The Concept of Masculinity
- Key Norms and Influences on Gendered Masculinity
- Masculinity Norms, Boys' Socialization, and Challenges
- Masculinity Norms and Gender-Based Violence
- Reshaping and Redefining Boys' Socialization: Policy Recommendations for Gender Equity

Reflexivity and Limitations

This review acknowledges that interpretations of masculinity are context-specific and continually evolving. While the analysis emphasizes the South African context, insights may resonate with broader global conversations on gender. One limitation is the reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture lived experiences or emerging grassroots interventions. However, the synthesis of interdisciplinary sources allows for a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The Concept of Masculinity

Masculinity is a dynamic and socially constructed identity that evolves across cultures and historical periods. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity [2] argues that dominant forms of masculinity sustain male privilege by reinforcing patriarchal power structures. In South Africa, masculinity has been profoundly shaped by colonial legacies, apartheid-era inequalities, and contemporary socio-economic challenges [3]. These influences have produced multiple expressions of masculinity, some of which emphasize responsibility and leadership, while others prioritize control, physical strength, and emotional detachment—factors that can contribute to gender-based violence (GBV).

Intersectionality [16] provides a crucial lens for understanding how race, class, and socio-economic status intersect to shape masculinity norms. In marginalized communities, economic hardships and limited opportunities often intensify pressures on boys to assert their masculinity through dominance or aggression. This complex interplay of historical, economic, and social forces makes it challenging to redefine gender roles and promote alternative, healthier forms of masculinity.

Early adolescence represents a crucial developmental period during which gender attitudes and beliefs begin to solidify. At this stage, boys are increasingly capable of semi-abstract reasoning, are

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developing empathy, and are beginning to understand concepts related to fairness and justice [1]. It is also a time when boys are especially vulnerable to internalizing masculinity norms that valorise emotional suppression, physical toughness, dominance, and heterosexual conquest. These socially endorsed ideals are closely associated with a range of high-risk behaviours frequently observed among adolescent boys, including substance use, early and unprotected sexual activity, and the use of violence against peers and intimate partners [9,19]. Furthermore, these rigid norms often discourage help-seeking behaviour, making it more difficult to identify and address mental health issues in boys, thereby contributing to long-term psychosocial challenges [12].

Transforming harmful masculinity norms requires not only encouraging boys to critically reflect on the social privileges they may enjoy but also addressing the intense social pressures and stigmatization that accompany deviations from dominant gender scripts. Boys who do not conform to these ideals often face ridicule, bullying, and marginalization—barriers that must be actively dismantled through intentional programming. Promising strategies include small-group participatory interventions that engage boys in structured, critical dialogues about gender inequality and their own roles in perpetuating or resisting harmful norms [4]. However, while these short-term interventions may show immediate changes in attitudes, sustained transformation requires a broader socioecological approach. This involves engaging not only individual boys but also their peer networks, families, schools, and communities in coordinated efforts to reshape gender norms.

Despite growing interest in this field, several gaps remain in the research and practice landscape, particularly within low- and middle-income contexts like South Africa. Much of the existing knowledge on gender socialization stems from high-income countries, highlighting the need for more localized research that reflects the lived realities of African adolescents [1]. Additionally, inconsistencies in how gender attitudes are measured across studies limit the comparability and generalizability of findings. There is an urgent need for the development of culturally relevant, reliable, and validated tools to assess gender attitudes among adolescents in a way that captures both individual beliefs and collective social norms [19].

Moreover, evaluations of existing programs often lack long-term follow-up, making it difficult to determine whether changes in gender attitudes endure over time or translate into sustained behavioural shifts. Longitudinal studies are essential to understanding how early interventions influence boys' health, relationships, and engagement with broader society as they mature into adulthood. There is also a need for more nuanced research on the role of parenting, particularly which dimensions of parental behaviour—such as role modelling, communication, or household gender roles—are most influential in shaping boys' gender attitudes. While evidence on the positive effects of comprehensive sexuality education that integrates gender equality content is promising, more rigorous evaluations are required to establish best practices for school-based interventions in the South African context [4].

