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Review

Norms of Masculinities 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 how norms of masculinity and processes of gender socialization among boys in South Africa shape attitudes and behaviours that contribute to gender-based violence (GBV). The central aim is to offer a critical theoretical synthesis and contextual analysis that informs the development of gender-equitable policies and interventions. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as hegemonic masculinities, intersectionality, and social learning theory, this study examines how historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors shape gender socialization and influence boys' developmental trajectories. Through an intersectional lens, this paper underscores the urgent need to challenge harmful masculinity norms and promote alternative models that encourage emotional expression, empathy, and equitable gender relations. Finally, it provides recommendations on how these harmful norms can be disrupted through educational, community, media, and policy-level reforms to foster healthier masculinity norms and reduce GBV in South Africa.

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

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1. 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]. GBV refers to any harmful act directed at an individual based on their gender, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. GBV disproportionately affects women and girls and is rooted in unequal power relations and rigid gender norms. It is both a consequence and a tool of patriarchal systems that normalize male dominance and female subordination. 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 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. Beyond its social implications, early gender socialization also represents a crucial public health concern. Rigid gender norms have been linked to a range of negative health outcomes, including increased rates of substance abuse, depression, suicide, and interpersonal violence among boys and men. As such, preventive socialization—defined as the intentional promotion of equitable gender norms and non-violent behaviours during early childhood and adolescence—has emerged as a promising strategy for long-term GBV prevention and the promotion of psychosocial well-being. Early adolescence, in particular, is a critical period during which gender attitudes begin to solidify. Intervening at this developmental stage can help disrupt the internalization of harmful masculinities and support the cultivation of empathy, emotional literacy, and gender-equitable behaviours.

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 the existing literature, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how masculinity norms can be challenged and redefined to promote more equitable gender relations. The central objective of this paper is to provide a theoretical and conceptual synthesis of how masculinity norms and gender socialization processes contribute to the perpetuation of GBV in South Africa. Specifically, this paper asks the following: How are young boys socialized into dominant masculinity norms, and what are the implications for violence and gender inequality? The analysis draws on empirical literature, established theoretical frameworks, and policy documents to (i) interrogate the construction of masculinities, (ii) identify institutional and cultural reinforcements, and (iii) recommend strategies for reshaping boys' socialization in ways that promote gender justice. This objective guides the structure and informs the paper's relevance to both academic and policy audiences.

2. Research Gap and Review Aim

Despite an expanding body of literature examining the relationship between masculinities 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 masculinities 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 family, educa-

tion, 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 (intersectional analysis) remains underutilized in the 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 early, practice-oriented interventions. Although many studies acknowledge the harmful effects of rigid masculinity norms, there is insufficient focus on practical, context-sensitive interventions and child-centred approaches that target boys during formative developmental stages. Most existing programs are reactive, engaging men only after harmful behaviours have been normalized [4,14]. This leaves a major gap in understanding how to effectively intervene during the formative developmental years, before these attitudes become deeply entrenched. It also presents 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 the existing literature on the gender socialization of boys in South Africa through intersectional and multi-level lenses. By adopting theoretical frameworks such as hegemonic masculinities [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.

In synthesizing these various lines of inquiry, this review not only highlights gaps in the existing literature but also contributes to a more integrated understanding of how early gender socialization informs broader patterns of inequality and violence. Guided by this aim, the central question underpinning the review is as follows: How are dominant norms of masculinities socialized among boys in South Africa, and what are the implications of these processes for the prevention of gender-based violence and the development of gender-equitable policy interventions? This question frames the structure and thematic progression of this review, allowing for a critical interrogation of the institutions, norms, and narratives that shape masculine identities from early childhood through adolescence. As such, this article presents a theoretical and thematic synthesis of the literature on the socialization of masculinities in South African boys, with the goal of informing prevention-focused interventions and gender-equitable policy strategies. While it does not offer a comparative analysis or a direct critique of specific policies, it consolidates conceptual and empirical insights across disciplines to highlight the formative role of early gender socialization in the perpetuation of GBV.