Additionally, as adolescents increasingly engage with digital media and online platforms, it is vital to understand both the harmful and transformative potential of media in shaping gender norms. Exposure to hypermasculine content online may reinforce harmful stereotypes, yet media also holds the potential to disseminate progressive, gender-equitable messages if used strategically [19,20].

Importantly, efforts to shift gender socialization among boys must occur alongside initiatives aimed at empowering adolescent girls. Building the self-esteem, agency, and voice of girls is essential to achieving true gender equity. Ultimately, addressing harmful masculinity norms will not only improve boys' mental and physical well-being but will also contribute to the safety and health of women and girls, while generating positive ripple effects across families and communities.

Race, Class, and Historical Legacies in Masculinity Socialization

The construction of masculinity in South Africa cannot be fully understood without accounting for the profound influence of race, class, and the country's historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid. These factors have created deeply stratified social and economic realities that shape how boys across different communities experience gender socialization. Masculinity, in this context, is not

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a homogenous concept but one that is lived and performed differently depending on one's social location.

During apartheid, racial hierarchies institutionalized the marginalization of Black South African men, stripping them of economic agency and political power. In response, alternative forms of masculinity emerged—often rooted in physical strength, toughness, and control—as a means of asserting identity and status in the face of systemic disempowerment [3,8]. These constructions have persisted and, in some cases, intensified under post-apartheid socio-economic pressures, particularly within under-resourced urban townships and rural communities.

Poverty and class inequalities also significantly influence how masculinity is performed. In communities with high unemployment and limited access to education or upward mobility, young boys may internalize masculinities associated with dominance, material acquisition, and physical aggression as accessible forms of social capital. Gang culture, peer hierarchies, and gender-based violence often become entwined with these expressions of masculinity, reinforced by a lack of alternative role models and supportive institutional structures [10,21].

Moreover, intersecting systems of inequality shape the ways boys are socialized within families and schools. For example, in contexts where fathers are absent due to labour migration or incarceration—a reality disproportionately affecting low-income Black families—the burden of socializing boys often falls on overextended mothers or community figures. These dynamics not only influence boys' understanding of gender roles and power, but also shape their expectations around emotional expression, authority, and respect [12].

An intersectional approach is therefore critical to any analysis of masculinity norms in South Africa. Without considering the intersecting influences of race, class, and historical injustice, efforts to challenge harmful gender norms risk being superficial or misaligned with the lived experiences of the boys they seek to reach. Gender-transformative programming must be rooted in this broader socio-historical awareness, ensuring that interventions are both context-sensitive and equity-oriented.

Key Norms and Influences on Gendered Masculinity

Masculinity norms are reinforced through various social institutions, shaping boys' perceptions of themselves and their roles in society. These norms are instilled from an early age and are perpetuated through family structures, educational settings, media representations, and cultural traditions.

Family and Upbringing (Early Socialization)

The family is one of the primary agents of gender socialization, playing a crucial role in shaping masculinity norms. In many South African households, boys are expected to be assertive and emotionally restrained, while girls are encouraged to be nurturing and submissive [12,13]. Fathers, in particular, model masculine behaviours, reinforcing notions of toughness and authority. However, the absence of positive male role models—whether due to physical absence or emotional unavailability—often leads boys to seek alternative influences, such as peers or media portrayals of masculinity [11,22,23].

Education and Peer Influence

Schools serve as critical sites of gender socialization, where boys internalize and reinforce masculinity norms through peer interactions and institutional practices. Research indicates that boys who do not conform to dominant masculinity ideals—such as those who express vulnerability or engage in non-traditional activities—often face ridicule, bullying, or exclusion [3,10]. The hidden curriculum in schools, which subtly reinforces traditional gender roles, contributes to these pressures. Additionally, despite being formally banned, corporal punishment persists in some schools, further legitimizing the association between masculinity and physical aggression [3].

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Media and Popular Culture

The media plays a powerful role in shaping boys' perceptions of masculinity. In South Africa, popular music, television, and social media frequently depict men as aggressive, emotionally detached, and dominant over women, reinforcing hypermasculine ideals [20]. Studies on South African hip-hop and kwaito music reveal that many lyrics perpetuate stereotypes of male dominance and entitlement, while online spaces, particularly social media, amplify these narratives by promoting 'alpha male' discourse [12]. Such portrayals contribute to normalizing violence and discouraging emotional vulnerability among boys.

Traditional and Religious Influences

Cultural and religious traditions further entrench rigid masculinity norms. Initiation rites, such as *ulwaluko* and *lebollo*, which are practiced among various South African ethnic groups, emphasize endurance, toughness, and male authority, reinforcing hierarchical gender roles [24]. While these rites serve cultural and communal purposes, they often discourage emotional expression and reinforce rigid expectations of male dominance. Similarly, religious teachings in some communities promote traditional gender roles that prioritize male authority and female submission, shaping boys' perceptions of their roles in society.

Masculinity Norms, Boys' Socialization, and Challenges

Within the broader context of gender socialization, the family remains one of the most influential institutions in shaping boys' perceptions of masculinity from an early age. Parents contribute to this process both directly and indirectly—through the enforcement of gendered rules, the use of differentiated disciplinary strategies, and the expectations they hold for boys versus girls. Boys are often encouraged to demonstrate independence, emotional control, and assertiveness, while girls may be guided toward care-oriented and submissive behaviours [12,13]. These parental cues play a central role in embedding dominant masculinity norms in the home environment.

Despite this well-established influence, existing literature does not sufficiently clarify how parental impact is mediated by the parents' own gender ideologies [25]. For instance, it remains uncertain whether parents who personally endorse more equitable gender attitudes are more likely to foster egalitarian socialization practices. Similarly, there is limited understanding of how the division of labour within households—such as who undertakes caregiving, decision-making, or domestic chores—may signal implicit messages about gender roles to children. Moreover, family structure itself is a potentially significant factor; boys raised in single-parent households, particularly those headed by women, may receive different socialization cues than those in two-parent households, yet the literature rarely disaggregates findings to explore these distinctions. Also underexamined is whether mothers' and fathers' attitudes shape boys' gender development in different ways, or whether their influence is more impactful in combination.

This lack of clarity highlights a crucial gap in our understanding of how masculinity norms are transmitted in the home. Future research must move beyond generalized accounts of parental influence and explore how intersecting variables—such as parental beliefs, household dynamics, and socio-economic conditions—affect boys' internalization of gender roles. Such inquiry is particularly vital in the South African context, where diverse family structures and cultural legacies complicate the pathways through which boys learn what it means to "be a man."

As boys enter adolescence, peer groups become increasingly central in the construction and reinforcement of masculinity norms. Within these groups, masculinity is often policed and performed through a combination of physical competitiveness, verbal teasing, and pressure to engage in high-risk behaviours. Adolescent males may challenge one another to demonstrate toughness, dominance, or autonomy through acts such as fighting, substance use, or risky sexual behaviour - particularly the early sexual conquest of girls, which is frequently valorised as a key marker of successful masculinity [3,10]. These performances of manhood are not merely encouraged; they are actively regulated

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through peer surveillance, with any deviation from dominant masculine ideals swiftly sanctioned. Boys who display emotional sensitivity, reject aggressive behaviour, or engage in activities considered "feminine" often face ridicule, bullying, and homophobic slurs. Such social penalties reinforce a narrow and often toxic version of masculinity that discourages vulnerability and diversity in gender expression, ultimately limiting boys' emotional development and contributing to the normalization of gender-based violence.