3. Theoretical Framework

The socialization of masculinities 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 masculinities, 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.

3.1. Hegemonic Masculinities

Masculinities are socially constructed identities and expressions of male behaviour, shaped by cultural, historical, and institutional contexts. Masculinities evolve over time

and are influenced by factors such as race, class, sexuality, and location [2]. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant and idealized form of masculinity that upholds male authority and reinforces gender hierarchies. It is characterized by traits such as physical strength, emotional control, heterosexuality, and dominance over women and subordinated masculinities. Though not universally practiced, it holds the most social power and prestige, shaping expectations of male behaviour and legitimizing patriarchal norms. It is a socially constructed concept that varies across contexts and is both maintained and contested over time [2].

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

3.2. 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, masculinities are 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 masculinities through alternative means, such as crime or gang culture [18]. Intersectionality provides insight into how race and class influence the construction of masculinities and the behaviours that are deemed acceptable within different communities.

3.3. 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 masculinities are 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 masculinities), 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.

In addition to understanding masculinities as a product of socialization, the emerging literature emphasizes the importance of preventive socialization strategies in curbing gender-based violence from an early age. Preventive socialization refers to deliberate efforts aimed at promoting equitable gender norms and non-violent behaviours during formative developmental stages—particularly in childhood and early adolescence—before harmful attitudes become deeply internalized [19,20]. Research highlights that early interventions that integrate gender-transformative and preventive socialization content within schools, families, and community-based programs can significantly reshape boys' perceptions of masculinities by fostering empathy, emotional literacy, positive identity formation, and respect for gender equity [21]. Such approaches are proactive, addressing root causes of

GBV rather than responding to its consequences. Integrating this preventive lens into the broader conceptual framework underscores the urgency and effectiveness of early, context-sensitive engagement with boys as a foundational strategy for long-term gender justice. It also reinforces the need for proactive, developmentally timed, and contextually grounded programming to support boys' holistic growth and contribute to broader social equity. Overall, framing preventive socialization is a public health strategy and aligns with global calls to address gender inequality and violence through upstream interventions.

4. Methodology

This paper adopted a thematic literature review approach [22,23] to examine how norms of masculinities 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.

4.1. Purpose and Scope

This review explored how masculinities are constructed and transmitted through socialization processes and how these constructs intersect with broader societal issues such as GBV. This 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.

4.2. 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 "*masculinities norms*" AND "*South Africa*", "*gender socialization*" *AND* "*boys*", "*gender-based violence*" AND "*masculinities*", "*hegemonic masculinities*", "*intersectionality and masculinities*", "*social learning theory*", AND "*gender roles*". A snowballing technique was also used, whereby references from key texts were reviewed to identify additional relevant literature. This strategy aligns with best practices for transparent and reproducible searches in narrative and reviews [24].

4.3. 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, focusing on South Africa or applicable to the South African or other relevant context; literature that discusses masculinities, gender norms, socialization, or GBV.
- **Exclusion**: Opinion articles, non-peer-reviewed blogs, and sources not directly related to the core themes.

In other words, studies were included based on relevance to the research questions, conceptual focus, and geographical context. This phase followed recommendations from a previous study [25] to ensure rigor in selection and reduce bias.

4.4. Screening and Selection Process

The initial search generated 216 documents. After the removal of 54 duplicates, 162 unique sources were screened based on titles and abstracts. From these, 78 full-text documents were assessed for eligibility. Following detailed screening using the stated

criteria, 45 documents were excluded for reasons such as geographic irrelevance, limited focus on masculinities, or theoretical misalignment. A final set of 35 documents was included in the thematic analysis.

4.5. 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 masculinities and gender socialization.
- Theoretical frameworks employed (e.g., hegemonic masculinities, intersectionality, and social learning theory).
- Contextual factors influencing masculinities.

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

- The concept of masculinities;
- Key norms and influences on gendered masculinities;
- Masculinity norms, boys' socialization, and challenges;
- Masculinity norms and gender-based violence;
- Reshaping and redefining boys' socialization: policy recommendations for gender equity.

4.6. Reflexivity and Limitations

This review acknowledges that interpretations of masculinities 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 and peer-reviewed sources allows for a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

5. Results

5.1. The Concept of Masculinities

Masculinity is a dynamic and socially constructed identity that evolves across cultures and historical periods. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinities [2] argues that dominant forms of masculinities sustain male privilege by reinforcing patriarchal power structures. In South Africa, masculinities have been profoundly shaped by colonial legacies, apartheid-era inequalities, and contemporary socio-economic challenges [3]. These influences have produced multiple expressions of masculinities, 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) [3].

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 masculinities 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 masculinities.

Early adolescence represents a crucial developmental period during which gender attitudes and beliefs begin to solidify [26]. At this stage, boys are increasingly capable of semi-abstract reasoning, are developing empathy, and are beginning to understand concepts related to fairness and justice. It is also a time when boys are especially vulnerable to internalizing masculinity norms that valorise emotional suppression, physical toughness, dominance, and heterosexual conquest [1,19,25]. 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 [10,27]. Boys who do not conform to these ideals often face ridicule, bullying, and marginalization—barriers that must be actively dismantled through intentional programming [3,12,28]. 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.

5.2. Socializing Masculinities in South Africa: Structural Roots, Agents, and Lived Realities

The construction of masculinities 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 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 masculinities 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 masculinities are 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 masculinities, reinforced by a lack of alternative role models and supportive institutional structures [10,21]. 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].

Within this structural context, various social institutions serve as critical agents in reinforcing masculinity norms and shaping boys' perceptions of themselves and their roles in society. The family is one of the primary agents of gender socialization. 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, emotional unavailability, or single motherhood—often leads boys to seek alternative influences, such as peers or media portrayals of masculinities [11,22,23]. Schools further reinforce these norms through both explicit practices and hidden curricula. 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]. Additionally, despite being formally banned, corporal punishment persists in some schools, further legitimizing the association between masculinities and physical aggression [3].

The media also plays a powerful role in shaping boys' perceptions of masculinities. 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 an "alpha male" discourse [12]. Such portrayals contribute to normalizing violence and discouraging emotional vulnerability among boys. 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.

Having examined the structural and institutional mechanisms through which masculinity norms are transmitted, it is important to consider the lived experiences and developmental consequences for boys navigating these rigid expectations. Boys face intense social pressure to align with hegemonic masculinities, with deviations often met with ridicule, ostracization, or even violence [3,10]. Expressions of vulnerability, emotional openness, or engagement in non-traditional roles are frequently discouraged, reinforcing restrictive gender norms. 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 [8,25]. 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 masculinities, sometimes through crime, violence, or gang involvement as a means of establishing dominance and social status [7,8,13].

Parental influence 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, 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. Family structure also matters; 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. As boys transition into adolescence, peer groups 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].

Although less robust, emerging studies indicate that educational institutions also shape masculinities. Teachers may, consciously or unconsciously, reinforce traditional gender roles through classroom interactions and differential responses to student behaviour [1,3]. Boys who display assertiveness or aggression may be rewarded or excused, while those who are quiet or nurturing may be mocked. Corporal punishment, still informally practiced in some schools, reinforces the link between masculinity, control, and violence [3]. Inconsistent implementation of comprehensive sexuality education further limits opportunities for boys to develop gender-equitable attitudes [4].

Finally, as South African adolescent boys gain increased access to mobile phones and online platforms, media becomes an even more potent site of gender socialization. Hypermasculine portrayals in music, television, and social media reinforce expectations of dominance and control. Boys may emulate these portrayals, particularly in the absence of positive real-life role models. 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 empirical research into how media exposure shapes gender attitudes and risk behaviours among boys.

Overall, 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 masculinities are constructed, reinforced, and experienced by boys. Addressing these dynamics is essential for informing effective interventions that promote healthier and more equitable masculinities.

5.3. 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 the violent enforcement of gender hierarchies, resulting in widespread physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Research indicates that men who internalize hegemonic masculinities 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 masculinities, 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 masculinities. Young men in the region often grow up in environments where dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression are not only normalized but valorised 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, masculinities become a vehicle for asserting control, often through violence, as a way to cope with social and economic marginalization [28].