As emphasized in literature [25], young adolescent boys often internalize and express masculinity norms that prioritize physical toughness, autonomy, emotional restraint, and dominance. These norms manifest in behaviours such as demonstrating high pain tolerance, engaging in physical altercations, competing in sports, and aspiring to financial independence and the role of provider. Boys are also socialized to suppress vulnerability, avoid behaviours perceived as "feminine," and resolve personal challenges independently. Furthermore, demonstrations of heterosexual prowess—such as having multiple female partners or asserting control in relationships—are often valorised as markers of successful masculinity.

The literature further suggests that adolescent boys are generally more likely than their female peers to endorse unequal gender norms. This pattern can be attributed to several interrelated factors. Firstly, in many sociocultural contexts, male privilege is deeply normalized, reducing boys' perception of the need to challenge prevailing gender hierarchies. Secondly, the onset of puberty often grants boys increased autonomy and social freedom compared to girls, reinforcing their relative societal privilege and diminishing the incentive to question these benefits. Lastly, boys who express more equitable or non-conforming attitudes—such as displaying emotional openness, assisting with domestic tasks, or adopting appearances associated with femininity—often encounter heightened social stigma, including peer ridicule and societal disapproval. These social sanctions act as powerful deterrents to embracing alternative, gender-equitable masculinities.

While a range of factors—such as ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, school environment, and the biological transitions of puberty—contribute to the gender socialization of young boys, literature on South Africa emphasizes the especially formative roles of parents and peers in shaping dominant masculinity norms. In the South African context, parenting styles are deeply influenced by historical legacies, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural expectations, all of which shape how masculinity is communicated and enforced within households [12,13]. Parents, either intentionally or unconsciously, contribute to gender socialization by imposing different expectations and disciplinary strategies for boys and girls [1]. Boys are frequently encouraged to be strong, independent, and emotionally stoic, while displays of vulnerability or caregiving behaviour are often discouraged. These messages are conveyed through both verbal instructions and daily practices within the home [11]. However, current literature does not provide sufficient clarity on how parental influence is shaped by the parents' own gender ideologies, the division of labour within the household, or the structure of the family—particularly how dynamics differ between two-parent and single-parent households, or how the attitudes of mothers and fathers respectively shape boys' understanding of gender roles. This represents a notable gap, especially in a country where family structures are diverse and often impacted by labour migration, poverty, and social fragmentation [23].

As boys transition into adolescence, peers play an increasingly dominant role in socializing and enforcing prevailing masculinity norms. Within many South African communities, male peer groups serve as powerful sites for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinities. Boys challenge one another through physical contests, verbal teasing, and social pressure to engage in risk-taking behaviours such as substance use, violent confrontations, and early sexual activity [3,10]. These behaviours are often celebrated as markers of manhood and status, while non-conformity—such as emotional openness, empathy, or participation in domestic tasks—is penalized through ridicule, bullying, and the use of homophobic insults [9,12]. Peer regulation acts as a potent force in shaping boys' behaviour, reinforcing rigid gender boundaries and discouraging deviation from dominant masculine ideals.

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Although there is less robust research on the influence of schools, emerging studies indicate that educational institutions in South Africa also play a significant role in gender socialization. Teachers may, consciously or unconsciously, reinforce traditional gender roles through their interactions with students and their responses to gendered behaviour in the classroom [1,3]. For example, boys who display assertiveness or aggression may be rewarded or excused, while those who are quiet or nurturing may be mocked or ignored. The persistence of corporal punishment in some schools, despite its formal prohibition, further embeds the association between masculinity, control, and violence [3]. Moreover, while some schools have adopted elements of comprehensive sexuality education, implementation remains inconsistent and often fails to meaningfully challenge deeply held gender stereotypes. This limits the potential of the curriculum to foster critical reflection and gender-equitable attitudes among boys during their formative years [4].