5.4. 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.

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].

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 centre 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 under-utilized [28].

5.5. 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 masculinities by integrating gender-sensitive curricula that challenge stereotypes and promote emotional intelligence. Educational policies should incorporate gender-responsive teaching methods, ensuring that teachers receive training to counteract toxic masculinities 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 masculinities, 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 masculinities and challenge harmful social norms.

The media plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of masculinities, making it imperative to implement regulations and awareness campaigns that challenge toxic narratives. The 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 the 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, there is 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 masculinities 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 masculinities.

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.

6. Conclusions

This review set out to explore how gender socialization and norms of masculinity shape the experiences of boys and contribute to gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa. Specifically, it examined how structural inequalities, socialization agents, and psychosocial dynamics interact to reinforce dominant forms of masculinity from early childhood through adolescence. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of hegemonic masculinity, intersectionality, and social learning theory, the review provided a thematic synthesis of existing literature to understand how masculinities are produced, reinforced, and contested within the South African context.

Findings were organized across three analytical axes: structural contexts, agents of socialization, and psychosocial consequences. First, it was shown that race, class, and the historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to produce unequal environments for gender socialization. These intersecting structures shape boys' access to resources, social capital, and role models, often reinforcing marginalization and exclusion. Second, families, peers, schools, cultural practices, and media were identified as powerful agents of socialization that reproduce narrow ideals of masculinity centred on emotional stoicism, dominance, and physical control. Finally, this review examined the psychosocial and developmental consequences of these norms, highlighting how they contribute to emotional repression, risk-taking, poor mental health outcomes, and the normalization of GBV.

These insights point to the urgent need for early, intersectional, and multi-level interventions that cultivate more inclusive and emotionally supportive masculinities. Short-term or individual-focused approaches are insufficient in the face of the deeply embedded social and structural systems that sustain harmful gender norms. Rather, a socioecological model that engages boys within their families, schools, peer groups, media environments, and communities is critical.

In educational settings, investment in gender-sensitive curricula and teacher training is essential. Schools should be reimagined as spaces that nurture emotional intelligence, empathy, and respect. Gender-responsive pedagogies, supported by structured mentorship programs, can provide boys—especially in under-resourced communities—with alternative models of masculinity rooted in care, accountability, and equality.

At the community level, interventions must actively involve fathers, caregivers, and traditional leaders to reframe gender expectations. Cultural and religious institutions hold significant power to reinforce or dismantle gender hierarchies. Engagement strategies that integrate gender-equitable messaging into initiation rites, faith teachings, and caregiving roles can shift both symbolic and practical norms around what it means to be a man. The media also plays a decisive role in shaping masculinities. Countering the glamorization of hypermasculinity in music, television, and online platforms requires coordinated media interventions. Media literacy programs can empower boys to critically engage with harmful content, while campaigns promoting alternative masculinities based on empathy and cooperation can offer new aspirational models.

Legal and institutional reforms must complement these efforts. Strengthening GBV legislation, ensuring gender-sensitivity training for law enforcement, and expanding access to mental health services for boys and young men are all critical components of a holistic strategy. Together, these interventions form the foundation for a systemic, long-term approach to transforming masculinities in support of gender justice.

This review has highlighted key research and programming gaps. There remains a lack of longitudinal studies evaluating the long-term impacts of early interventions, and there is limited research into how boys internalize equitable gender norms in non-traditional households or community settings. The influence of digital media and online masculinities, as well as the intersections of gender with race, disability, sexuality, and religion, are also underexplored. Future research must address these gaps through intersectional, context-sensitive approaches that prioritize the lived experiences of South African boys.

Summarily, this review offers a roadmap for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to transform gender socialization in South Africa. It envisions a society where boys are not constrained by rigid masculine ideals but are supported in developing emotionally rich, respectful, and equitable identities. Only through coordinated efforts across education, community, media, and policy can South Africa cultivate a generation of boys and men who reject harmful masculinities and actively contribute to building a just, inclusive, and non-violent society.

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