Media also represents an emerging site of gender socialisation, particularly as South African adolescents gain increased access to mobile phones and online platforms. Social media, music, and television often portray hypermasculine images that glorify dominance, emotional detachment, and control over women [12,20]. These narratives not only reflect but also reinforce societal expectations of what it means to be a man. Boys may emulate these portrayals as part of their identity construction, especially in the absence of positive real-life role models. Although the full impact of media on boys' gender attitudes and behaviours in South Africa is still under-researched, there is growing concern about the normalization of sexually explicit content, online harassment, and peer validation of harmful masculine behaviours in digital spaces [19]. This underscores the urgent need for further empirical investigation into how media exposure influences gender norms and risk behaviours among South African boys.

Overall, while the influence of parents and peers remains paramount in the gender socialization of boys, their roles intersect with broader institutional and cultural forces that reinforce harmful masculinities. The South African context - with its unique socio-political history, persistent inequalities, and evolving cultural landscapes - demands a nuanced and context-specific understanding of how masculinity is constructed and sustained during adolescence. Addressing these dynamics is essential for informing effective interventions that promote healthier and more equitable masculinities.

Rigid masculinity norms pose significant challenges for boys as they navigate societal expectations. From an early age, boys are socialized to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity, often at the expense of their emotional well-being and personal development. Accordingly,

- Pressure to Conform: Boys face intense social pressure to align with hegemonic masculinity, with deviations often met with ridicule, ostracization, or even violence. Expressions of vulnerability, emotional openness, or engagement in non-traditional roles are frequently discouraged, reinforcing restrictive gender norms.
- Mental Health Struggles: The demand for emotional suppression contributes to high rates of mental health issues among boys and young men. Research highlights a strong link between rigid masculinity norms and increased risks of depression, substance abuse, and even suicide, as boys are less likely to seek help due to stigma (Ratele, 2016).
- Economic and Social Struggles: Socio-economic challenges, including unemployment and poverty, further complicate masculinity construction. In marginalized communities, economic hardships often lead young men to seek alternative ways of asserting masculinity, sometimes through crime, violence, or gang involvement as a means of establishing dominance and social status [13].

These challenges underscore the urgent need for interventions that promote healthier, more inclusive masculinities, allowing boys to develop emotional resilience, seek support when needed, and redefine masculinity in ways that do not perpetuate harm.

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Masculinity Norms and Gender-Based Violence

There is a well-established link between rigid masculinity norms and gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa [9,26]. The socialization of boys into ideals of dominance, aggression, and emotional suppression fosters environments where violence is normalized as a means of asserting control. These deeply ingrained norms not only shape individual behaviours but also contribute to broader societal patterns of violence and inequality [19].

South Africa has one of the highest rates of GBV globally, with intimate partner violence being the most prevalent form [6]. The expectation that men must assert control over women often leads to violent enforcement of gender hierarchies, resulting in widespread physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Research indicates that men who internalize hegemonic masculinity are significantly more likely to engage in intimate partner violence and sexual harassment, reinforcing a cycle of gendered violence [7,27].

Cultural narratives frequently justify violence as a means of maintaining male authority, further entrenching GBV within social structures. Studies reveal that many South African men perceive violent behaviour as an acceptable response to perceived challenges to their masculinity, linking it directly to dominant gender norms [7]. Without intervention, these norms continue to perpetuate a culture where violence against women is tolerated, underscoring the urgent need for policies and programs that challenge harmful masculinities and promote gender equity.

Evidence from the Masiphephe Network's policy dialogues in Mpumalanga reveals that GBV is closely tied to entrenched patriarchal norms and harmful constructions of masculinity. Young men in the region often grow up in environments where dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression are not only normalized but valorized as markers of manhood. These norms are reinforced by cultural traditions, rigid gender roles, and a lack of gender-sensitive education. Anecdotal reports from community engagements suggest that many boys begin perpetrating acts of GBV in their teenage years, underscoring the need for earlier intervention in the socialization process [28].

Factors such as unemployment, substance abuse, exposure to violence in childhood, and societal endorsement of male sexual entitlement further drive the prevalence of GBV. Notably, the policy brief highlights that 75% of men in South Africa have perpetrated GBV, and one in three women has experienced GBV in her lifetime. In such contexts, masculinity becomes a vehicle for asserting control, often through violence, as a way to cope with social and economic marginalization [28].

Gender-Transformative Programmes and Community Interventions

Several community-based initiatives have shown promise in reshaping masculinity norms and reducing GBV. Among them is the Stepping Stones programme, which engages young men and women in participatory dialogue sessions on relationships, sexuality, and violence. Evaluation studies show that male participants reported reduced engagement in transactional sex, lower alcohol consumption, and fewer incidents of violence against women [14].

Similarly, Brothers for Life, a programme active in schools and communities, focuses on redefining manhood by promoting positive masculinities and denouncing toxic gender norms. It fosters peer-led mentorship, media advocacy, and structured dialogue among adolescent and adult men. Participants are encouraged to model respectful behaviour, take responsibility for their actions, and serve as role models in their communities [28].

Sonke Gender Justice's "One Man Can" Campaign provides another exemplary case. This initiative works with men and boys to challenge harmful norms, engage them as partners in ending GBV, and promote gender equity. Reports show that 50% of participants took action to stop violence in their communities, suggesting that with the right support and resources, men and boys can become effective agents of change [29].

These interventions share a "gender-transformative" approach, as defined by the World Health Organization [30]—they aim not just to include men in GBV discussions, but to actively challenge and change the norms, power dynamics, and behaviours that perpetuate inequality.

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Despite these successes, most GBV-related interventions targeting men remain small-scale, underfunded, and short-term. Government efforts, such as the 16 Days of Activism Campaign, are often event-based and lack sustained engagement. Young men, particularly in marginalized communities, are seldom reached consistently or effectively. This results in interventions with limited reach and minimal long-term impact [28].

Additionally, resistance to GBV policies among young men is a growing challenge. Many perceive gender-focused laws as biased or threatening to male identity, especially when poorly communicated or enforced. Such backlash reveals the importance of inclusive strategies that educate men and boys about GBV policies in ways that foster cooperation rather than defensiveness [28,31].

Although South Africa has demonstrated political commitment to addressing GBV through various frameworks, including the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF 2020–2030). This plan includes explicit goals to engage men and boys in prevention and response. At a broader level, national commitments such as the African Youth Charter, Agenda 2063, and the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5) all promote youth empowerment and gender equality.

However, the implementation gap persists. While legal frameworks are in place, there is insufficient investment in translating these commitments into practice - particularly in ways that center young men as allies in gender transformation. The Integrated Youth Crime Prevention Strategy (2020) and initiatives by the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) offer platforms to engage young men, but their potential remains underutilized [28].

Reshaping and Redefining Boys' Socialization: Policy Recommendations for Gender Equity

Transformative interventions aimed at reshaping harmful masculinity norms and addressing unequal gender power relations are critical for preventing gender-based violence and fostering gender equity. In South Africa, where rigid gender roles are often ingrained from early adolescence, there has been growing recognition of the need to engage young boys—not just adult men—in efforts to challenge traditional masculine ideals and promote healthier gender socialization [4,12]. Since the mid-2000s, increasing attention has been given to early adolescence as a pivotal stage for intervention. This shift has been accompanied by a proliferation of programs that target the social, developmental, and health-related needs of very young adolescents [1,19].

These efforts reflect a broader movement toward upstream, preventive strategies that seek to interrupt the formation of harmful gender attitudes before they become deeply embedded. Recent literature and programmatic evaluations underscore the importance of community-level interventions that create inclusive, participatory spaces for skill-building, dialogue, and mentorship—particularly for adolescents navigating restrictive and often inequitable gender environments [19,20]. Such platforms are especially crucial for girls, whose mobility and access to social spaces may be limited due to cultural norms and safety concerns, but they are equally important for boys who need safe environments to explore alternative masculinities that emphasize empathy, non-violence, and mutual respect.

There remains, however, a pressing need for innovation and further research to test and refine these interventions in diverse South African contexts. Evidence suggests that while many programs are promising, relatively few have been rigorously evaluated for long-term impact, particularly those targeting younger adolescents. As such, there is a call for more experimentation, adaptive learning, and context-specific program design that takes into account the complex intersections of gender, age, race, and class. Strengthening multi-sectoral collaborations—across education, health, justice, and community development sectors—will be essential for sustaining impact and institutionalizing gender-transformative approaches across South Africa's varied socio-cultural landscapes.

Addressing harmful masculinity norms requires deliberate interventions at multiple levels, including education, community engagement, media influence, and legal reforms. Schools play a critical role in reshaping boys' perceptions of masculinity by integrating gender-sensitive curricula

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that challenge stereotypes and promote emotional intelligence. Educational policies should incorporate gender-responsive teaching methods, ensuring that teachers receive training to counteract toxic masculinity and foster an environment where boys feel comfortable expressing vulnerability and empathy [13]. Establishing mentorship programs within schools can also help promote positive masculinities by providing young boys with role models who embody values of respect, cooperation, and non-violence.

Beyond formal education, community-based interventions are essential in redefining masculinity. Fathers and male role models should be engaged in programs that encourage positive masculinity, as research indicates that boys with supportive male figures are less likely to internalize harmful gender norms. Parenting programs should focus on promoting emotional intelligence and gender-equitable attitudes. Additionally, collaboration with traditional leaders can help reform initiation practices that reinforce rigid gender roles, ensuring that cultural rites of passage emphasize responsibility and respect rather than dominance and aggression [24]. Community-based peer-led initiatives can also provide boys with safe spaces to discuss masculinity and challenge harmful social norms.

The media plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of masculinity, making it imperative to implement regulations and awareness campaigns that challenge toxic narratives. Strategic use of mass media and social platforms to amplify positive masculinities and deconstruct hypermasculine ideals can reinforce healthy gender norms at scale [20]. Media literacy programs should be introduced to help boys critically engage with gender representations and recognize the impact of hypermasculine portrayals. Enforcing guidelines on gender representation can further discourage depictions of men as aggressive and emotionally detached. Campaigns such as *Boys to Men*, *Men as Allies*, *Stepping Stones*, *Brothers for Life*, and *One Man Can* can showcase alternative masculinities based on empathy, collaboration, and equality. These initiatives would not only challenge existing stereotypes but also provide young boys with diverse representations of what it means to be a man in a gender-equitable society. Their promising positive outcomes include reduced perpetration of violence, increased emotional awareness, and stronger commitment to equitable gender relations [14,29]. These programmes can be adapted and implemented more broadly in schools, faith institutions, and community settings to reach boys during formative years. Hence, a critical need to scale up such gender-transformative programmes that can shift harmful masculinities and promote empathy, non-violence, and mutual respect.

Legal and institutional reforms are necessary to address the structural aspects of masculinity-related violence. Strengthening GBV legislation to explicitly tackle gendered violence rooted in masculinity norms is crucial. Law enforcement officers should receive gender-sensitivity training to improve responses to GBV cases and prevent the reinforcement of harmful biases. Furthermore, expanding access to mental health services targeted at young men can encourage emotional well-being and reduce the stigma around seeking psychological support. By addressing masculinity at both individual and structural levels, these interventions can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society where boys are empowered to embrace healthier, more diverse expressions of masculinity.

Underlying all of these efforts is the imperative for sustained investment and political will. Without adequate funding, long-term planning, and institutional support, interventions risk being short-lived or tokenistic. Transforming masculinities is not a one-off event but a generational process that demands consistent engagement, cultural sensitivity, and structural change. When such efforts are implemented holistically and contextually, they hold immense potential to break cycles of violence and cultivate a generation of boys who champion gender justice.

Conclusion

Gender socialization is a lifelong process that shapes not only individual behaviours and identities but also the broader structures of society. In the South African context—marked by intersecting histories of colonialism, apartheid, and enduring structural inequalities—early gender

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socialization plays a pivotal role in reinforcing or challenging gender hierarchies. This review has provided a thematic synthesis of existing literature, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of hegemonic masculinity, intersectionality, and social learning theory to understand how boys in South Africa are socialized into dominant masculinity norms.

These norms—centered on emotional stoicism, physical dominance, and control—are not naturally occurring, but socially constructed and reinforced through key institutions such as families, schools, peer groups, media, and cultural practices. Left unchallenged, they perpetuate cycles of gender-based violence (GBV), entrench male privilege, and marginalize boys who do not conform. By critically examining these processes, this review contributes to the growing body of knowledge that recognizes the urgent need to engage boys early in life through transformative socialization that fosters empathy, equity, and emotional literacy.

The review also highlights critical research and programming gaps, including the lack of sustained interventions targeting early adolescence, limited evaluation of school-based approaches, and insufficient attention to the influence of race, class, and historical legacies on gender identity formation. Importantly, it calls for a shift from short-term, individual-focused interventions toward multi-level, socioecological strategies that engage boys in their social contexts—families, schools, communities, and media environments.

To that end, deliberate investment in gender-sensitive education policies is crucial. Schools should be reimagined and serve as transformative spaces where boys are encouraged to embrace emotional intelligence, respect, and non-violence. Teacher training programs must incorporate gender-responsive pedagogies that actively counteract toxic masculinity while fostering positive male role models through structured mentorship initiatives. Structured mentorship, especially in under-resourced communities, can provide critical support to boys navigating conflicting societal messages about manhood.

Beyond the classroom, community-driven initiatives play a critical role in redefining masculinity. Fathers and male caregivers must be engaged in programs that promote positive masculinities cantered on care, responsibility, and non-violence. Collaboration with traditional leaders can help reframe initiation rites to emphasize values of respect and gender equity rather than dominance and toughness. Continuously engaging them and faith-based leaders is also essential, especially in communities where cultural and religious norms heavily influence gender expectations. Reframing initiation rites and religious teachings to promote respect, care, and responsibility, rather than dominance, can shift the moral and symbolic foundations of masculinity. Additionally, peer-led interventions can provide boys with alternative narratives of masculinity that challenge societal pressures to conform to aggressive or emotionally detached behaviours.

The media, likewise, remains a powerful force in shaping public perceptions of gender roles. Therefore, media interventions must actively challenge the glorification of hypermasculinity and violence, instead promoting diverse and equitable representations of men. Media literacy programs can equip boys with the critical skills needed to analyse and resist harmful gender narratives, while awareness campaigns can showcase alternative masculinities based on empathy, collaboration, and emotional openness.

Ultimately, this review makes the case for a multi-sectoral approach as a necessary systemic approach to challenge patriarchal structures and foster a society where boys and men contribute positively to gender justice. Legal and institutional reforms must complement educational and community-based efforts by strengthening GBV laws, training law enforcement officers on gender sensitivity, and expanding access to mental health support for young men. By integrating efforts across education, community engagement, media representation, and policy reform, South Africa can cultivate a generation of men who reject harmful masculinity norms and actively participate in creating a more inclusive and gender-equitable future.

By linking theory to practice and identifying both the risks and opportunities embedded in current systems of socialization, this review offers a roadmap for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers committed to gender justice. It envisions a future in which South African boys grow

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into men who reject harmful gender norms and contribute meaningfully to a more inclusive, equitable, and non-violent society.

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